

Mela Kocher/Marie Denward/Annika Waern

***Sanningen om Marika* – The Interplay of Reality and Fiction**

Analysis of a Crossmedia Production

„Bloody liars!“¹

One of the most exciting developments in the field of new technologies, games and other media are crossmedia productions. New forms of interaction between the ludic and the narrative are being established, displayed via different platforms such as mobile phones, television shows, online games, websites, chats, blogs and forums, as well as physical locations. *Sanningen om Marika* (*The Truth About Marika*), a Swedish crossmedia production, employed those platforms to create a fictional universe with strong references to the real. As it turned out during the play course, the distinction between fiction and reality couldn't always and easily be made by the participatory community, since the blurring of the boundaries was one of the major design strategies of the production companies. Calling *Sanningen om Marika* (*SOM*) a *participation drama*, the producers clearly had the intent to actively engage the participants in the storyline, and to encourage them to imagine and *immerse into the fiction as if it was reality* rather than just engage in a game. This article will explore the strategies of the blurring of the boundaries between reality and fiction as it occurred in *SOM* and explain how the different platforms were contributing to its ambiguity.

1 *Sanningen om Marika* – an irresponsible production?

On October 29th, 2007, one of the major tabloid newspapers in Sweden, *Expressen*, topped its first page with the heading „*Sanningen om Marika* – Irresponsible by SVT?“. In the article, the TV reviewer Britta Svensson dealt judgment on the first episode of *Sanningen om Marika* – a drama series and a

¹ Anonymous; postgame Internet survey of *SOM*.

faked real-time debate aired in Swedish broadcast television the evening before. This reviewer forcibly expressed the opinion that „it is completely irresponsible by Swedish Television to blur the border between fiction and reality“². But *SOM* was not only a television series, it was also a reality game that lasted over a month, played both on the net and in the real world, produced by two teams, one working at The Company P and the other at SVT.³ A month later one of the participants wrote, in reviewing the happenings:

A wonderful experience on the borderline between fiction and reality. I see an underlying message that is true, but written in through the fiction to create a context and a complete picture. A creative way to tell a story, to get through with a message.⁴

2 Fiction and Reality

In order to talk about the blurring of the border between fiction and reality, one must assume that there is a clear difference to start with. In this section, we discuss what is commonly meant by these terms, as well as how recent media productions have started to question the commonsense notion of these concepts⁵.

2.1 Fiction, Reality and Lies

As commonly understood, a fictional text does not have a referent outside itself, a fictional story therefore deals with something which is not real.⁶ Many games and stories play out in a fictional universe (a diegesis), which exists outside our everyday world and which has its own rules and structures. Books, cinema and TV traditionally aim to clearly distinguish between fictional and

² Svensson: „Sanningen om Marika – Oansvarigt?“.

³ www.thecompanyp.com and www.svt.se. For a full listing of the production team members see www.conspirare.se.

⁴ Anonymous. Comment in Postgame Internet Survey, conducted by Marie Denward/The Interactive Institute.

⁵ See Behrendt: *Dobbeltkontrakten*, Bignell: *Big Brother*, Jansson: *Episkt dubbelspel*.

⁶ Iser: *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, p. 1. Iser goes beyond the opposition of the real vs. the fictive by including a third element, the imaginary; an interesting approach that we cannot follow further in this context.

documentary stories. Whereas fictional stories can contain documentary elements (e.g. being inspired by real events), traditional documentaries should reflect the *real* background as accurately as possible. A fictional story that does not reveal being fabricated, or a documentary which invisibly mixes in fictional elements, is usually considered a lie.

In the context of a diegesis, reality is best described as that which is *not* part of it. Reality is what was not made up for the purpose of telling a story (or creating a game). A fictional framework makes reality visible by creating a boundary towards it. The diegesis will negate some parts of reality and transform others to become part of the story world.⁷

2.2 Media between the fictive and the real

Media – in the meaning of tools to store or distribute information – play an important role in everyday life in contemporary society. What we experience, understand and integrate into our lives today is to a higher extent derived from a plethora of media.

Media as such make no fundamental distinction between factual⁸ and fictional information, and most media (e.g. theatre and TV) are able to directly play on our senses. Even though the credibility or authenticity cannot be attested in most media, most people still (try to) draw a distinct line between fact and fiction.

Television is a good example of how a medium creates illusions of reality through its technology, by recording real sound and moving pictures for factual as well as for fictional genres.⁹ The way TV programs such as documentaries, news or debate programs are produced and the way broadcasting is subjected to selection and editing processes, it is self-evident that even factual programs never mirror reality in a 1:1 ratio. Spectators develop skills of interpretation of the fictional and factual elements according to established codes and conventions that these formats implement. *Reality markers* that signal their truthfulness or *fictional markers* that do the contrary are widely understood and accepted by the audience, at least concerning traditional (TV) formats.¹⁰

⁷ Iser: The Fictive and the Imaginary.

⁸ About the concept of *factual* in TV as applied by viewers to signify non-fiction programmes that make truth claims and are based on facts, see Hill: Restyling Factual TV.

⁹ Burton: Talking Television.

¹⁰ Such strategies will be accurately discussed in the analysis of SOM, 3.2.

