

## **Undoing Gender through Performing the Other**

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**Abstract**

Following the perspective on gender as a socially constructed performance, consumer research has given light to how individuals take on, negotiate, and express a variety of gender roles. Yet the focus of research has remained on gender roles themselves, largely overlooking the underlying process of gender performativity and consumers' engagement with it in the context of their everyday lives. Set within a performance methodology and the context of crossplay in live action role-playing games, this paper explores how individuals undo gender on a subjective level, thus becoming conscious and reflexive of gender performativity. The study suggests that individuals become active in undoing gender through engaging in direct, bodily performance of the gender other. Such performance does not challenge or ridicule norms, but pushes individuals to actively figure out for themselves how gender is performed. As a result, individuals become aware of gender performativity and become capable of actively recombining everyday performance.

**Keywords:** gender performativity, performance, agency, crossplay, live action role-playing game, LARP

## Introduction

Gender is a central aspect of how we define ourselves and how those around us define us. Within contemporary consumer culture, gender also becomes inseparable from consumption, its practices, objects, and contexts (Schroeder and Zwick 2004; Holt and Thompson 2004). Butler (1990, 2004) proposed that gender is a performatively produced doing, that is, it is a doing based in a repetition that creates its own effect. There is thus no pre-existing being or norm behind the doing of gender, but it is created as it is performed. However, this does not mean that gender is non-existent or that it is not based on anything. Gender is socially dependent in that it is always created through a relationship to and dependence on others. Consequently, gender emerges within the confines of the social norms of its context, and largely defines the identity, behaviour, aims, and desires of individuals enacting it (Butler 2004). Consumption, as a central element of contemporary culture, helps form the seemingly pre-existing and normatively bound performance of gender.

Following Butler's work, much of consumer research focusing on gender has gone beyond the idea of two gender roles (male and female), approaching gender in a variety of ways. Research has explored individuals taking on different femininities and masculinities (Kates 2002; Martin, Schouten, and McAlexander 2006) as well as taking on elements of another gender as part of one's performance (Thompson and Ustuner 2015). Going beyond dualities, other studies have explored pluralities of gender (Goulding and Saren 2009) and the fluidity of gender (Zayer et al. 2012). Consumer research has thus embraced the performativity of gender. However, the focus of research is largely directed at gender roles, which, although at times do challenge power structures, end up providing their own forms of authority via a model of behaviour. Moreover, a binary perspective on gender often still emerges in research, even if in a fragmented manner, through reference to femininities and

masculinities. Little attention has been given to the process underlying these gender roles, that is, gender performativity in itself. In line with this, it is unclear how individuals reflect on gender performativity and possibly take on insights from it as part of their everyday lives.

In order to bring in a focus on performativity of gender as a doing in itself into consumer research, as well as gain insight about how individuals consciously reflect on and actively engage in gender performativity, this paper focuses on exploring the subjective performance of undoing gender. Butler (2004) explains that because gender is done, it can also be undone. In other words, it is possible “to undo restrictively normative conceptions of sexual and gendered life” (Butler 2004, p. 1). This allows individuals to become active or be motivated to become active in terms of challenging gender norms via gaining understanding that one can behave differently. Undoing of gender is thus tied into conscious understanding of gender performativity. By focusing on the subjective process of undoing gender, this research provides insight into how individuals actively engage with and understand gender performativity in contemporary consumer culture as well as relate it to their everyday lives.

A central way through which individuals can undo gender is through performing the other, that is, through performing a gender different from what they identify with (Butler 1990; Garber 1992; Winge 2006). To gain understanding of active undoing of gender, I engaged in exploring the performance of the other within the context live action role-playing games (LARP), in which I had found, through previous studies, individuals actively recombining their performance of self (Seregina 2018). I specifically turned to exploring the subjective experience of performance of crossplay in LARP. Crossplay is a geek culture activity, which involves the performance of a character of a differing gender from one's own. As I show in this paper, the practice emerges as an embodied instance of performing the other, as well as a revelatory case of gender performativity in contemporary consumer culture.

Set within a performance methodology, this study suggests that individuals gain awareness of gender performativity through engaging in direct, bodily performance of the other. Such performance pushes individuals to consciously figure out, learn, and reflect on how the performance of the other takes place, thus undoing gender as an immutable category. The seemingly pre-existing basis for gender performance disappears, and individuals begin to perceive gender as one element of performance that is intricately tied into structures of culture and power, and which is just as mouldable as other elements of performance. Furthermore, in light of newly perceived limitations and possibilities, individuals are activated to recombine performance also in their everyday life. In conclusion of this paper, I discuss how these findings can be used to advocate reflexivity of gender performativity within contemporary consumer culture.

### **Performativity of gender in consumer research**

As noted in the introduction, following Judith Butler's work on gender, consumer research has looked at gender in a variety of ways, mainly going beyond a traditional point of view of two gender roles. One central way that research has approached gender is as a set of different masculinities and different femininities. For instance, Schroeder and Zwick (2004) talk about the limits of masculinity, and Holt and Thompson (2004) show how men edit stereotypical ways of approaching masculinity. Similarly, Cronin et al. (2014) discuss the management of femininities, and Martin, Schouten, and McAlexander (2006), describe how women engage, resist, and take on masculine elements as part of their femininities.

In another approach, consumer research sees gender as something fluid, moving beyond or between gender categories. For example, Goulding and Saren (2009) show that, in

the context of goth festivals, individuals can experience a pluralism of gender forms and identities, thus defining their own selves. Similarly, in researching the content of TV-shows, Zayer et al. (2012) explore tensions of gender fluidity in crossing the boundaries of gender role performances.

Through such efforts, consumer research has given light to how individuals take on, negotiate, and express a variety of gender roles and gender identities. While stepping away from the traditional view of two gender roles, such perspectives still often group gender in a binary manner, through, for instance, discussing femininities and masculinities, or male and female characteristics that can be taken on. Moreover, even when approaching gender roles through a more blurred perspective, research tends to approach gender identities as performative acts, that is, performances that bring into being and reinforce certain norms and behaviours. As Butler (2004) explains, we are not free in taking on gender, because gender performance always depends on collective negotiation of it within its social context. In doing gender, we thus become a part of the power structure we perform.

In order to understand gender as part of contemporary consumer culture, it would be important to look beyond the performative acts of the variety of gender roles taken on by individuals, and rather explore the underlying process of gender performativity in itself as well as individuals' engagement in it. As Butler (1990, 2004) explains, gender performativity is learned through acculturation into cultural norms of a specific context. It is thus brought into existence, formed within, and constrained by its particular social environment. Individuals are often unconscious of the processes that produce gender, and are unlikely to fully remove themselves from its structures, as these are deeply entwined with socialisation. How can individuals then become aware of and consciously engage in gender performativity?

Butler (2004) proposes that gender can be undone, that is, it is possible to undo the normative structures of gender performance. Of course, individuals can never get away from

the ideology that has allowed them to become what they are performing, yet they can work with the materials of the dominant ideology in order to challenge it. It is important to note that the process of undoing gender is not inherently good or bad, and it is rarely subversive, as gender is always negotiated socially. However, undoing gender can create a tension between social norms and individual agency, allowing individuals to gain understanding of gender performativity and become active in challenging gender norms.

