Netprov

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Larping Five Genders

In 2016, LARP designer and scholar Samara Hayley Steele approached Mark and me looking to collaborate. Hayley mentioned that she had co-designed a five-gender role system for a LARP and that it hadn’t been played as thoroughly as she would have liked. Mark’s and my eyes lit up. If you can design a five-gender system for us, we said, we’ll play! We didn’t want to make it about humans so we decided to make it about the rainbow-colored single-celled dwellers of thermal hot springs like the ones Mark had recently visited on vacation.

Thermophiles in Love is a five-gender dating website for microorganisms. Play as one of five genders as you seek to form the perfect quadruple. The genders in this society are: Hype, Obli, Fac, Acido, and Meso.¹

We recruited writer-dancer-biologist and featured player Cathy Podeszwa to join the netrunner team and Thermophiles in Love⁰ was born. Mark created an online “genderator” to randomly assign genders. In addition to a netprov version created on a stand-alone forum website, Steele was gamemaster for traditional LARP versions run in Berkeley, California, at the conference of the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts (SLSA) in Atlanta, Georgia, and the Living Games Conference in Boston, Massachusetts.

Marino described the use of the genderator:

Hayley and I would stand by a computer displaying the webpage for the genderator (a simple random generator). We would ask volunteers to step up and have their gender scanned, encouraging them to clear the minds so as not to cloud the genderator’s sensors. Once they were in position, we would reload the page and then pronounce that the genderator had
determined their appropriate thermophile gender. The playful gender scan was meant as a satire on the arbitrary enforcement of the social construction of gender. However, it also served to bring participants into the world of the game.²

*Thermophiles in Love Relationship Norms*

- A quadruple (rhymes with “couple”) can have any combination of genders in it; it’s not unusual for two or more of the same gender to be in a quadruple.
- Thermophiles can’t choose who is in their quadruple: Mesos are the matchmakers.³

Each gender was taught a simple, easy to remember gesture or dance that quickly identified them to other players. The genders included:

**Acido:** Acidophilic thermophiles (aka lithotrophs), the magnificent gender.

- Temperature Preference: Extreme Heat and Acidity (130°F+/ 54°C+ and less than 7pH).
- Lucky numbers: 3 and 4
- Motto: The Magnificent 7 rolled into 1.
- Those acid baths keep your organelle looking magnificent! Your presence turns any situation into something valuable.
- Always aware of being seen because you stand out. No matter where you go, you quickly become a public figure.
- Other genders: Find you magnetic.
- Weakness: Occasionally you flip out over things that some might call “trivial.”
- You need constant feedback to feel secure (because whether or not they admit it, you know they’re all looking your way).
- Ideal Occupation: Company spokesperson, pop singer, clothing line namesake, on-screen talent, Instafamous Twitterati, community spokesperson, politician, salesperson, the embarrassing-and-proud parent.
Fac: Facultative thermophiles, the mirroring gender.

- Temperature Preference: can adjust to a wide range, from high to extreme low (100°F-150°F / 38°C-66°C).
- Lucky numbers: 7 or 9.
- Motto: Dare To be Similar.
- The shape-shifting gender, you conform to whatever situation you are in.
- Propensity to develop different personalities, which to you are more like modalities.
- Truth is relative to you; “lying” isn’t a concept to you.
- Other genders: Feel connected and at home with you—you remind everyone of their best friend from their hometown
- Weakness: Becoming overloaded by the very different expectations each person has for you.
- You are up for whatever.—Can cause jealousy as you flit about doing your thing.
- Propensity to lose yourself.
- Ideal Occupation: Explorer, investigative reporter, political strategist, Hollywood agent, cultural theorist, military intelligence in a “hot” zone, social worker, language interpreter, user interface designer, the parent who’s like a kid.

In a talk at the conference Social Studies of Live Action Role-Playing Games at the European University at St. Petersburg, Russia, Steele talked about gender playability.

The goal, ultimately, when you’re designing for gender playability, is for players to reify their game genders, which is to say, they take those social constructs to be facts of nature. It starts feeling “real.” Once that happens, you achieve a type of gender playability, a type of fluency in the things of the game gender. This I argue creates a more immersive alternative reality experience, because gender is something that so many of us take for granted in such a deep way, that achieving gender playability in a game creates this feeling of the surreal, like the sense of being in a truly different, truly foreign society, in a way that I think surpasses other forms of playability in game design. I believe gender playability shows us
the amazing achievements of game design, in terms of what game design can teach us about our own culture.5

Marino describes the live LARP sessions:

We held a series of thermophile speed dating rounds, followed by some match making, and then trial mini-dates of our quadruples. Participants live played all of these, which were followed by discussions about how the role-play and matchmaking went.6

An email from Steele after running the fifth live LARP version shows the subtle sensitivity of the larpwright and is a great model for netprov netrunners:

I’ve gotten quite a few of the kinks out (very much thanks to some Theatre of the Oppressed workshops I’ve been to in the San Francisco area—very good techniques to bring into a LARP!) Everything is now done kinetically—the Mesos now tap people’s shoulders and trade them with each other, gradually building the quadruples that way, rather than having to write names down.

[One] thing that really got me later that I wanted to share: two days after running Thermophiles in Love, I ran into one of the players at MIT, and they were introducing themselves as their Thermophile name!! . . . I always ask the players to think a of gender-neutral noun and they write it down, then we fire up the Genderator and after everyone is gendered, I tell them “remember that gender neutral noun you wrote down? That is your Thermophile name.”

What an amazing collaborative piece! The gendering ritual . . . plus the Genderator!—plus those gender write-ups we all came up with!—that stuff is pure magic I tell ya!

The dances have been a huge contribution to the game—having the way you move (rather than the way you look) be the thing that signals your gender has really gotten great feedback!! Also, perhaps the most moving moment in the Boston run had to do with the dances—this was described by one of the players during the post-game storytelling circle:

(Note: for this game, I told the players: “Facs, the mirror gender, are the only gender that can do other genders’ dances—they mirror the dances of others around them—they also have their own dance, but it is very rare to see.”)

This player had been part of a group that became quadrupled with a Meso who, mid-game, had a gender change. . . . Bartender (the former Meso) came wandering into their group saying, “I’m an Acido now.” He
had this moment of feeling great joy for Bartender, and also shock that someone can become another gender, and at that moment he realized he was having a feeling that was genuinely his rather than mirroring others around him & very softly, at the edge of the group, for a fleeting second, he did the Fac dance. And that’s what the Fac dance is about now: it’s about being there for those little moments that belong only to you.

During that run, I had a player have a moment of tears during the gendering ritual. Based on how Mark and I did it at the SLSA, I always say “congratulations!” to the person about their new gender. And this young person, they’d never been congratulated on their gender before and they were saying “I don’t know why it feels so good to hear that: congratulations” while wiping tears from their eyes.⁷