Factual and documentary genres for television have grown very fast since the beginning of the 1990s and are still growing.¹¹ Hybrid genres such as reality soaps like *Big Brother*¹² and drama documentaries like *Love Town*¹³ show that fact and fiction are increasingly blurred in television today.¹⁴ Having adjusted ourselves to these hybrid genres, electronic media make the distinction even harder. „Direct observation and hard evidence generally do not exist“ anymore in the Internet, where „identity play is omnipresent.“¹⁵ *SOM* applied strategies for blurring fact and fiction that were taken not only from TV, but also from *alternate reality games* (ARG) and from *live action role-playing games* (LARP).

2.3 Alternate Reality Games and Live Action Role-Playing Games

According to Jane McGonigal, an Alternate Reality Game (ARG) is

[...] an interactive drama played out in online and real spaces, taking place over several weeks or months, in which dozens, hundreds or thousands of players come together online, form collaborative social networks, and work together to solve a mystery or problem [...] that would be absolutely impossible to solve alone.¹⁶

The ARG genre emerged right after the turn of the century out of earlier experiments with media play. It traces its roots back to productions such as the advertisement campaign for *The Blair Witch Project*.¹⁷ An ARG uses techniques

¹¹ Hill: Restyling Factual TV.

¹² See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Brother_\(TV_series\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Brother_(TV_series)), 06.11.2008.

¹³ Helen Richards, BBC 1991. The series *Love Town* consists of six episodes of 30 minutes and features couples getting married.

¹⁴ Different subgenres are evolving according to their share of fact and fiction: Whereas the term *docudrama* denotes the integration of documentary items into a fictional format, *dramadoc* means bringing dramatization into the conventions of documentary (Burton: Talking Television, p. 155).

¹⁵ And further: „The popular forms range from posting fabricated dating ads to discussing with pseudonyms and creating whole websites projecting the desired identities.“ Stenros et al.: „Pervasive Games in Ludic Society“. The criminal aspects of identity play in the Internet is currently reflected at www.crimemedicine.com (05.11.2008), a Swedish website on the free distribution of medicine via Internet.

¹⁶ McGonigal: Alternate Reality Gaming.


¹⁷ ARGs have often been used as advertisement campaigns. Other examples include the archetypical ARG *The Beast* used to market the movie *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (Stanley Kubrick/Steven Spielberg, 2001) and the more recent *The Art of the Heist*,

such as fake websites, phone calls from game characters, and staged events in the real world to create a fictive game story that looks and feels very much like reality, and then invites participants to actively take part in the story.¹⁸ The ARG genre has inspired a mode of play in which the participants choose to act (primarily through writing styles in online forums) as if the game world was real, as *performing belief*: the players are not deceived by the game world but deliberately choose to pretend to believe that the game world is real.¹⁹

Player pretence is even more important in Nordic live action role-playing. Whereas LARP occurs in many countries and is by far not a novel phenomenon, the Nordic LARP culture is perhaps the game practice that has gone the furthest in realizing full immersion into a physical game world.²⁰ The basic approach of a Nordic LARP is to confine the players to a carefully staged environment, prepare them for their character roles, and leave them to interact with each other and the environment, in character, during the game. There are few formal rules in this form of LARP, the players stay in character continuously unlike American LARP.²¹ This design ideal, which was developed in the Nordic community during the 1990s, has been called the *360° illusion*:

[...] a complete universe available to interact with, a situational, emotional and physical realism in character immersion, and a what-you-see-is-what-you-get attitude to the physical environment of the game. I call this style the 360° illusion, in reference to the totality of both the physical game environment and the space for immersion it strives to create.²²

The original notion of a 360° illusion was developed for confined and special-propped spaces. But the community has also developed games that take the illusion out of the closed space and into our everyday environment as well as onto the Internet. The game designer and creative director of *SOM*, Martin Ericsson, had previously been the creative director of two such

 used to market a new Audi A3 model, http://www.mckinney.com/A3_H3ist/, 05.11.2008.

¹⁸ McGonigal: This Might Be a Game, IGDA ARG SIG: Alternate Reality Games Whitepaper.

¹⁹ McGonigal: This Might Be a Game.

²⁰ This practice, which originates from the 1980s, is well documented through annual self-reflective books published by the annual *Nodal Point* events where theorists and practitioners meet to discuss. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knutepunkt>, 05.11.2008.

²¹ Lancaster: Warlocks and Warpdrive.

²² Koljonen: „Eye-witness to the illusion“, p. 175.

productions: *Prosopopeia 1: Där vi föll*²³ and *Prosopopeia II: Momentum*²⁴. Both of these were *pervasive* LARPs, staged over vast spaces and for extended time, utilizing a role-taking model where the players could switch back and forth between playing themselves and a character without having to step out of the game. Both also had many design features in common with ARG, such as the use of in-game phone calls and fake websites. For Ericsson, *SOM* was the third production in the *Prosopopeia* series, aiming for a wider audience.

3 Fiction and Reality in *SOM*

The *SOM* crossmedia production spanned several platforms and media. The most important components were the TV drama series and debate, and the *Conspirare* web site. The production also spanned numerous other websites, real world activities, a mobile phone client, and activities staged in an online game *Entropia*. Throughout all of these media, the *SOM* production mixed fiction and fact. Rather than deliberately lying, the production was deliberately *confusing*: all of the different parts of *SOM* were in fact at the same time posing as fictional *and* factual.

3.1 Analysis Diagram of Fiction, Fictionalised Reality and Reality

In order to understand what was ambiguous in *SOM*, we first need to describe the construction of the fictional universe, and how it incorporated both fact and fiction.

