



NORDIC

LARP

EDITED BY
JAAKKO STENROS
MARKUS MONTOLA

“NORDIC LARP is a rare and vivid glimpse into a fascinating gaming tradition. If anyone knows how to imagine better worlds and build a more engaging reality, it’s larpers.”

– Jane McGonigal, author of *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*

“Now evolved far from its roots in genre consumption and modification, the progressive Nordic live role-playing scene is building the tools for participatory performance that artists internationally will be using for generations to come. NORDIC LARP is the first book to put community’s key pieces in one easily digestible and visually seductive format.”

– Brody Condon, Artist

“The rise of the ars ludorum is not confined to the bombastic power fantasies of the videogame but is manifest all over the globe in diverse ways, from the doujin games of Japan to the passionate intensity of the indie games movement to the rise of the Euro-style board game. Not least among these movements is larp, brought to its apotheosis in the Nordic countries, where vast, imaginative works of enormous artistic ambition receive attention not only from game geeks but from their national cultures as well. This vital phenomenon is now accessible to English speakers through this landmark work, an anthology of articles describing some of the most impressive and compelling works of the form. Anyone seriously interested in role-play, interactive narrative, and the collision between games and theater will find it of enormous interest.”

– Greg Costikyan, Game Designer

NORDIC LARP

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“A man is whatever room he is in”

– Japanese proverb

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The public discussion related to the Danish military engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan inspired Kasper Friis Hansen, Anders Rasmussen > and Søren Ebbehoj to create the fantasy horror game Bolvaerk (Bulwark, 2008) (Promotion; Rasmus Høgdall, top right Bjarke Pedersen)

Nicor and Nerthus were the Nordic equivalents of Oberon and Titania in Moira (2005). A lover's quarrel had led the faeries to civil war, >> but the couple was reunited in death at the end of the game so that their subjects could live free and at peace. (Portrait, Karin Tidbeck)





Games are world-building activities
– Erving Goffman



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A larp is a meeting between people who, through their roles, relate to each other in a fictional world

– Eirik Fatland & Lars Wingård

INTRODUCTION

This book documents and celebrates the Nordic tradition of live action role-playing games, a powerful and unique form of expression that has emerged and developed during the last fifteen years.

Any book that attempts to document the Nordic larp culture must address the fundamental quality of larp as an evanescent form of expression. Larps are ephemeral. They cease to exist the moment they become complete. They can only be perceived as wholes once they have already vanished. Thousands of hours of preparation, costuming, building and playing only exist in memories, stories, photographs and old props now serving as souvenirs from alternate realities. Documenting these events is not easy. Each player in a larp undergoes a unique, personal journey. Larp provides no shared core experience.

Nordic larps have not been documented systematically. While article collections by players, larp-makers and researchers have been published annually since 2003, the *Knutepunkt books* are more about perfecting the art than *documenting* individual games.

A few years ago we came across Allan Kaprow's *Assemblage, Environment & Happenings*. It is a fascinating book, published in 1966, offering a window to a wonderful, exciting and different world, a snapshot of an ephemeral tradition of performance art. Filled with entertaining descriptions, enigmatic recipes and enticing photographs, the tome documents the art scene Kaprow and his friends were engaged in.

The book showed us a place both alien and familiar. The Happenings of the 1960s seemed to have no connection to the games we were playing, yet the pictures conveyed a familiar feeling. Looking at those pictures and reading those texts made us approach larp from a different angle: Is this what it is like to look at larp photographs? What is really going on in these images, do we even recognize what is relevant? Is it possible to understand these pictures without being there? How did the participants feel about their costumes, props and make-up?

Ultimately Kaprow's book inspired this one. We wanted to create a document that explains and celebrates Nordic larp, something that while personal, still places the experiences in a context. We wanted to transmit the awesomeness of these events, and prevent them from slipping into obscurity. Ultimately we hope that this book will inspire the same kind of excitement in its readers as Kaprow's did in us.

Knutepunkt

At the heart of the Nordic larp tradition lies the Knutepunkt convention. It is an informal event with a casual atmosphere, weird larps, brilliant discussions, obscure drinking games and odd inside jokes that attracts role-playing enthusiasts of all stripes.

Tracking down the convention is not always easy; there is no stable organization behind it, not even a single website. The name of the event changes from Knutepunkt (Norway) to Knutpunk (Sweden), Knudepunkt (Denmark) and Solmukohta (Finland). Fortunately, many have discovered the northern community through word of mouth or by reading the annual books, available on the web for free.

Larpers have travelled to Knutepunkt from all over Europe, from the United States, the Middle East and even South America, attracted by the audacity and joyful megalomania of this creative community: Animatronic dragons! Refugee politics! Cancer immersion in flour!

We have chosen thirty larps to represent the diversity of larping, ranging from perhaps the first "international" Nordic larp, *Trenne byar*, organized in the summer of 1994, to *Delirium*, played in the summer of 2010. This book represents the spectrum of different genres, styles and design paradigms as well as attitudes towards practical production issues. The selected games range from six players to a thousand, and they lasted from an afternoon to a week. The production times range from a day to several years.

Despite numerous differences, certain common threads tie all of these larps together into one tradition. The migration of design philosophies, ideological aims and direct influences is obvious. The reader will certainly notice ideas and tropes from early games echoing and evolving throughout the years. But the extraordinary foundation of Nordic larp rests on a deeper similarity: the ambition, passion and dedication of the players and larpwrights. Every single game portrayed in this book was born out of a desire to make the most powerful, the most interesting or the most novel larp possible.

Documenting Larp

This book documents fifteen years of larp in a single volume. We obviously hope to create a book of memories and basis for bragging rights for the community, but especially we aim to offer an

◀ *Mad About the Boy (2010)*, inspired by the comic book *Y: The Last Man*, was a larp about a world where all the men had suddenly died. In one run of the game, all players were female (aside from the last man). In the second run, men could also play female characters. (Diegetic, Li Xin)

entry point into the world of Nordic larp for anyone who might be interested in it.

This introduction is followed by an essay on *The Paradox of Nordic Larp Culture*. It explains what larp and especially the Nordic variant of it is, exploring the roots and defining characteristics of the Nordic style of larp.

Most of the book is dedicated to stories of individual larps. The games documented in this book were chosen in a process involving the Knutepunkt community. As such, the selection is an overview of the international scene gathered around the convention, rather than a detailed picture of either each individual country or the mainstream of larping.

It has not been our intention to build a canon of the “best” or the “most important” Nordic larps. Countless wonderful games had to be omitted, such as *1944*, *Amerika*, *Begyndelsen*, *Futuredrome*, *Haavena*, *Helsinki FTZ*, *I skuggan av ringen*, *Kybergenesis*, *laitos*, *Mad About the Boy*, *Moira*, *Neonhämärä*, *New Voices in Art*, *Nordarak XIII*, *Nyteg*, *Pelageya*, *Ringblomman*, *Skymningsland*, *Thirteen at the Table*, *U-359 – Проект 613*, *Ett vin-tereventyr*, *Vreden*, *Wanderer 2*, *Walkabout and Yesod*. The book is also limited to the four original Knutepunkt countries, leaving out the Nordic-style larps staged elsewhere.

In selecting the photos, we have wanted to cover larp from as many angles as possible, showing not only polished character portraits and scenography, but also construction work, game mastering, workshops, props and debriefs. The source of each photo is marked, most importantly whether the photograph documents actual play (*play*), or whether the photos were taken by a character using equipment appropriate for the setting (*diegetic*). Similarly pictures staged to communicate the vision or advertise the game in advance (*promotion*), or created to document it (*staged*) have their own categories.

The book concludes with an essay by Jaakko Stenros, titled *Nordic Larp: Theatre, Art and Game*, which situates Nordic larp in a wider cultural context.

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Yet above all we are happy that the Knutepunkt larp community has supported us through this process. This book is our way of saying thank you for everything you have given us over the years.

Helsinki, November 14th, 2010,
Jaakko Stenros & Markus Montola







Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away

— Philip K. Dick

THE PARADOX OF NORDIC LARP CULTURE

Jaakko Stenros & Markus Montola

Documenting the Nordic culture of live-action role-playing is a paradoxical task. One needs to balance between underlining the similarities and shared influences of the larps produced in Nordic countries, while avoiding promotion of a false idea of a monolithic, homogenous culture. Like the label “Hollywood films”, “Nordic larps” covers a loose group with numerous commonalities, even though there is no single universal denominator.

Larp was imported, discovered and rediscovered in different Nordic areas at different times. It is not easy to pinpoint the first larps, due to the wide gray zone existing between simpler forms of larp and advanced forms of children’s pretend play such as *cops and robbers*. It is easy to retroactively stick the label of larp on numerous theatrical play activities or to find events that were called larps at the time but bear little resemblance to larp today.

The established Nordic larp cultures trace their roots back to the 1980s, when they emerged sporadically, often unaware of each other. The combined influences of cultural phenomena such as the wildly successful *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) and other tabletop role-playing games, the anti-role-playing film *Mazes and Monsters* (1982) that taught thousands to larp, as well as tales and first person experiences of foreign larps, especially British, were often instrumental in creating the foundation.

Tolkien societies, historical re-enactment, scouting, assassination games, community theatre et cetera also contributed to the formation of larp culture. Nordic countries have a long history of self-organized youth and young adult clubs and societies, which both influenced the content of the games and provided organizational structure. Governments, municipalities, churches and student unions often support these youth activities financially, or provide access to larp venues such as cabins, youth centres and university buildings.

A key ingredient is also the *freedom to roam*, the right of general public to access both privately and publicly owned land. As long as you do not disturb the privacy of people’s homes, you are

allowed to camp in forests, pick wild berries, flowers and mushrooms, swim, boat, hike – and larp. This everyman’s right makes larping in wilderness inexpensive and relatively uncomplicated.

While different larp cultures were born in isolation around the Nordic countries, their interaction started to grow during the 1990s. *Trenne byar* is often credited as a starting point of the Nordic larp community. Indeed, it was the game where many of the Swedish and Norwegian participants first started to realize just how many people shared their hobby. The first *Nordic* larper meeting Knutepunkt was held in 1997, and it immediately became an annual event. It provided an international stage for discussions and arguments about larp, about lessons of earlier games and about interesting games to come.

One obstacle between cultural exchanges between the different Nordic countries was language. Though Swedish, Danish and Norwegian are related, they are not interchangeable, and Finnish is completely different. As travelling abroad to larp became more common, some game organizers also started to plan for this. Most games are played in the local language, but nowadays there are often special roles for foreigners, such as ambassadors and prisoners of war. Some games are also run in English.

Characteristics of the Nordic tradition

It was in this environment that the numerous styles of Nordic larp emerged. The village larps emphasised the wonder of cohabiting coherent fantastic worlds. The vampire chronicles ran for years, inspired by the revolutionary tabletop role-playing game *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) and its larp rules *Masquerade* (1993), fostered playing styles centred around long-running social intrigues and politicking. Combat-oriented fantasy larps, culminating in a traditional battle at the end, were seemingly about conflict, but they also taught the players to expect dramatic fulfilment. Games drawing on historical re-enactment,

◀ *Amerika* (2000) brought the consequences of consumerism out on the open in Oslo. (Play, Britta K. Bergersen)



A very early British larp, Treasure Trap (1981-1984) at the Peckforton Castle, Cheshire. Modelled closely after Dungeons & Dragons, it inspired numerous larps not only in the United Kingdom but also in the Nordic countries. (Play, Malcolm Rich)



Knutepunkts host discussions, workshops, lectures, parties as well as small larps. (Non-larp, Katri Lassila, Britta K. Bergersen)





Like Enhetsfront, Ringblomman (The Marigold, 2004) was a larp about life in a commune in 1978, essentially placing the players in the time when their parents were roughly of their age. Both games were about ideologies such as leftism and feminism. (Clockwise from top: portrait, restaged, pregame; Sofia Nordin)

where preparing food over campfires was a major part of the experience, made it possible to find the pleasure in concentrating on the minutiae of the everyday life of the character.

Today the villages may be built out of containers, the vampires be replaced with 1970s leftists, the epic dramas have made room for quiet tragedies and the re-enactment may portray contemporary refugee centres, but the structures remain the same. Sometimes influences travel directly, as when the innovations of *Mellan himmel och hav* were used in *Totem* and *Delirium*. Other structures are so deeply ingrained in the culture that it is impossible to trace individual threads: *Dragonbane* clearly owes a debt to the genre of village larp, and hence to *Trenne byar*. Sometimes wheels are reinvented. The co-creator-players of *The White Road* were not directly influenced by the Norwegian style of collective larp organizing, but later discovered the close similarities with games such as *Enhetsfront*.

Out of these thin strands, certain characteristic themes of Nordic larp culture emerge:

Ambition is a defining quality of the Knutepunkt scene. Larps like *PanoptiCorp* compete through novel designs, games like *Once Upon a Time* through bigger and more expensive productions. Political themes (*1942*) and artistic expression (*inside:outside*) are a part of the ambition. Traditional genre larps are plentiful, but seldom receive much attention within the Knutepunkt community. The scene is driven by its love for the new and the experimental, its wish always to be pushing some boundaries.

Commitment grounds the ambition. *Dragonbane* was in the works for three years, collaborating with governments, foundations, companies and universities. However, even tiny larps such as *The White Road* are taken very seriously. As one uncommitted player can ruin an experience for twenty others, social control is necessary. Some games are by invitation only, and central characters are usually cast by the game masters. Nordic larps require the players to stay continuously in character when inside the play area, often around the clock for several days. All activities must be diegetic; if one must take a break, it can be done behind the scenes.

Nordic larps are also decidedly *uncommercial*. Apart from *Rollespil i Rude Skov*, none of the larps presented in this book were intended to make any money. This reflects the movement's historical basis in non-profit youth activities, but it is also dictated by the economic realities – if the organizers were remunerated for their countless work hours, participation would simply become too expensive. On the other hand, this commitment to expert amateurism allows authors to realize their visions without compromises, freely tackling mature themes and adult content. Larps like *Det sista kapitlet* and *Momentum* can toy with historical occultism without concerns of offending the mainstream, and themes such as political apathy, heteronormativity and immigration policy can be addressed without watering them down.

The Knutepunkt community discusses the *philosophy* of larping, often in heated debates. Solmukohta 2000 launched the manifesto boom, pitting *Dogma 99* against *The Manifesto of the*

Turku School, and since then every year has seen at least one new manifesto. Fundamentally the debate is about what the core of larp is (e.g. storytelling vs. characters), how to create the best games, what this form of expression should be used for (e.g. recreation, revolution, art), how the player should approach a game (immersion, simulation, drama) and about how the creative control should be distributed before and during the game.

On a more practical level, *game mechanics* are usually minimal, even though there are notable exceptions. Instead of numeric mechanics, simplicity and trust are often preferred. In *PehmoYdin* this attitude was distilled into the rule “pain hurts and death kills”, implying that players should play the consequences of simulated violence in a realistic manner. Dramatic rules are more common – such as in the *Silmäpuoli merirosvo* rule stating that all conflicts should be resolved in the way that maximizes dramatic action, or as in *Hamlet*, where all the conflicts on the last day escalated until they ended in someone dying.

Many Nordic larps also feature *high production values*. In larps aiming for historical accuracy, such as *1942* and *Antikristuksen yö*, this sometimes means preparing props and food in difficult, historically correct settings. At times this total what-you-see-is-what-you-get ideology is adapted and the scenography is stylized (as in *Mellan himmel och hav*) or even rejected (as in *Helsingin Camarilla*, *Delirium* and *Luminescence*) as too work-intensive or restrictive; but even then the aim is to achieve a coherent visual style and depth to the illusion. High production values are not a universal norm, and this book perhaps celebrates attention to detail more than is representative of Nordic larp as a whole.

Larp as Critical Play

Larps are created for a *first person audience*, for players relating to the fictional world from the first person perspective of a fictional character. As such, they are almost impossible to truly comprehend from the outside, looking in.

This quality of role-playing games as immersive systems has led to many misunderstandings and numerous instances of moral panic. It has been feared that these alternative worlds would absorb or alter the player irrevocably. The best-known outcry took place in the United States during the 1980s when role-playing games were falsely associated with mental illness, suicide, and devil worship. As larping became more commonplace and its visibility in the media increased in the 1990s, the moral panic spread to the Nordic countries. The most articulate of these opponents was Swedish drama teacher Didi Örnstedt. She argued in the book *De övergivnas armé* that the society was on the verge of a collapse and of an armed uprising, which larps – the titular Army of the Abandoned – would lead. She imagined larps as a threat to society, training camps for sadism and revolutionary methods:

It is these abandoned [role-player] children who, if adults do not quickly change their attitudes and approaches, could join together. Who would be more suited to lead The Army of the Abandoned than those who spent much of their childhood practicing leadership, group dynamics, manipulation and



The submarine used in Carolus Rex represented a starship, but in U-359 – Проект 613 (U-359 – Project 613, 2003) one was used to portray a Russian submarine in the aftermath of the 1963 Cuban Missile Crisis. (Group portrait, Carsten Andreasen)

GAMES BY THEME

An illustration of some of the common threads of this book, relating to discussions published in Knutepunkt books – such as the Dogma 99 manifesto, the fateplay technique to create deterministic drama, or producing the gratifying tragedy of positive negative experience. The Philosophies are designer aspirations, like striving for a 360° illusion even when detailed physical immersion is costly or limits the possibilities of imagination. The Structures are typical formats such as enclosed spaces and functional villages, or pervasive larps that seep into the surrounding world. The Contexts situate the larps in relation to politics, art and theatre, while Themes are about their fictional content

	PHILOSOPHIES							
	Gamism	Immersionism	Simulationism	Dramatism	Collective	Dogma 99	Positive-Negative	Aspiring to 360°
Trenne byar	*	*	*		*			✗
Helsingin Camarilla	✗				*		*	
Föreningen Visionära Vetenskapsmäns Årliga Kongress			*					
Det sista kapitlet				*				*
Ground Zero		✗	✗	*			✗	✗
Knappnålshuvudet							✗	*
Carolus Rex	*		*	✗				✗
1942 – Noen å stole på			✗			*	✗	✗
Europa		✗	✗		*	✗	✗	✗
PehmoYdin		✗		*			✗	
The Executive Game	*	✗	✗				*	*
inside:outside	*	✗		*			✗	
Hamlet				✗			✗	✗
Zombie	*	✗		✗			*	
PanoptiCorp			✗		*			
Mellan himmel och hav			✗	*				
Luminescence								
Rollespil i Rude Skov	✗							
Silmäpuoli merirosvo		*		*				
Once Upon a Time			✗		*			✗
Enhetsfront		✗	✗		✗			✗
System Danmarc		*	✗		*		*	✗
Dragonbane		*	✗	*	*			✗
The White Road		✗	*		✗	✗		*
Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum	*	✗		*	*			*
Totem		✗		*			*	✗
En stilla middag med familjen				✗			✗	
Antikristuksen yö		*	✗				*	*
Krigslive	✗		*		*			
Delirium		✗		*			✗	

	STRUCTURES							CONTEXTS			THEMES							
	Village	Sandbox	Enclosed	Pervasive	Rules-based	Combat	Fateplay	Politically Motivated	Staged as Art	Theatre-Influenced	Adventure	Intrigue	War	Historical	Occult	Rituals	Sexuality	Therapy
	x	x		*	x	x				*								
		*		*	x	*					x			*		*		
				x					x		x			*	x	x	*	
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Albiön: Kesäyön unelma (Albiön: A Midsummer Night's Dream, 2008), like Silmäpuoli merirosvo, was a game in the style of adventurous romanticism, which embraces the fun escapism of playful adventure. (Play, Katri Lassila)

militant scenarios? Maybe they decide to follow the young vampires' thoughts of "hunting Elders", use Grimtooth's Traps or apply the social Darwinist teaching of Mutant Chronicles, Kult, Wastelands or Neotech. (Didi Örnstedt & Björn Sjöstedt, 1997)

Ironically, Örnstedt's attack has been mentioned by some designers as the impetus that first started them thinking about using role-playing games to change society. She was correct in presuming that role-playing is a powerful method of teaching, although the qualities she lists would surely be more profitably employed in commercial and professional environments than in the revolution she imagined. But what she failed entirely to grasp was what the larps most centrally teach.

The process of larping together automatically generates temporary communities. Building functioning social networks is the crux of their existence. As these games can portray any world or society imaginable, they are a natural tool for studying questions such as what kind of a world is possible, what the world should or could be like – and what our world actually is like. Larps are great at showing alternatives, both good and bad. It is one thing to postulate an alternative society on paper; constructing and living in one is another thing entirely. The compelling experiences of both utopian and dystopian ideas that such simulations offer are why larp lends itself so easily to critical play.

Nordic larp has been employed to escape, to explore, to expose and to impose. In the following, these four approaches are fleshed out with the hope of providing a framework for understanding the variety of ways in which larp can be used.

Escape and Explore

Larp is a form of entertainment, often used for *escaping* the mundane, everyday existence. In a way a larp is a total vacation as the participant leaves behind not just ordinary routines and environments, but also everyday roles, worries and responsibilities – her self. Sarcastically it could be said that in role-playing games you replace your worries with the worries of the character.

