

SCHLARAFFIA –  
THE FAUX DIGNITAS  
OF PSEUDO-KNIGHTS.

The oldest massive multiplayer live action  
role-playing game still played.

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## SUMMARY

It was in Prague in 1859 that a group of actors and other artists started performing adapted parts from their plays etc for each other, slowly building a knightly role-play around it. When some of them moved to other cities, they took the idea along and started new chapters to their game that got more and more sophisticated rules and rituals over time. Even though it took a few years until they realised, they had started Schlaraffia, a live action role-playing game (LARPG) that is still played today by almost 10.000 men in 251 local chapters across the globe. It is the oldest and longest-running LARPG in existence, despite the fact that it remains virtually unheard of both within the general public and academia. Most prominent feature is its role-play about knights that gather in their castles to sing together, entertain each other cleverly and as part of that even duel each other verbally or by performing other arts in competition. The role-play is dependent on the leading principles of friendship, humour (or rather: wit) and arts: all kinds of cultural content are performed or discussed in this peculiar form of game that combines established rituals and improvisation, constantly switching between subversion of and adherence to the given rules of play.

## KEYWORDS

multiplayer offline role-playing game, RPG, MMRPG, LARPG, impro-theatre, gameplay, immersion, rhetorics of play, irony, disorderly play, court ritual, mockery, mock ritual, ritualised play, Romanticism, chivalric ideal, German language.



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# INTRODUCTION

Schlaraffia is a role-playing game that was started in 1859 and currently comprises almost 10.000 players worldwide. Its role-play is framed by frequent and quick shifts between in and out-of role action. Its metagame is quite complex, as all kinds of cultural production can become object to the game proper: Topics and developments that might be hotly debated in society as well as rather arcane finds of individual interest can get used as material within the game itself, thus opening the highly formalised game-play to allow for social and cultural metaplay to become negotiated within the game itself. Schlaraffia is introduced in the following with a focus on its roleplay and its interrelations of in and out-of role actions and its complex metagame. Games' research can gain from comparing more recent role-playing games with this oldest continuously played live action role-playing game (LARPG) because the game's longevity seems to directly result from its ability to react to and include changes in its surrounding out-of-game cultures without abandoning the core idea of the game itself. It may seem odd to make this claim, given that Schlaraffia play has thus far been more or less insulated from the mainstream of larp activity, but Schlaraffia involves adopting chivalric persona in playful performative social settings, much as contemporary LARP does. It contains aspects of improvisational theatre and is based on collaborative gaming, the principles of friendliness, even friendship, and (amateur) arts by employing humor, creativity, and cultural learning.

This text discusses the structure of the game as it is currently played and outlines the more than 150-year history of Schlaraffia. Continuing from there, rules and their application and the particular demands towards spaces and rooms for play are looked into before concluding with reflections on the rhetorics of play that are at work when Schlaraffia is playing its game.<sup>1</sup>

1 Reflections are based on printed Schlaraffic sources, the author's active participation in the game and many communications with other participants of this very game.

## SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE GAME

Before I examine Schlaraffia's gameplay, its roleplay and the way, playing is depending on its meta-play, a description of the game is warranted. The core-description of the game is given in the rule-books, *Spiegel* and *Ceremoniale* (translating as "mirror" and "performance of ceremonies"), with the former dealing with the principles and the spirit of the game, and the latter with formalities, the performance of rituals and other game-elements. They define all crucial elements of the game, the rituals and repetitive patterns, the central functions within the game, and the points of possible influence that are assigned to the different groups of players in each chapter, local players as well as those visiting from other chapters.

While the bulk of rules has been developed over time, based on the game-idea of the founders, changes always are possible if supported by the majority of players. Such changes are supposed to adhere to the original idea and spirit of the game, but as with all cultural practices, the rules are amended and interpreted differently and sometimes lead to substantial changes of game and game-culture. For example, the first statutes were written down two years after the foundation of Schlaraffia, but it took until 1876 to codify the rules of play. While the original rules still are at the core of today's game, they are framed and interpreted in masses of additional regulations. Schlaraffia started as entertainment and it took quite a while until its participants started to consider it a game.

The Schlaraffic game is based on the same rules wherever it is played, but the rules are interpreted and improvisation on the given topic can happen at all times, leading to new ways of seeing and playing different parts of the game. In this regard, individual players influence local sessions a lot and use their personal interests and abilities to form their interpretation of individual moments in the game. The dynamics of adherence and deviation



from previous readings of the rules are of course depending on local power distribution, whims, and on abilities in regards to improvisation. Local variations lead to quite diverse rituals and ceremonies, quite different topics to discuss in the individual chapters. Resulting from this, differences occur whenever members of one chapter visit another chapter and join the session there. Banter and more on how to play the game properly are the highly welcome result from these differences.

Mock-chivalric playfulness is a leit-motif for Schlaraffia. But it is usually not played in real castles and the like. The “castle” as place of play usually is anything but one. Some chapters of the game own fine rooms located in the center of town. Others convene in affordable locations at the outskirts of town. Players might need to descend into some cellar decorated to resemble a castle’s great hall by easy means. In that room, there will be a throne with three seats, facing two tables: one for the knights and one for the striving yeomen and castellans under the auspices of their master. To one side between throne and the tables is placed a kind of pulpit as the focal point of the arrangement. Next to the throne are two small desks, one for the chancellor and one for the marshal, who sounds the gong that signals opening and close of the game proper as instructed to do so by the chairman. The game only admits men, and when they meet, many wear suits and ties, but usually these are covered by colourful capes. They wear hats covered to the brim with metal pins and woven signs that signify their knightly or other status within the game, and they speak a somewhat fanciful and mock-courtly German.