The fictional universe in *SOM* consisted of two back stories, which we have chosen to call the *fiction* and the *fictionalised reality*. The fiction was clearly marked as such, while the fictionalised reality pretended to be true, but was indeed a fabrication. The fictionalised reality centred on a missing person called Maria. Her childhood friend Adrijanna went looking for her, suspecting that she had disappeared with the help from a dubious underground organisation (Ordo Serpentis). As part of her search, Adrijanna created the website www.conspirare.se and put up posters with a photo of her friend, trying to recruit help. The SVT production team, who were in the process of planning a drama series around missing people, spotted her efforts. They contacted Adrijanna and her boyfriend Agent Orange to learn more about the

²³ Jonsson et al.: „Prosopopeia. Experience from a Pervasive LARP“, Montola et al.: „Prosopopeia. Playing on the Edge of Reality“.

²⁴ Jonsson et al.: „Five Weeks of Rebellion“, Stenros et al.: „Play it for Real“.

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story, and to use some of it as inspiration for a drama series production (see also the timeline in figure 1). This drama series is the fictional part of the production; its fictional nature is openly discussed in the fictionalised reality.

Just before the broadcasting of the TV drama started, SVT communicated – still as part of the fabrication – that they didn't believe in the actual existence of Maria, thereby creating conflicts with Adrijanna who pretended to be disappointed about the poor depiction of her personal experience. Adrijanna recruited people to help her – these became the first game participants – with the double objective to find Maria and to prove SVT wrong. SVT reacted to the conflict by creating the debate programme – a supposedly *live* studio debate between participants who discussed issues such as if Maria really existed, if it was possible to disappear in Sweden, if there existed organisations that help people disappear, etcetera. Again, the debate storyline was part of the fictionalised reality. The real purpose of the debate was to allow the online and real world game events to be reflected in prime time TV, and to connect the game to the TV series.

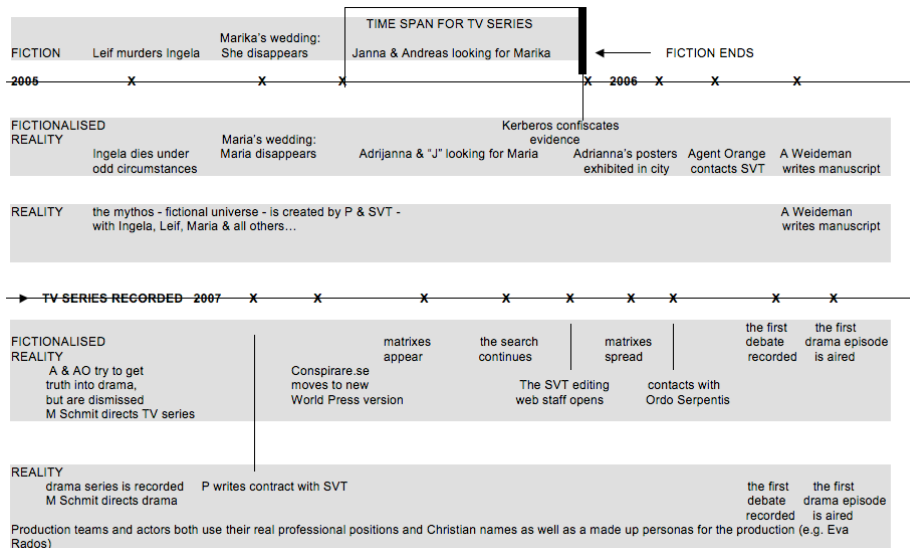


Figure 1: Timeline and layers of fiction, fictionalised reality and reality in *SOM*

3.2 Fiction and Reality in the different *SOM* parts

In this section we describe the major constituents of the *SOM* production in more detail. In this discussion, we have deliberately left out some of the less central parts, such as a set of online puzzles made available in the TV series that lead to a separate web site *spektaklet* and the series of events played out in the online universe *Entropia*. Although these are interesting in themselves, they attracted a much smaller audience than the parts discussed below and are for that reason less representative of the majority experience from *SOM*.

3.2.1 The *Sanningen om Marika* TV series

The TV drama series called *Sanningen om Marika*²⁵ was aired on five consecutive Sunday evenings on the public television channel SVT2 at 21:20, starting from October 28th 2007. Each 45-minutes-long sequence was then followed by a 15-minute debate show. The series was clearly marked as fictional in many respects; the form, the content and the way it was marketed.

According to the trailer, the drama was based on the *fact* that *6'000 people disappear in Sweden every year*. The drama's contextualisation, as based on true facts, was confirming its fictional status, and none of the formal aspects such as genre features (a typical conspiracy thriller/mystery series) contradicted this set up – as long as you watched the mini-series as a stand-alone product.

3.2.2 SVT website

The SVT website for *SOM*,²⁶ questioned the trustworthiness of its own content with the main headline „Over 20'000 Swedish people have disappeared without a trace since the 60s. Conspiracy theory or alarming truth?“. Furthermore, the gameness of the site was clearly communicated with the subheader immediately below: „There is only one rule: pretend that this is real!“.

²⁵ Directed by Martin Schmidt, screenplay by Anders Weidemann, produced by SVT.

²⁶ www.svt.se/marika, 05.11.2008.