Carolus Rex, *Silmäpuoli merirosvo* and *Zombie: Rædslernes nat* all offered a wonderful chance of escaping into a fantastically adventurous world of heroes and villains. Instead of seeing adventure on a silver screen, these games were all about experiencing a narrow escape from the clutches of the undead, the pirates' duels of shining swords and tongues, and the spectacular hero's death defending the spaceship from invading aliens. These experiences are bodily, and the endorphins and the adrenaline are very real – even though the encounters themselves are also fictional.

Children get to indulge in the fantastic through their pretend play every day. The western culture restricts the grownups' escapism to mediated entertainment. This is an escape for the mind, but not for the body. Regardless of platform, indulging in too much fantasy is perceived as improper, as behaviour reserved only for carnivals. Justifying play in our efficiency-obsessed culture is often difficult. Play is, by its very nature, not serious: It is

free, voluntary and seemingly pointless. Harnessing it for a goal is, in a way, to go against its very nature.

It has been argued that games, by definition, only have *negotiable* outcomes for our everyday life. This means that we can lose all of our money in *Monopoly* and still take a taxi home, or role-play a sadist social Darwinist troll while remaining a loving husband outside the game. The outcomes of games do not influence our everyday life unless we consciously allow them to – like we do with gambling. This means that in games we can safely fail, try out things that we would avoid in real life and be more adventurous, receptive and open-minded. We need not fear the consequences of failure. This opens the door for larps as a space for *exploration*.

Exploration takes many forms, ranging from fictional, historical and contemporary to educational, political and artistic. *Enhetsfront*, *Antikristuksen yö* and re-enactment in general are very much about exploring a given time period, both through pre-production research and during play. Sometimes the exploration continues after the game: *The White Road* dove into a contemporary subculture through play, but the experience was so strong that one of the players returned to film a documentary about the actual subculture as well. These games are about exploring through inhabiting. Yet, exploration is not necessarily simulation: *Luminescence* explored cancer through abstract symbolism.

As safe zones, games have a huge potential as critical tools. Communities, ideals and identities can be constructed to safely explore hypothetical scenarios. Sometimes, in the process of exploration, a player uncovers something about the fictional world or the fantasy self that makes more sense than their mundane counterparts. Larp can foster personal growth, offering insights that can empower players to enact real change in their lives and environments.

Expose and Impose

Though larps are created in collaboration between all participants, they can also carry the message of an auteur. Even though the possibility of the game being pushed in an unforeseen direction by the players is always present, the larpwright can convey messages through larp. One of the strongest uses of larps is as a tool for revealing the underbelly of the real world. When game masters build their games around specific topics, themes or situations in order to push an agenda, then exploration turns into *exposition*.

System Danmarc was seemingly an escapist game about a futuristic cyberpunk society. As the game ended the players were shown a film where homeless people, politicians and researchers were interviewed. The film made it clear that the game's fictional dystopia was a reflection of the contemporary reality. Some players felt betrayed by this twist. More typically the exposition is no surprise to the players. *Mellan himmel och hav* was an exploration of gender and family structures, but the outspoken intention was to question and make visible their socially constructed nature.



*Østerskov Efterskole is a boarding school in Northern Denmark, for 100 students on the 9th and 10th grade, teaching all subjects from mathematics to history through role-play. Celebrating newly acquired freedom from British colonialism, the USA of 1776.
(Play, Mads Lunau)*



In a Cold War simulation the teachers are soviet special forces out to get the students newly invented atom bomb. (Play, Mads Lunau)

The line between exposing and exploring is at its thinnest in historical games. What sets apart games that seek to expose is their willingness to challenge widely held beliefs – or a silence that can surround a difficult issue. *Europa* exposed the cruelty of refugee systems, *1942 – Noen å stole på* was a study of life in Norway during the German occupation, and *Ground Zero* imitated the horrors of a nuclear war. Comedy and satire can work perfectly as tools for exposing the grim reality also in larps. *PanoptiCorp* was a scorching study of corporate culture and the capitalist system, and at times also laugh out loud funny.

Sometimes exploring and exposing are not enough and the players want to leave a mark in the social fabric surrounding the game. They want to question hegemonic truths, engage in a dialogue or just shock people out of their routines. Games and play are standard tools of activism: the playful nature of humour, theatre and games lends a social alibi for pushing the boundaries of what is tolerated. Even so, games as activism are rarer.

These games *impose* themselves and their message on the onlookers and unsuspecting bystanders. They are either pervasive games that blur the line between ordinary, everyday life and the ludic spectacle, or games staged in a public space that can be witnessed or participated in.

The players of *Momentum* carried out rituals in plain sight around the city of Stockholm in places that were deemed historically relevant. The largest of these rituals was a public demonstration that called for remembering the dead revolutionaries and their sacrifices. *Föreningen Visionära Vetenskapsmäns Årliga Congress*, *Knappnålshuvudet* and *The White Road* were played at least partly in public, but in these games the surrounding world was a backdrop and a setting, not something to be bullied into dialogue.

Most games listed in this book were publicly announced and it was theoretically possible for anyone to try and participate. Still, word seldom reaches outside the larp community. Gallery larps are one attempt of making a difference; *inside:outside* did not only tour numerous role-playing conventions, but it was also staged in the Kunstnernes Hus in Oslo. The aim was not to show its message to art crowd, but also to display larp in general. In this vein the most successful and revolutionary larps have been the Danish children's larps (such as *Rollespil i Rude Skov*), which reach tens of thousands of kids annually and have taught an entire generation the magic of role-playing.

It is tempting to think of escape and exploration as player-centric, and imposition and exposition as larpwright-driven approaches. However, the co-creative nature of larps renders such a distinction problematic. A more fruitful angle is to consider escape and explore as inward-looking. Escape could also be called indulgence, whereas explore is about inhabiting. Exposition and imposition are more societal, they have something to say to the world at large. Exposition is about changing the world through the players. Imposition attacks the surrounding reality head-on.

The Impact of Nordic Larp

The Knutepunkt scene takes larping very seriously. Larps themselves are not necessarily serious, but as a subject they are treated with respect. They are discussed and analysed, their meaning is debated, and there is a constant drive for deeper understanding and new experiences. This tendency leads to the continued evolution of not just the games, but also of how they are understood. Descriptions of game mechanics, design philosophies and complete larps are immensely valuable, as otherwise only the participants, and perhaps their friends, would benefit from the lessons learned.

As a result of this atmosphere of progress, a process of professionalization is shaping the community. Even though high profile larps are almost invariably uncommercial, a growing number of people are able to support themselves with larp-related work.

In Denmark, the children's larps have grown into a mainstream hobby that challenges traditional leisure activities. Larp-based education is also growing; with the Danish boarding school Østerskov Efterskole that uses role-playing as a central teaching principle as the leading example. There are a few companies that produce larp-like events, experiences and games, most flamboyantly The company P, which produces transmedial participatory dramas with big media companies. Larps regularly receive support from cultural funds, they are increasingly showcased at cultural festivals and it is not uncommon for them to be covered in the culture sections of newspapers. Interest in the research on larps and role-playing games has also risen. There are half a dozen of doctoral dissertations on larp in the works, and masters' theses are too numerous to count.

Yet the core of Nordic larp culture and its success and continuation is the player base. New larpwrights and organizers emerge from player pool and it is their enthusiasm that keeps the tradition fresh. Ultimately the international scene is grounded in the national larp cultures from which most new players come.

Only time will tell whether this book documents a movement at its peak, or the birth of a long tradition. Whatever the case may be, Nordic larp defies its ephemeral nature on these pages.



A collaboration between Tim Kring, Nokia and The company P, Conspiracy For Good (2010) combined the ideas of Nordic larp and alternate reality gaming into an interactive drama. We estimate that the game, played both online and in London, had a seven-figure budget. (Play, Richard Chambury)



Touitau



TRENNE BYAR

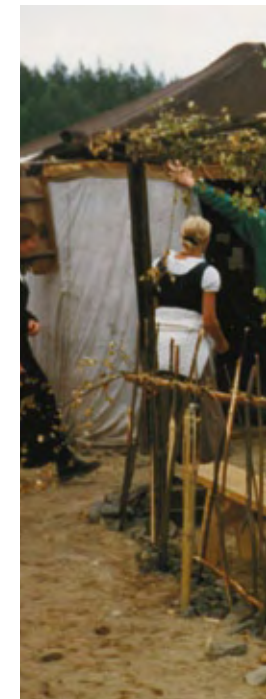
THE WOODSTOCK OF NORDIC LARP

Erlend Eidsem Hansen

WE WERE MARRIED THAT EVENING, at sunset. Bashfully, she had drawn her hood backward and revealed her elven ears to me. Now, entirely naked, she immersed into the lake, pointy ears towards the dark blue sky, my own elven princess. In the distance the echo merged with drumming, battle cries and murmur of folktales, forty campfires sparkled through the gentle summer night.

◀ *Happy villagers leave Vidhamn in the ferry, Lovisa (written in Dulin). At times frustrated people would sail away without the owner's permission. (Play, Niklas Arugård)*

The shore of Vidhamn. (Post-game, Samantha Bonnevier)



Trenne byar (Three Villages), a fantasy larp set in the land of Duvrike, was the first Nordic larp to bring together a thousand larpers, thus becoming a legend for a subculture. At the time large fantasy larps accommodated 200-300 players in Sweden, 100-150 in Norway. Storylines used to centre on a single tavern or small village involving all main characters, condensing action to one space. For *Trenne byar* the organizers constructed three settlements – the monastery of Svalvid, the farmer village of Arnros and the town of Vidhamn. These centres reflected the central themes of the game: religious tradition, life in the countryside, and trade.

Most participants signed up for the larp in groups of 10-30, with each group creating their own characters together with the organizers, agreeing on a common backstory. The printed booklets that provided the players with the overview of the Duvrike impressed the whole community with their fresh ideas, structured presentation and strong vision.

More resources were put into building village scenery than in preparation of battles, despite the fact that there were numerous action-oriented characters like orcs and highwaymen roaming. At night it was possible to pick a boffer fight wherever you were travelling, or participate in the gamist quest competition for adventurers. Still, compared to the boyish hack 'n' slash fantasy of the era, *Trenne byar* showcased a more civilized state of interaction. Routines and social relations matter more. Daily life was explored through preparing food, travelling, feasting, bonding.

Even the drinking songs were written for the larp.

I played the Earl of Norrland, son of one of the king's envoys. Our group of players was my entourage. Apart from our group's obvious political assignments like forging a diplomatic agreement with the king, obtaining a written consent from the guild of merchants, and marrying my sister to a local rich man or noble, there was one personal quest, one that was not based on anything designed for the game.

One of the Norwegian girls organizing our local group had in the spur of the moment written some semi-nonsensical quest telling me I would meet destiny in the shape of a woman with a birthmark imprinted on her bottom. Despite the juvenile starting point, this plot would nevertheless unfold in a way that would become one of my strongest larp experiences.

The fertility priestess of our clan interpreted the prediction seriously and initiated a search visiting every camp asking to inspect the girls. In a few days time she had found 14 girls who had anything that could resemble an appropriate birthmark.

Dream of a Perfect Illusion

There was much anticipation in the Swedish larp-scene at the time, as to how successfully a believable world could be built and populated. *Trenne byar* showed that it was possible to make larps involving players with complete characters, staying

The restaurant Fiskefyren was run mainly by people from Örebro. (Post-game, Samantha Bonnevier)



Snöfrid and Sig-inge visiting from Arnros village. (Play, Daniel Hallbygård)



in-game continuously during day and night for six consecutive days. Since one thousand players never sleep at the same time, the game evolved non-stop, regardless of any single person's actions. It was a physical and verbal storytelling jazz-session lasting for almost a week. The foundations were built for what would later be called *the 360° illusion*.

The rich societal infrastructure included a messenger on horseback, a ferryman with a barge, markets to buy and sell food at, and houses with room to rent. In addition, Vidhamn featured a town hall, four taverns, a magic academy and a sauna. Everything was bought and sold using the 18,000 tin and copper coins that were engraved by the same person who engraved the Swedish krona. Money was handed out at check-in, according to the hierarchy of economic power, making sure everyone could buy the meat and vegetables needed to prepare food. I was afraid that our heavy-drinking delegation would spend all our money in a tavern early on.

The game succeeded in running continuously for six days. Organizers never needed to pause the game; personally I encountered them once, after we had killed and eaten a sheep without permission. By some mistake, some Vidhamn sheep ran away on the first day of the larp. After three days of potatoes and cabbage, our troupe had enough: The hunt and slaughter took us six hours. A great party ensued, gathering people from all over the game area. The following day a shady game master character led me into an alley, asking if we had killed a sheep. Without



The garden of Svalvid monastery. (Pregame, Mattias Ekman)



The king's camp, as seen from Vidhamn. (Pregame, Jenny Drakenlind)



Outside the Amros grave digger's house after the game. The man on the left is wearing a ridiculous homemade instrument, a top honker, on his head. (Group portrait, Samir Belarbi)

breaking character, he said we would have to pay a hundred copper coins for it. I was relieved. Today one could easily be banned from a larp for doing a lot less than slaughtering a sheep.

The event resembled a hippie festival: too many people, enormous logistical problems, exhausted organisers, limited sanitation, teenage drinking, and clashes in social norms due to regional differences. There was a risk of diarrhea outbreak, as people were getting drinking water and bathing in the same place. Leftover meat rotted in the sun. The smells of Vidhamn sewers resembled Calcutta. People built their own toilets, and had to make sure they got enough food and sleep.

It was hard to tell in-character fistfights from real ones. When the town guards deserted their posts, volunteers had to step in to keep peace and order, as people were getting increasingly drunk. A group of orcs and trolls had only raw potatoes, dry bread and barrels of cider. Drunk and frustrated they refused to go off-game just to correct a mistake, raiding a village instead. A good choice, as Arnros had stocks of vegetables, fruit, baked bread and fresh eggs laid by the hens.

During play a new social contract between *players* evolved, despite the organisers' preparations. People were stealing food, borrowing boats without asking and drinking alcohol wherever it was to be found. *Trenne byar* resembled a society more to the taste of urban teenagers. Eight organisers and a few helpers could not possibly look after a thousand players. The larp taught young people to take care of themselves and each other, and to not expect the organisers to tell them what to do, or to provide rules for everything. Still, the organizer took numerous precautions. Christopher Sandberg recalls:

Minors' parents were contacted individually, and they could only enter in groups with older players. We had a direct line to the fire department and emergency services, radios and mobiles in the area. We wrote instruction booklets on sanitation, and sampled the drinking water.

Many of these arrangements were invisible to the players, and the logistical mishaps lead to aggressive debates in Swedish larp communities during the rest of the 1990s. They eventually provided the impetus for Tomas Walch and Henrik Summanen to write *Saga mot verklighet*, a book on organizing large scale larps, promoting the idea of players not as free participants and fellow creators, as they practically were in *Trenne byar*, but rather as comparing them with theatre audiences. The book underlined the organisers' duty of taking care that nothing got out of hand – the way it magnificently did at *Trenne byar*.

A Sandbox of Fantasy

The priest of fertility urges me to make a choice. Nervous, I raise my lantern, looking around the circle. Fourteen girls surrounding me. I circle, looking deep into their eyes, touching some at the forehead, waiting for an excuse, a coincidence, whatever, indication of a magical union. It is pitch black; I

only make out silhouettes of a crowd gathering against the dark blue sky this summer night. They are waiting for something to happen.

I am bluffing. I have no idea what is supposed to happen, since this has not been planned by anyone. In raising the stakes I had hoped to make something happen. Now here we are. Are we cheating? There is no way the other players could be certain whether this was staged by organizers. Many wish that something would happen. I cannot disappoint my friends who had plotted all day to surprise me with this. I feel strange being the main character in an election process. I search for someone with blue eyes similar to my own. These girls are way over my league.

A girl looks me straight into the eye, stunningly beautiful. Someone wants to remove her hood; she refuses with a graceful gesture, silence descending among the crowd. In that moment I realized how magical a split second of true improvisation can be. She did not smile.

At midnight we are married.

Trenne byar unfolded as a *sandbox scenario*, where organizers focus on designing the framework of the larp, rather than on characters or story. By taking care of the practical and logistical preparations, fiction and background material, and possibly casting some central characters, they create a world to inhabit, explore and play in. The philosophy is that the best situations, stories and scenes emerge from true improvisation.

Even though the organizers also provided big plots, the play experiences mostly emerged from the sandbox community of thousand players. The cultural structures and game rules, languages and laws based on the materials provided by the organisers were the basis of the game, but no universal truth on *Trenne byar* can be discerned. The King of Duvrike sometimes brought elements into the game that were obviously guided by someone else, but the players were mostly left to their own devices.

Gabriel Walldén (1995) later remarked: “The storylines that existed were well thought through, but we could not possibly make personal stories for 1000 people. We also expected that so many people gathered for a week would generate stories by themselves.”

Discussions in the *StrapatS* magazine indicate that the organizers felt that they failed to communicate some of their vision. Yet the players were empowered to create a good larp. They went home ready to organize their own games with an open mind. The organizers went home thousands of kroners poorer, hatching more careful game designs. In their later larps they were much stricter about distributing creative ownership, opting for active runtime game mastering and carefully designed characters.

On the final night, some eager people hammered at the wooden gates of Korpvingens Klan. I was busy drowning my character's misery in alcohol, expecting the game to end soon. I had lost my title as Earl of Norrland, and abdicated

the right to speak on behalf of the rest of my travel companions. I thought the story was over, but it started anew.

Out there in the dark, someone shouted that it was a matter of life and death to meet the son of the Earl of Norrland. Wait – that was my character! In five days the story we hacked together during the first days had not only spread, it had grown into a prophecy. The Earl’s son and his Elvish princess were to save the world from orcs and trolls. I still had a role to play in the story.

When the end approached, and the last battle was to be fought, we were supposed to prevent it. The prophecy was chanted and sung around campfires of Duvrike. In a few days, my character had become a kind of hope for those who tried solving the riddle of how the war could be won. Perhaps also on how the larp was to be played?

When we landed in the king’s camp, the king threw himself into the lake ordering his guards to attack Vidhamn. As a joke, without any motivation. Then and there, with a huge anticlimax, my game ended.

Paradise Lost

Trenne byar started the Swedish tradition of building wooden houses for larps, and established a diegetic currency as a standard for serious village larps. Trondheim larpers still use magic rules and runes originating from *Trenne byar*. The most tangible legacy is the *off-game rune*, a symbol denoting that a container is not a part of the game, also implying that everything else is intently a part of the illusion, therefore vulnerable to theft, use or misuse by other players.

Jonas Nelson summed it up in his review: “I was not expecting this kind of project to be done without some mishaps. Although several of the mistakes were unnecessary and could have been avoided, after all, I am content. Above all *Trenne byar* was a milestone of role-playing. I would not have missed it for all the butter in Småland.”

Trenne byar was the Woodstock of Nordic Larp, where we realized that we were part of a subculture much bigger than our largely isolated larp groups. Any Norwegian or Swedish organizer included in this book has been to a larp organised by someone who was there. For many years people went to large scale *summer larps* seeking to recreate the atmosphere. Even with all of its shortcomings, it is a mythic paradise lost for major parts of the Swedish and Norwegian larp scenes. For many, *Trenne byar* is the game that changed everything.



A knight and a magician enjoying a Coke in Vidhamn after the game. Wearing a full armor was a test of endurance, as the summer was unusually hot. (Post-game, Samantha Bonnevier)

Trenne Byar

CREDITS: Ett Glas, Christian Angerbjörn, Alexander Graff, Aigars Grins, Gabriel Sandberg, Christopher Sandberg, Gabriel Walldén, Victoria Henriksson, Martin Ericsson, Jonas Henriksson and others

DATE: 26-31 July, 1994

LOCATION: Ludvika, Sweden

LENGTH: 6 days

PLAYERS: 1000 participants

BUDGET: €85,000

PARTICIPATION FEE: €50

GAME MECHANICS: Detailed rules for boffer combat and magic

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HELSINGIN CAMARILLA

VAMPIRE LARPS IN FINLAND

Mika Loponen

THE TOREADOR MEETING was starting in a secluded cabinet of the restaurant. One by one, the vampires entered, each draped in the regalia of the era they were stuck in. Tensions were high, but they managed to keep their calm posture through heavy effort. The Prince of Helsinki had died, and the clan needed to find a candidate to fill his shoes. Either that or they would have to succumb to a prince from another clan. The vile Nosferatu candidate was quickly gathering support from other clans, and time was running short.

During the 1990s, the larp scene in Finland started to grow rapidly. In addition to the increasingly popular fantasy games, the expansion was spearheaded by the introduction of gothic vampire larps based on White Wolf's best-selling *Vampire: The Masquerade* role-playing game. White Wolf's larp rules were first published in 1993, and they were the first commercially successful larp product (originally called *Masquerade*, later *Mind's Eye Theatre* and *Laws of the Night*). The wide availability made it possible for people from different cultures to have a shared view of the game world.