While politics, religion, and business are off-limits as topics for Schlaraffia, comments and reflections on cultural issues (which of course have their political and religious and economic references) are central to the enactment of Schlaraffic performance, as is playful, satirical, and self-mocking wordplay and interaction. For example, upon a player kindling the ceremonial blue candle and offering a few words on the theme of “absent friends,” as

required, the acting chairman might praise the player's handling of the match and his dignified words about the candle's function. A different player might playfully contest the chairman's praise by twisting and tweaking the first player's ceremonial words to suggest that they meant or implied the opposite of what the chair considered them to state. Subgames can start within the wider frame at every moment, ranging from simple and short-running exchanges between two players to variations on a point made earlier by more and more of the players present during the course of the session. Deviation from the rules by individual players can be caused by local power negotiations within the chapter, by whims, or just for fun as the reactions to deviation from the rules cater for banter and exchanges that make these and possible duels the heart of the game. The mock-chivalric setting of the game has changed over time from parody of Austro-Hungarian aristocratic nobility and salon-culture, of the "fine" culture of yesteryears etc. to the parody of more contemporary bureaucratic hierarchy and social pomp.

## A HISTORY OF SCHLARAFFIA

Schlaraffia originated in the later 1850s Prague, just as development of the bourgeois entered a calm phase that allowed for idealisation and romanticisation of all kinds of aspects of life (Moretti 2014). While cultural life was rife with political, ethnic and artistic power struggles, people looked for more secluded ways to socialise with likeminded others after the revolutionary waves of 1848 that had aimed for democratic reforms, had been suppressed everywhere. A salon-culture of partly quite cultural elitist mind was established, firmly focused on literature, plays and music. So too in Prague, which was one of the important cities of learning and trade in the Austro-Hungarian empire and held a large German-language minority. Most founding members of Schlaraffia were actors, singers, musicians, who were employed seasonally at various theatres, operas etc. of Prague. Out of a regular but informal gathering of likeminded artists, Schlaraffia was started as a joking response to the fact that some from this group had been denied membership in a prestigious romantic circle.

At the beginning, the meetings were rather unregulated, containing performances that blended ironic takes on some romantic dreams of the Middle Ages and parodied the extreme ceremonious pomp and obsession in royally bestowed titles that defined the Austro-Hungarian Empire at this time (but also – in slight differences in detail – all other monarchies). Mock-courtly rituals and protocol were part of the setting, in which artists presented – it was the frame of reference for the artists as its serious original was well-known to all members of Schlaraffia, in fact, it referred to aspects in public life every citizen was aware of. The presenters blended in idealisations of knightly behaviour and quickly banter was established that was partly plain parody of the plays and operas they used to perform at work. And in a few instances, their work and game activities overlapped massively, acting beyond the game. Schlaraffia became known in the wider public of the time and partly attacked by the conservative press for

its large festivities that included concerts, comedies, puppetry performances, carnivals, mask balls, theatre performances that mostly performed their own text and music, even Schlaraffic operas were staged.

While all these activities took place, and intertwined with these, a more stable form was slowly established for their gatherings, blending spontaneous ideas with more reflected strategies. This early form of the game was spread by members that found employment in other cities and started new Schlaraffic circles there (Vitruvius 1984, 190-199). In the beginning, new chapters were run rather independently, partly introducing completely different titles for their chairmen and diverse rituals in response to local conditions and cultural topics of the time – e.g. during its early years, the Berlin chapter did use titles and rituals inspired by the then current interest in Japanese Society. Slowly, the form of the game was established and codified in rule-books, when the benefits of co-ordination for the game were realised and the chapters duly adjusted their play, but did not necessarily consider their activities as game-play. Only much later, after World War II, a treatise was published that reflected on Schlaraffia's game-ness and the virtues harboured in that (Juppitter 3rd ed. 1972).

The Prague-chapter remained the head of Schlaraffia, referred to as the Mother of all Schlaraffia, until the abolition of Schlaraffia in Nazi-Germany and in the Nazi-occupied territories. Already in 1924, a substantial number of members of the game from Germany and Austria who were supporting the Nazi's racism and natinalism, did found "Urschlaraffia", blending the game with their political ideas (Vitruvius et al. 1960, 286). It was in due consequence not affiliated with Schlaraffia and barred members who were not "arian" (s. N.N. 1960, 122). In reaction to the Nazi's rise to power and knowing the likely consequences for cultural organisations and fraternities, especially those that were known for their independence of thought and deviance of political powers, Schlaraffia divided itself into different sections to allow for adjustments in the sections under German control. While the

sections Helvetia and North America were beyond Nazi-control and able to continue the game in the original spirit, the German section changed dramatically to remain allowed to play their game: it renamed itself into “Bund Deutsche Schlaraffia” without official affiliation to the other sections or Prague, adjusted the rules of play, gave up its humanist basis, and expelled its Jewish members (despite the fact that religion had never been allowed to be an issue in Schlaraffia). Schlaraffia was prohibited soon afterwards anyway, adding ridicule to the previous character-suicide of the German section (s. Vitruvius 1984, 202-207). This show of submission remains the dark antithesis to the game’s principles. After the end of WW II it took some years for Schlaraffia in Germany to pick up from before the Nazi-era, but its losses became and remained as obvious as those of German society and culture as a whole.

Also, Schlaraffia was not officially sanctioned in the Eastern Block later on. It was re-established in Austria and West-Germany after 1945 (s. N.N. 1960) and also in East-Germany after 1989, but many of the chapters in the former Eastern block are gone (s. Ton-DIN et al. 1990). The fact that the particular blend of romanticisation and caricature that is at the core of the Schlaraffic game has survived in these changing times and got adapted to changes in societies again and again shows the appeal of it – and its qualities as a game.