When visiting the website for the first time, a disclaimer would also pop up, explicitly stating that the site was part of a fictional work and that visitors should only enter the site if they were able to differ facts from fiction.²⁷ The fictional genre of *SOM* was also made clear through a sideline paragraph titled *Vad är detta?* (*What is this?*) (see figure 2), explaining that this new form, *participation drama*, was created together with the Company P, and that the whole site was fictional. There was also a link to a *Wikipedia* entry about *reality games*.²⁸

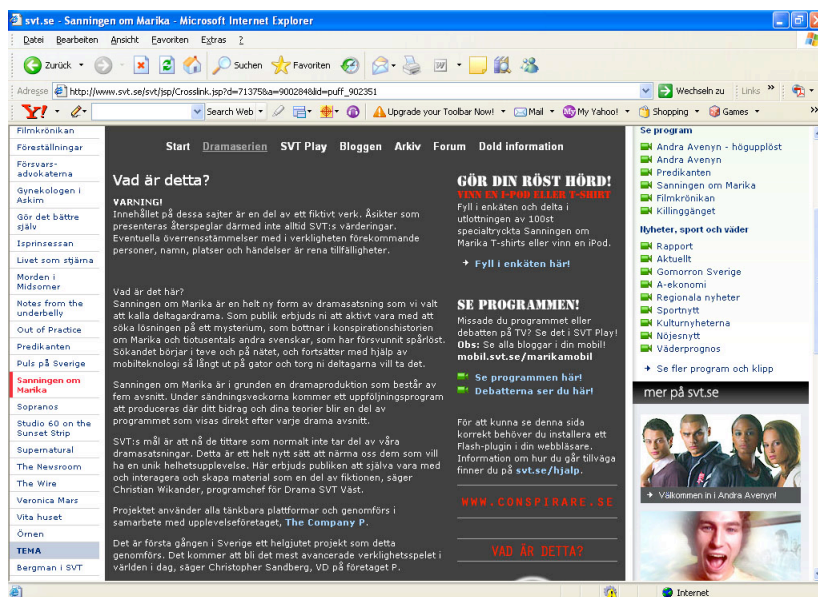


Figure 2: SVT Website: *What is this?*

At the site a website service, SVT Play, offered possibilities to watch the TV series online. Other features were a blog, a chat, an archive, a forum and *hidden information* (a mini-game connected to the drama episodes). Furthermore, the user could chat with the editorial staff, *Redaktionschatten*, and was linked to *Redaktionen live*, a live-webcam placed at the SVT editorial office. By contrast to the popup warnings and the header, all of these services were consistent with the fictionalised reality and used reality markers (they basically *looked realistic*)

²⁷ A similar one would pop up at the *Conspirare* game website. See for screenshot figure 5.

²⁸ <http://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Verklighetsspel>, 05.11.2008. This link and the *What is this?* text was posted after a few weeks due to many questions from viewers.

that confirmed their authenticity (see figure 3). The webcam showed the room of the editorial staff for the website and the debate program. The chat was not a real-time chat, but was strictly moderated, where the questions could be sent in and be answered by an anonymous part of the editorial team (more resembling frequently asked questions, FAQ). At night the chat was closed. The video blog, hosted by the SVT reporter Eva Rados, showed, in a very serious manner, the investigation of the game events carried out by SVT. These video blogs followed a story line that complemented that of the *Conspirare* game – where SVT pretended to at first doubt Adrijanna's story only to become more and more convinced that the story was real and that Maria really had disappeared.

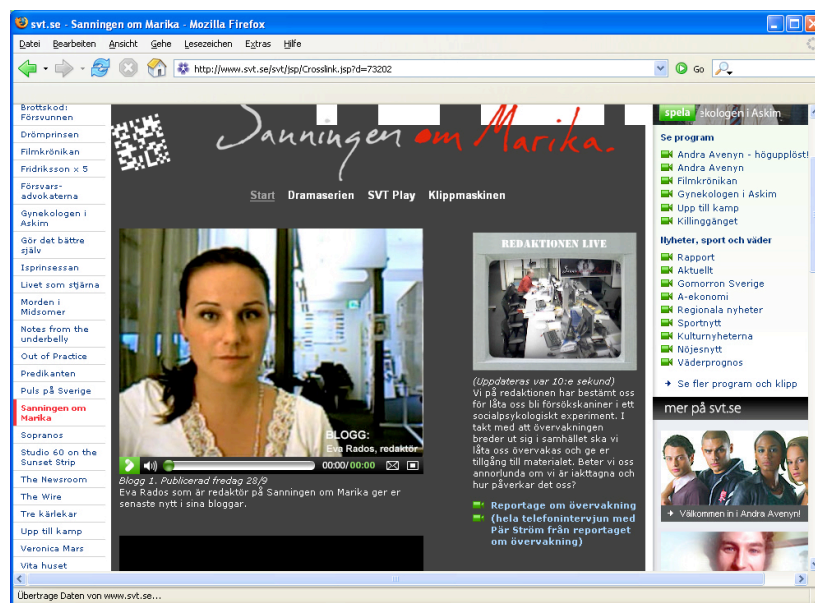


Figure 3: SVT site with blog and live webcam

3.2.3 Debate

The debate program was perhaps the most confusing and intriguing part of the SOM production. As already discussed, the actual reason for the debate

program was to tie the game and the drama series together. But another important goal was to anchor the whole production (both the game and the series) in reality.²⁹ According to the fictionalised reality, SVT arranged the debate as a way to deal with the controversy between Adrijanna and SVT. The debate show was carefully fabricated, the guests were meticulously instructed hours before the recording according to their role in the debate, and the debate programs were each recorded up to five times, and cut together afterwards.