Consumer research has often equated contexts that allow the challenging of gender norms with the carnivalesque (e.g., Kates 2002; Martin, Schouten, and McAlexander 2006; Goulding and Saren 2009). Researchers explain that the carnivalesque allows for a safe space, in which individuals can challenge, ridicule, and play around with gender norms. The carnivalesque, as described by Bakhtin (1984), is a temporally and spatially limited performance that is apart from 'real life,' unbound and free from rules and structures. The result is a topsy-turvy world that subverts and liberates dominant assumptions. However, as Fiske (1989) stresses, the carnivalesque has always been a form of social control. He explains that the carnivalesque suspends everyday life and its problems, showing the potentiality of a different world. This potentiality often becomes too scary for individuals in its unstructured and outrageous form, with the carnivalesque thus reinforcing existing norms. Moreover, Fiske (1989) and Bakhtin (1984) both suggest that many contemporary performances that may appear to be carnivalesque are actually spectacle-like, as they lack direct interaction, a shared point of departure, as well as bodily and communal elements central to the carnivalesque. Such spectacles do not link back to real life, but are rather entertaining and pacifying. Hence, while carnivalesque performance supports undoing gender, it also inadvertently reinforces existing normative structures and rarely results in change or action.

One way of undoing gender in an active and bodily manner is through the performance of the other, that is, through the performance of gender that is different from

what one identifies with. Studies outside of consumer research have shown that performing the other allows undoing gender by way of challenging normalised behaviours and structures. Garber (1992) describes cross-dressing as enabling the disturbance of gender roles and the problematisation of identity through crossing borders. Similarly, Winge (2006) suggests that dressing up as characters of a differing gender than one's own is cosplay becomes a performance that challenges norms and breaks stereotypes. Butler (1990), in her famous study of drag, describes the practice to ridicule and parody the idea of gender, thus bringing forth its socially constructed nature. Parody, Butler (1990, 2004) explains, is a form of performance that allows norms and ontological presuppositions to be exposed by detaching individuals from and denaturalising that, which is perceived to be normal. Butler adds that, in itself, using excessive and dramatic elements does not result in subversive or transgressive performance; such performance is only able to *show* individuals the previously unimaginable.

Performance of the other thus also supports the undoing of gender. Such performance can create change in attitude, but it is unclear how it possibly activates individuals. Moreover, previous research has mainly observed performing the other as part of public performances and spectacles. Yet gender politics are also a deeply private concern that is an inherent, mundane part of everyday performance. Following these notions, it becomes relevant to explore how the performance of the other may activate individuals as well as influence engagement with gender performativity on a subjective, personal level. Accordingly, the aim of this research is to explore the subjective experience of undoing gender in order to gain insight about individuals' active, personal engagement with gender performativity. Next, I discuss the methodology of the research.

## Performance and performativity

This study incorporates the methodology of performance theory, following which all human action and interaction can be seen as performances (Carlson 2003; Schechner 2006). The approach focuses on the doing and the live, forming an ontology and epistemology based on interaction and experience (Bode 2010), in which understanding emerges through acting in and engaging with one's context in a dynamic manner (Denzin 2003). Following Carlson (2003), the focus is then not on exploring *whether* things are being repeated, as the underlying assumption is that they always are, but rather on *how* things are being repeated.

Schechner (2006) describes performance as the repetition and restoration of “previously behaved behaviors” (p. 35). In being repeated, the restored elements become detached from their original context, resulting in their re-contextualisation with each iteration (McKenzie 2001). Hence, performance is neither the behaviour, nor the norm guiding it, but it rather exists in the negotiation of the two (Denzin 2003; Schechner 2006).

Schechner (1988, 2006) suggests that there are two main types of performance: aesthetic and social (everyday) performance. Typically, everyday performance is perceived to constitute material life tied into norms and an idea of reality, while aesthetic performance is seen as something having a referential relationship to quotidian life. In contemporary culture, the two are increasingly difficult to differentiate, as their difference becomes a matter of taste and context rather than form or reference. Schechner (2006) nevertheless stresses that the aesthetic and the social remain important categories of performance, because people continue to make significant subjective differences between the two based on context and norms.

Performance gains power and authority through repetition that echoes its history (Butler 1993). Norms, structures, and symbolic meanings emerge through the seeming exact repetition of familiar performances. This repetition of the restored elements of performance is

never fully exact, leaving room for interpretation, rearrangement, and change (Carlson 2003; Butler 1990). However, subversion is not common, as performance has great power over us; we are socially expected to perform according to norms and previous performance iterations (McKenzie 2001). To connect more specifically to the performance of gender, we are compelled by regulatory practices of gender coherence. The performance of gender is driven by the need to be recognised by others, as a result of which individuals submit to norms and the maintenance of an account that is recognisable and seemingly stable (Butler 1990, 1993).

Thompson and Ustuner (2015) stress the necessity of distinction between social performance and gender performativity. I concur with their notion. Yet, it is equally important to note that performance and performativity, while separate, are also intrinsically tied into one another. Butler (1993) describes performativity as the “...reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (p. 2). Performativity is thus the power of various norms and structures that takes shape over time through a reiterative process of its citing. This takes form in instances of repetition, that is, in performance (Schechner 2006). Performativity could therefore be seen as the larger term, which encompasses and opens up the possibility of performance (Schechner 2006), but is, at the same time, sustained through performance (Butler 1993).

Following these ideas on performance and performativity, gender emerges as it is performed, existing and gaining power in our repetition of norms that are associated with it. Hence, no ‘true’ gender exists as basis for performance, and gender is real only to the extent that it is learned, repeated, and behaved.

While no ‘true’ gender precedes its performance, the body remains a central element that helps form the basis for gender performance (Carlson 2003; Denzin 2003). Materiality and matter are also effects of performance, effects that create a feeling of stability and naturalness. The body thus provides a seemingly real and continuous basis for the self.

Moreover, the body emerges as a boundary, through which the ideas of inner and outer, immaterial and material make sense (Butler 1990, 1993, 2004). It becomes a reference point within materiality, which helps us understand our selves and our world, yet, at the same time, further sustains the illusion of a pre-existing, constant gender (Butler 2004).

To summarise, this study approached gender as something that does not pre-exist performance, but is rather formed in the repetition of performance, guided by socially and bodily bound performativity. Next, I turn to a description of the context and research methods of the study.

### **Exploring crossplay: context and methods**

This research is based on the ethnographic study of crossplay, that is, the performance of a character that is of a different gender from what the performer normally identifies with. Crossplay is common to many geek culture activities, such as cosplay (Leng 2013; Seregina and Weijo 2017; Winge 2006), tabletop role-playing games (Martin 2004; Kinkade and Katovich 2008), historical re-enactment (Belk and Costa 1998; Chronis, Arnould, and Hampton 2013), and live action role-playing games (Bowman 2010; Seregina 2018). Winge (2006) has noted that women are more prone to engage in crossplay, theorising that this is due to the practice being a way of challenging stereotypes (especially gender stereotypes), and thus also challenging patriarchy. This is especially topical within geek culture, which has traditionally been a male-oriented subculture. Nevertheless, Leng (2013) has shown that the practice of crossplay is growing and becoming just as common for men.

My research specifically looks at the performance of crossplay within the context of live action role-playing games (LARP). LARP is “a form of role-play where the participants

take on fictive personalities and act out their interaction in a predefined, fictive setting” (Bøkman 2003, p. 177). The performance is secluded temporally and spatially, and involves enacting fantasy characters that operate with some degree of freedom within a fantasy setting. LARP differs from other types of role-playing games in that the players interact face-to-face within actual space and time. The performance often involves elaborate costuming and propping of a space, with themes of the games generally being based on popular fantasy or science fiction media, as well as the mixing of elements of these (for more on LARP, see, e.g., Bowman 2010; Seregina 2018).