Over the years, Finland – like other Nordic countries – has hosted dozens of *Vampire* campaigns of various sizes. The campaigns are typically played on locally modified versions of the official rule set. *Helsingin Camarilla* (The Helsinki Camarilla) was the largest and the longest campaign in Finland, running continuously from 1995 to 2004.

World of Darkness

In the *Vampire* setting, seven vampire clans plot and scheme against each other to improve their standing in vampire politics. Each clan portrays an archetype from vampire fiction: the regal Clan Ventrue draws on the archetype of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, while the shadowy and monstrous Nosferatu draws on the F. W. Murnay's film of the same name. As one long-time player recalls:

The different archetypes gave something for everyone. All the players that wanted to play romantic or seductive beauties went for the Toreadors, the tragic figures went for the Nosferatus, and the ones wanting to fill the shoes of savage outcasts became animalistic Gangrels. The key, I think, was in the cookie-cutter feeling of the archetypes: all types were portrayed in almost comic-book clarity, and they presented something for everyone.

Helsingin Camarilla was initially created as part of a national alliance of independent vampire campaigns cohabiting in the same game world, creating a loose meta-plot in collaboration.

◀ *Many games included different kinds of performances. A Toreador dance at the Juniors' Night in 1996. (Play, Suvi Lehtoranta)*

Two narrators collect game fees before play begins. They wore orange vests or armbands even during play so that players could find them when need arose. (Pregame, Suvi Lehtoranta)



Each campaign allowed characters from the other campaigns to visit their games, fostering relationships and stories that span the chronicles.

Due to numerous reasons, such as spectacularly failed joint games and radically different ideas on genre and style, the collaboration came to a halt in 1997. The various campaigns went their separate ways indulging in fratricidal elimination of the other campaigns from their storylines. After the fall, *Helsingin Camarilla* continued to coexist with *Helsingin Sabbat* (The Helsinki Sabbat) two more years until the need for freedom in storytelling mandated the separation.

Playing Vampire

Helsingin Camarilla began as a typical *Vampire* larp. The games had 30-120 players. Some of the characters were created by the players themselves, some by the game masters, and some were collaborations between players and game masters.

At the early stages, *Helsingin Camarilla* was basically a *locked manor* game, games where the characters sometimes had a diegetic reason to stay indoors – but often the players were just instructed to ignore any reasons to leave. In a manner typical to Finnish larps at the time, the characters arrived to the play area and spent their game at the site advancing their plots and social intrigues. In practice, however, the characters often left the play

area to either play some events with tabletop role-playing methods or to spend time off-game just to socialize with other players. Both of these activities were done in a designated off-game room. A player reminisces:

The off-game spaces were typically well populated. There were groups playing visits off-site as tabletop games, there were a few late-comers hurriedly putting their clothes and makeup on, there were some people discussing plots on a meta level, and of course there were a few people who enjoyed socializing off-game or who couldn't be bothered to enter the game just yet.

Over the years, the games evolved into citywide events spreading all around Helsinki. Playing took place both in prepared locations as well as amongst the mortals on the streets, in bars and other public venues. This had two profound effects: Firstly, the tabletop role-playing practically vanished from the game events, even though it was still used between larps: events taking place outside the vampire clubs could now be larped in real environments, so there was no reason to play them table-top. Secondly, the most grandiose plots moved from the larps to be played between the games. As players could actually visit any place in the town at any time, the earlier narrative methods of altering the external environment through large-scale events had to be dropped from the repertoire; if a player would hear of

Most games were set up as formal social gatherings. Here, a vampire ball. (Play, Suvi Lehtoranta)



A typical scene of vampires discussing the topics of the day, in 2001. (Play, Suvi Lehtoranta)



*Clan Ventrue had a firm grip on power in both Helsinki and Lahti in 1996, the early days of the joint chronicles.
(Portrait, unknown)*



*Most Nosferatu masks concentrated on boils and scabs. Some masks included rotten juices to provide horrid smells.
(Portrait, Suvi Lehtoranta)*

a riot in-game, she would go see it first-hand:

For me, the change from pure indoors gaming to citywide games was a profound one. Previously, I had to worry about getting my dress and makeup perfect; afterwards, I had to worry more about my clothes being suitable for outdoors gaming and about being able to play in restaurants and bars without the non-players paying too much attention [...] But the change was so positive in all ways! During the first years, my games consisted of endless socializing and meetings, characters wallowing through the same politics over and over with some new permutations. After we took to citywide gaming, my character could actually visit a pub with some fellow vampires, have a clan meeting in a restaurant, or after hearing a rumour of a monster in a park, I could actually go to the park to look for clues. Or meet the monster there and run for a few blocks in mortal fear.

Another player recollects:

Having the whole city as our playground was neat. We only used a small portion of it, of course, but we *could* have gone anywhere. After we got to play freely in the town, my gaming style changed radically. Gaming got much more relaxed, and the typical days of the vampires didn't feel as packed or game-like as they had felt earlier. Afterwards, much of my gaming consisted of just sitting in cafeterias with some fellow vampires, trading gossip and doing vampire spotting on other vampires that strolled the streets.

At the beginning, megalomania was the hallmark of *Vampire* larping in Finland. The intertwined campaigns tried to boast as many characters and games as possible. With size came the problems of size. Erratic quality of writing, central characters hogging attention, and above all, problems in coordination: Information exchange between the larp writers fluctuated wildly, and sometimes, the lack of communication required hours of game time to waddle through.

Even though in the later years all information was collected into an organized wiki knowledge base, the sheer amount of information was enormous enough to hinder storytelling. Many times, a character might do something that affected something another character had done a year or two earlier, and the plots would twist without touching, requiring extensive retconning and discussions to make them function:

It was a practical catastrophe at times. We could arrive to the game and just brace ourselves for trying to find out all the information we should know but that had dropped out of the loop. Sometimes information that we should have known for quite some time dropped out of the blue during a game. But we learned to make the most out of it, quickly compromising and negotiating our ways out of the situation.

A Gem of Many Facets

The main strength of the campaign – and one of the reasons it lasted for nearly 10 years – was practically found by accident. The chronicle had a large number of *narrators* (game master in White Wolf lingo), typically eight – one for each *Vampire* clan, and one

for the other characters. As the writers were largely autonomous in creating and developing characters, over time even the playing styles started to diverge into wildly differing directions.

In its last years, players described the genre of the campaign in descriptions such as *detective drama*, *over-the-top melodrama*, *talking heads politicking*, *epic drama*, and *superhero action*. Most importantly, players from different clans had explicitly differing ideas about the genre of the game, even though these contradictory genres worked side-by-side for years. A player recalls:

I spent my games playing deep intrigues and political wrangling within my character's clan or family – and after the game heard of other people doing high concept politics or car chases or telenovella style romances. It was oddly satisfying seeing so many different games mixed into one ongoing game. And even though we played practically different games, we acted as the backdrop for each other: our characters got to know each other across the years, and even though we had different playing styles, familiarity over the years made it one hell of a game.

Due to the different perspectives, the resolutions of a single plot could range from quietly dramatic in one clan to wildly epic in another: When an NPC vampire faction from Tallinn attacked some player characters, some of the playing characters spent the next game mourning for the losses and their helplessness, while others decided to conquer the offending city.

This particular case led to some very interesting gaming. Even though conquering cities did not feel compatible with the generic style of the setting, the players presented their arguments conclusively, and some of the narrators started to write the war effort – and the subsequent occupation of the city. As there was no possibility to play in Estonia, nearly all the gaming in Tallinn needed to be played as tabletop or over email. Nevertheless, the occupied city stayed until the end of the campaign as a setting for players who wanted to enjoy epic, pulp-spiced vampire gaming:

I found it refreshing. You would have half a hundred players in the same game but not playing the same game. [...] Players could just observe the different gaming styles of the narrators and pick the style that suited their own style the best. You could play whatever genre you wanted, from action adventure to a slow paced love drama. I'm not certain if the effect was intended, but for me, it worked. Even though it felt like sheer game writing anarchy.

This sandbox type gaming created an interesting side effect for information segregation; as players liked to play different parts of the sandbox in different playing styles, it was not uncommon for some players to prefer *not knowing* about specific plot points or other playing styles as they did not fit their idea on what the game was about.

Even though not originally an intentional feature the variations in style became recognized as a game writing tool for the narrators. A narrator recalls:

We held meetings between the games and discussed our plots. What we didn't discuss that often were the *styles* in which we



Clan Tremere at a cemetery in Lahti, 1995. This game can be seen as the launch of the national alliance. (Portrait, Suvi Lehtoranta)

wrote. We could hatch a nice plot for many characters – and write it down in completely different tones. At the time, it was alternatively frustrating and exciting, but we quickly started to view it as one of the best things in the game. A freedom to write what my players liked. And they could play what they liked alongside other players who had picked their narrators based on who wrote what they wanted to play.

As long as no other narrator was explicitly against an idea, it could be implemented. This made the campaign function as a sandbox full of ideas the narrators wanted to see in action or had seen elsewhere and wanted to test themselves. In this way, the campaign popularized many ideas originally introduced by small experimental games: For example, many of the pervasive street gaming elements pioneered in *Turun Vampire* (The Vampire of Turku), the *Shapers* campaign and *Isle of Saints* were popularized in *Helsingin Camarilla*.

Helsingin Camarilla and Vampire in general were pivotal in growing the larp hobby in Finland: The setting was accessible, games were regularly run and on the whole it was beginner-friendly. It might have begun as a typical Vampire larp, but it evolved into a style-free play-the-way-you-want campaign and a test laboratory for larp ideas. Due to its length, size and player turnover, it touched a larger portion of Finnish larpers than any other larp.

After the Fall

After *Helsingin Camarilla* ended, several smaller campaigns were still played in Finland, with a few new chronicles spawning every

now and then. Even so, *Vampire* games are a dwindling trend in Finland, and it seems unlikely that larger campaigns will be launched anymore – unless the *Twilight* phenomenon finds an outlet in *Vampire* larping.

In 2007, there was an epilogue for Finnish *Vampire*: the karaoke larp *Äbo by Night* was a loving, humorous and nostalgic look back at the absurdities of the genre, portrayed through vampires expressing their feelings and intrigues through singing karaoke. *Äbo by Night* was a eulogy as well as an epilogue: the genre had given all it could give, and it was time to move on.

Helsingin Camarilla

CREDITS: Main organizer Suvi Lehtoranta with nearly twenty narrators (up to nine at a time)

DATE: 1995–2004, approx. 60 games

LOCATION: Mostly in Helsinki, Finland

LENGTH: Typically eight hours, each

PLAYERS: Small games 10-30, large games 40-120

BUDGET: €100-2,000

PARTICIPATION FEE: €5-20

GAME MECHANICS: Modified White Wolf rules

Further Reading

White Wolf (1994) *The Masquerade. Second Edition.*

White Wolf (1996) *Laws of the Night.*

FÖRENINGEN VISIONÄRA VETENSKAPSMÄNS ÅRLIGA KONGRESS

SAILING THE SEAS OF MENTAL DISORDER

Samir Belarbi



JACOB KARLSSON *and his tense and introvert partner Karl Tyrving presented The Garden Guru, a combined pluviometer, power station and ornament, for probably the fourth year in a row. Each year with a small but not insignificant improvement. The big issue right now was to convince the society to join them in organizing the world's biggest gardening expo in Gothenburg next year.*

The title *Föreningen Visionära Vetenskapsmäns Årliga Kongress* almost tells the entire story of the game: The Annual Congress of the Society for Visionary Scientists. Members from all over Sweden gather at the congress centre on board the MS *Silja Europa* to elect a new president and to participate in The Golden Stone, a prestigious competition to determine who among them runs the most visionary project. In the backstory the society was created when disappointed Lennart Wiréus had left Kungliga Vetenskapsförbundet in 1983. He had presented his report *Dolda satanistiska och homoerotiska budskap i svensk politik och svenskt näringsliv 69-72*, and no one wanted to listen. Thus was born a more vital and open-minded society under the motto: *Vision Above All*.

The *Kongress* was played in public and these down-to-earth, everyday "scientists" were not the romantic *Nutty Professor* types or extravagant Doc Browns from *Back to the Future*. Instead they were tragic characters with mental illnesses.

Setting the Stage

The central tensions in the game stemmed from The Golden Stone competition; who is going to win? Will it be Tony Fleece and his plans to construct New City, the largest town in the world with amazing 70 million inhabitants? Or maybe Madeleine Schrödinger, for her discovery of the Human Passivisation Virus, the most likely cause of the recent increase in unemployment. Other things that concern the members include Carl-Henrik

Höglund's appeal against expulsion from the society and the case of the allegedly missing president of the society, Petra Strinde.

Except for this framework, there were not many big stories or plots created for the players, as such structures sometimes exclude players and turn them into bystanders. Instead, the players were given the basic concept and small triggers to evoke interaction in the following fashion:

Jane Nilsson reminds you of your mother, you often get nonplussed when she approaches you. If she would criticize you or your work in any way you would become very upset.

During the last couple of years you have been trying to find out who stole the spare change from the society's coffee cashbox in 1992. That's pretty much the only thing you talk about...

The ferry between Sweden and Finland, with its shabby passengers, slot machines, karaoke pubs and the kitschy luxury of interior design, was a perfect place for the larp. It not only suited the story, but made the characters blend in perfectly. It had a clearly defined area, big enough to give the players some freedom of movement but limited to ensure that they all stayed in contact with each other most of the time. The mix between public and private spaces supported both low key as well as more dramatic acting. The price of the trip, including the cabins and the typical Swedish smörgåsbord, was a real bargain and solved all logistics problems.

By observing the other passengers, you were able to define your character's insanity/sanity. (Diegetic, Samir Belarbi)



At the harbour's parking lot, dressed up as their characters and ready for 24 hours of pervasive larping. (Pregame, Samir Belarbi)

Vision Above All

The blur of fact and fiction in the *Kongress* was inspired by a run-in with Bobby Goldcrest and Reginald von Hindenburg, who had the idea of *The Peace Striker*; a gigantic televised concert they planned to hold at the under-siege Sarajevo Airport. I attended their absurd press conference at a tacky motel, pretending to be a journalist. They appeared quite normal, but the project had no basis in reality: It was all lies and delusions.

The public setting was crucial to the game. I wanted the players of the *Kongress* to have the same sensation I had in the press conference, of doing something deceptive in plain sight – the quick heartbeat, the adrenaline pumping and the dizziness caused by the bombardment of delusions, nonsense and facts.

Finnish artist Alvar Gullichen's *Bonk* exhibition in Stockholm was another key inspiration. *Bonk* is an art project about an imaginary industrial conglomerate that manufactures nonsense machines; I particularly liked the fact that you never knew for certain if the expo was for real or not.

Playing in public was nothing new. I studied at an art school and was very much influenced by the movements from the sixties, like Fluxus and Neo Dada. I was familiar with Augusto Boal's *invisible theatre* – a method to perform short undercover plays in public. The objective of those plays was to enlighten the

spectators and force them to take action, thus becoming a part of the play.

Another touchstone was the game *Gotchal'90* (1990, inspired and named after the 1985 film) played in Stockholm, running around in public and shooting each other with water pistols and ping-pong guns.

Getting Ready to Rumble

I started working on the larp in late 1995. At the time, Noomi Liljefors, a producer at Swedish television SVT was making a documentary about larp. Liljefors and her team followed me around – to school, to my work as a test subject for psychopharmacological drugs, and to the larp *Brustna illusioner* (Broken Illusions, 1995). She became very enthusiastic when I told her about my plans and she offered to help out financially. They really backed me up through the whole project, paying for the conference room and sandwiches on the ferry, printing the booklets and taking care of the postage. The only things the players had to pay for were their own tickets, the plastic pockets for the name tags, a spray can and the engraving for The Golden Stone. Not much, in other words.

The hardest task in organizing the event was communicating



8.30 Samling i konferanslokalen högst upp. Alla medlemmar hälsas hjärtligt välkomna och informeras om helgens aktiviteter.

9.00 Vi kör igång med konferansen, i pass fyra om fyra. Föredragen kommer vara ca 15 minuter långa och följs därefter av kort frågestund.

1. Egon Hjellmertz
2. Jakob Henrik Karlsson
3. Barbara Bark
4. Tomas Andersson och Oskar Drense

10.20 Fikapaus och smörgås.

10.40 Konferansen kör igång igen.

5. Lorenza Pastorelli
6. Wilhelm B. Flug
7. Tony Fleece
8. Marianne Dollmayer

12.00 Lunch och sedan tid för rekreation. Båten erbjuder många olika saker att göra, varför inte slappna av vid poolavdelningen eller strosa omkring på däck.

13.30 Andra halvan av konferansen startar.

9. Jukka-Pekka Väänänen
10. Hedvig Wunt-Flak, Ernst Loob och Edvin Flak
11. Jane Nilsson och Charlotte Lindberg
12. Elof Löfgren

14.50 paus

15.00. Fortsättning

13. Annvor Klasson
14. Börje Fahlström,
- Göte Larsson och Bengt Ekblad.



SEASIDE-HYTTERNA PÅ DÄCK 5, 9 OCH 10 HAR HAVSUTSIKT OCH ÄR SMAKFULLT INREDDA FÖR 1-4 PERSONER. ALLA HAR DUSCH OCH WC MED SKÖN GOLVVÄRME, HÄRTOR, TELEFON, TV OCH RADIO.



SAUNA BEACH PÅ DÄCK 12 HÅLLER HÖGSTA KLASS MED SEX BASTU, POOL, BARNPOOL, TRE JACUZZI, SKYBAR OCH GRILL. FRÅN BÅREN KAN DU STROSA DIREKT UT PÅ SOLDÄCK.

15. Karin Stimmer
16. Cliff Atterbom

16.20 Fikapaus

- 16.35 Forts
17. Mona och Arvid Zetterberg
18. Petra Strinde
19. Karl-Henrik Hölund
20. Madeleine Schrödinger

17.55. Pausrast, kaffe och kaka, fram till Årsmötet.

18.10. Årsmöte

ca 19.30. Slut på mötet. Lite tid att fräscha upp sig på innan kvällens nöjjen.

20.00 Smörgåsbord "Buffet Europa". Gemensamt smörgåsbord!

21.00 Fria aktiviteter ombord. Kareokee eller dans valet är fritt.

07.00 Prisutdelning i kafeterian. Med jurymotivering och tack tal från vinnaren.

08.00 Båten ankommer till Värtahamnen.



MUMMAD OCH MAKEADOT MATTKLUBBEN OCEAN PALACE PÅ DÄCK 8 LOCKAR MED DE BÄSTA DANSORKESTRARNA, ÖSTERLJONS ABSLUT STÖRSTA DARSGOLV OCH DEN SÄRKlassIGT LÅNGSTA BARDISKEN.



SUGERT SILJA EUROPA HAR 9 RESTAURANGER OCH TIO BAREER, SOM TILL FREDSTÄLLER ALLA BENDY FRÅN OFÖRGLÖMLIGA 5-STJÄRNIGA LÄCKE HETER TILL MCCORNALDS MER STANDARDISERADE.



Early roll call in the conference room. (Diegetic, Samir Belarbi)



Coffee break. The scientists certainly knew how to mix business and pleasure. (Diegetic, Samir Belarbi)



With small and simple alterations of their physical appearance the players were able to portray their characters. (Diegetic, Samir Belarbi)

my visions – and sticking to them throughout the preparations. I wanted players sensitive to my ideas and invited about 50 people to take part, mostly people who had played in *Nemesis Divina* (1995), close friends and people I knew from art school.

The vision of the game was communicated through two booklets containing instructions on how to improvise and create characters for a larp as well as background material on the society. For example there were short presentations of all the characters and their work. The players were encouraged to use this information and network as much as possible already before the game to create shared memories, to conspire against other members and to plan for common actions at the annual meeting.

The players were required to prepare by reading Keith Johnstone's *Impro* as well as a book on mental illness. They were encouraged to enjoy the photographs of Lars Thunbjörk, Martin Scorsese's film *The King of Comedy* (1982), the Swedish game show *Bingolotto* and the films of Roy Andersson.

The booklets also contained home assignments making the players dress up as their characters and play trivial things in public, like going to the café or the library. The important thing was to become somewhat comfortable with playing in the real world. The players were also instructed to organize small preparatory larps together in small groups. In these they were free to stop the action every now and then to evaluate their own performance.

Pervasive gaming, playing in public, was not really explained for the players, and there were few restrictions. I just told them that the game was to be played secretly in public and there were no free zones on the boat. If the players needed to step outside the game, they were able to do so in private only. They were allowed to break the illusion only in the case of real danger.

The players knew all the participants as the characters were introduced in the booklets. I urged them to take care of their co-players and pay attention to the person behind the character. They were free to interact with other passengers responsibly, and had to bear the consequences of their actions. I wanted them to play subtly, but without letting go of their odd characters, in order not to cause outsiders big discomfort.

24 Hours of “High Life”

The larp started in the ferry terminal early in the morning. The characters got their tickets, name tags, cabin keys, and got onboard. They stayed in cabins of four, and it was important to match the right ones together. Reserved players ended up with outgoing ones, rookies shared with more experienced, people who were friends in real life were separated and characters likely to end up in a dispute were put together.