## THE STRUCTURES OF SCHLARAFFIA

To be able to discuss Schlaraffia as a special case of LARPG in its peculiar referring to and inclusion of in and out-of game realities within its gameplay logic, the structure of Schlaraffia and the Schlaraffic game needs to be described. Role-play, game and play-elements are found on various levels of the game. I have divided the description and discussion into the following segments, which do – of course – overlap and blend in the game itself all the time:

- Schlaraffia as an institution (called Allschlaraffia),
- the individual chapters (“Reyche” – a most difficult term after 1933),
- the ceremonious, ritualised performances in each meeting/session,
- and non-ritualised meetings of players outside of these sessions.

### SCHLARAFFIA AS AN INSTITUTION

As Schlaraffia has almost 10 000 members distributed over several continents, a certain amount of administration is needed to co-ordinate the developments in the game’s play. This administrative structure forms the core of the Schlaraffic metagame – including those activities that are not part of playing the game itself, but are firmly connected to it (cf. Elias, Garfield, Gutschera 2012, 203 f.). Due to the specific referential frames of this game, its metagame might also include all kinds of cultural activities and developments as these can even turn into material used within one or several of its subgames. From the need of co-ordination and administration, some rituals and hierarchies of their own have developed, which re-create some of the administrative oddities, which were cause to Schlaraffia’s original mockery

of hierarchies and administrative self-importance. While each chapter does have quite high autonomy, Schlaraffia as a whole is organised in several sections, which are led by councils that are consisting of elected representatives from these groups. These councils again send representatives to a general council that is intended to coordinate and drive issues that are of importance for the whole of Schlaraffia. This administrative super-structure has become a playing field that takes itself and its agents quite serious. While it in itself is perfect material for the game's sessions, it is hardly ever subject matter of Schlaraffic irony and satire.

As the game proper is played within the individual chapters, the administration of the whole network of chapters stands somewhat outside of the average player's experience and considerations when playing. For the metagame the work of the various councils is of huge importance and tends to get discussed by players when socialising. Also, chapters might petition or communicate with these councils, thus opening the boundary between game and metagame: Petitions and the like are written, prepared and posted outside of the game, but their wording and that of responses will be read out and commented on in the gaming sessions themselves, thus becoming elements of the game and the metagame at the same time.

As it is played in parts of the world, where the German language is of no importance, and as the arts in German speaking countries are of course open to influences from all other cultures, too, a wide variety of backgrounds get referred to and mashed up. In this, it is interesting to note the differences between the game as it is played in countries with German as one of its main languages and other countries. The Americas are particularly strong represented in the game with own branch-organisations for North and Latin America. Due to assimilation and loss of German language skills in the second and later generations, the average age of player in the Americas is currently rather high as finding new and younger players is difficult – no waves of immigration have

been recent. As a consequence, the language and cultural references have partly been changing, causing all kinds of changes to ritual and nature of the game. It has to be seen, how it will fare in the non-German speaking world in the future.

## THE CHAPTER

The organisation of Schlaraffia does mock and construct courtly hierarchic order: While all members are called Sassen (translating roughly as freeholder or yeoman), i.e. subjects of Schlaraffia and of their individual chapters, only the chairmen are considered Herrlichkeit (i.e. "magnificence"), these are usually three players of the chapter that have been elected to run the game. Unrelated to individual qualities, these chairmen are set as authorities and game-masters by the rules of the game. They are supported by the chapter's other administrators, its chancellor, marshal, and master of arms. While small chapters only have a rump-administration that is needed to perform the rituals within the game, larger chapters put an entire array of functionaries into all sorts of office to add richness and variation to the role-play, as each function can be played in very different ways and still be firmly within the boundaries defined by the rules. All functions and offices are filled in accordance with annual elections. As the game has grown so big, an administrative superstructure has been established, which tries to integrate all chapters and to steer suggested rule-changes etc. The resulting positions in "higher" administration are filled by people willing to focus on these aspects of the game – thus making the visits at all kinds of tournaments or celebrations of individual chapters, the processes of administration etc. their own game that blends the ideas of Schlaraffia with some kind of higher court-routines. Whether these are part of the game played in the chapters or an extra game within the game is matter of debate within Schlaraffia.

Crucial for the game itself to work as it is intended, the players need to play collaboratively, in gatherings of players at the same



place and same time, “collectively sustaining the imaginative process” (MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler 2008, 234). The chapters convene at scheduled times in their particular burgh to switch from their real-life roles into their assumed chivalric figures. There and then, fictional time sets in. This is the time spent within gameplay. In reference to Jesper Juul, Schlaraffia is set to take place in fictional time (ref. Juul 2005, 142). At the same time – and this sets the game aside from most other LARPGs – the game is played in fictional and real-time simultaneously: The game takes place in a fictional time that is loosely set as Middle Age-ish, but time-keeping within the game has been reset to count the years of play, starting with the foundation of Schlaraffia in 1859 as Year 1 etc. All references to time within the game follow that logic. There is no make-believe that contemporary society would not exist around the session and burgh. Instead these are used as material for many contributions to the game.

## SCHLARAFFIA AS RITUALISED IMPROVISATION AND IMPROVISED RITUAL

Role-playing games “[...] require rules that allow for a wide range of choices by the players. There are no set paths, no specified areas with established rules for what happens when you land on them, and rarely any intended ‘endings’ “ (Fannon 1999, 35).