The data was collected ethnographically in Southern Finland during 2012-2015. It is important to stress the cultural context of my study, because LARP differs very much from country to country in terms of organisation and themes used for creating the performances. LARP in the Nordic countries tends to focus on emotional aspects of character performance, interpersonal relationships among characters, as well as social structures and communities. Hence, suchLARPs do not focus on battling or gaining experience points (as LARP in other contexts sometimes does, thus reflecting strategically oriented table-top and video role-playing games), and, effectively, cannot be won. This structuring of LARP is most likely due to the egalitarian, non-hierarchical cultural context of the Nordic countries that focuses on collective meaning-making, mutual well-being, and informal interaction (see e.g., Holttinen 2014). While the Finnish cultural context may be non-hierarchical, traditional gender roles still exist, with the status, power, abilities, and expectations for these differing greatly.

The ethnography involved participant observation of various LARP events. Following performance theory’s call for active involvement in one’s research context (Conquergood 1991; Denzin 2003), I was an active participant in the LARPs, taking on the entire process of preparation for, engagement in, and aftermath of character performance. I also actively engaged in crossplay. I have a neutral gender identity, but I do partially identify as female

and I am mainly identified by others as female. My crossplay characters thus tend to have strong male characteristics. Although, perhaps, performing strong female characteristics could also be seen as crossplay in this case. In addition to participation, I engaged other LARPerS in discussions on the topic of particular performances as well as their own experiences in them, thus supporting my own personal perspective with the perspectives of other performers. The ethnography took on a performance focus (Conquergood 1991; Denzin 2003; Schechner 2006) in that the central elements of data collection were the body as a site of knowing, active and critical engagement in the context, and emphasis of non-human elements, such as the space and its material aspects. I documented my own experiences and reflected on the overall LARP performance through detailed field notes.

The ethnographic accounts were supported by photography and artistic practice. Photography helped document material and spatial aspects of the performances, as well as aided me in recalling and reflecting on performances I took part in. Artistic practice aided data collection and analysis through deepening reflection on and understanding of the context by allowing me to explore my experiences through non-verbal and non-textual means. In practice, following art-based research methods (see Seregina and Christensson 2017), my work involved creating paintings and mixed media installations. This helped me capture my subjective experiences of the research phenomena through affective and bodily practice, and allowed me to access embodied, lived knowledge, which cannot necessarily be reached through logical structuring of language. The finished artworks were used to communicate findings at conferences, workshops, lectures, and art exhibitions. The presentation of the artworks incited discussions on the topic of the research, helping develop theorisation and argumentation.

Ethnography was further supported by in-depth interviews with key informants. A total of 16 in-depth interviews were conducted with nine LARPerS. These were all Finns,

aged 19 to 29; seven identified more as female and two more as male. The interviewees had very differing experience within LARP: some were newcomers and others had been involved in the practice for over a decade. Interviewees were chosen through prior in-field interaction with the aim to gain varied perspectives on LARP in terms of experience with, interests in, and development through the practice; I approached interviewees either in field or via social media. The interviews mainly took place at interviewees' homes, with some taking place in cafes or places of work/study, as interviewees felt more comfortable with this. The interviews were open-ended and interactional, focusing on discussing recent LARP experiences in detail as well as reflecting on these in light of interviewees' overall experience with LARP and in connection to their everyday lives. We often discussedLARPs we had both attended, comparing experiences and reflecting on them together. The interviews lasted from about 40 minutes to three hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim; interviews were conducted and analysed in Finnish, with extracts used in this paper translated into English by me. The excerpts have been anonymised, and all interviewees have been given pseudonyms.

All data was analysed together as a whole using a hermeneutical approach, with analysis taking the form of a continuous reflexive activity conducted throughout the research. The unit of analysis was a LARP event, that is, a single LARP with all related preparation and aftermath. This allowed me to map out a LARP performance in detail as well as compare performances for similarities and differences. The goal was to find recurring performances, explore how they are repeated, and gain detailed understanding of them through their relation to and among individuals, objects, spaces, and contexts.

It is important to note that the original focus of the described ethnography was the exploration of fantasy experiences. Hence, this paper emerges out of a larger project that included, but was not limited to crossplay and gender performance. One of the central themes

of the original research was identity as part of fantasy performance. The topic of gender arose in an unsolicited manner in both the interviews and the participant observation, emerging most clearly in the performance of crossplay. I became interested in exploring crossplay, as individuals seemed very keen on engaging in it, and often approached it as a difficult aspect of LARP, as I will explain in more detail below. Moreover, individuals clearly enjoyed and kept coming back to crossplay, which pointed to performers gaining something from the engagement. I turned my focus to exploring how crossplay is performed and how it is negotiated by individuals both from the point of view of the fantasy performances of LARP as well as their everyday lives. No additional data was collected for the specific purpose of this paper. Nevertheless, I re-analysed the entire data set for the purposes of this paper with focus on gender as well as its performance and performativity.

Lastly, previous research has sometimes suggested that crossplay is a practice engaged by individuals of ‘non-traditional’ or ‘atypical’ gender (e.g., Brooks 2000). Of course, there are individuals within the LARP community who face struggles in their lives because of their sexualities and/or gender, and some of them do engage in crossplay. However, what became apparent to me is that this was not a common underlying reason for engaging in crossplay. Crossplayers seemed to rather be driven by an interest to explore performing something different from their so-called real self.

### **Performing crossplay in live action role-playing games**

LARP is a highly communal performance that is intrinsically tied into its cultural context, social context, as well as its physical, material context. In addition to the performance of the individual character, a LARP involves the performance of an emergent community of

characters, as well as the performance of a fantasy world, both as a material space and as a set of social norms. In this paper, however, I will be observing LARP only from the point of view of the character performance of a participating individual. This is because of the scope of the work and focus of the paper on subjective understanding of gender performance (for a broader analysis of LARP as performance, see Seregina 2018).

In the following sections, I will describe LARP performance from the subjective point of view of an individual's performance, focusing specifically on how individuals prepare for character performance, how the character performance unfolds during a LARP performance, and what happens after the performance is over. The structuring follows Schechner's (2006) suggested sequencing of performances: proto-performance, performance, and aftermath. Proto-performance involves the preparation that helps set up the performance. This may involve workshops, rehearsals, or training. Performance includes the event itself, its warm-up and cool down. The aftermath is an indefinite part of the performance that involves reflection on and critical response to the performance, as well as its archiving and memories.

### *Preparing for a character*

The performance of a specific LARP character is based on a 'character sheet,' that is, a description of the character that is provided by the LARP organisers (sometimes also written partially or fully by the players themselves). The character sheet varies in length and in content, but its goal is always to provide a basis for the character performance. It often includes a background and a set of characteristics for the character, as well as a list of 'contacts,' which are pre-defined relationships to other characters in the LARP. Additionally,

a character sheet may include things like an overview of the character's history or attitudes towards elements of the fantasy world and society being created.