The result was a very realistic *live* debate program. At first sight, hardly any fictional markers could be detected. The structure and form of the 15-minute-long program purposely followed the features of a current affairs debate program, a television genre Swedish viewers were acquainted with.³⁰ It was aired directly after each drama episode and pretended to be live sent (in reality, it was recorded a day in advance). The host, John Carlsson, was a well-known television personality who had hosted several current affairs debate programs the last few years.

Each show addressed a very realistic theme, which centred on the – supposedly for real – missing person Maria. The themes covered societal issues: homeless people, surveillance in public spaces, police work, conspiracy theories etcetera; and each show would have 3-4 invited studio guests who discussed the issue at hand. Several of these were recruited as *themselves* in their official roles/professions as a psychologist, a forensic dentist and even as a police spokesperson. Other guests – Maria's foster-mother, organisation representatives – were professional actors hired by SVT, and some were crewmembers of The Company P. The debate program was kept entirely within the fictionalised reality: everybody talked about Maria as if she existed.

Slight bits of fiction markers were surfacing at a closer look. An observant viewer would find that some actors were presented as cast and others as participants in the credits. A closer look at the SMS ticker texts at the bottom

²⁹ Phone interview with Christoffer Sandberg, 13th November 2007. Conducted by Marie Denward.

³⁰ The current affairs debate program is a factual television genre very well established in Sweden. It uses strong conventions and features of realism that are familiar to the viewers who generally interpret debates as solely based on reality and facts. They are combinations of interviews, expert opinions, authoritative narrators, actuality footage and the validation of issues by their appearance elsewhere in the news agenda. They claim to cover important societal issues, through strategies of subject or participant selection and presentation, and to play an important role in the public sphere as a whole (See Örnebring: *Televising the Public Sphere*, p. 505).

of the screen would also reveal them as fictional to most viewers. The host tended to overdo his act: at times he steered the discussion a bit too much and got too involved. But the perhaps most obvious fictional marker was that it was unrealistic to make even a single current affairs debate program, much less a whole mini-series, about a single missing person and her story. After one or two shows it became obvious that the debate series created a narrative following a dramatic curve. A clear fictional feature was that the music track from the *SOM* TV series sometimes was blended in.

So, even though the observant viewer would have some serious doubts on the factual nature of the debate program, it would still be very hard to understand which parts were fictional, and which parts were factual. This ambiguous design was also a strategy for the major game hub at www.conspirare.se.

3.2.4 Conspirare

As discussed previously, the game part of *SOM* consisted of several parallel websites, events staged in the real (physical) world as well as in the online game *Entropia*³¹, and messages sent to players' mobile phones. The players' tasks were to gather information on Maria and her past, trace her whereabouts, and find out the reason for her disappearing. Maria's traces were spread on all those different platforms; the wide range of media contributed in itself to infuse realism. This is typical for ARG³² and strengthens the feeling of the game being ubiquitous and available everywhere. By this property alone, ARG tend to feel more *real* than ordinary computer and video games, which are accessible only through one media.

Adrijanna's website at www.conspirare.se was the hub, henceforth called *Conspirare*. This website adhered to the contemporary format of community websites and consisted of a forum, a chat system, and a blog. The main page was dominated by the most recent blog entries but also provided direct reading access to parts of the forum. Participants had to register in order to write to the forum or read all of it, and to take part in the chat.

Conspirare was rather different from the genre-typical ARG web presence. ARG community web sites are typically maintained by *players* rather than by organisers. Produced ARG sites tend to be fake company sites or pure game sites rather than community sites. The international ARG community

³¹ Entropia Universe is a computer game/virtual world created by MindArk, Gothenburg, www.entropiauniverse.com, 05.11.2008.

³² Szulborski: This Is Not A Game.

maintains a set of permanent community web sites where they discuss ongoing campaigns and help each other out.³³ On *Conspirare* everything was kept strictly in-game. The serious tone kept on the site, frequent references to real-world historic events, links to participant-created videos and photos on *YouTube* and *Flickr*, links to external authentic web sites, all contributed to the impression of authenticity.

In classic ARG, organisers stay hidden during the game and only *pull the strings* from behind the scene. If organisers assume roles, these are non-player characters guiding players/player teams or provide information. The *SOM* organisers assumed roles as *Conspirare* members, people who had long known Adrijanna. All were registered members and entitled *Conspirare crew*, a title any registered community member would automatically obtain after a certain number of forum postings. Their role as *crew* explained why the organisers had higher privileges, could write blog posts and act as forum editors. Since it was possible to identify some of them in the real world, Organisers created their *fake* identities, closely resembling their real life names and identities. *Agent Orange*, played by Adrijanna's boyfriend, frequently mentioned this fact on the *Conspirare* blog, where he wrote many entries.

One reason to organise *Conspirare* as a community web site was to make it a central hub of activity. It was a natural place to get updated about the game for players, and organisers could easily post important information and keep track on what players were up to.

The ability for the organisers to control the content was an even more important reason. This made it possible to keep the site consistent with the fictionalised reality, despite the fact that players contributed much of the material. The organisers composed all blog entries and the background material. The forums were heavily moderated; threads would be closed or deleted that risked spoiling the game, as well as singular forum entries edited that either discussed the game as a game, or provided spoiler information. One forum participant noted the registration number of the Kerberos³⁴ car, and looked it up in the car registry. He copied the full data record into the forum, including the fact that it was owned by P, the production company where Adrijanna also worked. This information was removed with the comment: „Moderated some boring dead-end information /The moderator“ (see figure 4). The next discussion entry (from another participant) emphasised that this discussion had gone outside the boundary of the game: „In other words, not worth digging further into“. After this the moderator locked the thread.