In Live Action Role-Playing (LARP), all physical action & dialogue in character is about agency. In this game, agency is expressed in the ways, players find to stage in collaboration each session balancing adherence to and deviation from the rules and rituals. The game asks for role-playing and for a kind of impro-theatre-approach that takes the clearly defined sets of rules for each part of the game as their challenges. Creativity is needed to subvert the routines of administration that deals in a mocking way with pseudo-formalities – not at least to hinder the chapter’s chairmen in becoming too aggrandised or the session’s content too foreseeable and thus boring. If the administrative parts

of the session are played too seriously and is lacking (self-)irony, this part tends to become rather tedious. Each gaming session consists of clearly defined elements that can be understood as a sequence of explicit subgames (cf. Elias, Garfield, Gutschera 2012, 103). Within the ritualised progression of the game through these subgames, many options exist for implicit subgames that might span the entire session or re-appear in different parts of it. From experience, players know what kind of actions work best to enliven gameplay of these different subgames, but experimentation on unusual forms of player-input usually are regarded with most surprise and enjoyment of playing.

As is generally understood, role-playing is used in childhood and adolescence to test diverse possible realities. In adult role-playing, the same applies plus the possible use for escapist and compensatory reasons. Role-play that is constructed around pseudo-chivalric ideals and ceremonies does pick up or rather return to role-play topics established in childhood. The Schlaraffic variation allows for the entire bandwidth from fully immersed role-play to participation in the game without any advanced role-play beyond some formulaic expressions and wearing the needed attributes. Today, participants can be fully ironic in their performance of “knighthood,” they also can reduce reference to the bare necessities of using the minimum of obligatory terminology and courteous manner. Within the game, rituals slide freely between these extremes, too: Ceremonies are executed sometimes in a hilarious way, or they are delivered in a deadpan style, leaving it to each player to read meaning of whatever kind into the performance. In some chapters, special rituals like knighting are considered so important for the role-play that all steps out of character (e.g. lacking gravitas in movements or comments out of style or register or costume malfunctions or even dropping a wooden sword) are frowned upon. While such behaviour is accepted in other moments of the game it can even get fined then.

Surplus of resources is a necessary prerequisite for play: extra material, time and energy have to be available to be used for the purpose. The currency ideally used in Schlaraffia is cultural capital. In the past, this was defined as being based on the classic texts of German-language literature, theatre and even music (the founders of Schlaraffia were mostly actors, musicians and other men from the various fields of the arts). It has to be pointed out that many societies and self-proclaimed chivalric orders existed in Europe during the Romantic period. Their members had to have the ability to converse in the right style and command the necessary resources to spend on such activities. A certain cultural frame for these groups was the consequence. Meanwhile, most members today neither have an artistic background nor do that many sincerely know the former cultural canon: culture changes and so do the topics and approaches within Schlaraffia.

Each chapter uses a permanent castle, but for larger gatherings suitable rooms can be decreed to be their festive burgh. The place itself is not important but the space is, as it is defined as being detached from everyday life and culture. Each consists of areas, which are representing specific rooms that are used for the game's play within and around each session: its anteroom and great hall, sometimes its gaol. These rooms are decorated in pseudo- or semi-chivalric style, where the localities and ownership or conditions of lease permit. Often, usually because of limited funds, the castle is a room, booked only for the duration of the weekly (or bi-weekly) sessions, decorated only for the occasion.

By designing and handing out small medals and pins designed around their names and/or characters, individual game-personae are expressed and become elements of the wider game as these private pins get used together with pins and medals that are given out by the individual chapters as reward for each performance within a session. While the pins etc. of the chapters usually depict canonical figures and values of the game and cover the crucial functions and events within the game, the private

ones add a huge variety of personalities and character traits – thus allowing the chair of each session to reward each performance with a medal or pin that is relating to the performance’s topic in word or image. While in real life most people never get a medal bestowed on them, in Schlaraffia it is hard to avoid them. Some players actually are driven by the desire to amass these, unobservant of the fact that Schlaraffia in the beginning handed out medal-like tokens made of paper and colourful crepe paper and hilarious sounding titles to ridicule the cult surrounding medals and noble titles in contemporary society. It is interesting to note that the idea of parody found its limitations rather quickly in this area: Complaints about players who do not get the irony of Schlaraffic medals and titles are found from early on in Schlaraffic writings, e.g. in different volumes of the game’s chronicle (s. references at the end of this text).

Each session of each chapter is ideally dedicated to a specific topic. Those from the chapter, who feel able to respond to the topic and want to present something in relation to it, prepare a *Fechsung* (a word of uncertain origin, it is defining content as artistic production by the player presenting it) that is performed in session: they might give a speech, recite a poem they wrote, present a painting, sing a song or play some musical instrument (self built instruments are always a popular option), etc. Others might consider a text or other artistic production by somebody else fitting for the purpose and they might present their chosen text, image or other in a *Vortrag* (translating as “presentation”).

With *Fechsung* and *Vortrag*, the tone can be humorous, serious or reflective with an ironic twist, better even self-ironic. The aim is decidedly not to deliver educative presentations like in evening class. Central is the objective to entertain the others, to allow the others to continue on the topic or the particular view or reading of it. While it may be delivered in an amusing manner, it shows Schlaraffic finesse to make the listeners reflect on some more serious aspect of culture and the Schlaraffic mind-set at the

same time. Ideally, the ensuing discourse may sting but must at no time ridicule other players. In reality, individual comments do hurt others and in each chapter very different routines are in place to react to such incidents – some chapters are known for their rather rough trickster-humour that is considered crucial for the game there while in other chapters the same tone would be considered unacceptable.

In Live Action Role-Playing (LARP), all physical action & dialogue in character is about agency. In this game, agency is expressed in the ways, players find to stage in collaboration each session balancing adherence to and deviation from the rules and rituals. While sitting and listening to the active players might be considered downtime, each player can jump into action at any given time, thus following closely the game is needed for optimal gameplay. Also, entertainment – i.e. reward – results from following exchanges between active players and from being able to influence the development of whatever subgame or strategy at any time. The game asks for role-playing and for a kind of impro-theatre-approach that takes the clearly defined sets of rules for each part of the game as their challenges. As no tangible rewards are intended, an evenings' gaming can be carried by collective entertainment and joy that results from well-paced interactions as in e.g. improvising some rhyming exchange between two or more players.