The characters are 'cast' (emic term borrowed from theatre) by the organisers, but LARPer themselves have a lot of say in what characteristics and demographics their character will have. In taking on LARP characters, individuals are not limited to their own physical or social characteristics, thus performing characters of a different age, race, social class, political and religious views, as well as gender (i.e., crossplay). LARPer describe choosing to perform characters of a different gender for very similar reasons to choosing a character of a different age or social group: they are curious about and want to try performing various personalities and life situations. In discussing why she was interested in crossplay, Rose (who strongly identifies as a woman) says: "I like to, just out of curiosity, to try very different kinds of characters...and I hadn't LARPed a man before...so I had to try." Echoing other LARPer, Rose explains that she likes to LARP because it allows her to perform different types of people, in different contexts. Taking on a crossplay character thus becomes a way of trying out a very different kind of performance compared to her real self, allowing her to develop as a LARPer.

Before having experienced crossplaying, LARPer expressed feeling anxious about and even intimidated by this type of performance: crossplay seems ultimately different and clearly set apart from their real self, and, thus, more demanding than the performance of one's own perceived gender. This point of view is supported by the LARP community's insistence on crossplay being something to be engaged in by LARPer with at least some experience, because the performance does require more preparation and reflexivity. While somewhat nervous about the performance, LARPer that had not (yet) engaged in crossplay stressed that it is something that they wanted to and even needed to try. For many, crossplaying became a milestone of sorts that reflects their skill in performing characters

different from their everyday selves. Nevertheless, as I will show later on, after having engaged in crossplay, LARPerS often found that the performance was not very different from the performance of a character that is of a similar gender to what they normally identify with.

Similarly to Winge's (2006) observations in her study of cosplay, crossplay in LARP is something that individuals identifying more as female engage in more actively (nevertheless, all genders do engage in crossplay). In my analysis, there are several reasons for this. Firstly, it seems to be less stigmatising, in the wider cultural context, for females to take on male characteristics than the other way around (Helgeson 2017), with these ideas trickling into the LARP community. In line with this, some LARPerS identifying more as male have pointed out fearing that their crossplay performance may be seen as humorous. In contrast, those crossplaying male characters are usually approached very seriously. Secondly, LARPerS identifying more as female clearly show more interest in exploring male positions within society than LARPerS identifying more as male show interest in exploring female positions (again, I am not saying it does not happen at all; merely that it is less common), possibly because male positions are more dominant and wield more power in many social contexts. Many LARPerS expressed wanting to experience such a social position in order to understand how and why its performance works. Lastly, the difference in amount of engagement may also be attributed to the fact that, in many of the communities in my research context, there are more individuals identifying as female than as male overall. Hence, crossplay can become a necessity for sustaining the gender ratio of characters.

After receiving a character sheet, LARPerS prepare meticulously, focusing both on the appearance of the character, as well as their physical and mental performance. In terms of appearance, LARPerS put a lot of effort into creating their 'props,' that is, the costume, personal objects, and overall visual appearance of a LARP character. The props create a material, bodily image of the character that helps all performers to immerse into the fantasy

world. Peg explains that “[the props] create an atmosphere, a feeling.” Props are almost never ready-bought, but are put together piece by piece using elements that are crafted, commissioned, borrowed, or compiled of things found in thrift and speciality stores.

To aid the performance, the props need to fit the character and communicate their background and personality. Dawn explains an instance of choosing props, which exemplifies that this mostly becomes an associative, rather than a cognitive choice: “It’s like this white shirt [points to shirt] is ok, but I’ll take this pink one [to wear as my character]! Because it screams my character. That’s a really important thing!” The material elements can further serve as a guide for the LARPer during the performance: “I try to pick props that are typical for the character or like ones that remind me of a certain character trait. So it’s like my check list without the paper,” says May. Props communicate the material and physical aspects of the character, thus building other, incorporeal meanings associated with the performance.

Props become especially important for crossplay, as individuals feel the need to influence their physical appearance drastically in order to authentically perform a different gender. In crossplaying more feminine genders, LARPers use make-up, wigs, and stuffed bras to change their appearance. When crossplaying more masculine genders, individuals bind their breasts, and use cosmetics to create facial hair and change their hairlines. Crossplaying other genders similarly focuses on choice of clothes, hairdo, and make-up. Some LARPers even use a different deodorant or perfume/cologne to create a multi-sensory difference in their performance. Many LARPers note that the extreme change in physical appearance is a central aspect of enjoying crossplay, as one gets to perform someone other than their self in a distinctly clear fashion. This reflects Butler’s (1990) notions of embodiment being central to gender, making the latter feel real, continuous, and pre-existing.

In addition to preparing the appearance of the character through propping, LARPers also prepare mentally and physically to get into character. LARPers describe thinking about

and practicing various elements of their characters, such as how they move, how they talk, how they react to their environment and other characters. These form the mannerisms and habits of a character, resulting in a different “frame of mind” (May) or “mood” (Dot) that an individual takes on for the LARP performance. LARPer often prepare with others, especially with individuals that will be performing their character’s contacts. Such preparation mainly happens through discussions, helping synchronise performance of various relationships and gain an understanding of how other characters perceive one’s own. Right before a LARP starts, organisers further hold a general ‘brief’ for all the LARPer, which provides an overview of rules, the context of performance, and characters being performed.

Once again, crossplay often requires more preparation, as bodily movement, presence, habits, and norms may be unfamiliar. LARPer tend to rely on various archetypes, clichés, and gender stereotypes as the basis for their performance, sometimes asking friends and other LARPer, as well as looking into various media for help. Many describes watching TV-shows or movies to prepare for crossplay, paying close attention to things like how characters hold themselves and move about. Dot discusses her approach to preparing for a male crossplay character, which was based on reflections and discussions with friends:

*Dot: I have friends who are guys, and I’ll ask them what it’s like being such and such, so I think ... I’ve thought a lot about being a different gender and how that’s different in different situations, like how a male would think and deal with a situation.*

Dot continues that, unlike performing female characters (the gender she identifies with), she needs to practice how to talk, sit, and walk for LARPS, in which she is crossplaying. Hence, she needs to be consciously aware of and relearn elements of performance that are extremely natural to her both in everyday life as well as in LARPing characters of her own gender.

Together, the props and the pre-planned physical and mental characteristics of a character could be described as the character's personal front (Goffman 1974). In researching historical re-enactment, Belk and Costa (1998) similarly noted the appearance and manner of a character to be a front. Following these ideas, they proposed that "consumer 'props' are more important to role enactment" (p. 231), as the material elements of these 'fronts' are easier to maintain. In LARP performances, something different happens, as May explains:

*May: Of course the props help and they help others to experience things in an authentic way [...] but I would say the primary place where you develop the character is in your head. And that's what's great aboutLARPs! It doesn't matter that you don't have the magic wand that looks exactly authentic, or a sword that looks exactly real. They're just the tools you play with.*

Props provide a tangible basis for the character's identity performance, allowing the performance to become material and physical. As Butler (1990) has argued, we subconsciously link materiality with an underlying essence of realness. The materiality of props thus creates the idea of something real at the basis of the performance, and anchors character performance in it. However, as it becomes evident in the above quote, LARPer do not consider the material elements to be the central aspect of the performance; these merely create a supportive basis for the performance, emerging as tools for beginning the change of one's performance.

Beginning with the material fragmentation of one's body, and followed by the breaking down and building up of immaterial meanings and mannerisms for the character performance, the seeming pre-existence of gender starts to break. This begins the process of undoing gender as a seemingly stable, continuous social construction. However, the character

performance and the performance of the gender other only fully come into play in interaction during the actual LARP performance, to which I turn next.