³³ For example, see <http://www.argn.com/>, 05.11.2008.

³⁴ Kerberos Surveillance Company was a fictive company that was thought to have something to do with the disappearance of Maria.

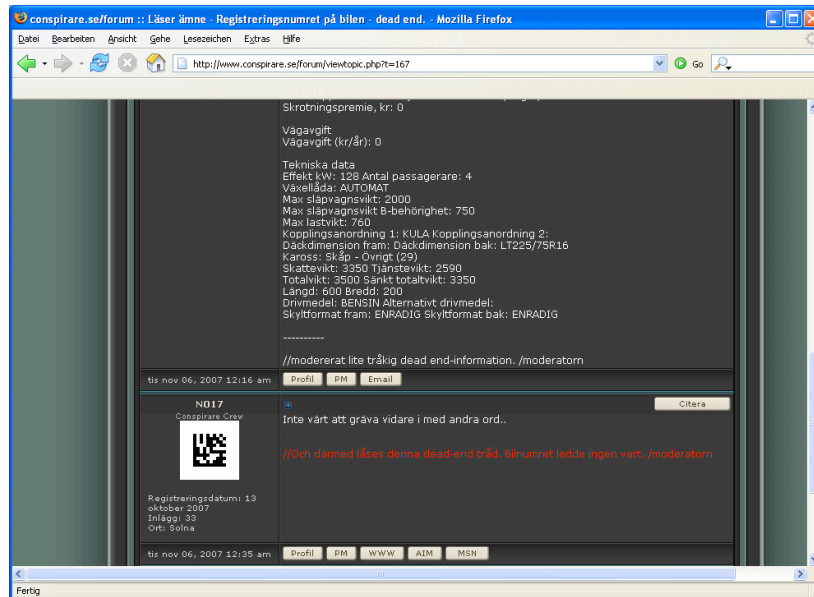


Figure 4: Dead-end marker in the *Conspirare* forum

The most difficult part to control was the chat, as this would have required real-time moderation. The organisers wanted the chat to be held strictly in-game, but this would not always happen. The problem was particularly large in conjunction with the airing of the first episode of the drama series, where spectators wanted to know what this was all about, and asked a lot of metaquestions. Later, the organisers made the login details for the chat available only for registered *Conspirare* members, and on occasions also banned members from chat discussions.



Figure 5: The pop-up warning message at www.conspirare.se.³⁵

As with the SVT site, the fictional nature of *Conspirare* was also explicit. A pop up warning message would appear the first time a person visited the site from a particular web browser, and the same warning was issued when a participant registered (see figure 5). There was also a persistent link on the web site to the Wikipedia explanation on *reality games*.

In all, *Conspirare* created a very ambiguous message. The message in the pop-up, sign-up contract and the *Wikipedia* link were contradicted by the site content, which was kept strictly in-game.

On some occasions, the blog and forum discussions would even explicitly contradict the warning messages. One example of this was when a forum participant asked about the pop-up and what it meant. The forum moderator replied as follows:

In conjunction with the airing of the SVT series we moved *Conspirare* to the web server at SVT to be able to handle all traffic that was

³⁵ The full text reads in translation: „Warning: Conspirare is part of a fictional creation. The opinions expressed here do not always reflect the opinions of P or SVT. Random similarities with real people are sometimes pure coincidental. You participate on your own risk and under your own responsibility. Conspirare has only one rule – pretend that it is real. You participate through following the blog, watch the movie clips, and discuss in the forum. The search will lead you out on the Internet and out on the streets of your own city. Click on OK to show that you have understood this.“

expected to come our way. We were then forced to put in a disclaimer. Disregard it; it has nothing to do with our cause.

3.2.5 Ordo Serpentis and Real-World Activity

A major design challenge was to encourage players to take part in the game activities in the physical world. *Conspirare* invited to and organised larger events such as the final demonstration outside the SVT building in Gothenburg. These events were well attended and thoroughly documented at *Conspirare*. On two occasions, SVT also sent a film team to document the events and air them in the debate programs. Most of the physical world activity was however organized through a separate web site *Ordo Serpentis*, of a secret organisation of the same name. This site is particularly interesting as it was a deliberate attempt at automatic and self-organised play.

Ordo Serpentis was not designed to be ambiguous. As its purpose was to inspire real-world activity, it was important that the participants understood that they were, in fact, gaming. Where *Conspirare* appeared as an authentic community site, the *Ordo Serpentis* site followed no established website genre. The site used very similar pop-up windows as *Conspirare* to declare its fictional mode. The real-world activities were semi-automatic, and the invisibility of the secret organization was (at least for seasoned ARG players) easily attributed to the traditional invisibility of the ARG *puppet masters*. All of these are strong fictional markers, with little to contradict the sense of fabrication. In reality, this seems to have been obvious to only a few participants, perhaps primarily due to the fact that few players actually carried out more than a few *Ordo Serpentis* missions.

Still, *Ordo Serpentis* managed to contribute to the sense of reality for the production as a whole through its missions. These encouraged the participants to go slightly out of their ordinary lives; do things they would not normally do or go to places that they would not normally visit. As players documented these activities through video clips³⁶ and photos that sometimes were published in the *Conspirare* blog, the missions contributed to the richness and realism of the entire production.