## INTERACTIONS OF SCHLARAFFIA PLAYERS

The game leans heavily on cultural production in German language, having a firm root in the German language Classics for theatre and literature. The influence of the original basis in theatre plays, opera, etc. is still strong, as many quotes from the Classics remain in constant use. Some even in the short forms developed by the original gamers: The exclamation "Lulu!" that is used to greet other players, also to voice support or applause

within the game, is a prime example. It derives from a quote from Friedrich Schiller's play *Wallenstein* (Chap. 4, 7): "Lustig, lustig! da kommen die Prager!" – "Cheer up! the Prague forces are coming!" [my translation, JFD], and was used by the theatre-savvy players most likely because of its reference to Prague, their location, the play's reflections on knightly behaviour, and because of "lustig", which translates as "cheerful" or "merry": cheerfulness is the reason they were and are playing for.

Players of the Schlaraffic game are coming from quite diverse social, geographical and political backgrounds. This bears consequences for the form and content of play in the reference-frames of individual parts of the sessions and for individual performances of texts, music or other within session: Especially the Fechsungen that are prepared and performed by individual players show a high diversity in interests and style: Elvis Presley has become an established reference that is used as often as Beethoven without raising eyebrows. While already the first Spiegel (statutes) of 1861 banned political debate, conversation or debate about nationalities and religions, card games or reading newspapers, and thus managed to establish the setting for the game apart from contemporary debate (s. Chronik I, 54 f.), it never was able to define Schlaraffic culture but in the ongoing game itself.

## ROLE-PLAYING

Role-playing in the Schlaraffic game is of course very close to role-playing in all kinds of fantasy RPGs, as Daniel Mackay has defined it (2001, 53 ff.). In every role-playing game, player-character-constructs consist of layers that co-exist simultaneously and are mediated in the game: According to Fine (2006, 582), the basis of this is of course the real life-person that is the real-world social being defined by its outside contexts. Some part of this person is forming the next layer, the player, who is mediating between reality and play. The fictional character or persona that is depicted and steered by the player within the mechanism set out by the rules and their application within the game is the third layer. Mackay differentiates further, thus allowing to consider the importance of the narrative frame for the creation of game-play in role-playing:

- 1) the social frame inhabited by the person;
- 2) the game frame inhabited by the player;
- 3) the narrative frame inhabited by the raconteur;
- 4) the constative frame inhabited by the addresser;
- 5) the performative frame inhabited by the character.

(Mackay 2001, 56)

By differentiating the frames this much, “the theater and performance of the game” can be understood better (ibid, 57). In the context of the Schlaraffic game this is of extra importance: The performance of roles and staging of subgames is crucial for the creation of atmosphere and together with the utilisation of given possibilities for stories and character exposure, this is one of the main motivations to engage with this game – the enjoyment of these performances and flights of fancy is one of the major rewards that the game offers.

Following Salen and Zimmerman (2006, 29), we may say that a lamination of identity can be observed as the person through the player always can reflect on the fictionality of the settings and

issues at stake. In some form of meta-communication one communicates the fact of playing while playing (s. Gregory Bateson 1972), and the frequent references to their game in Schlaraffia are both: rhetorical form as well as entry to a meta-discourse on Schlaraffic identity. The understanding of the real world does not only inform the logic and functions within the game, but goes much further in this case. In a normal role-playing game (RPG), players assume the identity of their game persona within the fictional setting and perform within that role during the game (see e.g. Salen & Zimmerman 2006, 29). The Schlaraffic play and game is a very reflective, quite intellectualised game in its use of real-life themes and forms as game elements. As a result, a high ambiguity or double edge of comments and play is constantly at work as references might link to play-content, the fictional characters, as well as they might refer to the players' personae. Many myths about prominent examples of Schlaraffic play are recounted by its members even today, thus canonising a collective ideal of how the game ought to be played.



## CHIVALRIC AVATARS AS CENTRAL FIGURES

Each player is executing a progression through the ranks within Schlaraffia. While starting as a guest, a pilgrim, to find out whether one wants to join Schlaraffia, each becomes *Prüfling* ("probationer"), to test whether they fit in and really want to continue to play the game. All the time, they experience behaviour performed by different players in all kinds of situations, thus learning about how roles can be filled as well as Schlaraffic game-culture as such. While getting into the mood, they develop a knightly figure that is different from their own player's persona, but might dwell on aspects of the player's personality that dominate the way the knightly character is designed and performed. Here the knight truly is based on the gamer's ideas of the game and on the development of a suitable avatar to be used best in this environment. The idea of progression to become a knight is again leaning heavily on the topics that dominated theatre and opera at the time that was most formative for Schlaraffia's settings. Heroes and knights of the Wagnerian mould were impossible constructions already before Wagner's career took off, really, as the negotiations of social responsibilities of nobility in Schiller's and Goethe's plays did show. Especially in reaction to events like the wars of 1864, 1870 etc., chivalric heroes had to be constructed for a distinctly different world from the real one. To gain access to an imagined knightly realm that is based on the arts alone, could be considered escapism, would the game not return regularly to its parody and comment on real life. Schlaraffia is utilising "the distinction between the theater of the role-playing game and the role-played performance" (Mackay 2001, 57) to cater for the entertainment of all players, no matter whether they are in or out-of role.