### *Performing the character*

Preparation is immensely important, but the characters only come to life in their performance at the LARP, as individuals interact with one another and with the co-created fantasy world. Performers are expected to act according to the provided character sheet and take on this role seriously, avoiding parody or ridicule, even as stereotypes or clichés may be used as the basis for the character performance.

LARPers stress that one can only fully understand the character through behaving and interacting *as* the character. Through the performance, individuals gain a bodily, material, and emotional understanding of what they are engaging in. For instance, performance that initially seemed stereotypical may open up as having a lot of depth or unexpected reasoning for its emergence. Similarly, previously unreflected limits or constraints as well as possibilities and alternatives of performance emerge clearly through the performance of a character. This corresponds with Butler's (1990, 2004) ideas of identity emerging as it is performed, and not preceding its performance. As Rose describes it, the performance "opens your eyes to how other people live, how they are like and how they got there."

To provide an example, in crossplaying a politically active male character in a LARP that focused on political drama preceding a fictitious election of a prime minister, I noticed how the character's interaction was freed and constrained in various ways. Compared to my own interaction in everyday life, I was allowed much more aggressive and manipulative tactics by others as my character in convincing them of my perspectives. I was also clearly

given more room to talk, and could talk over others much more easily. At the same time, the character was limited in expressing emotion, showing weakness, and interacting with other characters in an affective manner. The performance was enforced by tone of voice, choice of wording, and bodily stance that I embraced for the character performance. The support of other performers was also central, as it allowed for the development of the performance characteristics through interaction.

Character performance is heavily reliant on the reactions of others to it and the resultant relationships among characters that become formed in the context of the LARP performance, as these verify and reinforce the individual's performance. Other performers need to *recognise* the character; otherwise its performance changes in nature or fails completely. Just like in everyday life, characters have a need to be recognised, and the performance only becomes real, as it is identified by others (Butler 2004).

Recognition becomes especially important and visible in crossplay. Rose explains that “[crossplaying] is really easy in that environment,” meaning that performing an other gender is readily recognised by other performers, making the endeavour easier within the context of LARP. Other LARPer's interactions and reactions give the performance validity and power, bringing the performed gender about and allowing it to exist. Hence, crossplay in LARP does not require the breaking or challenging of norms in the way that cross-dressing (Garber 1992) or drag (Butler 1990) do; it rather allows individuals to take on a different set of norms in a context that accepts the performance of the other directly.

Recognition as part of crossplay further allows LARPer's to gain insight on how gender performance is intrinsically tied into various other performances within a cultural context. In my own experience of crossplay, I have been amazed at just how differently other performers treat me when I take on a different gender. The reactions to, as well as the norms and expectations set by others for my own performance change drastically, leading to new

possibilities of interaction, identity display, bodily and spatial presence, emotional connections, and power relations. For instance, I have experienced male crossplay characters to have more possibilities for influence and dominance in a conversation, but be more limited in emotional display or personal interaction with other characters.

As noted, LARPers perceive performing a character to be alike to taking “a new point of view” (Wade) or “a new perspective” (May). The aim of the performance is to think, act and be recognised by others differently from one’s everyday performance. Nevertheless, the performance is not free or limitless, as it comes with very specific guidelines in the form of the character, its motivations, characteristics, and background. Essentially, individuals “learn to operate in new limits and express [themselves] in a completely new way” (Hope). Operating within new limits becomes especially important in crossplay. Dot elaborates on bodily aspects of crossplaying male characters: “for example, I won’t sit with my legs crossed and things like that.” In a conversation after a LARP, Grace discussed normative aspects of crossplay performance, pointing out that a performer has to deeply reflect on expectations for the behaviour of another gender and embrace these structures. Through these novel possibilities and limitations, LARPers become aware of details that influence the performance of gender and consciously create a performance of a specific gender.

The non-normalised attributes of the character performance require continuous monitoring, as, without reflection, individuals could fall back to their normal performances or lose awareness of the make-believe nature of the performance. To sustain character performance, LARPers need to be “continuously conscious of one’s self and environment,” says Wade. Rose further describes the experience: “it’s like focusing on something, but simultaneously acknowledging everything that is around you.” As a result, LARPers never reach the state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), as performance is continuously reflected on. Continuous reflection can be quite arduous and challenging, especially when recombining

deeply naturalised elements of performance, as Dawn's experience shows: "One time I was crossplaying a man, but [laughs] this character kept letting out very feminine squeals."

In upholding the intensely reflexive performance, individuals become very aware of their bodies and their performance, comparing and contrasting these to their normalised versions in everyday life. "Of course you yourself are always somehow present," Peg explains. While taking on the performance of character, individuals never lose track of their own selves, with activity always being anchored in this real self (Goffman 1974). As a result, through consciously monitoring their activities, individuals are not only extremely conscious of the character performance, but also become very aware of the performance of their self, their normalised body language, their attitudes and opinions.

As a consequence of the continuous comparison of performances, individuals end up either pushing themselves or holding themselves back based on what they perceive to be their normal, everyday performance. Rose elaborates in discussing character performance:

*Rose: you're like how am I supposed to react to this? A little bit differently in this LARP that I would personally react. You think about everything through the character. [...] Like I knew the situation and how I felt. But then I also knew that as the character I could not accept that view.*

This negotiation of performances in terms of pushing oneself or holding oneself back involves such aspects, as opinions, morals, attitudes, and presentation of self. Moreover, this may involve bodily elements, such as posture or a way of walking. As noted, these elements are often already engaged in the pre-performance preparations. They are further developed and refined as they are performed, through reflection and interaction with other performers.

The comparison and negotiation of performances is especially evident in crossplay, as

LARPers often become aware of norms and structures for their own gender that they have previously never noted, but needed to change in order to perform a gender other authentically and realistically. These norms include various bodily and interactive elements of performance, such as how one sits or walks, how one is approached in interaction with others, how one's opinions are received, and how one can exert power.

LARPers stress the necessary of keeping a distance to the character in its performance. "LARP does not involve your feelings, they are the character's. But you get to feel them...and they can be really strong" (Field note). LARPers are very particular about differentiating the self and the character, their perspectives, attitudes, and feelings, as otherwise, the game "can get very heavy and difficult" (May). Failure to discern self and character can result in disillusionment, disenchantment, and, in the worst case, negative experiences or emotions, such as fear, grief, or stress. If one is not careful, the experiences of the character and the self can become mixed during the LARP performance, with emotions and responses 'bleeding,' an emic term that refers to the partial or full transfer of feelings and sensations from character to self or the other way around.

All in all, a duality of performance takes place: one of the character and one of the self. This is upheld through continuous reflexivity and negotiation of performances, which does not allow performativity to set in. The dual performance is embodied and highly monitored, allowing guided deviance from and conscious perception of both the norms one steps away from and the norms one takes on in a limited time and space. Through the duality, the unity of self and body described by Butler (1990) becomes broken. Performance becomes experienced explicitly, with individuals consciously undoing gender bodily and normatively. As I show next, this provides a basis for understanding and changing performance.

*After the character performance*

Once a LARP performance is over, individuals return to the performance of their everyday self. This transition is quite abrupt and much less structured than the preparation for LARP. Nevertheless, there are important elements in the aftermath of the performance that aid in creating closure for and distance from the character. To begin with, LARPers often change into their own clothes right away and aim to talk about characters in third person.