At eight o'clock they all gathered in the conference room for a roll call. A large portion of the day was then spent listening to the absurd lectures of The Golden Stone competition. There were breaks for coffee and small talk. The documentary crew



Lorenza Pastorelli talked about God's plan for mankind and how it had been manifested throughout history. (Diegetic, Samir Belarbi)

made short interviews trying to catch the general mood of the conference.

In retrospect, there were too many lectures. Almost every character gave one and a few players commented that they had a hard time staying in character, due to the "lack of interactivity".

The one-hour lunch was a perfect opportunity to socialize and debate the lectures on a more informal basis. The characters could be seen taking a bit of fresh air on deck, shopping for perfumes (trying every single bottle out), strolling down the corridors, and enjoying burgers and milkshakes in "the world's only floating McDonald's".

Anna Bäsén, one of the players, wrote a review for the fanzine *Fëa Livia*. She complemented the other players for excellent acting skills: "blending well with the other passengers, especially in smaller groups".

In late afternoon, after the second stretch of the never-ending lectures, it was time for the annual meeting. It turned out to be a complete disaster. Nothing was prepared, the auditor and annual reports were missing – as was the president. The society members had a long-winded debate on whether or not to postpone the meeting until she was back. They were paralyzed, not able to make any decisions. Some wanted to speed things up in order to eat dinner sooner, while others wanted to deal

with minor items, such as the society's new logo and whether or not to invite Donald Trump as an honorary member. Egon Hjellmertz took the opportunity to invite everyone for a canoeing holiday in September. Finally, the annual meeting was postponed to a later date.

The banquet was served in the great dining hall at eight o'clock in the evening. The members feasted on meatballs, smoked salmon and pickled herring. One character only ate plates and plates of raspberry and chocolate pudding, while another organized his food in geometrical patterns. In the background there were a beautiful sunset and the Finnish archipelago, with its rocks and navigation marks slowly drifting by.

Around ten in the evening people gathered in the ballroom. The characters slipped into the crowd of senior citizens, bikers, hen parties and ordinary families. A lousy orchestra played cover songs on stage. Couples were dancing in pairs and many of the scientists joined in. Others sat in their lounge chairs, drinking cocktails and clapping their hands in ecstasy.

Next morning, the prize ceremony was held close to the reception desk: Mona and Arvid Zetterberg, who had presented their theory about the worm growth factor and the new possibilities for full brain transplantations, were announced as the winners and received the trophy. Tony Fleece threw a tantrum



There was a thin line between tragedy and comedy. Timid Barbara Bark presented her work "Friendly Dimensions", informed by receiving vibrations from sea shells. (Diegetic, Samir Belarbi)

accusing the Zetterbergs of using illegal substances the night before. It was an awkward situation for most members.

Soon after, *Silja Europa* called at the port in Stockholm. The scientists walked the long passage, through the customs and in to the terminal, starting the voyage back to their small and lonely existences back home. The game was over.

In 1997 I started to work on a grandiose sequel, *Expo - 98™*. It was supposed to run for a month in a high rise apartment building outside Stockholm – and simultaneously in Norway and Finland. The idea was to concentrate on the darker side of mental disorder in a story of an unemployed and divorced father, falling free outside society.

Expo - 98™ was never finished; the vision was out of proportion and had no basis in reality. It never happened, just like the plans of Goldcrest, von Hindenburg and my visionary scientists.

Föreningen Visionära Vetenskapsmäns Årliga Kongress

CREDITS: Samir Belarbi

DATE: 12-13 May 1996

LOCATION: The MS *Silja Europa*, between Stockholm, Sweden and Turku, Finland

LENGTH: 24 hours

PLAYERS: 34 players + TV crew of 4

BUDGET: €800

PARTICIPATION FEE: €25

GAME MECHANICS: Freeform improvisation.

OTHER MATERIAL: A video at <http://www.youtube.com/user/Titelmatchen>

Further Reading

BÄSÉN A (1996) Föreningen Visionära Vetenskapsmän – en utflykt i hjärnans tassemarker. *Fëa Livia #14*.

BOAL A (1992) *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*.

JOHNSTONE K (1979) *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*.

LILJEFORS N (1997) *Den lekande Människan – en film om ett folk som kallas livare*. Documentary film by SVT.



DET SISTA KAPITLET

DECADENT PULP OCCULTISM
Holger Jacobsson

“AH... THERE YOU ARE, GOOD LOOKER!” a disgraced industry bigwig with some lingering charm approaches. A while ago he was melting sugar for his absinthe, but now there is surprising clarity in his eyes “Are you dead?” he asks. There is a tone in your ear from the whizzing lead, and the room is filled with a sticky smell of burning sulphur that doesn’t mix well with Shalimar. But you’re not dead! “Me neither”, he continues. “Let’s kiss this damned place goodbye. I snatched the car keys from the house boy, we can’t let him drive in that condition.”



The infamous Folke Bolin entertains a secret agent. The vintage cars were borrowed from a local collector. (Portrait, Mattias Ekman)

Det sista kapitlet was the Final Chapter in a campaign set around the turn of the 1930s inspired by the works of H. P. Lovecraft and Western occult sciences. The first light-hearted brushstrokes in the series (consisting of three major games inter-spaced by several mini-larps and some play-by-mail action) were drawn in 1993 and the arduous task of pulling it all together into a worthy finale was accomplished five years later.

It all began with *Herr Gyllenstiärnas gästabud* (Mister Gyllenstiärna's Banquet, 1993), a larp focused around the death of Mr Gyllenstiärna and the abortive reanimation ritual conducted by his cultists. He had been poisoned by his butler who, for valid reasons, feared that the feast was the climax of the host's demonologic pursuits. *Nemesis Divina* (1995), the second major game, was played some 18 months later. The main theme was the possibility for the chosen few to join an expedition following the footsteps of an eccentric professor who had disappeared in search for Atlantis. There were rumours about some long-forgotten Atlantean knowledge that might help correct the mess caused by Mr Gyllenstiärna. One participant lent us an old device for electroshock therapy: it looked and worked like something invented by Nikola Tesla and was being used to retrieve crucial memories from Mr Gyllenstiärna's deranged butler.

The first two games, especially the second one, were sophisticated and relatively calm events. The highlight of the evening could be a bath in a silly loose-fitting swimming costume or Charleston sessions in front of the wind up phonograph. Or, perhaps watching that chess player who, after a few strong cocktails, outclassed everyone, even some decent amateur competitors. With his back to the table! Up until this point the story had evolved around a handful of leading characters. The juiciest parts, such as discovering that the mysteriously appearing doll with a vague resemblance to one of the leading figures was not just stuffed with cloth but also with some pig intestines and pieces of parchment with abhorrent notes, were enjoyed behind closed doors. That said, there was inspired acting going on far from the spotlight. But in the final chapter we decided to make the overall story more pervasive.

The Final Chapter

The backdrop for *Det sista kapitlet* was a welcome-home party for those who had won the contest for the Atlantis expedition tickets. However, the travellers were also subjected to an open hearing organized by a chapter of high-grade Freemasons supervised by the Swedish police. There were many mysteries to be



Grammofonorkestern Nattugglorna did American jazz, Swedish variety numbers and the pseudo German strip-club classic Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen, all with the same inimitable panache. (Group portrait, Susanne Gräslund)

solved and a miscellaneous bunch of occultists from numerous countries had been invited as experts. In the pile of character descriptions – more than a meter thick – hardly anyone could be found who was not a member of a secret society, a smuggler of occult paraphernalia, a psychic, or at the very least a pen pal of Aleister Crowley. This may sound over the top but for most characters events were finally about to draw to a head.

The first parts of the campaign took place during the Roaring Twenties in an atmosphere of luxury and ease, but at the time of *Det sista kapitlet* in 1931, a huge part of the assembly had lost everything during the Great Depression. The players were having well-informed discussions about the rise to power of NSDAP in Germany and the alarming state of world politics. This provided a gloomy background for the events of the game -- but the feelings of doom were about to become thicker!

Nearby, in a chapel on a small island a mere rickety bridge away from the partly art-deco furnished mansion where the welcome-home party took place, the Freemasons kept a prisoner in a straitjacket. Watched over by a nurse, a beefy guard and a doubt-ridden psychotherapist, he was possessed by an entity growing in strength and affecting the environment with decay and decadence: blood could appear in someone's hand-basin, or

maggots in a flowerpot. But the main effects were to be found in the mindsets of everyone around, established in the participants' personal stories. There was, just to make an example, a very depraved manifesto circulating. The prudish academic who inquired into its origin made the disturbing discovery that he himself was its originator, and also that he had done some other bad things during that night of demon-inspired automatic writing that he could not remember.

Yet just killing the prisoner was not an option, it would have given the entity its eagerly awaited freedom. To find a stronger host for the possessor and delay or terminate the process was more reasonable but the pieces of the transition ritual had been distributed between opposing factions. It was also unclear who could be considered a strong enough host and how the operation would affect the delicate balance of power between those factions.

There were literally hundreds of player handouts outlining different facets of the situation and very little time to solve the puzzle. As a game master I thought it was obvious that cooperation in face of a common threat was crucial, but the old players stuck to their secretive demeanour encouraged during the previous parts of the campaign. Thus almost everybody died in



The police constables who failed to maintain law and order at Follökna Manor. Per Wetterstrand, one of the initiators of the campaign, in the middle. (Group portrait, Mattias Ekman)

a shootout at the end, which certainly was not something we had prepared for, but which turned out very well. The players themselves crafted an alternative ending: after being shot, they gathered with strange zombie smiles for more jazz and cocktails or to give their personal intrigues an eccentric post-death twist. To me, it felt like the collective soul of the game, something richer than the work of my own imagination, expressed itself through the participants. This experience provided a deeper satisfaction than the rare occasion of seeing everything fall in place as planned.

In a superlatively positive review, Martin Olsson (1998) called *Det sista kapitlet* a

true milestone and the first larp where the illusion was so total and the background so well worked through that it felt equally natural to relax at the veranda sipping brandy and discuss horse breeding, running around in blood frenzy, or to sit alone in your room crying.

He also credited us for coming close to perfection in practical matters. But behind the scenes our chefs had to change the menu because of breakdowns of kitchen machines – and when I had to wake up the local electrician in the middle of the night my plan was to auction out some props to be able to pay him. Luckily he settled for two bottles of home made wine. A few days earlier I had made the same deal with a vintage car enthusiast who helped some guests to make a classy entrée and then parked

two of his shiny darlings outside the main building.

The attendance fee was high by local standards at the time, but considering the full room and board – with five course dinners – all worldly needs during the game were well catered for. But the players really did their part of the preparations: several long-haired larpers got their first haircuts in years to arrive in period hairdos, we had a live band of semi-professional musicians working for free, one player memorized the Hebrew alphabet, some of our Nazi occultists collected props from dubious sources and made their own authentic-looking uniforms and so on.

Articles of Faith

From the very beginning we felt connected to the *Sollentuna School*, an informal group of players who considered strong feelings and character identification to be the holy grail of larp. We idealized an all-in attitude to difficult issues. Rituals were based on historical sources, people were giving each other bruises during quarrels, and once, when I entered a room to deliver martinis, I found three guests with post-coital smiles under the same covering. But our attitude came with a price: We offered a player of Asian origin a character of high rank to ensure that remarks about her ethnicity would not dominate her experience. However, we refused to back out from our what-you-see-is-what-you-get philosophy, and she decided not to participate. As my co-creator Jonas Lindblom (1998) and I, harshly, wrote in



*Most of the dramatis personae. Only a handful of them survived the occult equivalence of an atom bomb.
(Group portrait, Susanne Gräslund)*

a *Fëa Livia* article about our style of intrigue writing:

You don't have two-meter tall dwarves with fake beards at fantasy larps. Why should we tolerate bleach negro kings, swarthy Nazis or thalidomide deformed elves?

What really attracted me to larp in those days was the possibility to get in touch with difficult facets of the human condition, in a reasonably safe setting. I was impressed by a friend who, during *Europa*, finally found those swallowed condoms in his own poo that had been causing him constipation. The line between reasonably safe and problematic can be thin, and the alcohol-fueled intermezzo of the last night of *Det sista kapitlet* offered many questionable ingredients: Fencing with sharp swords, the throwing around of furniture and indoor-use of signal pistols. We received a well deserved bashing afterwards for not taking safety issues seriously enough.

Writing the plot of the game was not a precise exercise in cause and effect. Due to the complexity that had evolved over time we had to handle the story more like a wax figure in a state of constant progress. One player spent days at the Uppsala University library with the twelve volume version of J.G. Fraizer's *The Golden Bough* checking out some tribal practices that he connected to the house spirit of the campaign. We rewarded him by making room for such a connection in the plot. The main quests could be solved in many ways, and I think the feeling of being free to act and react without the weight of a predetermined story

was an inspiring relief. The whole course of the campaign had been set in *Herr Gyllenstiärnas gästabad*, when Capt. Hammar suffocated a priest with a pillow: We considered his soul to be the perfect soil for the aforementioned house spirit, and this was the player who ended up in the straight jacket during *Det sista kapitlet*.

We had our ways of pushing the drama in certain directions like the possibility of communication with the outside world through telegrams. But we preferred "mood enhancers" to "commands from the control room". Many character descriptions were written so that the participant, without knowing it, would contribute to a certain aspect of the overall ambience. I especially remember Folke Bolin – that ill-fated variety artist with a weakness for "jazz-powder" and German schlagers who handily dragged others into his personal inferno of downfall and denial. The player behind that character is an acclaimed actor nowadays but still remembers this game as his strongest experience of the role taking over the actor, turning him into an astonished observer of his own behaviour.

Today I can see that staying loyal to your character and doing what is good for her can slip into viewing the game as a contest or even a show off. In 2000, Martin Ericsson commented against the simulationism of *Det sista kapitlet* on the Swedish larp discussion forum Galadrim, arguing for the narrativism of *Hamlet*:

I can see merits in the simulation method, especially



On the bonnet: A secret agent disguised as flapper. Later on she happily threw herself into the lake, forgetting the Testament of Swedenborg hidden under her garter. It had taken several days to craft. (Group portrait, Mattias Ekman)



The notorious occultist baron in the middle had gathered an assortment of ceremonial weapons for the occasion. All with hand engraved symbols from the grimoire Clavicula Salomonis. (Group portrait, Mattias Ekman)



Fiendly gossip about the Bachelor of the Year contest before the evil schemes kicked in. (Group portrait, Mattias Ekman)

when it is as well executed as under *Det sista kapitlet*. But isn't it time for players to leave their egos at home and enact a story together instead of letting its twists and turns be the hazardous consequence of initiatives from individuals?

These remain valid points. But our way of doing it was intended to react upon the players initiatives, enhance them and giving them back in a way that made a story develop on its own. As opposed to the narrativist way where the end and turning points are known from the beginning, like in *Hamlet*. Of course there should be room for both approaches. But no one makes games like *Det sista kapitlet* any more...

Det Sista Kapitlet

CREDITS: Holger Jacobsson and Jonas Lindblom (main organizers), Tony Gustavsson (plot material, handouts and props), Anders Ohlsson, Markus Lifmark, Anna Hjertin, Lina Claesson, John Gunnarsson, Jessica Arnell, Hanna Larsson, Therese Bengtsson, Kerstin Örtberg, Petter Acebo (staff), Karin Persson, Karin Nordin, Susanne Gräslund, Oscar Hedin, Henrik Summanen, Jessica Arnell and Peter Lind (articles and proofing), Per Wetterstrand, Martin Jostby (plot material from the earlier stages of the campaign)

DATE: 6-9 August 1998

LOCATION: Föllökna Manor, Flen, near Stockholm, Sweden

LENGTH: 60 hours

PLAYERS: 65

BUDGET: €6,000

PARTICIPATION FEE: €70

GAME MECHANICS: None

Further Reading

TESTORF M (1994) Herr Gyllenstiärnas Gästabud. En lajvåterblick. *Fëa Livia* #5.

JACOBSSON H (1994) Live i 20-talsmiljö. *Fëa Livia* #6.

SUMMANEN H (1995) Nemesis Divina – Ett lyckat evenemang. *Fëa Livia* #10.

FESSÉ S (1995) Fotoreportage. *Fëa Livia* #10.

SUMMANEN H (1996) Tema: världens bästa lajv. *Fëa Livia* #14.

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GROUND ZERO

THE FIRST DAY OF A NUCLEAR HOLOCAUST

Jori Virtanen

WHEN THE SIREN RANG, it became obvious that there would not be a Sunday service in the church. The residents of the neighbourhood hurried to the bomb shelter. The worst had come to pass – the Black Saturday of the Cuban Missile Crisis would be followed by the blackest Sunday possible. Hourly newscasts confirm that the Crisis has escalated into an atomic war. Finally the bomb falls. The city above the shelter is gone. The radio is silent. The shelter is your salvation, your prison and possibly your grave.

◀ *The larp was situated in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The area outside the game location looked nothing like it. (Play, Ilmari Vauras)*

Ground Zero was a 30-hour larp for 21 characters portraying the first day of the atomic war in the sixties. It told the story of eight households from a quiet suburbia of Tulsa, Oklahoma, fleeing to a bomb shelter when the sirens started wailing, and then waiting for the world to end. It was about the desperation and mind numbing terror when you realize that your world is gone, and you have survived to mourn the loss of your families and friends.

The early sixties were an obvious and immediate choice for the setting due to its historical significance. The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 very nearly resulted in the Third World War. The Russians were erecting nuclear missile bases in Cuba, causing political tensions between east and west. On October 27th, a United States reconnaissance craft was shot down and the pilot was killed. The crisis took a turn for the worse, and although President John F. Kennedy strived to find a diplomatic solution, he knew that it would now take very little to ignite a full-out nuclear conflict. Later on that same day, the worst almost came to be: a second recon plane was hit, but despite heavy damages, it managed to limp home.

In *Ground Zero*, the plane crashed, and the world bathed in thermonuclear holocaust.

Early Immersionism

In the late nineties, the Finnish larp scene was still taking its first baby steps. Sure, games had been organized for well over a decade, but games with real ambitions were few and far between – and practically every game was a single serving fantasy dish that got really old, really fast. The only real contender for the ubiquitous fantasy genre were vampire games utilizing the rich world of *Vampire: the Masquerade*, with a strict set of rules and heavy difficulties in getting the multitude of plot lines to be on the same level of epic, or the lack of it.

Ground Zero aimed to do something different. By choosing the real world instead of an imagined setting, every player would be able to agree what the world is like. Literature, movies, comics and parents are chock full of details about the sixties, and the players would have no difficulties tapping into the information overload.

The whole game aimed to be as *immersionist* as possible, with as little need for suspension of disbelief as possible. Although immersionism is nowadays one of the dominant aesthetics of larping, it was almost unheard of in 1998, before Mike Pohjola's *Manifesto of the Turku School* (2000).

The rationale behind immersionism was that the main point of *Ground Zero* was not the depiction of an atomic war. Sure, an A-bomb would detonate, but the bomb was just the means to an end: the game was about how people feel and think when their world is literally obliterated. Realistic characters without special powers or hidden conspiracies was the only way to go.

Since *Ground Zero* was intended to be a psychological terror experience instead of an action adventure, and as the characters were all civilians and civilians tend to avoid conflict whenever possible, there was also little reason to include any kind of rules

mechanics into the game, further reinforcing the immersionist approach.

The bomb shelter isolated the players from any outside influence, and also restricted the area that needed to be scenographed, thus allowing the immersion to feed on itself. *Ground Zero* also utilized a gimmick its contemporary games lacked: special effects. Or, to be more precise, one special effect: The Bomb.

Creating a Community

Tulsa, Oklahoma, was the oil capital of the world and rife with aviation industry. Such an important industrial city would most certainly be a prime target for the Soviets, but since the city was located in the middle of US, it would not be among the first cities to be hit, allowing the news to trickle in before the inevitable would happen.

The characters lived in an idyllic suburb, with white picket fences and lots of promise. They were neighbours, on a small strip of road with eight homes. The cast was rather stereotypical: a proud but bitter father who held his family in a tyrannical grip of respect born out of fear, a retired marine colonel suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, a wizened high school teacher in deep denial, a Mormon questioning his faith, a loving wife of a truck driver. Such stereotypes were chosen on purpose, as that's what your everyday people are. The idea was that this would allow the players to really see their characters as real people instead of a conglomerate of a few distinctive traits, as was often the case.

Such a realistic approach placed a huge importance on the players' abilities to immerse themselves to the psychology of their character – only when the player fully committed to the personality of the character, the horrors of the atomic war would become palpable. At that time it was customary for the game masters to create all characters, and the players would make do with what they'd been given. Yet it was obvious that no matter how well the characters would be written, a complete psychological profile was an unreachable goal for even one character. Thus it was decided to break the mould, and just write down the basic concepts – an outlining of a personality, some unconscious traits, and an idea of history. The rest would be then fleshed out by the writers in cooperation with the players. The phone bills from these never-ending talks were enormous.