A short comment on the cultural dependency of the game on Romanticism is needed to understand the mental frame of these references then and now: While society changed quickly due to the

fast advance of industrialisation, Romanticism took a counter-enlightening position, pointing out the human need for phantasy and emotions, deams and poetics. The idea of the Blue Flower of Romanticism by Novalis symbolised the desire and search for an eternity that was based on a chivalric ideal that is in fact closely related to the gentleman ideal at the core of British education of the time. It is focused on an ideal that is larger than life, a myth that takes in imaginations and describes an ethical ideal of manliness, intellectual refinement, and developed related principles. An educational goal to which boys and young men were raised for and educated to strive after: The gentleman in the making has to learn to adhere to this code (cf. e.g. Wingfield-Stratford) while the adult has to behave according to the established ideal as gentleman in life (cf. Galsworthy or Somerset Maugham for examples). The romantic revival of Arthurian Romance in Britain, including the stories about Sir Perceval or of the Nibelungen and similar story-cycles in Germany, did for example develop and illustrate a full typology of knighthood and the ideal of true knighthood as a role model for idealist (s. Kennedy 1992). Even though these figures can only be looked on with at least a certain distancing and irony, they remain strong in boy's literature and the negotiation of male role models (see e.g. Lash 1995; Schnack & Neutzling 2000).

Anyway, interested guests are introduced to the game and if they want to join for real, they may join if voted in. After a probation-phase they are promotion to *Knappe* (a squire who will become a knight). Each Knappe has to learn about how to drive and play the game, prove his abilities by taking actively part in the game again, before being promoted to *Junker* (a title originally referring to a high ranking squire who rules over a number of men, a "Castellan" in English). Knappen and Junker are under the authority of the chapter's *Junkermeister* – and part of play for Knappen and Junker is to execute ritualised disorder in cases of inattention of their "master". E.g. mechanical sound-devices are employed to indicate lack of supervision. In effect, grown

men pretend to be an unruly lot because they are members of a group that is supposed to be unrefined – it appears rather odd in description, but it exemplifies the logic of advance through the ranks to finally become a wise knight in full control over one's behaviour. Also, it is fun to misbehave as an adult, too.

When dubbed to be knights, they assume fancy names and gain the right to wear wooden swords in some of the rituals. The creation and performance of their own chivalric avatar by each of the players within Schlaraffia is a central element of the role-playing within the game: the game centres on becoming a knight and performing as this knight within the game. The name chosen for a knight can express aspects of his avatar's character, his player-identity, the way he performs within the game, or some area of his in or out-of game interests or hobbies. Crucial for the individual character design of each knight is its game-character and the name that is chosen for this avatar (it is an avatar as established in gaming, as the figure within the game is distinctly different from the player and his real-world situation and options). As the name is only chosen after some time within the game, these names tend to express and comment on the way a player is performing the knightly figure, or his knightly identity.

## IMMERSION

Immersion describes the acceptance of the internal logic of the game experience. To express identity, the name and performance of specific roles within the game is crucial as clothing or costume is not visually chivalric but rather uniform within the different branches of Schlaraffia: people mostly dress in suits or similar formal menswear, with the addition of caps that are the same to all members of the same chapter. Also, in some chapters a cloak in the colours of the chapter is worn, while others wear a uniform sash instead. Cloaks and sashes are decorated according to individual merits and abilities with the decorations earned, mostly metal pins and signs in woven textiles. In this area, too, some room to express individuality is given. From this outer appearance, no conclusions on players' individual immersion nor efforts to immerse themselves in role-play can be drawn.

A comparison with professional acting might help to explain: While some actors try to become the figures they are to play (as in method acting) others simply imagine what behaviour would be appropriate to perform to make the performance of a figure believable. Both approaches can be employed to describe the extremes given with the players of the Schlaraffic game as well: while some become the particular knight characterised by his given name and titles, others switch between acting out their particular game-character in the given game-situation and their profane / out-of-game personality constantly. The majority of players is located somewhere between these poles: most use their avatar's name to address each other even in private communications outside of the game-session. Also, some of the terminology seeps into everyday language of the gamers. Players might wish to role-play to enjoy the use of particular language and style to immerse themselves within the mock-chivalric narrative of the game or might wish to use their avatars for being part of the game as straight forward as possible. It is important to understand in this context that a player in Schlaraffia can easily

stay in one mode or switch between a function as performer and a more passive spectator-role. For the mock-chivalric narrative to work well, most rituals within the game ask for some players to act as audience for individual performances:

The distinction between the theater of the role-playing game with its participating characters, and the performance of the role-playing game with its players and gamemaster up-keying and down-keying into other frames, corroborates Schechner's observation that there is a continuum of 'distinctly observable breaks between the experiences of the performers and audiences in all kinds of performances' (1988:258) (Mackay 2001, 57).

It has to be noted that not all players are fully aware of the ironic perspective onto chivalry suggested by the founders of the game. Several traditions of play exist and very diverse styles of play are to be found simultaneously in almost all chapters: ironic, serious, self-important styles co-exist. For example, it is due to the human factor that in some chapters individual players dominate the sessions with some kind of pompous performance of their selves (one could call this egomania), which is not in tune with the idea of the game and the wink and nod in the faux dignitas of pseudo-knights; while some of the jokes on them are lost to these, they allow for the entertainment of those others who are aware of the hot-air-factor involved in their performances. Another aspect is caused by the different cultural backgrounds of the members: all levels of education, all sorts of temperaments are given, with very diverse approaches to role-playing and use of language-registers etc. are the consequence of this. No immersion into the world of make-believe knighthood is actually needed to take part in the Schlaraffic game. Rather it is comparable to massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), which offer role-playing to the minority of players who really want to do this, while the majority does utilise the offered game with a focus on advancing the development of their avatar. Crucial is the performance of rituals, and possible deviation from established forms to cater for or stimulate the banter that makes all exchanges and duels the centre of the game. While collabora-

tive merriment is central, the idea that the balance of powers and routines needs to be tilted to allow for novelty, suspense, the development of something unforeseen, in short: for entertainment (s. Johnstone 1999, 84-129), becomes more obvious.