The aftermath of the performance is emotional and contemplative, with individuals reflecting on and making sense of what happened. To ease the process, LARPers ‘debrief,’ an emic term for discussing the performance, both formally with the lead of the organisers and informally amongst LARPers. The discussions include talking about the performance as experienced by the LARPers and their characters; talking about how characters and their actions were perceived, influenced, and received by others; clarifying any uncertainties and misunderstandings. Through this, individuals gain an understanding of the LARP performance both from their own and others’ perspectives, thus aiding personal reflection.

Individuals stress that performance of LARP characters is a learning experience that helps them understand and develop their own self. May elaborates on how the character performance provides deeper understanding of her own behaviour and norms:

*May: When you play a character, you notice that you would react differently to a situation than the character does. And then you understand that ok, now I know how I would react to that. ... At least for me personally that brings a lot into my life.*

Rose similarly points out that character performance “makes new sides of yourself evident.” Many LARPers echo these sentiments, stressing that better understanding of one’s self and

the various norms and structures that guide it are the central giveaways of LARPing as well as an important reason why they keep coming back to LARP.

Crossplay becomes an especially eye-opening way of reflecting on one's self. Rose explains that this is because it allows one to take on a role and a bodily performance that one could not really experiment with otherwise. A different gender is a seemingly unreachable and impossible performance in the framework of everyday life.

*Rose: I very strongly identify as a woman, so it's not like ... I know some people feel that they are of a different gender, but I just want to immerse into that body language [of a different gender], like what the character could hold in itself. Because being a different gender is so different.*

Individuals are often capable of reflecting on or imagining the performance of various other differences in social statuses, such as change in economic status, cultural differences, or age differences. Many may have even experienced such changes in status during their own lives. However, the performance of gender, at least to most people, remains a strict norm one cannot easily change or experiment with.

Crossplaying is therefore often experienced as engaging in the performance of “a truly different character,” as Rose notes. Peg similarly explains that crossplay characters are much more different from her real self than characters of the same gender, and she, therefore, gets much more out of the experience. She continues that crossplay is in many ways easier to engage in because “...if the character is different then it is easier in a certain way to behave according to that character because you can distinguish the difference all the time, that this is now the character.” Through a clear difference, the structures and limits of both self and the character become much more distinct, alleviating the risk of mixing performances of self and

character, and allowing for more direct comparison and reflection of said performances.

I noted earlier that LARPer initially approach crossplay as more difficult, demanding, and even scary compared to performance of characters of their own gender. Crossplay can, of course, require more preparation and cognitive control, as the difference between self and character may be more drastic. Nevertheless, once having engaged in crossplay, LARPer do not find it to be more difficult than the performance of any other character. Chase casually notes that “neither gender is difficult [to perform].”

Based on my own experiences of crossplay and on discussions on the topic with other LARPer, the lack of perceived difference between ‘regular’ LARP and crossplay is promoted by a learning process that the performance allows. LARP in general pushes people to deconstruct performance in building up a non-naturalised performance within the temporal and physical confines of LARP, and in requiring performers to be simultaneously reflexive of both the character performance and the everyday performance it differs from. While gender may involve much more nuance, structure, and norms compared to many other aspects of identity, performers begin to see it as similar to other forms of social performance, just as malleable and changing. Dawn explains: “It’s not that different to play a man or a woman...I mean deep down inside it’s pretty much the same performance.” Moreover, LARPer cease to perceive gender as a holistic entity, and rather approach it as just one element of performance among many others that can be recombined in various ways to suit one’s intentions. As Hope notes: “It’s not that much different to perform another gender ... the performance comes down to [the character’s] personality. And gender is just one aspect.” Gender is undone subjectively on a bodily and normative level through emerging in performers’ perception as a set of various mouldable performances, intrinsically tied into other aspects of performance within a social context.

Through engaging in LARP and crossplay, individuals point out becoming “more

open” (Dot), gaining “new perspectives” (Wade), and becoming “a completely different person” (Rose). Rose elaborates: “[crossplay] has deepened my understanding of things and taking into consideration other people and their situations.” Performers thus end up transferring the undoing of gender also to their everyday performance. But how does this take place? As described earlier, during the LARP, individuals take on a duality of performance, which requires them to be continuously, consciously aware of their performance.

Performativity never sets in as part of the performance because of continuous reflexivity and a limited time frame. The result is explicit awareness of limitations, possibilities, and nuances of two performance structures: the character they are aiming to perform and the self that they are pushing away from. By deeply reflecting on both the unfamiliar performance of the other, as well as the very naturalised actions and reactions they need to *not* perform, LARPer become aware of the structures that both performances operate in, as well as how these structures possibly limit and/or enable their status and behaviour. Hope says that she has “gotten to learn about [her] own limits as a person” through crossplay. “You learn how things can be done differently,” she adds, “and that’s the beauty of it, [the character] gets to do things differently to how you would and you get to see these limitations.” Rose similarly explains that “when you get to do and get to be something different, it really fun because it brings out new aspects of yourself and it has made me more brave in social situations.”

The transfer of undoing performance to everyday life is further supported by the revelatory nature of LARP performances. Individuals come to perceive their gender performance as similarly performative to the gender other’s, with the novel perspective shattering the idea of gender as a pre-existing entity. This becomes especially evident when LARPer come back to real life. In having to take on their regular norms, the performative nature of which they have become reflexive, individuals begin to actively rethink how they perform gender in everyday life. Rose points out that “the reflexivity from LARP allowed me

to open up as a person [...] it has shown me that I can do things and I can do things differently ... it has clarified my own experience of me.” Possibilities for recombining performance elements in new ways in everyday life emerge based on the experience of already having done such a recombination of performance in taking on a LARP character. For instance, Wade explains that he now often approaches situations and interaction “in a similar way as I would in a LARP”, meaning he aims to consider various points of view, consciously editing his behaviour through taking on various roles and performance elements.

The bodily and spatial characteristics are especially important for reflexivity to take place, as Rose explains: “you are in that situation, in that [physical] place, with other people, it really brings a lot to all this.” Different gender performances require the use of one’s body in different ways, including posture, taking up of space, allowed/forbidden body movements or stances. LARPer gain first-hand knowledge of these through engaging in the bodily performance of crossplay characters. Moreover, through the dual, bodily performance, the seemingly pre-existing reality of the body of everyday performance is deconstructed and reconstructed, allowing the immutability of norms to be challenged on a fundamental level.

How much influence crossplay has on a performer’s everyday life varies a lot from individual to individual, depending on their existing status in society and on their personal goals (which may also change through LARP). Crossplay often becomes life influencing, because the character is more clearly distinct from one’s self, which allows deeper reflection.

The content of learning also varies. For some, crossplay may simply confirm that, which they were already aware of. Yet, for many, it becomes a revelatory experience that helps them structure their lives in ways that allows gaining the type of role and/or place in a cultural context that they want. Firstly, learning can be directly linked to gender, its understanding and performance. In a discussion after a LARP, Grace explained that she had become a feminist as a result of crossplay, because engaging in such performances “opened

her eyes to a lot of things,” helping her “realise how structures are often built around men.” She notes that these revelations have helped her see how her own everyday life is limited by gendered power structures, and has actively made changes to her behaviour. For instance, she has changed her body language at her workplace to get her opinions heard.