It was also important for the players to know all of the other characters as well. Being one with your own character was crucial, and knowing your immediate family and neighbours thru and thru was essential. So, the players were constantly encouraged to communicate with each other, so that even those small quirks and habits, like eating one's hair and calling your father "sir", would become mannerisms familiar to all.

One method of creating this kind of familiarity with the characters, and the players, was to give the players the chance to experience and practice what their characters are like in a non-stressful environment: a short dinner party hosted by the newcomers to the street served as the perfect pregame. Such

A family tyrannized by the unemployed redneck father (second from left). (Portrait, Ilmari Vauras) ▶
The age of a character was not always immediately apparent. Parents (left) and their teenage daughter (right). (Portrait, Ilmari Vauras) ▶▶

a simple thing as a basic dinner get-together proved to be an invaluable tool in creating as stark a contrast as possible with the everyday life and the life in the bunker.

In the Shelter

The game started on a Sunday morning. The characters were having breakfast, preparing to meet the day by going to church. When the air raid siren rang, everyone did what had been rehearsed many times: they grabbed pre-assembled backpacks and headed to the communally funded bomb shelter.

In reality, the shelter was the basement of a local youth centre. While the building dated back to sixties the modern day gadgets like a Coca-Cola vending machine had to be concealed with cardboard sheets, and spreading props conveying the proper zeitgeist around. The murals done by kids and youngsters were explained away by making one of the characters a mentally retarded but good-natured kid who loved to paint. *Time* magazines from early sixties were placed on the tables, old toys on the floors, books that had been published by that time on the shelves, and sheets from food cans were removed so they'd be as plain as possible.

For the duration of the larp, the players would be confined to this basement and left to their own devices. The game proceeded according to scheduled events such as flickering lights, power outages, and so on. Apart from that, the players would have very little contact with the outside world. An old radio was used to broadcast news from the nation in crisis; each broadcast was a bleak snippet of what was happening, like a bright flash of light and then a mushroom cloud from where New York had used to be. After six broadcasts, the radio went silent.

Then, 16:23, The Bomb.

The atomic blast was created with an audio track played through four heavy duty loudspeakers hidden in the basement. The volume was cranked up, and the result was a 40-second wall of sound. The soundscape started with a low and heavy boom of a detonation three kilometres away, followed by the rolling rumbling of an approaching earthquake that grew in intensity quickly, and, a few seconds later, the deafening roar of the building above being ripped apart by wind, fire and flying debris. The players were utterly terrified, and one reported that he was sure that he saw the ceiling buckle and dust rain down from the cracks.

After the detonation, all game master influence ceased, and the players were left alone to simmer in hopelessness for 22 hours.

The End

The game was ended as abruptly as possible in the following afternoon. We yanked the basement door open, turned on the lights, and hollered that the game was over, please gather up for debriefing. The ending was jarringly sudden on purpose, in hopes that it would shock people back to reality rather than allowing them to mull it over.

The debrief started with a quick narrative overview of what the future in the shelter would bring; the walls of the shelter were damaged in the nuclear blast, allowing irradiated black

rain to seep in. The water source would be permanently out of order, and the only electricity would come from car batteries. Soon, the effects of radiation would begin to show: three to four characters would get sick to the point of vomiting, then get even more fatigued, and lose some hair. One or two characters would die, slowly and painfully, after three or four weeks.

The question of who would die and who would live was left intentionally open. Many players found it hard to cope with the uncertainty about their characters' fates, and some tried to decide amongst themselves who would get sick, who would commit suicide, and who would be standing tall. This was discouraged, as such things would allow players to reach closure, which was adverse to the cruelty of the never-ending nightmare their characters would face. The goal was that players would exit the game feeling heavy hearted from the horrors, but also elated by the fact that they, the players, are indeed very much alive and well, and able to appreciate what they have.

As Mike Pohjola reminisces:

Many people felt that this was a depressive game, but I felt a great surge of optimism and hope at the end. When living in the underground shelter and hearing reports of nuclear war on the radio, we imagined the world around us being destroyed. [...] Instead of dismal ruins, I see the suburb and the youth center with sun shining and birds singing. And this created a very strong albeit unplanned sense of catharsis: there is hope yet for humanity!

You Can Leave the Shelter, But...

Ground Zero had a profound effect on its players, and the players continued to feel anxiety and sadness for a long time afterwards. The debrief continued on an email list, which clearly helped to alleviate the artificially created post traumatic stress disorder symptoms. Heidi Hopeametsä (2008) has analysed the written player debriefs:

The events of the game and the emotions it raised were discussed in the debrief session after the game, and also later with friends and on the game mailing list. Two players mentioned they had cried when they had thought about the game several days later, and one player said that new interpretations about the game arise every day. The "fictitious" experiences had, on some level, been real experiences. [...] One of the players mentioned at the end of her debrief that writing really helps in dealing with the emotions brought on by the game.

Janos Honkonen, who participated the first run, says:

Ground Zero gave a brief glimpse what it would be like to be ravaged by war, or a natural catastrophe, and how it would really feel to see your whole life destroyed before your eyes. The anti-war sentiments were driven home with full force. [...] There's one particular song that reminds me of the game, and the memories still bring tears to my eyes, more than ten years after the game.

Ground Zero also pioneered immersion as the key element of larping, and became a pivotal inspiration for the influential and

Major and Mrs Harrison and their mentally disabled son. The bomb shelter was built under their house. (Portrait, Ilmari Vauras) ▶
The Stanislavsky family were second and third generation immigrants from Russia, and thus perceived as Communists by some in the neighbourhood. (Portrait, Ilmari Vauras) ▶▶





debated *Manifesto of the Turku School*. As Mike Pohjola says:

Nothing was exaggerated or dramatized, things were as they were. [...] The players weren't expected to create drama out of nothing, but just do what their characters would do. A style that would later become known in the Nordic countries as the Turku style as I propagated it in *The Manifesto of the Turku School*: "When playing a character and immersing myself in it, my foremost goal shall be to simulate what happens inside the character's head, and how it affects his behavior. Hollow pretence I leave for the actors."

In many ways *Ground Zero* is the quintessential representative of the Turku School style. A game that was all about character immersion, in a basement, in Turku.

Ground Zero

CREDITS: Jami Jokinen & Jori Virtanen

DATE: April 1998, spring 1999, October 2001

LOCATION: Turku, Finland

LENGTH: 30 hours each

PLAYERS: 21

BUDGET: €200

PARTICIPATION FEE: €10

GAME MECHANICS: None

Further Reading

HOPEAMETSÄ H (2008) 24 Hours in a Bomb Shelter. *Playground Worlds*.

POHJOLA M (2000) The Manifesto of the Turku School. *As Larp Grows Up*, 2003.







KNAPPNÅLSHUVUDET

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE HUMAN?

Susanne Gräslund & Daniel Krauklis

I WOKE UP WITHOUT KNOWING WHY – my angel shook and slapped me. When I scrambled to go to the bathroom, I discovered that was not where my legs wanted to take me. As if in a trance, I snuck to the room of my cousin, straight up to her bed. I sat there quietly, trembling with fear and desire, watching her. I felt weak, horny and dirty. My angel whispered that I was a coward for not touching her. That I wanted her. After a couple of minutes I went back to bed, in shame, trying to get some sleep. The next day I had lots of emotions to draw upon. The whole thing had played out in my head: A struggle of will and desire.

◀ *Angel Temol watching over the institute. (Play, Izabelle Hesselberg)*



A group therapy session. (Play, Isabelle Hesselberg)

The central themes of *Knappnålshuvudet* (The Head of the Pin) were life and eternity, creativity and art. For three days, the participants played the parts of visitors to an institute for self-improvement, while guardian angels moved among them.

Jegelinstitutet was a ramshackle company balancing on the edge of bankruptcy. Its leadership was an incestuous family with occult interests, seeing their business as a mere cash cow. Its staff consisted of serious (although sometimes inept) therapists, who were at the premises to sell their courses during a trial weekend. In the attic, there was a small mental ward, supposedly run on a private contract to net some desperately needed extra funds for running everyday business.

The characters were a gathering of the curious, the desperate and the sceptical – all with at least one dark secret. The angels were divided into the fallen and the unfallen. Some were human in their outlook, while some were alien in their holy, rapturous mindset. Their job was to influence and guide their protégées, while playing out their own story in the background.

Making it Happen

The organizers of *Knappnålshuvudet* took a non-apologetic stance in regard to larp as an art form. We asserted our right to create an invitation-only event instead of being accessible to the

entire larp community. As *Knappnålshuvudet* was essentially a method experiment, it required just the right player to fill each spot. To make every piece of the puzzle important, we built a narrative structure with firmly established story functions for each character. Group and character descriptions were finalized before the event was even announced. There were three layers to the stories: Personal, quartet (four individual stories tied to an angel, giving the group a momentum of its own), and general themes for each day. Our goal was to keep a small number of key positions from overrunning the game, making every player feel like the main protagonist.

Another way to avoid top-heavy intrigue was doing away with secrets and hidden plots. All the dirty laundry was out in the open, so participants could use this information for greater emotional impact in play. The unspoken ambition of the game design was to touch the player behind the mask, which required a solid and believable gallery of characters, with tangible fears and goals.

Characters were burdened with crushed aspirations, drug abuse, religious and moral dilemmas. One group consisted of survivors of M/S *Estonia*, the ferry that had sunk on the Baltic Sea a few years earlier and was a fresh national trauma at the time. Another group consisted of up-and-coming corporate



*Krisse and Klas have finally become friends at the party.
(Play, Izabelle Heselmarm)*

employees with uninhibited career ambitions, a history of backstabbing, and sexually laden inter-relationships.

One of our chief ideas was to motivate our players to play *for the benefit of others*, rather than to achieve total immersion. The aim was to create an *ensemble*, where the sum of the whole was greater than its parts. We tried to make players *want* to move in a common direction.

Journey into Character

Petra played the cello in her teens, but stopped when she realised she did not have the capacity to be the best in the field. The second night, I believe, I sensed the characteristic angel scent and heard faint cello music. I felt the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. I was certain my angel was in the room. After the larp, I went over to him and thanked him for that scene, but he claimed never to have been in the room and certainly not played any music. (female player, post-game survey)

The preparations for the game were part of the journey. A player received very little in the way of background information, other than the organizers' artistic intentions. As an early pervasive larp, the real world was our stage, after all. Many presumptive

players had trouble understanding what the game was really about. It did not have a main plot. How it would feel to be there was hard to explain in advance, but the process was rooted in angel support, a thematically changing environment and fateplay – scripted instructions directing players to do certain things at a specific time and place. “During dinner, the second evening, you will have a heated argument with the character Jonas Nilsson in the cafeteria. Exactly how you make this happen is up to you.”

Participants were given a brief and given into the care of a writer, who was responsible for keeping the group on course and develop its individual parts into fully realized characters. The writer met, talked to and worked with her players, acting more like a coach than an author.

Five preparative weekend workshops were held: Two for all participants, and three for angels only. These were aiming to practice player acting skills, help them getting into character, reduce the tentativeness of the starting phase of the game, and to practice human-angel interaction. *Knappnålshuvudet* was not first to employ drama exercises, but its application of them was more extensive and tailored to establish a common language of expression, specific for the event.

In addition, several participants staged their own, preparatory mini-larps or made field trips to study their part in its home environments. Some wrote diaries or took strolls downtown in character.

I (that is, my character) was sitting at the Central Station of Gothenburg and had just ordered a Bloody Mary. I was trying to make my mind up on this course, whether I should go see these shrinks, or take the next train back to Stockholm. After some deliberation, I decided to go, downed the drink and went out to catch a taxi. Before I went in-character, I had written down the name and address of the place on a paper note. I got in and asked to go to [the fictitious] Jegelinstitutet, please – ready to hand him the note. He turned, smiled, and said he knew exactly where that was, since he had just taken a girl there. I got a big kick out of him being in the know! It was simply fantastic that I could interact with this man, who was not part of the game. On the way over, he told me about all the best places and strip bars in town. (male player, post-game survey)

Playing an Angel

In the beginning, the Lord made the world by separating Himself from nothingness. From complete union with the divine, creation progressed to individual beings, separated from the whole. The Lord is a jealous God, and in time He wanted to be rejoined with what He had made, His all-consuming love. Like a wife abuser, He would force creation back to original bliss, if necessary. And it resisted His advances, because the alternative would mean annihilation. So He sent His angels, part of His collective Self, to bring all living souls back to Him – but with distance came isolation, and with isolation came fall from grace.

This was the backstory for the Angels on *Knappnålshuvudet*.



A game with supernaturals runs a risk of turning other characters into a supporting cast. In this game, they were used as a supportive function – as plot instigators and emotional kickstarters. They could touch on exact details in the humans’ background and story, since they had full access to all character material. Each one was based on a signature emotion which influenced the quartets in their care. Their driving force was a possessive love for humans.

We needed professional actors or very accomplished larpers for these parts and worked intensely with our cast during the pregame workshops. They practiced wordless communication, explored extreme emotional states and trained for a precise body language, inspired by the movement of birds or schools of fish. In-game, they wore a special incense-like scent which conveyed their presence even when they stayed hidden.

The feedback on playing these parts varied widely. Some felt unprepared, some were stressed out by the intense pregame work. A few were unimpressed by the angel function as such, while others had the time of their lives. One angel player even married one of his protégées.

Dancing on the Head of a Pin

I had to leave the game area after an emotional outbreak. Went to a Chinese restaurant and had a beer. A few middle aged guys – to all appearances family men – were sitting around, drinking at seven in the evening on a Sunday. One of them got up to leave, but was so drunk that he stumbled on the door mat, then once again. Seeing that, the only thing

that came to mind was how unrealistically he was overplaying it all. (male player, post-game survey)

With the many layers to this onion and the larps within the larp, each participant had a unique experience. The mental patients were kept locked up and argued ceaselessly with each other and their caretakers, were taken out for meals among the weekend visitors, worshipped their false god in the attic and were even given an in-game tour of the Womb by their protector angel. The owner of Jegelinstitutet drank, watched porn, yelled at his naïve secretary and was beaten up by an ex-convict who was hitting on what he considered to be his girl. An average visitor went through birth canal therapy, Christian counselling and physical exercise – all the while wrestling with inner turmoil, receiving in-game calls from relatives and friends, having their quarters wrecked and even set on fire, as well as enduring increasingly inedible health food served in the cafeteria.

The angels moved through the corridors of Jegelinstitutet alone or in pairs, dressed in plain grey clothes. They stood silent in the background or gently touched and whispered to their protégées. At pivotal moments, several of them gathered at once, carefully moving in unison to set the mood. One-on-one, they were free to speak more directly to their mortal, tugging on his or her heart. As their own stories unfolded, one among their number fell from grace. This led to a major confrontation with God, who raged at them through sound, then slowly progressed to despair, sorrow and final silence during a several hours long scene in the Womb.

Every night, scenography and content was modified to reflect

◀ *Staged picture taken before the game to illustrate the inspiration material. (Promotion, Isabelle Hesselberg)*

The Womb, a portal between heaven and earth where the angels could communicate with God through sound and light. (Detail, Isabelle Hesselberg)



the theme of the day. Furniture was rearranged, signs switched, therapeutic courses grew increasingly tough, and so on. In the game, letters, phone calls, costumes, props and music were consciously used as storytelling devices.

In the post-larp evaluation, many players expressed having gained the courage to delve deeper into both immersion and expression. As a sign of the times (and perhaps organizer arrogance), we had invited a professional psychotherapist to play the game and be on stand by for helping, in case somebody broke down. The service was never needed. It seems, though, as if the post-larp trauma – the bittersweet sense of loss after game over – in some cases actually resulted in players re-evaluating their real lives.

I have cried so terribly and pitifully. I have never cried as I did on Knappnålshuvudet, and I never will. It was as real as make-believe can get. Best was probably when Lennart talked about God, absolution, good and evil, while an angel slowly circled at the corner of my eye, hands held high towards heaven, humming in a authoritative, chanting tone. What I sensed of good and evil then is still rooted in me. All the pain my character suffered went through a turning point there, and when I later shed some tears and joined my friends in our room, everything felt so wonderful! I can't say when I last experienced something as profound and moving in my real life, if I ever have. (male player, post-game survey)

Knappnålshuvudet

CREDITS: Martin Ericsson (writing), Susanne Gräslund (writing and production) and Daniel Krauklis (creative leader, seminars), with Mathias Gullbrandson (the Womb), Holger Jacobsson (mental ward, logistics), Henrik Summanen and Andreas Hedberg (music), and Anna Ericson, Karim Muammar, Karin Tidbeck, Johanna Venables, Jonas Lindblom, Daniel William-Olsson, Lotta von Schéele and Ragnar Nordquist (writing).

DATE: 15-19 October 1999

LOCATION: Kviberg, conference grounds in Gothenburg, Sweden

LENGTH: 4 days

PLAYERS: 85 in total; 73 mortals, 12 angels

BUDGET: €40,000

PARTICIPATION FEE: €90

GAME MECHANICS: Narrative techniques, such as directors, blackboxing and fateplay

Further Reading

FATLAND E (1998) *The Weaving of the Fate or How to Make Rail-Roading Legal*. Panclou #2.

FATLAND E (2005) *Incentives as tools of larp dramaturgy*. *Dissecting Larp*.

GRÄSLUND S (2001) *Building Dramatics*. *Amor Fati*. http://fate.laiv.org/pub/build_dram.htm

KOLJONEN J (2007) *Eye-Witness to the Illusion*. *Lifelike*.

A sculpture of the God at the mental ward. Sculpture by Max Magnus Norman. (Detail, Isabelle Hesselberg)

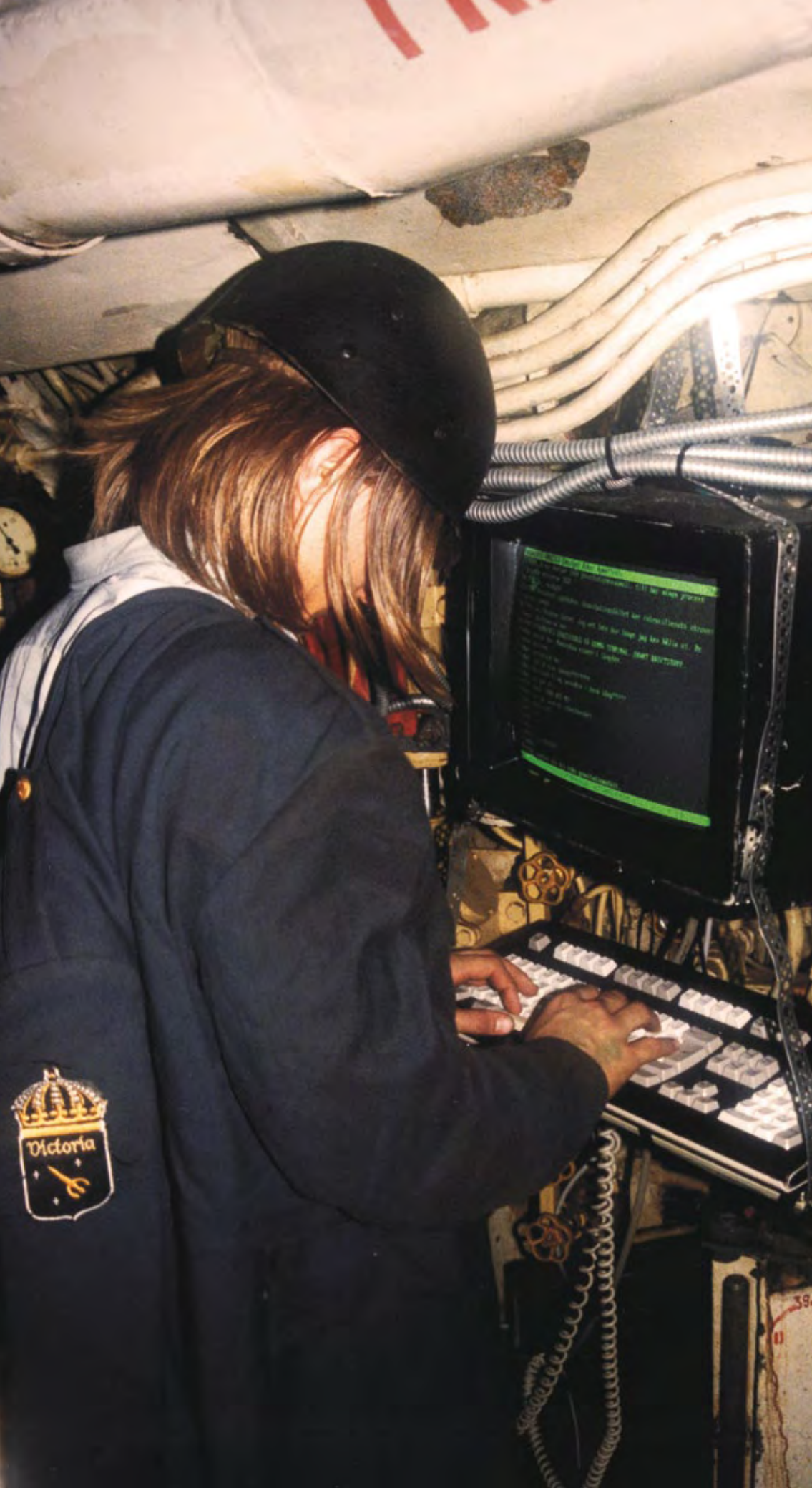




CAROLUS REX

THE FLAGSHIP OF ENCLOSED SPACE OPERA

Johanna Koljonen





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THEY'VE TAKEN MY STRIPES, *my job, my dignity. I had responsibilities, I had the respect of the recruits, I had their back; now I have nothing. There's smoke everywhere as the others fall back. No-one will notice I'm gone. The intruder is easy to find, it is trashing the mess. It doesn't seem to see very well, not that it matters now. It knows where I am, moves towards me through the steam and the blinking, still in his spacesuit, helmet gone, tentacles for hands, the head I don't have a word for. I fire, again and again, as it moves towards me. I fire my gun as it reaches me and as I fall and as it clambers over me. It has no effect at all. I fire my gun as I die.*

Larpmaking is like filmmaking in the following important way: Making a larp is always a group effort, but after the fact, the director and scriptwriter are considered its authors. Writers and visualists are, it is understood, larpmaking's true visionaries, who craft worlds so awesome and game designs so snug that players cannot help but enjoy themselves and shine. Forgotten are the prop men, lighting technicians, make-up-artists and costume designers, as are all friends, patient husbands and girlfriends who drive cars, store smelly tents, carry things and write twenty character descriptions the night before the deadline because a loved one's reach exceeds her grasp. And forgotten are the names of the producers, except, in film, in the case of the occasional action blockbuster.