Role-play in Schlaraffia is executed by players that are used to intermissions in programming from theatre and television. Quick changes between different frames of reference and behaviour are not only normal in role-playing but also quite common in popular culture. Accordingly, almost everybody has developed the ability to get back into a particular mood and setting more easily than it was approx. 70 years ago: Bert Brecht's concept and use of the alienation or distancing effect to destroy the immersion of the audience is not working in the way it was possible back then (s. Brecht 1964).

Schlarraffic gaming uses the interrelations between role-play and references to reality outside its fictional world. The rituals that frame and stabilise each individual session are formally the same as they were, but the gamers have of course changed with the cultures they are part of: While rituals today may be performed in similar blends of deadpan and parody, they tend not to be as bombastic and alcohol ridden as they once were: "Lots of alcohol" commented an unnamed Schlaraffe on the inebriation at a christmas feast, which lasted until December 26 or maybe the following day, and "posterity will be in awe of such stamina" (Keil, 36; emphasis in the original). As the social acceptance of the consumption of alcohol has changed profoundly, and as most gamers do depend on keeping their driver's licences, the collective consumption of large quantities of alcoholic beverages until intoxicated is a thing of the past in Schlaraffia, too.

Advertisings for the game argue that its aim is to maximise satisfaction of the individual members that take part in the individual sessions within the game. This is true to some extent, as – while personal preferences differ and ideas vary on how to play the

game in detail – satisfaction can only be reached in compromise, by playing together. For some that aim is the entertainment of playing the game, while others use the form of the game to advance their knowledge on specific issues or their (most often layman's) artistic abilities. The mock-administration of the game is most fun when the players manage to subvert the routines creatively without de-railing the game: aim is not to troll the form or its individual parts but to improvise on them in a way that others can join in and proceed from. All this has to be achieved under the eyes of a chairman who leads the session in absolute power, usually combining the functions of referee and game-master, while being the head of the chivalric gathering and thus part of the role-play as well. The chairman is one of three players on the throne who complement and support each other and ought to ensure that the functioning chairman is not blocking the game or annoying the players. If this happens, the court jester might step in or instant comments by other players are intended to subvert the principle of throne-authority and remind the chair of their duties towards the group. The trick is – and the reward that derives from these moments – to role-play criticism of an absolute ruler without getting fined or derailing the game-concept itself.

As Thomas Henricks has pointed out, play consists of orderly and disorderly elements, which together make out the character of a game (s. Henricks 2009). While the nature of play can be described as orderly or disorderly, it is their co-existence that defines the qualities of a specific game and the reason for playing: “play is as much a quest for excitement, uncertainty, and disorder as it is a search for order, control, and cognitive harmony” (Sutton-Smith in Henricks, 2009, 13). Especially in Schlaraffia, the quick succession of seriousness and parody, the mock ritual of the Schlaraffic game are prone to oscillate between order and disorder. The appeal of the game stems to a high extend just from this richness and the options contained. Here, cognitive harmony of the players is partly caused by unsettling the order of the proceedings. They compete in a cooperative manner (ibid, 20 ff.), as

the process of the game is important, not the result of the competition, and it is this process that makes the game worth playing, the enjoyment of banter and disorder and its resolution motivates the game, not the feeling of unity in difference from others. In the language of impro-theatre this means that routines get established, tilted, and re-established. Or they slide into different routines, which might get tilted again. But all these processes remain within the stable frame of the session itself. It is high-order play: In any moment of the game, irony may pile on parody and even self-parody with the intention to make others react on and continue from. Will the throne be able to continue into the next part of the game or does some individual performance not only merit but also enforce a diversion? If played well, some players manage to subvert the intentions of the throne or make another gamer voice a point that starts another routine.



## RULES AND THEIR APPLICATION

In his classification of games, Roger Caillois argues in oppositions that are partly not applicable to Schlaraffia: It is a game of skills, and in duels and tournaments players compete to win. But the general rhetorics of the rules and comments on the game suggest that players are not to win over others without taking them along, the aim is to be as good as possible in playing and performing something, not to outdo others but instead to entertain and enjoy contributions by others in collaborative gaming. In standard sessions, no winners are pronounced. As with most games, the participants can learn about themselves, about their culture (within game and real life), about human nature etc.

Finally, whether the outcome of the game is open, is difficult to determine – it has been going on for more than 150 years so far without a defined end for the game. But also with a short-term perspective, the outcome is rather open: Players do not know what will happen in a session, but the process of the game is guaranteed in its ritualised sequence of subgames. Schlaraffic gaming needs adherence to the rituals but allows for the adage of new elements all the time. The game's contexts and the difference between character or avatar and player identity offer many points of return for improvisation. The assumed chivalric style of expression and behaviour is quite different from contemporary styles etc., but all knowledge of contemporary and historic issues, also whatever incident or topic of the metagame, can be used and brought into Schlaraffic gaming, as nothing needs to be ignored, instead it needs to be put into the right frame and narrative context and form. As with all RPGs, switching between acting in and out-of role at the wrong moment destroys the established fictional world for the moment, but depending on the abilities or inventiveness of the chairmen or other gamers, even these incidents can be used to drive the gameplay forward.

## CONCLUDING WITH A FEW REMARKS ON THE SCHLARAFFIC RHETORICS OF PLAY

The rhetorics of play that explain why the Schlaraffic game is played are not different from other LARPGs or RPGs. As usual, different players focus on different aspects when explaining why they are playing just this game. This very text itself gives further proof to the general validity of the following list of motivations for playing a game: very different aspects of the game are emphasised and interpreted in regards to their motivation within the game in different contexts. The same happens when games are advertised, different people stress different functions on the following list, partly because of their personal situation, partly because of social aspects dominating at a specific time.