Secondly, learning can become more widely applicable through the perception of gender as one malleable aspect of performance. Through gaining insight into the structures that gender performance is a part of, individuals become aware of how gender performance is connected to various other performance elements, such as communication or power relations, thus influencing how individuals approach everyday performance as a whole. For example, Dawn explains that she used to be quite shy, but, through crossplay, has learned how to take a more sociable and dominant position in interaction with others. She says she has learned this from performing male characters, yet feels that she has not become particularly masculine through taking on some aspects of such performances into her everyday life. This recombination of everyday performance has allowed her to meet new people and find a job she enjoys.

To conclude, the performance of the other in crossplay allows individuals to undo gender subjectively, giving individuals the tools to approach and engage gender performance differently in their everyday lives. LARPer become aware of gender performativity and the possibility to perform gender differently. They are further pushed to actively recombine their everyday performance through becoming aware of the possibilities and limitations of various performances and the performative nature of the structures that these emerge as part of.

## **Discussion: gaining awareness of and recombining normative performance through performing the other**

The performance of the other, as it takes form in crossplay, allows individuals to undo gender on a subjective, yet also bodily and normative level. Individuals gain awareness of gender performativity as well as how their everyday performance is guided by and limited to a variety of performative structures. Through this, individuals become capable of reflecting on and actively modifying their everyday performance.

I suggest that the particular form of performing the other creates opportunities for active learning and change. Crossplay in LARP emerges as something that shares many characteristics with the carnivalesque, a type of performance that challenges and possibly undoes gender norms. Yet, crossplay in LARP and the carnivalesque differ in important ways, which points to how crossplay works as an activating performance. In Bakhtin's (1986) description, the carnivalesque performance has four defining categories: it allows interaction among individuals that would not normally come together; it welcomes eccentric and unacceptable behaviour without consequences; it connects elements of performance and interaction that would normally be separated; and it supports sacrilegious performances. The carnival is a second life that suspends everyday affairs, taking on an unstructured and outrageous form that frees its participants from any norms or repercussions (Bakhtin 1984; Fiske 1989). The performance of the other in crossplay does indeed entail performers entering another world, in which individuals that may normally never interact come together and engage in performances that may lie outside of the norms of their ordinary contexts. However, this performance is not free from structure.

In contrast to the freedom and topsy-turvy of the carnival, crossplay involves a performance that is very clearly structured, bears logical hierarchies, and only allows the

breaking of norms in limited ways specified by the context of the performance. As a result, crossplay does not publicly challenge or ridicule gender norms, but rather allows performers to take on an *additional, different* set of limitations within a context that supports its performance. This requires individuals to engage in a duality of performance, which pushes them to become highly aware and reflexive of both the performance of the other and of their everyday self. Individuals come to understand the cultural and normative structures that guide these performances, thus gaining sight of their various limitations and/or possibilities. Both performance of the other and of the self loose their immutable essence, with the recombination of performance emerging as a clear, realistic possibility also in everyday life. In line with this, individuals begin to see gender as a set of changing, mouldable elements of performance.

Next, I provide a perspective on the form of performance of the other that takes place in crossplay in LARP, showing how such performance provides a basis for undoing gender, understanding gender performativity, and actively recombining normative performance.

### *Performing the other as an aesthetic learning experience*

In my analysis, a central aspect of performing the other in crossplay is the specific *form* of performance, in which naturalised norms are made visible and undone through reflexive, active learning. Unlike in drag or cross-dressing, crossplay as part of LARP does not involve direct critique, ridicule, or parody of gender norms. Moreover, unlike crossplay in cosplay (Winge 2006), crossplay in LARP does not merely focus on public display and visual aspects of gender, but involves a holistic, interactive, bodily performance of the other, including both their inner world and their place within a cultural context. Performers of crossplay in LARP

engage in the bodily performance of gender norms of everyday life, but with the possibilities and constraints of a perceived other. As a result, individuals find out for themselves how the performance of gender norms emerges, is structured and contextualised on an embodied level. Individuals cease to perceive gender as immutable and pre-existing, as well as gain sight of its performativity, becoming activated to engage in recombining their everyday performance. I elaborate on this below.

I suggest that performing the other, such as it takes place in crossplay, could be likened to aesthetic performance. The two are similar in structure and aims. Aesthetic performance has been described as reflecting everyday life (Schechner 1988), and it has been connected to imagination (Tolkien 1964) and media (Holbrook 1980); aspects also evident in crossplay. Moreover, similar to crossplay performance, aesthetic performance is carefully structured and involves reflection that does not allow flow to set in (Schechner 2006). In line with these ideas, Mackay (2001) has linked role-playing games to aesthetic performance, and Leng (2013) has compared crossplay to artistic practice.

The aesthetic form of performance of the other allows for direct engagement with gender norms. As I explain next, this differs in important ways from second-hand engagement with gender norms, such as through watching television (Zayer et al. 2012), through interaction with ads (Schroeder and Zwick 2004), or through being presented a parody of gender norms (Butler 2004). In discussing how parody can teach individuals about gender performativity, Butler (2004) stresses that the created awareness does not in itself result in transgression of norms, merely showing its possibility. In contrast, the form of performing the other evident in crossplay provides a different approach to or direction for learning about gender performativity. Individuals are not shown a critique or parody, but are required to seriously perform a character of an other gender, set in a context and normative structure similar to their everyday one. Hence, performers need to figure out themselves how

to *not perform* their own gender and how to *perform* the other gender performance realistically, engaging in the latter emotionally and bodily. Through this, individuals gain first-hand understanding of various elements that influence, limit, and enable gender performance.

This type of performance of the other could be more specifically likened to Brecht's (1965) perspectives on aesthetic performance. Working in the context of theatre, Brecht stressed that aesthetic performance should not show people narratives and ideas, as explaining things causes passivity. He rather promoted a type of performance, in which actors and spectators are required to create their own understanding through piecing together fragmented performance and filling in gaps with their own interaction. Such performance provides a vague starting point and no clear narrative, with meaning emerging through actors and spectators interacting with the performance and amongst themselves.

Crossplay emerges as very similar to Brechtian aesthetic performance. To begin with, character performance in LARP is based on a vague structure provided in the form of a character sheet, ultimately emerging through bodily performance and interaction among performers. Unlike Brechtian performance, however, LARP is not usually a public event. It is closed and private, thus allowing performers a safe space for experimentation.

Performance of the other in crossplay further involves the strict separation of self and character advocated by Brecht. Brecht stressed the separation of the two roles in a rational and non-emotional manner, because this supports self-reflection and prevents mixture of character with the self. LARPer, however, do not engage in dual performance only rationally; they also experience emotion through their character. Peg provides an example: "Even though it's you performing the character, you also somehow feel the emotions of the character. Like Damien [a LARP character] is kind of grim and serious, so he reacts to things differently than I do." She adds that experiencing different reactions in settings previously

unfamiliar to her allows her to learn about performance of such interaction. Yet she stresses that the emotions need to be kept at bay: “I mean, you let go of [the character’s emotions], they aren’t yours. And if a character is in trouble or something, you might secretly laugh at it as yourself.” This is in line with McConachie’s (2008) criticism of Brecht, in which the former proposed that emotion is central for creating empathy and sympathy; it is not merely a side effect, as Brecht suggested. Separation of self and character can thus be simultaneously emotional and rationally differentiated.