It is curiously apt, then, that the greatest contribution made to Nordic larp by a team of producers belonged to the action blockbuster genre. The space opera *Carolus Rex* was written by a team spearheaded by Karim Muammar and Martin Ericsson, but it was primarily made possible by Tomas Walch and Henrik Summanen, who took on the production pro bono through their company, Alternativ. *Carolus Rex* was born out of a simple idea to "do something on a submarine", as Walch puts it today, and driven at least in part by a wish to puncture the perceived pomposity of highly lauded and deeply serious contemporary productions such as *Knappnålshuvudet*. There was no reason for larps to be like difficult art movies, Walch and Summanen opined. There was also no reason for "fun" to equal "bad". *Carolus Rex* ended up raising the bar for the entire field forever.

Producing a Space Adventure

Carolus Rex was set on a steampunk spaceship of the same name in a retro-futuristic Swedish Space Empire, at war with the nefarious Danes. The game began with *Carolus Rex* accepting a

mission to investigate a distress signal from a Bavarian scientific expedition. Along the way, the ship would engage in battle with a Danish spaceship, then be confronted with a lifeboat full of survivors from said battle and finally encounter an alien presence on the surface of a hostile planet. Brought on board by an infected space marine, the alien would then attack the ship. The game was designed so that the crew had a chance through solving a series of puzzles to get the information necessary to defeat the alien and the ship's rebelling AI, but so that losing and dying an epic death would be just as satisfying an experience. The game was played four times, and although only the last crew "won", player satisfaction was very high across the board.

The genre of the game was, ostensibly, pulp space opera, and certainly many plot elements pointed in that direction: betentacled aliens, space commanders in 19th century admiral hats, a hivemind pyramid of human brains taking control of a distant planet. And while the players had fun with details like these, it is important to emphasise that from a character perspective, all events of the game were dead serious. At the time, the questions of how to play and design to genre had not been extensively theorised within the Nordic larp community. The success of *Carolus Rex* was at least in part a result of the players' intuitive understanding, guided by the tone in the introductory texts provided by the organizers, that a pulp plot requires serious playing. Albeit at a brisk pace, and with melodramatic twists wherever possible.

Walch and Summanen had made fantasy games together and had early taken an interest in larpmaking best practices, as documented in their how-to-book for fantasy larp production, *Saga mot verklighet* (1998). They came to *Carolus Rex* with a clear and practical game design ideology. The plot was designed on three levels – individual, group, and global – where individuals

◀◀◀ *The physical realities of the submarine – low ceilings and cold, clammy surfaces – acted as a constant reminder of the fiction. (Restaged, Olle Sahlin)*

◀◀ *Computer stations allowed for interaction with the ship's Artificial Intelligence, Psykomatrisen. (Restaged, Olle Sahlin)*

◀ *Every knob and dial represented something within the game. Some of them moved and were actively in use. (Portrait, Olle Sahlin)*



The futuristic setting, as well as practical game design, called for a gender neutral space force. (Portrait, Olle Sahlin)

The machine crew interacted with every part of the submarine, climbing hatches for access to the most claustrophobic of crawl spaces. >
(Restaged, Olle Sahlin)



The officers' mess was off-limits to most of the crew. Name tags were integrated into the uniforms. (Restaged, Olle Sahlin) ▶

could affect groups and groups the choices of the spaceship as a whole, effectively protecting the over-all game from dominance by individual players. Since the game was only 36 hours long and included a number of points where the game masters would introduce new elements affecting all players, it was possible in advance to approximately predict the story arc of each individual character. Tweaking the parameters where a story was judged less than satisfying was a practical way to design for the traditional maxim that each player should feel that hers is the main character of the game.

A stationary Russian museum submarine was rented for the production and rigged with surround sound, light effects, and some very minor pyrotechnics (smokes, sparks). This enabled the organizers to create the illusion of sound, movement, space battle, and interaction with the inner workings of the fictional space engine. Computer terminals equipped with primitive chat software developed for the game were hooked up to the game masters' station outside the ship. These terminals were the ship's "artificial intelligence" – through which the crew controlled the ship's movement and weaponry, interacted with the outside world, and with the ship itself.

The interface was in a basic, natural-language dialogue format. An operator would type in, for instance, that there was an odd timbre to the engine sound and steam emerging from hatch five, and ask the computer to run diagnostics. A game master on the outside (having, of course, previously triggered both the steam effect and the broken-engine sound effect) would type in the computer's response and what needed to be done to correct the situation. The organizers had made a map of the submarine's many existing valves, knobs and handles and could instruct the players very specifically to, for instance "turn 4591-2 in section 4", an existing but non-functioning piece of equipment with the number engraved on it on a little brass plaque. Runners would take the command to the engine crew, who would find 4591-2, turn it, and report back, enabling the game master to trigger the appropriate responses. A command like "load torpedoes" or "fire" would trigger the appropriate sound effects with an even shorter delay.

Obfuscating the Edges of Fiction

The players were enclosed in the submarine for the game's duration, but the constant flow of information in and out of the AI created a powerful illusion of existing in a complete universe. The game designers decided, however, that this was not enough. They knew that players will typically avoid moving the action close to the edges of the fiction. Knowing that crossing the borders of the game area requires breaking the fiction, players will not let their characters choose actions that risk removing them from or breaking play: leaving the haunted house, calling the police, getting off the island. This powerful player prejudice is

often used as a design tool in itself.

At *Carolus Rex*, however, the designers wanted to counter this assumption for wow effect, and built in devices to create the illusion that the fiction had no limits and that players had complete freedom of action. Enabling such an illusion would become a central aesthetic in the design tradition *Carolus Rex* pioneered, in which an "alchemical" or "crucible" model, isolating players and putting different kinds of physical and psychological pressure on them, is combined with a strictly pre-ordained sequence of plot events. Ericsson would, for instance, copy this model directly for his influential larp *Hamlet*.

Several hours into *Carolus Rex*, the AI alerted the crew to the presence of a nearby Danish lifeboat – an emergency capsule ejected from a condemned ship. The sensors were, however, unable to ascertain whether humans were alive on board. At least in one of the games, the players resisted docking with the capsule, assuming reasonably that it would either be impossible anyway, or that the game designers would unleash upon them some invisible horror – a disease perhaps – that would be both difficult to play and dangerous for the characters' mission. But the AI persisted, reminding the crew of their duties to the ship-wrecked as codified in international space law. A docking was performed, and once sensors had reported that the air in the capsule was clean, the hatch was opened, space marines at the ready, pointing their guns at whatever horrors the game masters would now throw at them.

What descended into the ship was not a monster at all, but half a dozen Danish prisoners of war. They were played by Danish larpers in Danish space uniforms, smuggled to the area by the game masters and hidden away while the Swedish players prepared, got dressed, boarded, and started the game. Player astonishment was quickly transformed into character worry. Danish is a language sufficiently distant from Swedish to make communications between the two parties very difficult. To add to the practical challenges, the crew of the *Carolus Rex* were already sleeping in shifts in the bunks. There was no lockup on board, and some question about whether there was sufficient food and oxygen to complete the mission with the enemy bodies on board.

In one stroke, the game designers had demonstrated that in this game the players would never be able to predict what they could or could not pull off – while adding a whole new level of drama to the interactions on board. Further into the game, *Carolus Rex* was reached by the news of a truce in the war, shifting again the onboard dynamic. Crews that had chosen to treat their POWs well understandably had an easier time collaborating with them in the final battles against the common enemy.

If bringing in new characters was a way to permeate the border of the game from the outside in, a model for space walking and planetary surface expeditions had also been built into the game.

From the control room the game masters ran lights, sounds, radar and pyrotechnics, and controlled the game by performing as the ▶ Artificial Intelligence through a chat interface. (Play, Olle Sahlin)



A spacesuit was designed out of an old diving suit with the front panel of the helmet blacked out. If command agreed with the AI to send somebody outside, the person in the spacesuit would climb out of the hatch to be met by game masters who would lead her, blind, to a spot further away. The spacewalk would be performed as a traditional freeform role-playing sequence. At intervals, the marine would report on his progress into the ship through radio, creating the illusion on the inside that the crew was following events as they unfolded. The crew would for instance hear an artefact inside a wrecked ship described, then see it with their own eyes as the marine returned – validating the physical reality of the universe outside the ship.

Legacy of Carolus Rex

If *Carolus Rex* proved most influential when it came to design practices, it was also a pioneer in other ways. An ambitious mp3 trailer was released on the internet when both mp3s and the web itself were relatively new, paving the way for the mood-setting film teasers that are common in larp marketing today. At the time, the game was considered very expensive. But its method of providing costumes, food, and all props for the players to ensure a consistent visual universe is a standard solution for ambitious games today, as is playing the same game several times in succession to break even at a costly location.

Perhaps most ground-breakingly, the game did not make a loss. Everyone worked for free, and certainly left the project exhausted, but they were not in debt. In fact, the game made a tiny profit – “around €20,” Walch remembers.

Carolus Rex

CREDITS: Karim Muammar and Martin Ericsson (game design), Tomas Walch and Henrik Summanen (production and dramaturgy), Emma Wieslander (writing), Mathias Larsson, Erik Stormark and Daniel Krauklis (runtime logistics help)

DATE: Four games between 30 October and 7 November, 1999

LOCATION: Norrköping, Sweden

LENGTH: 34 hours

PLAYERS: 35-40 players per game, 3 runtime game masters

BUDGET: €10,000

PARTICIPATION fee: €90

GAME MECHANICS: None

WEBSITE OR OTHER MATERIAL: www.alternativ.se

Further Reading

KOLJONEN J (2007) Eye-Witness to the Illusion. *Lifelike*.

WALCH T & SUMMANEN H (1998) *Saga mot verklighet*. At www.alternativ.se/smv/node/1



The crew before the game. The outside of the fictional spaceship looked nothing like the submarine. (Group portrait, Olle Sahlin)



1942
NOEN Å STOLE PÅ?

ROLE-PLAYING LIVING MEMORY

Eirik Fatland





◀ *Portrait of a Norwegian-German couple. Such liaisons were seen as treasonous by the civilian population, and the woman could face ostracism or worse if discovered. (Diegetic, Britta K. Bergersen)*

THE AIR ALARM IS SOUNDED, *and villagers hide in the darkness of their basements, praying to the Lord that they will see the next day. A group of prisoners of war escape and hide amongst civilians. One is caught and executed. A priest is hiding weapons in his basement. His Resistance affiliation is discovered, and he is led away praying that the weapons are not found and his family is spared.*

Without seeming cause, alone in her Oslo apartment on October 30th 2000, Hilde Skånli began crying. Our only clue as to why is the news she had just received, regarding some graffiti on the back wall of a grocery store.¹

To find out why this information was so upsetting, we need to understand a story that spans six decades. It occurs on Herdla: a hilly, barren island off Norway's west coast, dotted by wind-harrowed trees and the occasional farm or fisherman's house. A week before Hilde receives news, an old man stands on the tallest hill of the island, staring in disbelief as Wehrmacht soldiers march back to the garrison they had abandoned fifty-five years earlier. Peering out to sea, past the swastika flying above re-erected barracks, he watches young men – dressed as he had dressed in his youth – fishing from wooden boats with greasy diesel engines. Were he to walk through the village, he would encounter their wives in the grocery store, exchanging ration stamps for products he could vaguely remember, their children wearing sixpence caps running down the street, playing a game involving rusty tin cans and sticks.

It was, of course, a larp. The larp was called *1942 – Noen å stole på?* (Someone to Trust?), and brought together 130 players for five days in an ambitious attempt to relive history – to build, inside those few square kilometers, a close proximity of people, places and events from 58 years earlier.

The experiment was successful. *1942* is one of those rare larps that has remained relevant for new generations of players, as well as imprinted deeply on the minds of those who were there. But exactly in which respects it succeeded, and how, is still open for discussion. At the heart of that discussion stands two claims: The first is that *1942* achieved an unparalleled authenticity in its depiction of history through larp. The second claim is that it taught us something about life during the Occupation, something that could not be learned in any other way. As Hilde's story will illustrate, these lessons had a powerful impact on players. But were they true? How do we judge their truthfulness?

The Year the War Was Lost

The larp was set in October 1942. The Norwegian government had surrendered to the German invasion two years earlier, after having evacuated the cabinet and royal family to London, and been replaced by a puppet regime led by Vidkun Quisling and his fascist party Nasjonal Samling. As of late 1942, Stalingrad was besieged, the Atlantic was crawling with U-boats, and 200,000 German soldiers were stationed on Norwegian soil. As far as anyone knew, the Axis were winning. For the Norwegian population the temptation to change sides – to enjoy privilege as a member of Nasjonal Samling, or at the least some safety by taking work for the Germans – must have been great. For those whose sympathies lay with the resistance and government-in-exile, the question of whether there was “someone to trust” weighed heavily.²

But the struggle was not black and white: More Norwegians died in German service, as SS volunteers on the East Front, than fighting for the resistance. Most of the German soldiers in Norway were of the regular army – young men sent to fight for a cause they barely understood, and for an ideology they did not necessarily share. The popular resistance, however, did not differentiate between Germans and Nazis, between Quisling and the hapless teenage girl with a crush on a German soldier. Daily life was governed by an undeclared policy of disdain towards the Germans and ostracism of any perceived collaborators. Maintaining this *ice front* was seen as no less important than fighting at the East Front or the Pacific war – and the wounds it inflicted were no less severe. And it was along this front that the organizers had chosen to situate the larp *1942*.

The Players and the Characters

1942 was not an easy larp to participate in: Players were expected to create their own costumes, help furnish their in-game homes, join in multiple meetings and workshops, read up on some 200-300 pages of briefing documents on life during the War, and do





Everyday work was an important part of the game. Fishermen, having returned from the fishing boat, slaughtering their catch. (Diegetic, Britta K. Bergersen)

their own research by reading books and interviewing people who might cast more light on their character.

These were highly motivated players, and they needed to be. The larp was role-played in the persistent style common to Nordic larp: Every action taken and word spoken was to be in-character, without exception. When the air alarms woke players up at midnight, they were expected to role-play from the moment of gaining consciousness. Furthermore – the players were expected to live the daily lives of their characters: Every day of the larp, no matter the weather, fishermen set out to sea in boats, women toiled away as seamstresses at the textile workshop, housewives kept house, and met at the grocery store to purchase goods and exchange gossip. *Theatre without audience* is a poor metaphor for this kind of role-playing; theatre edits, selects, highlights, abstracts. *1942* consisted of the raw stuff.

The characters were divided into two main camps: Some 70-80 souls constituted the civilian population of Herdla, subdivided into families, spread over some 5-6 houses – one of which functioned as a pension, another as a grocery store. Roughly a kilometre away from the hamlet, in a field that had been used as an airfield during the war, was the German garrison, consisting of some 20-30 Wehrmacht soldiers, the Red Cross and a group of East European POWs used as forced labour.

Inventing a model that would later be used for similar larps (such as *Once Upon a Time*), the organizers described the characters with written life stories, featuring three relational dimensions: work, family, and social circles. So a man might be a fisherman, a father, and a participant in the underground poker game, while his wife would be a seamstress, a mother, and an anti-gambling activist. All of these dimensions were typical during the War, but their combinations made each character a unique and fictional person.

In designing the characters, the larpwrights drew on their own knowledge of the occupation – for example, one character was based on an organizer's uncle, a member of the resistance who hid weapons in his basement, thereby endangering his whole family. Another character – Håkon Hammer – was based on the father of a local Herdla man, who had shared his story when the organizers talked to the present-day inhabitants in order to prepare them for the larp. Håkon Hammer had been despised as a local traitor – an officer in the *Hird*, the Norwegian Nazi army. In reality he had been a spy for the resistance, secretly carrying an English uniform in his backpack so he could invoke POW status in the event of being caught. Post-war, he was ordered to maintain cover, and the fact of his service was not known until the 1970s, when he was awarded a medal and publicly recognized as a war hero briefly before his death. Though vindicated in public, not all in the community were willing to accept his restitution.

Authenticity and Historical Accuracy

It is difficult to say how historically accurate *1942* was, for how do you measure such things? Against general history books or subjective memories of survivors? Could Thomas Nes do justice



A Wehrmacht officer. Portraits such as this were used to produce diegetic ID paper props. (Diegetic, Britta K. Bergersen)



The photographer's assistant posing between assignments. (Diegetic, Britta K. Bergersen)



Despite food rationing, the availability of fish ensured that players did not go hungry. This experience was confirmed afterwards by players' relatives from the same region. (Diegetic, Britta K. Bergersen)

to historical Håkon Hammer? Could a historian, or a film actor?

The visual and physical aspect of authenticity is the easiest to evaluate, and it is also a field where 1942 stood out: antique fishing boats were brought out of retirement, war-era heavy weapons, military vehicles, and even an enormous searchlight were borrowed from private collectors and the Norwegian army to populate the garrison. Furniture, telephones, currency, ID papers, uniforms, and goods for sale in the grocery store – all were either antiques, or detailed reproductions. To drive the point home, even the toilet paper was an accurate replica. This immense accomplishment was possible only through the massive goodwill and volunteer effort of individuals, collectors, and museums.

But is this enough to make the larp “historically accurate”? Did the fact that Thomas Nes carried the British uniform that had been worn by Håkon Hammer make him behave as Håkon Hammer? On the face of it, the answer is no. But the function of the uniform was not to convince historians, but rather to convince the player that he was Håkon Hammer, to remind him of his allegiance and the constant danger he was in, presumably the same effect it had on its original owner – and the boats, clothes and toilet paper similarly served to convince the players that they were living in the year 1942. Thereby the imagination was left free to focus on living the lives of the characters.

Recounting the events of the larp through highlights overlooks the fact that, for the most part, nothing in particular occurred. Most of the time was spent living the daily lives; patrolling perimeters, cooking and eating, gossiping at the storefront.³ For many of the players, the enduring memory of the larp was one of unarticulated community and belonging: a family working side by side in silence, a group of soldiers listening to gramophone recordings from home. These constructed communities felt real and present for the duration of the larp: when a co-player lives, acts, and behaves as a member of your family for several days, the scene where he is arrested and hauled away becomes similar to the experience of seeing the same thing happen to a member of your own family.

What Happened to Us?

Immediately after the larp, the players' emotions and feedback were all over the place. There was a sense of elation – of victory, even – that was powerfully expressed by the spontaneous singing of the national anthem at the debrief. But there was also another emotion at play: a remaining entanglement in the moral and personal complexities faced by the characters that led others to feel anger at the spontaneous song. I was one of those who did not sing, the player of an old Jewish refugee with fresh memories of pre-war Norwegian anti-Semitism. But more than anger, I felt a deep and dizzying sense of pain.

Such pain is hard to describe, and compare. Was it the same

pain that was expressed in the face of Anders, the Swedish labour organizer, as he tore up the swastika flag his character had adored? Was it the same pain I could hear in the trembling voice of the girl recounting her experiences playing the ostracized lover of a German soldier, or in the voices of those who shunned her?

Let us return, then, to Hilde Skånlia, who had enjoyed an uneventful but deeply immersive larp. Meeting the other housewives at the grocery store, she had noticed the graffiti on its back: “Your father was a Nazi, and so are you”, thinking “wow, even the graffiti is in-game!” The larp experience had been tough for her, as for most players, but there was always the consolation that it was merely a game – an artificial experience, based on events long past.

What she learns, on that afternoon in Oslo, is that the graffiti had nothing to do with the larp. It was painted a year earlier, targeting the son of Håkon Hammer.

And here, perhaps, we find the source of the pain so many of us experienced: Not in the in-game experience alone, but in the connections between it and the world we returned to, validating our fictional experience as something real and relevant.