4 Analysis

³⁶ See for example: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SIocadg6MJs>, 05.11.2008.

As described previously, the *SOM* production created an ambiguous message throughout by simultaneously being fictional *and* factual. The deliberate blur, the serious tone and the use of documentary genre features all contributed to the ambiguous message. In this section, we try to analyze the meaning behind this mixed message. Was *SOM lying* to its audience, or was it meaningful in a more ambiguous way?

The fact has to be taken into account that the production was not aimed at a single audience, such as TV spectators. The main intention was to create an ARG with possibilities to participate at various levels of activity, participation tiers,³⁷ where the producers considered the most active tier of players to be co-creators of the game story line.

4.1 The Producers' Intention

It is fairly safe to assume that the production team did not intend to fool their audience – or at least, that this was not the primary intention. Instead, the production team was guided by a strong desire to create a full *360° illusion* for the participants (see discussion in 2.3). In an interview in September, a team member expressed this aim as follows:

Next week we will hold a press conference and then we will say that this is a participatory drama, where we play with reality. The reason for not talking about it is too much is..... that it ruins the player experience for those taking part. [...] We will say what we need to say. This is what you need to know, and then just engage!³⁸

The production of the fictional current affairs debate program created discussions about the fictional markers, as expressed by another team member:

It has to be trustworthy, so you think that they [the *Conspirare* crew] are searching Maria in reality. [...] Now its up [for internal discussion] that we have to have a disclaimer in the credits saying: This is fake! Just because people afterwards might feel cheated and say, that the SVT debate shows cheated viewers... [...] It is like a reality game – but to know the end, to know who the killer is from the start – that will

³⁷ Dena: „Emerging Participatory Culture Practices“.

³⁸ Interview with Eva Rados, web editor on 22nd September 2007. Conducted by Marie Denward.

kill the enjoyment totally... [...] If you put a disclaimer – who wants to watch it then?³⁹

The uncompromising aim at the ideal of the *360° illusion* was most obvious at *Conspirare*. The *Conspirare* producers were adamant in covering up the fact that it was fabricated, wherever visible. On numerous occasions, they also complained that the pop-up and player contract would destroy the game for active players. To avoid this, the *Conspirare* site was heavily moderated. Through the moderation of the *Conspirare* forum and chat, the producers ensured that the participants were *pretending reality* on the site.

It is clear that the *360° illusion* has a purpose in LARP, be it in the physical world or online. It creates a context for the active co-creation of belief. But it is a design ideal directed towards *participants*, people who enter the *magic circle* of pretense and who are prepared to actively contribute to upholding it. For spectators, the situation was different and this posed a problem particularly for SVT, who also had to scale the consequences of fabrication towards the TV viewers. In the case of movies, spectators do not co-create and uphold pretense, but willingly suspend disbelief⁴⁰ in exchange for an experience. What then, is the role of fabrication in this context?

As several interviews with the productions teams revealed, another goal of the production was the education of the participants, especially the spectators, in *media criticism*:

One of the producers expressed this view in a newspaper interview in October 26th: „You can probably fairly soon identify what is not completely true. But what IS completely true, that can be very hard to understand.“⁴¹

This usage of contradictory messages was obviously a strategy for media criticism and can be understood best in respect to their different display in the debate and in the SVT online content. The debate was aired as a *real* debate and no disclaimers or explicit fiction markers were shown in the TV program, even though it was heavily discussed internally. As discussed previously, the debate contained some indications that it was fictional (especially in the

³⁹ Interview with Rickard Jarnhed, director, on 24th October 2007. Conducted by Marie Denward.

⁴⁰ Coleridge: *Biographia Literaria*.

⁴¹ Interview with Christopher Sandberg, CEO at the Company P in Eskilstunakuriren, October 26th 2007.

credits) but the mere TV viewer could not easily detect these. The SVT website was much more explicit, through the use of pop-ups and the sub header *There is only one rule: pretend that it is real* and other fictional markers discussed in 3.2.2. This can be read as SVT really wanted to make television viewers believe in the fictionalized reality story (or at least suspect that it might be real), but that any deeper investigation would expose its fictional character rather quickly.

The purpose was to raise awareness about that no media can be trusted straight off. This intention was expressed quite clearly in the SVT online chat straight after the final show was aired.

Question:	Isn't there a risk that people stop paying their TV license now that you show these kind of things? Some people will probably feel that they do not want to contribute economically to a system where you do not know what is true and what is false.
Answer:	Maybe it also means that others start to pay their license. We want everyone to question what they see and hear and not just accept all claims as truth.

Figure 6: Excerpts from the post-game chat at the SVT site

To (at least) some of the producers, the ambiguous presentation of fact and fiction was also motivated by a radical constructivist agenda, where reality itself can be questioned as strongly subjective. The *SOM* game designer Martin Ericsson has expressed this view on reality and its role in play as follows.

Fortunately, *the real world* today is as wild as any fantasy extravaganza. Jettison your personal reality tunnel and take a look at what is believed to be true in our world. Environmentalists are planning mass extinction, capitalism is the solution to problems created by capitalism, super-terrorists crash and bring down fireproof skyscrapers, ... pervasive games open portals to other realities... Take your pick and be ready to face the consequences, because whatever you choose to unleash upon the world will, to some extent, become real.⁴²

To Ericsson at least, *SOM* was meant to be more than a game; it was also intended as a learning experience in *radical constructivism* – according to which our world is constructed solely in our head, therefore negating a *universally existing reality*: „What we make of experience constitutes the only world we

⁴² Montola et al: Pervasive Games (forthcoming).

consciously live in.”⁴³ A radical, politically motivated constructivist as pictured by Ericsson would therefore question everything that is calling itself the one and ruling reality; a game like *SOM* would try to empower people to create their own way of thinking and living in opposition of power structures.