According to Brian Sutton-Smith, a number of crucial aspects can form the rhetorics of play. They are not exclusive, but interrelate and different drives dominate different situations within each game (the description follows Sutton-Smith 2006, 304 ff.). The rhetorics of play is based on aspects like progress, identity, imagination, benefits, and others. The frivolous is a further very important motivation in play. In the following these aspects are described very briefly while their function for the Schlaraffic game is considered.

The aspect of progress is mainly concerned with cognitive development, while the fate of a figure in a game is most important in games of change. The first has been described as a major motivation for taking part in this game, while the latter is only of importance in the context of progress through the ranks of the chivalric hierarchy.

Questions of power usually are negotiated in contests, usually sport and comparable games. The Schlaraffic game does include much negotiation of powers, with some of these being negotiated more openly while others are negotiated more clandestine. In many situations within the game power-status is negotiated,

not at least when doing all kinds of artistic or other performances. Also, the manning of specific roles within the game exhibits and negotiates the distribution of powers within each chapter, as some roles give (and demand) authority over other players on site. A mishandling of these roles results in certain redistribution of powers within the chapter. This, as well as the question of who is powerful enough in a social group to motivate a change of its culture in e.g. some specific re-interpretation of rituals or rules illustrates the continued validity of Norbert Elias' observations on the civilising process: The dynamics of adherence to and deviation from ritual have hardly changed since the introduction of tableware (table manners were one of Elias' most poignant examples). Comparing the success of some interventions against the failure of other initiatives for change or subversion of the established form illustrate clearly the power-distribution in each session of each chapter within Schlaraffia.

The aspect of identity applies to games that are "confirming, maintaining, or advancing the power and identity of the community of players" (Sutton-Smith 2006, 305). An aspect that gets emphasised in the context of all RPGs and certainly when looking into the fictional world of Schlaraffia as well. The self-understanding of Schlaraffic gamers is that they are humorously taking on their environment and human folly without forgetting their own fallibility, at the one end of the spectrum of players duly are those that consider themselves a modern form of the wise court-jester. And some gamers truly are masters at ridiculing and reflecting wisely over self-aggrandisement while being self-ironic and entertaining, as well. On the other end of the gamer-spectrum are those, whose knightly avatar turns into an alter ego and their game loses its mocking presumptions, it becomes invested with an importance it ought not to have. Between the extremes most players are more humble and see it as a self-reflective game that offers good entertainment for normal people. And it can be concluded that the rituals and forms of the Schlaraffic game do create an environment that is culturally, socially and

emotionally entertaining and committing – not only for gamers who fully immerse themselves, but also for those who remain rather reserved players. The importance of the imaginary, i.e. of playful imagination, creativity and improvisation is most likely the most important aspect of the game. This is of course relating to the rewards gained from playing a game that has a focus on entertaining yourself. The self-centred perspective on playing such a game with a consumerist focus on entertaining yourself is important. The psychological and social benefits of entertaining yourself are duly used a lot when Schlaraffia is advertising itself. In that context, the fictional world and the avoidance of work-related issues by the Schlaraffians, “play is idealized by attention to the desirable experiences of the players – their fun, their relaxation, their escape – and the intrinsic or the aesthetic satisfactions of the play performances.” (ibid.)

As the importance of parody and satire for the game imply, the aspect of the frivolous is very important for many players. The lack of tangible rewards and the economically unproductive nature of the game (apart from personal and collective entertainment and reflection on human nature) is a very important aspect of its longevity. Also its celebration of the jester and trickster as wise men, of the idle and sometimes even the foolish in its “playful protest against the orders of the ordained world” (ibid. 306) are very important motivators for many performances and even the collective self-understanding of the gaming community of Schlaraffia.

To conclude, it can be argued that the performance and theater of role-play as defined by David Mackay are in this game not only easily accommodated and not subdued by adherence to strategic conventions of the game as this very game asks for narrative expression and flights of fancy to work most rewarding. It is quite special how the fictional in-game-reality and out-of-game-reality, of actions in and out-of role interrelate, and how both are referred to within the metagame and the game proper with its vari-

ous subgames. The frequent and quick changes between frames of reference are shared with most role-playing games, allowing different players and different groups of people to follow different issues (Salen & Zimmerman 2006, 296): Small groups create cultural traditions within specific frames of involvement. In this, individuals pass from frame to frame while being involved in frames that are grounded in the social order, i.e. frames are embedded within frames. In analogy to systems theory, one could explain this as the interdependence of various systems and sub-systems of each other, with none of them being truly independent of outer circumstances. The engagement within a group of people playing jointly a role-playing game stabilises the fictional reality, the setting for the game. The shared observance and constant negotiation of the rules and game-culture also stabilises the group as such. Due to the particular options for improvisation and theatre sports by simultaneous reference to the fictional setting and to real-life, Schlaraffic gaming is negotiating all layers of its players' actions and the game simultaneously. This gameplay allows for the inclusion of much more out-of-game issues into the game itself than LARPGs usually permit, as they intend to protect their fictional settings. The continuous play of Schlaraffia for more than 150 years seems to stem from this very difference: It allowed and allows for the adjustment to changing cultural frames.

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Schlaraffia is the oldest and longest-running LARPG in existence, despite the fact that it remains virtually unheard of both within the general public and academia.

Most prominent feature is its role-play about knights that gather in their castles to sing together, entertain each other cleverly and even duel each other verbally or by performing other arts in competition. Their role-play is dependent on the leading principles of friendship, humour or wit, and (amateur) arts: all kinds of cultural content are performed or discussed in this peculiar form of game that combines established rituals and improvisation, constantly switching between subversion of and adherence to the given rules of play.

This book looks into the game and its peculiar set-up to establish what it is that keeps it being played continually for more than 150 years and counting.

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