Was our experience true? It was obviously not an exact recreation of Herdla life during the war. But it was close enough, thematically, and tangible enough that it would force us to bridge the gulf of understanding between us and our grandparents, us and the televised reports of today's distant wars. This speaks profoundly about the larp masterpiece that was 1942 – *Noen å stole på*.

But, to me, it speaks even more strongly about the human cost of war, even that which occurs far from the front lines. It is telling, then, that when asked if we would play the larp again, knowing what we do now, many of us cannot answer “yes”.

1942 — Noen å Stole På?

CREDITS: Margrete Raaum, Ståle Johansen, Anita Myhre Andersen, Øyvind Wormnes, Magnus Y Alvestad, Hilde Bryhn, Bjørn Kleven, Tor Kjetil Edland, Håvar Larsen, Hein Bodahl, Henrik Bøhle, Jostein Hassel, Espen Nodeland

DATE: 9-13 October 2000

LOCATION: Herdla, Norway

LENGTH: 5 days

PLAYERS: 130

BUDGET: €20,000

PARTICIPATION FEE: €100

GAME MECHANICS: None / theatrical honour system

WEBSITE OR OTHER MATERIAL: Two documentation films, in private circulation only

Further Reading

KOLJONEN J (2007) Eye-Witness to the Illusion. *Lifelike*.

1 Name changed here and later in the case of Håkon Hammer.

2 The source for organizers' research and intentions is Margrete Raaum, who contributed as an interviewee and a fact-checker. This article is additionally based on my experiences as a player, the documents given to players, the two films about the larp, and the reviews at www.laivforum.net.

3 Some of the players of German soldiers jokingly refer to the larp as “The Thin Green Line”, after the line on the radar that they would observe for hours, looking for the telltale squiggles revealing British bombers.





EUROPA

INTIMATE REFUGEE ROLE REVERSAL

Susanne Gräslund

FINALLY IT WAS MY CHANCE to explain my dire need for asylum. Two female officers, a good cop and a bad cop, stood in front of me. Friendly at first, they asked how I liked my stay. All of a sudden the tone changed: they were pressuring me on why I had left Sweden. A male officer sat behind me, kicking at my chair vigorously and clapping his hands right behind my head when I was not answering fast enough. Sobbing and crying, I told them how I fled the war, how I had been raped over and over. The story came out in bits and pieces; at the end I was a complete wreck. My character's back story was now firmly imprinted on me. The horrors happened there, during the interview.

A Norwegian asylum seeker. In the background, the main building of the reception centre. (Diegetic, Britta K. Bergersen)



The people at the table are staff, and the people working in the background are refugees. (Diegetic, Britta K. Bergersen)

Europa was a larp about asylum politics and refugee reception. The modern history of Europe was rewritten for the game so that instead of Yugoslavia falling apart and its different ethnic groups waging an armed conflict, it was the Nordic countries which were at war with each other. Refugees from Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark fled the war in search of a safe haven and a promise of a new start in the imaginary Balkan country of Orsinia. With a dream of a better life they entered the asylum process, prepared to leave their old nationalities and become Orsinians.

Nationalism and the nation-state as a social construction were major themes of *Europa*. The game reversed the roles, placing the Nordic players into the shoes of asylum seekers. The groups of characters from the different countries were not sorted based on country of origin by the refugee centre personnel, but they quickly and instinctively sought out the company of their fellow countrymen.

For me and my character, both Swedes, the people from Norway quickly became just an abstract group of *The Norwegians*; I still don't know exactly how many of them there were or what they all looked like. They were just "the others" who spoke and acted strange. This effect was strengthened by the fact that all players played their own nationalities. The few Swedish-speaking Finns and Swedes from Skåne (culturally tied to Denmark) were the most marginalized characters, unable to be included in any group and treated with suspicion. The 20 Swedes formed the biggest group.

The native Orsinians were played by Russian larpers, allowing Russian to be used as the Orsinian language. As few Nordic players could speak any Orsinian, the frustration of not being able to understand or be understood was the first cultural shock. The officials converted the names of all characters to their Russian equivalents, making it cruelly explicit that we were not accepted as we were. This was done to reflect the reality of refugees coming to Europe with names that are impossible to spell or pronounce for us with Latin alphabet. Who are you really when everything you know as your identity is being taken from you?

The second shock was the bureaucratic refugee system. There were vitally important forms that no one understood that were used to determine the outcome of the asylum process. We also had to try to adapt to the everyday rules and routines at the centre. For example, the food was deliberately strange to further the feeling of alienation, for example we were given raw onions to eat like apples. Every night we had to exercise outside in the winter landscape, and we were shown the Orsinian way of rubbing snow onto our naked bodies. We slept in chilly quarters and could not shower or use toilet paper for the first few days. Some of this was done on purpose to incite us to interact with the staff, whereas some just happened. These physical hardships made us feel very fragile, very close to our emotions.

Ethical questions were constantly discussed among *The Swedes*, such as how much should we help each and if we should stick together? We soon chose a leader who became



A Norwegian asylum seeker. (Diegetic, Britta K. Bergersen)



The Swedish table at dinner at the reception centre. Nationalist segregation was obvious in the dining room. (Diegetic, Britta K. Bergersen)

Asylum seekers in kitchen duty. (Diegetic, Britta K. Bergersen) ▶







our spokesperson. My impression was that the other groups did not have any representatives in the same way, but in a way the Swedish leader became a front person for the whole refugee group. Many were surprised by how easily the majority of refugees fell into the routine at the centre, so that even the most absurd rules were followed. As our strong leader always told us what to do, it was just so easy to go with the flow, to do as we were told without questioning or resisting. We all just wanted to survive.

A Dogma Larp

Around the turn of the millennium, the Oslo larp scene was at its height, and *Europa* was one product of a larger movement. In 1999, Eirik Fatland and Lars Wingård wrote their manifesto, *Dogma 99*, setting out a new way of organizing larps. A network of organizers known as Weltschmerz explored political themes in larps in accordance with the Dogma: *Amerika* (2000) was the first game in the series, exploring **liberty, capitalism, consumerism** and the gap between the rich and the poor. *Europa* followed the next year. Sadly it would turn out to be the last larp in the series, though some members of the Weltschmerz would later get involved in organizing *PanoptiCorp* and *inside:outside*.

The *Dogma 99*¹ gave more freedom to the players than was normal in larps, by putting up restrictions for the organizers. The most striking rule in the manifesto is that there must be no background material that forces the players to strive towards a certain direction during the game. Also, there shall be no main plot, no sorting of players into main and supporting roles, no secrecy, and no hidden agendas. All cards must be on the table from the start, so that all players can contribute to the common experience as they choose. Following the Dogma rules completely seems to be very difficult which is proven by the very low number of pure Dogma larps being made. *Europa* was no exception, but it was clearly inspired by the main points of the manifesto. For example, *Europa* had no main plot in the typical sense, even if the reception centre, its personnel and the asylum process created some sort of framework where all the personal stories were acted out in parallel. Most of the characters weren't connected to each other by back story, but since almost everyone started on equal footing, it worked. We all tried to find liaisons with people that seemed trustworthy to help us get through this trying time.

Acting Style

The organizers of *Europa* had communicated a clear vision, requiring the game to be played in the immersionist style. Acting out would be low-key, tightly kept on a very unobtrusive level. This was well absorbed by the participants, who soon formed a

smooth ensemble. Even when the surface playing was invisible, underneath emotions went on continuously, and a mere gaze or a discrete sob could communicate more than the most well formulated line or shriek.

Sometimes peaks of intensity broke the quiet when someone had a public breakdown and cried out their pain. This billowing in the dramatics was both good and bad: Peaks served as a good contrast to the low-key playing, but it contributed towards an inflation of intensity towards the end of the game. By the last day a nervous breakdown was the only way to get attention from the other players. Everyone was so busy playing out their own stories before the end signal that there was not enough energy to support surrounding players.

To prepare for the game, several small pre-larps were organized by national *role developers*. I participated in a pre-larp detailing our characters' exodus from Stockholm. I still remember extremely well the night when I, fully in character, locked the door to my home. I left everything I knew behind, plunging into an unknown future. A small group of refugees gathered at a friend's place and ran to a meeting point a few kilometres away, where smugglers picked us up. They drove us to Nynäshamn harbour, taking several detours along the way, forcing us to lie down in the van and hiding us under blankets, all in order to avoid being detected by patrols. We had to walk the last part, hunted by a mob tracking down traitors like us.

At the shore we hid behind bushes, waiting for a boat to pick us up. All of a sudden a car sneaked up and stopped right beside our hiding place. A gang of people stepped out with chains in their hands and walked slowly along the street. The moments before they went back to the car and drove off were some of the longest in my life, and this simple pre-larp is still one of the strongest larp experiences I have ever had. It also gave me a very good body memory of what it felt to be a chased refugee.

Personal Highlights

Almost ten years after *Europa* I still recall vividly the moment when a Norwegian woman tried to drown herself by swimming out into the icy waters of the Oslofjord. The few people who were there, all Swedes, went into the freezing water without hesitation. As I was the last one to undress, my withdrawn character was left to coordinate the whole situation from the shore, and to make sure everyone found dry clothes again and were taken up to the centre. I strongly believe that the larp prepared me mentally to handle similar emergencies in real life.

The interview with Orsinian bureaucrats opening this text was another extremely intense experience. The scene came quite early in the game, which was good because it forced me to go through the events in my head while telling the story to

¹ *Dogma 99* was inspired by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg's film manifesto *Dogme 95*. It launched a manifesto boom in the Nordic larp community, inspiring a debate over the functions and aesthetics of larp. The most influential response was *The Manifesto of the Turku School* (Pohjola 2000).

Orsinians, leaving me with a clear picture of what had happened to my character before I came to the centre. I also wrote the story down in a letter during the larp, which the Orsinians promised to send to my Swedish boyfriend.

Over all, I have never been so close to my emotions during a larp before. I think I started to cry more or less spontaneously about ten times during the game. Normally I cry quite easily, but during *Europa* it was extreme. The low blood sugar level combined with the depressed mood was a very good basis for immersion into the darker feelings. This made *Europa* an excellent game for me, as I always search for powerful emotional experiences from larps.

I brought very few items to the game, just underwear, a toothbrush, a notebook and some photos of my diegetic boyfriend. The pictures and a memorised poem helped me immerse into my character. I usually use these kind of methods when I larp, but they have never worked as well as during *Europa*. It was like all stored bad feelings from earlier crashed relationships came up to the surface when I tried to imagine what it was like to have lost the one that my character loved. Furthermore, I remember a lot of more diffuse feelings such as the happiness of biting into a piece of freshly baked bread, after starving for several days, and finally getting a chance to shower after more than a week with no washing at all. You learn to survive with very little, and to appreciate the small things.

In several very obvious ways *Europa* increased my self-understanding. Of course it is impossible to wholly put oneself in the shoes of a refugee, to really understand what it is like to flee from one's country and head towards the unknown. Neither had we experienced any real war traumas. But even trying to imagine proved out to be a valuable exercise in understanding and empathy.

Europa

CREDITS: Eirik Fatland (director), Irene Tanke (producer), Jannicke Krogh (economy), Attila Evang (prologues & kickoff), Heidimarie Evensen (character development), E. Cath Røsseland (scenography), Annika Evensen & Britta K. Bergersen (food). Weltschmerz.

DATE: 24-28 February 2001

LOCATION: Lunde Camp, Vestby, Norway

LENGTH: 4 days

PLAYERS: 40

BUDGET: €5,000

PARTICIPATION FEE: €100

GAME MECHANICS: None

Further Reading

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A Swedish asylum seeker. (Diegetic, Britta K. Bergersen)



The Orsinians organized a snow battle for the refugees as cultural training, claiming that "real Orsinian men" withstand such cold. (Diegetic, unknown)



PEHMOYDIN

SEX, DEATH & DECADENCE

J. Tuomas Harviainen

YOU ARE AT A FEAST, filled with beautiful people in gorgeous underwear. As you enter a room, two men are seriously discussing the details of military music while a bisexual threesome is going on at the corner bed. In the next room, there's an athletic woman eating raw meat with a fork. She suddenly orders you to kiss the person next to you. You do not dare disobey her, and thus your lips are locked with a stranger for half an hour. Then someone walks in behind you and slits your throat without any warning.

PehmoYdin (SoftCore) was a thematic series of five small adult larps, run in Finland. They explored various types of sexual content and expressions, ranging from naughty fun to very serious themes of abuse and rape. They were designed to be as strongly erotic as possible while still remaining games, instead of turning into orgies. People played at sex in them, using techniques such as dry-humping, yet did not actually have sex. And many players in each of the game had purely non-sexual roles. The *PehmoYdin* larps explored the ways of making meaningful and significant larps using those premises, but also discovered that it is not easy to do so.

A Slow Ascent

The *PehmoYdin* series started off as a joke, from a random complaint near the end of a sci-fi larp, about no one supposedly wanting to play at any kind of prison-camp larp. This made us think about the possibility of actually organizing a larp with sadomasochistic elements. From the start, we had two goals: The first one was simply making a successful game, combining elements from BDSM role-play and larping that would neither be boring nor degenerate into just people having casual sex at the pretence of playing. The second one was to gain knowledge for the purpose of eventually realizing a long-time dream: Creating a serious larp based on Marquis de Sade's *Les 120 journées de Sodome ou l'école du libertinage* (*The 120 Days of Sodom, or the School of Licentiousness*).

The U-shaped sauna is not on, but it is heated by the bodies of the ten people present. As I enter, a muscular man is licking chocolate from the inner thighs of a sighing woman, while another woman whips his buttocks with a riding crop. The rest of the people are watching this, and loudly debating whether singing *Kum Bay Ya* or *Singing in the Rain* would please their chaos-god more. They settle on the former. (The author's personal experience from *Pastellitemppeli*)

Combining two forms of physical role-play, larp and BDSM role-play, may sound easy. It is not. Ascertaining sexual tension in a larp is extremely hard, if one wants to do it on the scale of a whole game, even one with just 20 or so players. So we started small. The key to a successful sexual larp is that the organizers know their players to a greater than normal extent. They should know who is whose ex, or the ex of an ex, and who does not get along with whom. Even a single error can ruin the mood of the game for everyone – as can the recruitment of players who are too little or too strongly interested in the game's sexual content. To our knowledge about 60% of the players of the *PehmoYdin* larps had at least some experience with sadomasochism or the Finnish kinky scenes. This led to a suitable balance, creating an atmosphere where erotic things took place without needing much pre-arrangement, yet were not taken so far that they would have offended anyone or significantly harmed the ludic aspect of these larps.

We had also heard rumors of at least one group of people

booking youth houses in Finland under the pretext of organizing larps, but actually for the purpose of having group sex there. This was not something with which we wanted to be confused. The original *PehmoYdin* (1998) was thus an invitations only –game, played at a privately owned location. The game itself was not that special: A simple murder mystery in a closed area, spiced up with a bit of naughty fun. The players not so interested in the sexual elements were rather displeased with it, but the great majority enjoyed the game a lot.

We were soon seriously planning the de Sade adaptation, and thus started experimenting. In the second *PehmoYdin* game, *Pastellitemppeli* (A Temple of Pastel Colours, 1999), we included elements of more mainstream sexuality in addition to BDSM, and our interlude, *PehmoYdin 90210: Saavu hopeaan* (Come to Silver, 2000), was an *Assassin* variant played at a spanking party: 14 characters trying to kill each other in a tiny two-room apartment. Each game was better than the previous, and with *Saavu hopeaan* a definite success, we were ready for the *Magnum Opus*.

To Bratislava ...

120 Days of Sodom became *PehmoYdin 3: Bratislavan syntiset yön* (The Sin-Filled Nights of Bratislava, 2001). Taking a cue from Pier Paolo Pasolini's film adaptation *Salò* (1975), we preserved the theme of the original book while changing the setting to an exclusive orgy in 1950s Czechoslovakia. The French libertines were replaced by decadent Soviet Elites, the story-telling pimps with crooked diplomats, and so on. To emphasize the theme of power and abuse, we included both genders equally in each group, aside from the soldiers who were mostly male.

The design followed the rules of the *Post-Bjorneborgan School* (Harviainen 2001), meaning that it strove for brevity and clarity of game material, and used low-key magical realism as its base setting. The game was run at an old country house, which was made to look as credible as possible, making *Bratislava* as visceral and tangible as possible without compromising player safety.

The game was advertised beforehand as exactly what it was, but most players nevertheless expected light-hearted naughty fun of the earlier larps. It was not to be so: Given our short six hour playing time, we emphasized the most brutal parts of the book. This meant that in those few hours, the attendees were teased, abused and finally killed, one by one. Players of the Elites had been given specific instructions to play each group against the others, so no one would dare revolt. As the soldiers and the diplomats, for instance, thought themselves as too valuable – or entertaining – to kill, unlike the guests and staff who'd certainly die, they willingly participated in both the pleasures and the pains of others. Until it was their time to die as well.

The tone of the evening was set already when we were just arriving to the game location. In the pitch black darkness of the freezing cold winter evening, the warm glow from inside



The Mist, a perverted nature spirit seen in both Bratislava and Selun/Messu. (Portrait, Miko Asunta)



Robert "Rex Bellum" Bell, the not-so-grand-wizard, from Sielun/Messu. (Portrait, Mikko Asunta)

was deceiving. Just like that, while mingling with the other guests, the decadent atmosphere of the party lulled us. I began to relax and enjoy myself, only to wake up to a nightmare when we were walking through another room.

Being witness to such atrocities and realizing what was going on, I began clinging to other people. Like herd animals, we sensed that the predators will take the weak and the loners. The rationale was that by not showing I'm scared, I could survive and the predators might think I'm one of them. (player of Sgt. Detjeva, the General's female secretary)

Another part of the plan was to create an actually scary horror larp. Thus, all the characters had significant goals they wanted to reach before the game would end for them, and made sure that those goals would not be reached. This was done to channel the players' drive to not leave the game into diegetic fear. Even

very experienced players reported afterwards that they had frozen up for real when their time to die came.

[*Bratislava*] was – and still remains – one of the only horror games that have actually worked for me. Thanks to its base concept, at no point did the game feel like railroaded or predestined – even if it had only one possible outcome: the death of all the visitors in the hands of the masters of the manor. The suspense and the feeling of freedom – as well as the horror itself – stemmed from the setup: while the violence was total in the end (no survivors amongst the guests), the visitors had their freedom in irrational hopes of survival and the arbitrariness of their extinction. As the orgiastic party turned slowly into a bloodbath, the visitors could at least hope to survive a bit longer by pleasing the masters of the place. (player of Boris)

The game mechanics emphasized this, being basically just a trust system of “pain hurts and death kills”, with an off-game safe word and a “meta” command for conveying system information. The dead were carried out by the soldiers, and served warm tea in another building. Most kills appeared to happen in an arbitrary order, but in fact the Elites made plans on whom to kill and when, in order to both amuse themselves and preserve the top spot in the power structure. Of course, sometimes they were carried away by a perfect opportunity presenting itself. When more than half of the characters were already dead, one of the soldiers commented that “at least six people are dead, maybe we should start to look after our own safety”, after which he was told by the others not to worry too much. They were all dead ten minutes later.

The game was a raging success on all accounts. Only the players of the first two characters to be killed, somewhat prematurely, were disappointed. As the player of Arkadi stated “I had a great time, but having the game end for me after just two hours was not fun.”

The larp was loved, not as an enjoyable game, but as an interesting experience. As American larp organizer and analyst Gordon Olmstead-Dean (2007) notes in his set of articles about *Bratislava*:

It is easy to say that the game is about creating story, but in the end what is the point of a plot or story but to create experience, and by experience we usually mean strong emotion, whether that emotion is triumph, vindication, eros, or fear.

Bratislava was meant as a strong experience and was received as such. Whether it was accomplished by careful selection of players, or efficient, if not that elegant (to quote Olmstead-Dean) character design, or subject matter, or a combination of all, the game left a lasting impression in most of its players.

... and Back

The success had two natural after-effects: A repeated series of requests from the players for one more game, and our mounting dread of failing, if we were to make one. Four years later we decided to create *PehmoYdin 4: Sielun/Messu* (Requiem, 2005). It too was an experiment of sorts: A game which would be boring to the characters, but interesting to the players. It was set in a sub-section of Hell, with a varied cast of characters from different places and times, locked in eternal, empty trysts. Speech was limited, physical contact mandatory, characters defined as “constantly horny”, but there was no satisfaction to any of the characters. There were plentiful clues on how to escape Hell, but all of them were dead ends.

As can be expected from this, some players loved it, others simply found it boring, but it was a fitting end to the series and a chance to return to older characters one last time. As two female players said in the debrief:

This was great. I got all the best parts of sex – the intimacy, the tension, the caresses and the sweet feeling of relaxed ache and exhaustion – without that pesky need for any actual penetration.

My experience was exactly the opposite: I would have just wanted some sex without those damned hours of empty foreplay.