4.2 Sensemaking by the Audiences

We have three main sources of information on how *SOM* was understood by its audience: in-depth interviews with twelve selected persons (participants and spectators), an online survey,⁴⁴ and collected media and blog coverage of the production.

In order to understand how, and if, the blurring of fact and fiction was meaningful to the audience, we first need to understand something about which audiences *SOM* had. SVT had the explicit goal of supporting three tiers of participation: the ordinary television viewers, an audience that would take part in lighter forms of interaction such as communicating on the SVT website, and a more active and reactive group that would take part in online and physical world LARP.

We know that the first and the third group existed. The TV drama series attracted on average 219 000 viewers and the debate 162 000 viewers.⁴⁵ 490 participants were registered at *Conspirare* forum and 751 participants on *Ordo Serpentina*. What is less clear is if there were any in-between participants of the second group; the following discussion therefore focuses on the spectators who primarily watched the TV series, and the participants who also were registered and active on *Conspirare* and *Ordo Serpentina*.

From the online survey, we know that at least some respondents believed the debate series to be real until they started to surf the web:

My approach to things is rather critical, the first time I saw the drama I did not understand the way it was constructed but the debate awoke some suspicions so I checked the web pages that the debate discussed. And then I happened to see the popup on the SVT site for *Sanningen om Marika...* (Survey comment, shortened)

⁴³ Von Glasersfeld: Radical Constructivism, p. 1.

⁴⁴ Made accessible on both *conspirare* and the SVT site at the very end of the game. 385 person answered the survey.

⁴⁵ Viewer statistics declined from 350 000 to 170 000, and 240 000 to 105 000 viewers for the drama and debate respectively (SVT viewer statistics).

Respondents like this one who are best classified as spectators, shared the understanding of *SOM* as media criticism, which was not always the case.

The active participants' reactions were also rather diverse. The post game chat at *Conspirare* indicates clearly that some participants had thought that the fictionalised reality was true until the game was over. This observation is supported by the survey, where a question concerning this issue was included.⁴⁶ Although some reacted very negatively to *being fooled*, not all did. Some also picked up on the radical constructivist view of the production: „Is it really possible to separate games from reality, do we have to?“ (Survey comment).

The participants that understood the fictional nature of the fictionalised reality were in general positive to the mixing of reality and fiction. One of the most interesting reactions indicates a *brink gaming experience*, that the game activities were so close to reality that the players no longer could view them as just play.

Double thinking, to play so seriously that it becomes the truth, even if I did not succeed in letting go of my other reality (it is an art, demands concentration and training, on the Saturday it was 90%/10% *Conspirare* reality/ordinary daily reality). (Survey comment)

As discussed by Poremba, brink gaming offers a potential for powerful artistic and political expression.

Brink games, in forcing second-order observation of the game/life boundary, may be situated in a more empowered position for social critique, since at the level of metaobservation, their impact can extend beyond games and into society's own self-description.⁴⁷

For the participants who understood the layers of *SOM* and accommodated the *pretend to believe* playstyle, the production thus offered a layer of meaning that lay beyond pretence and fabrication, truth and fiction.

5. Concluding Comments

⁴⁶ The question was worded „How did you perceive Sanningen om Marika?“ The answer options (only one to be selected): I did not think that it was real (29%) / I thought that it was real (30%) / I pretended that it was real (24%) / I make no distinction between truth and fiction (17%). (124 answers in total).

⁴⁷ Poremba: „Critical Potential on the Brink of the Magic Circle“, p. 777.

Considering the befuddlement and obfuscation *SOM* created, it might never become repeated or copied in its extreme way of blurring of the real and the fictive. As an ambiguous production *SOM* can definitely be seen as a unique example and it thus plays an important role in contemporary society. Ambiguity as a strong design resource has already quite a tradition in media like the well-known *Candid Camera*⁴⁸ and recently especially in online media like *lonelygirl15*⁴⁹. *SOM* is one more media phenomena that plays on the borderline between a serious and playful context, creating

[...] a context [that] is playful to some and serious to others, due to intentional secrecy and misrepresentation. The events taking place during the candid camera shoot are physical and actual, and the video clips of fabricated blogs are actual video clips. But as the metacommunication is altered, these contexts are framed as ordinary instead of playful.⁵⁰

If „the Western world has been moving into the direction of becoming a culture of gamers“⁵¹, it will depend on how we react, how we live and orient ourselves within ambiguous media landscapes and how we develop media competence in doing so. *SOM* in its extreme ways of provoking different media reception patterns has showed how problematic that can be, but has also provoked an insight on the fabrication of everyday media.

In this analysis we looked at how different parts of a crossmedia production make use of fiction and reality to create an own universe between narrative and play. In a further step the analysis could dig into the question of which narrative and which ludic forms are being used to blur the line between reality and fiction, and further, which media parts were designed for the narrative or the ludic function, and how successful they were in that aim.

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⁴⁸ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Candid_camera, 05.11.2008.

⁴⁹ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lonelygirl15>, 05.11.2008.

⁵⁰ Stenros et al.: „Pervasive Games in Ludic Society“.

⁵¹ Ibid.

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