Another point of similarity is focus on the body. Brecht advocated the importance of the body in his aesthetic performance, as he believed the body to be more in control than the mind. Physicality, in his opinion, is the only way to create active engagement. Similarly, in crossplay, individuals stress the importance of bodily and material aspects of performance, as these create the feeling of reality and essence. Dot describes the importance of bodily aspects of performance of a crossplay character: “Ivan clearly comes out in the way I speak. Or maybe like the tone he comments in, you can hear it in everything. Then there’s also the way he stands...and just is.” Following Butler (2004), reality is imposed on individuals through performance; an imposition they are rarely aware of, but one, which makes the idea of stable reality possible. More importantly, reality is imposed on individuals through the embodiment of norms that makes the body seem like it pre-exists and thus defines performance (Butler 1990, 1993). Hence, the focus on body in crossplay is central, as it allows the denaturalization of performance and resultant undoing of norms on a fundamental level.

All in all, the performance of the other, as it takes form in crossplay, could be described as Brechtian aesthetic performance. Through engaging in the direct, bodily performance of the other that pushes performers to figure out its limitations and possibilities, individuals learn to recombine normative performance by having to make their own meaning. The process is supported by the clear differentiation of performances of self and character, as

well as the resultant duality of performance. Moreover, the bodily and material aspects of performance are central for gaining reflexivity, as these tie into the experience of an immutable, pre-existing reality that then becomes changed.

Through the active, bodily learning, the previously fixed basis for and the point of opposition of one's gender (Butler 1990, 2004) become shattered; gender performance becomes perceived as a set of performances that are continuously recombined and intrinsically tied into various elements of performance of contemporary culture. In effect, individuals undo gender for themselves and begin perceiving gender as performative. What's more, the performance of the other as active meaning-making provides a basis for recombining everyday performance in ways that overcome norms one is performatively limited by. In other words, the performance provides a basis for agency. I discuss this next.

#### *Performing the other as a basis for agency in recombining gender performance*

I suggest that, in pushing individuals to actively make meaning and actively learn, performance of the other in the form of Brechtian aesthetic performance creates an activating basis for the recombination of gender performance in everyday life. This is once again tied into the specific form of the performance, which does not result in a plurality of gender (Goulding and Saren 2009), taking on a different femininity or masculinity (Kates 2002; Martin, Schouten, and McAlexander 2006), taking on elements of the other gender as part of one's performance (Thompson and Ustuner 2015), or a fluidity of gender (Zayer et al. 2012). The above described categories always, in the long run, become instances of performative acts (Butler 2004), that is, instances of authoritative speech that reinstate the power of a

discourse by reiterating its performance. Even when challenging traditional gender norms, these performances present a new identity, which is, in itself, normatively binding.

Conversely, the performance of the other in Brechtian aesthetic form allows individuals to deconstruct the idea of gender as a solid and immutable concept by means of active and reflexive recombination of its performance. Through this, individuals begin to approach gender as one facet of performance of self that is formed through a set of various, shifting elements of performance, never establishing an immutable totality. The result is a focus away from gender as a definitive and central category for normative everyday performance. As I have shown, many of my interviewees cease to see an opposition or difference in performing different genders, rather focusing on the recombination of various performance elements that an identity is made up of.

Individuals are further activated to recombine everyday performance of gender, as it is no longer perceived as having a stable, natural form. The Brechtian aesthetic form of performance requires individuals to engage in a very structured and delimited bodily performance of the other, and also actively figure out *how* to do this on their own through reflecting on both their normalised performance of gender and the non-normalised performance of the other. The learning that happens through reflection on the dual performance is embodied, active, and directly projected onto everyday structures, making the performative nature of their norms evident and shattering their fixity as the basis for performance. The shattered basis for everyday life activates individuals to rethink and recombine their performance. In practice, individuals do this through recombining various elements of performance, which become apparent during the bodily performance of the other. These 'novel' performances do not form a new reality, but are based on already existing elements of performance (both previously unreflected elements of one's own performance and those of the other) that individuals become aware of. As Butler (2004) has suggested, we

cannot perform outside of the ideology we are in, and we must therefore work with its own tools and structures in order to subvert it.

In essence, through undoing gender, performance of the other creates a basis for agency in everyday gender performance. Butler (1990, 1993) proposed that agency does not exist outside of norms, but emerges as awareness of the structures of performance that, in turn, allows those performances to be repeated differently or not to be repeated at all. Similarly, through the performance of the other, individuals gain understanding of how gender performance takes place and how it emerges as a part of its context. Hence, the previously immutable reality, one's body and self, as well as the norms and structures that bind these become apparent; a newfound perspective that pushes individuals to change their repetition of norms through recombining elements of performance (or not repeating them at all).

Of course, individuals cannot change their entire social context or create their own realities. As Butler (2004) wrote, gender is always socially negotiated, as it "is always coming from a source that is elsewhere and directed toward something that is beyond me, constituted in a sociality I do not fully author" (p. 16). Nevertheless, I suggest that through Brechtian aesthetic performance of the other, individuals become capable of functioning differently within the limitations of their social contexts. As gender is socially dependent, in taking a different personal approach to its performance, individuals make a claim to structures much larger than themselves. In effect, they can disturb norms of gender performance in subtle, but also very direct ways through change in their subjective understanding of gender performativity and the recombination of their own roles in normative performances. For instance, they may use small cues and normalised mannerisms differently, causing different responses or interaction in others. This can have wider impact in the long run through changes in interaction, role, and status that the individual brings into the

larger context of performance.

## **Conclusions**

This paper set out to explore the subjective experience of undoing gender in order to gain insight into how individuals understand gender performativity and relate it to their everyday lives. I have shown that individuals undo gender through bodily performance of the other, which allows them to perceive gender as one element of performance, formed through and intertwined with various recombinable elements of social performance that never solidify into a totality.

I propose that the specific aesthetic form of performance of the other activates individuals to reflect on gender performativity and recombine normative performances. Such performance does not directly challenge or ridicule norms, nor is it completely free. It rather promotes active, bodily learning through pushing performers to engage in an additional set of limiting structures, and, in performing these, to figure out on their own how to perform their norms. Through reflection, meaning making, and interaction with others, the immutability of performance becomes shattered, and performers gain the agency to reconsider and recombine performance in light of its reflexively perceived limitations and possibilities.

Following these findings, I suggest that one approach to creating awareness of gender performativity and, through that, of gender equality would be creating opportunities for reflexivity and personal meaning-making. One way to do this is through aesthetic performance, which allows individuals to gain understanding of performance structures and norms by means of active learning. Moreover, this has the potential for becoming a powerful tool for organising, understanding, and recombining norms of performance. In practice, such

reflexivity can be created in a variety of consumption contexts, such as servicescapes, in which aesthetics play an important role.

Thinking beyond gender, a similar performance of reflexive agency can be applied to other aspects of performance of self, interaction, and social structure. The findings can be further linked to the study of consumer agency and emancipation. Consumer researchers often describe emancipation as the process of consumers retreating from a market or culture, linking the concept to playfulness and impermanence (Murray and Ozanne 1991). However, Kozinets (2002) questioned whether consumers can be emancipated at all, concluding that only temporary, localised liberation is possible. Similarly, Holt (2002) has suggested that perhaps we can never escape the structures of the market; we live within a culture of consumption, and resistance within it will always feed back into its structures. I concur that we cannot get away from the structures we have been acculturated into, as this forms the background to any reformulation of performance. Nevertheless, I propose that what consumers *can* engage in is the ‘hiatus of iterability’ (Butler 1993), thus becoming free of the blindness to the structures of everyday performance. Individuals can gain the possibility to not only undo gender, but undo normative performance more generally.

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