On Adult Larps

These games, *Bratislava* in particular, show that despite the claims of researchers like Borina & Mertins (2009), fictional sexual violence can indeed be used for a positive effect in a larp, if handled in the correct manner. This is especially true if one selects the player base well enough, and warns people of potential problem points in advance. Furthermore, since one third of the participants in *Sielun/Messu* were invited through an open, free-for-all sign-up process, we can also conclude that player selection in such games is at least not the sole defining factor.

One of the best accomplishments of the game was in how erotic imagery was used. The B&D themed imagery was not overemphasized, but rather made a vital part of the oppressive atmosphere of inevitable doom. At the beginning, when the guests were still more or less relaxed and could at least hope to survive the night, the imagery was used to convey a feeling of decadence, while as the game progressed and the atmosphere turned creepier, the same imagery served to convey the violent oppression of the masters of the manor. (Boris)

The series has sparked many discussions on the ethics of larp and larps created to be interesting but not enjoyable in the traditional sense as well as on the responsible use of sexual themes and sexual violence in larps. It has also influenced several other adult-themed larps, such as *Blue Threads*, which was run in Washington, D.C., in 2010.

Bratislavan Syntiset Yöt

CREDITS: Lihaa kuvitelmille pelit. J. Tuomas Harviainen (design, characters, background material) & Nina Hämäläinen (design, casting, locations)

DATE: Early 2001

LOCATION: Southern Finland

LENGTH: 6 hours

PLAYERS: 28 players, 2 organizers

BUDGET: €50 (total)

PARTICIPATION FEE: €2

GAME MECHANICS: Sex simulated with dry humping, violence with latex weapons

OTHER MATERIAL: The full, expanded script of *Bratislava* is available in English from the author

Further Reading

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THE EXECUTIVE GAME

MISOGYNOUS MOBSTERS, MINIMALIST IMMERSION

Markus Montola

IT'S FOUR O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING. *The poker game has been going on for eight hours, and there's no end in sight. It started out with a few good hands bringing in piles of chips, but protecting your winnings has made you limp downhill step by step. As the morning draws closer, the excitement turns into exhaustion, with coffee and cigarettes keeping you going and a chilly sweat creeping in. The part where a pissed mob goon dropped his hidden gun on the floor didn't help, and the bragging redneck millionaire keeps pouring insult to your injury. You really should have stayed out of this game, but now there's only one way out: More money on the table.*



*Performing for the first person audience: Even though the poker faces hide emotions, *The Executive Game* was all about character immersion. (Restaged, Kalle Kaivola)*

The Executive Game was created around a minimalist concept inspired by HBO's drama series *The Sopranos*: The Montenelli Mafia family runs games of illegal high-stakes poker for a few adventurous celebrities, businessmen and crooks with a few dozen grand to spend. Each of the five games in the series followed an exact pattern: a poker game commences around sundown, and goes on non-stop until early morning hours, with the stakes increasing steadily to maintain the tension.

The game ran with very few elements: the poker, the stakes, the chatter and each participant's individual story – their reasons to play the game and the relationships they had to money, crime, violence, and the other players. As was common in Finnish games of the time, these elements were used to support character immersion, and all the players of *The Executive Game* were expected to play in the *immersionist* style advocated by the *Manifesto of the Turku School*.

The entire game revolved around money. Players strived to become immersed in the feeling of gambling with dead serious stakes: The players' experiences could be very different depending on their characters' perceptions on money. Quoting the play instructions:

To set the mood of the game, it needs to be stressed that the chips are to be treated as real money. Simply put, \$50,000 is one shitload of money. [...] Some of the more prosperous participants have lost more than a hundred grand in a game, but few people can afford to do that without sweat and anxiety. This shouldn't be considered play money. It's your children's college fund, the yacht you crave for, the car loan and the

home mortgage.

The power of such immersion is inexplicable. Combined with the caffeine, the exhaustion, the smog and a few drinks, seeing one's fortunes come and go produces a visceral and rich roller coaster of emotions. By the end of the game, the exhaustion clouds your judgement, both in terms of the poker tactics and how to socialize with impulsive, violent criminals. The intoxicating high of victory and the agony of loss generate a different dramatic arc to each participant: personal stories of tragedy, success, fall, recovery and hubris.

Minimalist Precision

Played at a secluded cottage, the larp sought to provide a very tangible experience of the card table. Detailed attention was paid to the foods and drinks served, clothing and music – there was an implicit quota for smokers, just to ensure the steady smoke screen for the entire duration of the game. A quote from a player debrief illustrates the meticulous precision, and its value to the players:

Having real whiskey and Bud improved the experience, in fact I'd also have appreciated seeing Bud served in bottles – from the perspective of the atmosphere; the brand of beer makes little difference when you serve it in glasses. Besides, in a manly event such as *The Executive Game*, drinking from bottles and cans should be all right. Of course they should look the part; seeing [Finnish beer] bottles in the first game was slightly distracting.

While such attention to detail might appear as snobbish elitism



As the evening progressed, ties were loosened and jackets discarded. (Restaged, Kalle Kaivola)

at first, in many ways the detail was all *The Executive Game* needed. These larps were special in the way you could spend literally every minute of your game in essential character activities: You enter, you play some poker. You get a beer, take a leak and play some more. Maybe nap on the sofa or go outside for a breather. The clear structure of the game, combined with the way all action took place in a very small area, and the way bids were getting higher all the time, ensured that the intensity carried over to the very end of the larp.

The soundtrack of the game included many cultural references to Mafia fiction, played on an old vinyl player. This was diegetic irony in the style of *The Sopranos*; playing Frank Sinatra was a clear choice for the Montenelli characters, as *The Godfather* author Mario Puzo allegedly used the mob-linked singer as the inspiration for his Johnny Fontane. The diegetic joke also helped create an exciting Mafia atmosphere – also serving the purpose of entertaining the Mafia-romantic high-rollers of the poker table.

The way alcohol was represented in the larp changed as the series progressed. Even heavy immersionists often prefer inebriated characters to be played by somewhat sober players, rather than running the risk of having a drunk player actually disturbing the game. Thus, early on, non-alcoholic substitutes were used for hard liquor, but in the later games whiskey and beer were represented with the good stuff. However, the players established the Miller brand as a code word for non-alcoholic beer, so that they could control their consumption while pretending to be on a binge.

The Montenelli family insisted on playing *five-card draw*. The simple and best known poker variant was mostly chosen in order to minimize procedural hassles, but also to encourage social play. Compared to popular tournament variants, five card draw offers fewer opportunities for probability calculations, thus highlighting the importance of factors such as luck and bluff in the game.

As the larps were played before the poker boom, obtaining proper clay chips was a task in itself for the game organizers; plastic chips were considered inappropriate due to their light weight and unsatisfying sound. In order to maintain trust among the players, a new deck of cards was unsealed whenever someone requested, and the old one was tossed into the fireplace.

The Mobster Mindset

On the surface level, *The Executive Game* was a racist and misogynist game; a larp where white heterosexual males throw racial slurs, mock sexual minorities and engage in greasy flirt with the waitresses. Even the characters holding more liberal opinions were wise enough to keep them to themselves in the presence of these alpha males. For instance, the porn director Albert immediately felt the looming aggression as the discussion turned to the fact that indeed, he had shot gay porn during his acting career.

This political incorrectness was deliberately encouraged, being an important part of the game genre, described in the background material:

For the Mafia men, a nigger is a nigger and a kike is a kike. Gays are not treated kindly, and democracy is not a big part of the family life – the boss is the boss, and that’s it. Omertà, the vow of silence, is taken very seriously, and you don’t have much of a future after breaking it. Snitches are filth, honorless bastards who deserve to die. No one talks much about the fact that the attitudes on Omertà are often hypocritical. [...] it doesn’t mean that you couldn’t do business or have a beer with [a black guy], but it means that he probably has a big penis, might be prone to street crime, and you certainly don’t want him marrying your daughter.

For some players, engaging in the vulgar and abusive chat of *The Executive Game* was not an easy task. Indeed, the competition over obscenity of expression was a part of the game – just like it is in the similar discourses of ordinary life.

It would be easy to make a racist reading of the surface layer of *The Executive Game*, just like the racist dialogue of *The Sopranos* can be utilized in racist rhetoric. However, in a small scale larp, the game master has a precise control on the audience, and the pregame discussions also influence the way the game is read. Thus, in this sense, *The Executive Game* was an anti-racist and anti-misogynist game, as both attitudes were brought to the game in a detached and underlined manner, as parts of the Mafia lifestyle. The mobsters were questionable characters; even while sitting around a table and playing cards, the game subtly touched the central psychological themes of the genre, such as the conflicts of honour and hypocrisy, and of reality and façades. Even though there was no visible violence, the masculine pecking order was clearly built through implicitly aggressive behaviour.

As perfectionism was central to all the game preparations, the mobster mindset also meant that almost all characters sitting in the card table were white males played by white males. As the genre dictates, the few female characters were waitresses and cooks who poured drinks and made sandwiches, and occasionally even got to cut the deck for good luck. They were subjected to stares, remarks and even an occasional grope. One female player commented:

There was a particular ambience in the kitchen, washing dishes has never been that fun or rewarding. We also did rounds in the hall, emptying ashtrays, collecting empty plates, taking orders for food and drinks. Sometimes you’d be tipped with a chip. In every game there were two-three young and pretty waitresses; I can only speak for myself, but personally I felt a strong sexist/erotic charge whenever entering the hall. The players had been warned against laying their hands at us, but that didn’t stop sleazy stares. One time a family member grabbed my butt and was immediately told off. [...] I would have preferred even more groping! Nicky kept everyone in line, so no-one dared to touch us.

In some sense, the misogyny aimed at the female players served as an enabler for playing racism as well. Being able to toss lewd jokes at the girls, trusting that they would only be offended on the diegetic level, allowed one to trust that a given black person

would likewise understand the ludic nature of the discourse: Just like one’s misogynist quips were not aimed at the players but their characters, the racist remarks were similarly aimed at fictional people.

Toni Sihvonen (1997) has argued that according to the *role-playing contract*, it is forbidden to make assumptions regarding players based on their characters, and vice versa. Thus, it’s forbidden to label a player racist because he’s playing a racist character. The waitress players served as a psychological proxy for all minorities; as they consented to the role-playing contract, it felt reasonable to assume that other targets of the slander would have accepted it as well.

Even though the kitchen characters were given as much attention as the poker players, some women in the larper community were understandably very annoyed by the idea of a larp where men play poker and women do the dishes. In this respect *The Executive Game* followed a philosophy directly opposite to the likes of *Hamlet* and *Carolus Rex*.

Contextually, *The Executive Game* series was a rather typical and elegant example of many larp movements of the time. The high focus on immersionist play highlights the way larps were supposed to be played for the *first person audience*, the player being the primary audience of a performance consisting of both physical and social action, but also of the player’s own moods, emotions and thoughts during the game. All the props and other elements aiming for authenticity in the game were intended to just support the internal play.

It has sometimes been said that character immersion is a difficult mental state to reach, but in *The Executive Game* the opposite was true as well. You can use a lot of effort detaching yourself from the game while going all-in on three queens, but in some point it strikes you: Your hands are shaking, no matter what you do.



The notepad where the mobsters marked down debts. (Detail, Kalle Kaivola)



The players of the kitchen staff. (Debrief, Kalle Kaivola)



As the night turns to morning, the exhausted players gather for a debrief. (Debrief, Henri Block)

The Executive Game

CREDITS: Mikko Rautalahti

DATE: 2001–2003 (5 games)

LOCATION: Lohja, Finland

LENGTH: Some ten hours each

NUMBER OF PLAYERS: A dozen poker players and 3-5 kitchen players.

BUDGET: Approx. €300

PARTICIPATION FEE: Approx. €30

GAME MECHANICS: Almost none.

OTHER MATERIAL: The name of the game comes from *The Happy Wanderer*, the 19th episode of HBO's *The Sopranos*.

Further Reading

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INSIDE:OUTSIDE

IN PRISON WITH KAFKA AND BECKETT

Mike Pohjola



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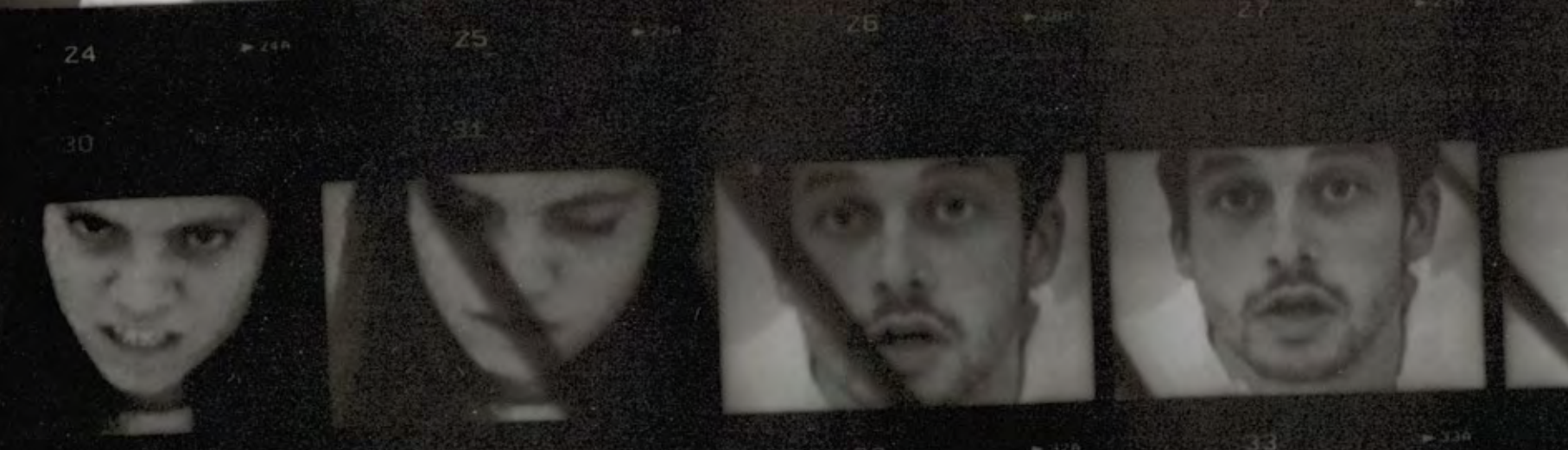
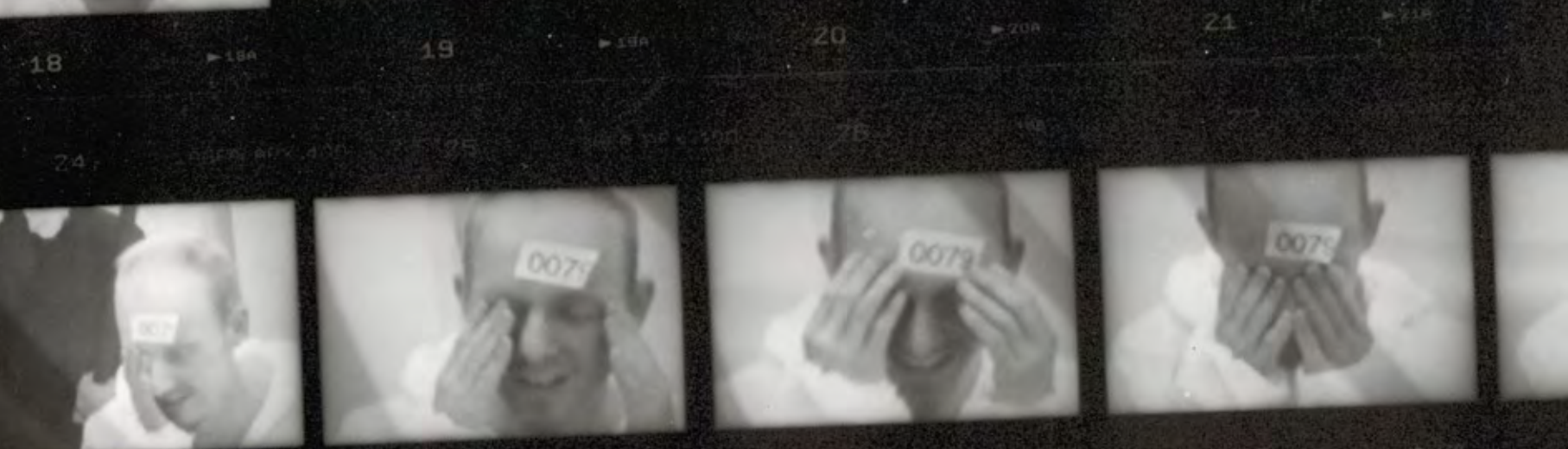
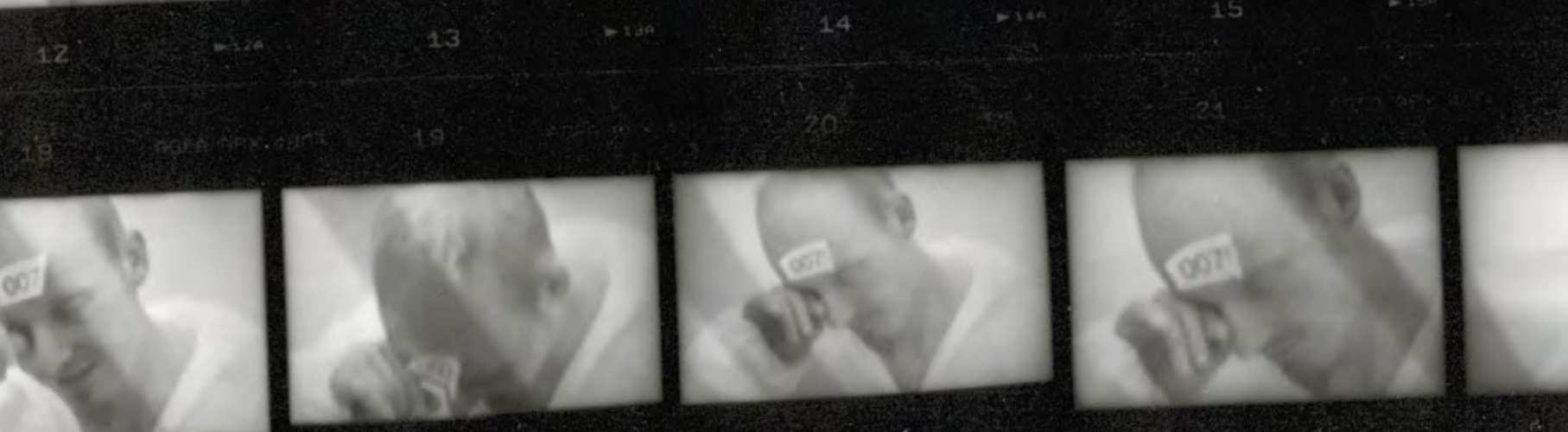
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A BUNCH OF STRANGERS *wake up in a white cube, not knowing how or why. They are all prisoners, wearing white, numbered overalls. A female voice calls them by numbers, one at a time, to the next room. In the other room a male voice accuses them of unspecified crimes, holds philosophical monologues, and forces them to confront ethical dilemmas. Then the prisoner is returned with the others. At random times, or if the prisoners are difficult, guards enter the cell and beat up the prisoners.*

◀ *Prisoners facing the Judge in the Courtroom, as seen by the Judge. Prisoner 0079 has ripped the number tag from his overall, and placed it on his forehead. As he refuses to put it back, he is punished by the Judge and the Guard. (Diegetic, Frode Dybvad)*

inside:outside was a highly abstract four-hour game that was staged ten times for no more than fifteen players. The game was played in Sweden, Norway and Finland, at art galleries, role-playing conventions, political youth camps, and more informally with local larpers.

In the spring of 2001 Eirik Fatland and I decided to bury the hatchet and create a game together. Eirik was an author of the *Dogma 99* manifesto while I had written the opposing *Manifesto of the Turku School*. Though they disagree on key concepts such as the meaning of story, the role of the game master and importance of character immersion, both manifestos agreed that larps are a medium that can be used for creating art, and were scorned by the majority of role-players who held the opinion that role-playing is and should be only entertainment. Together we decided to create the first joint Nordic art larp that would really make people think about the world and their place in it. This became *inside:outside*.

Much of the feedback to *Dogma 99* and the *Turku Manifesto* was based on the assumption that role-playing games are X (e.g. “fun fantasy adventures”), and what the manifestos describe is not X – and therefore wrong. Back in the day such views were pretty common. After getting tired of trying to broaden people’s definitions or role-playing, we decided to coin a new word, *indrarna*, for what we were doing, based on placing the participant inside an interactive drama. *inside:outside* was framed as an art larp in the context of devised theatre and interactive storytelling.

Another attempt at tilting at windmills was to create a pseudonym for the larprawrights to combat personality cults rampant in the larpdom in the early 00’s. We merged our first names into Emir Zweik, a revolutionary Tajik artist. We presented him as the creator of *inside:outside* with ourselves merely realizing his vision. Few were fooled, and we are not sure whether this served to diminish or enhance the personality cults, either.

Yet perhaps the best name in this nominal charade was the title of the game itself, *inside:outside*. It was suitably Kafka-esque, anarchistic and abstract, with the colon at the time giving it a slightly futuristic hacker feel.

Oppressive Aesthetics

In the summer of 2001 George W. Bush had just recently been inaugurated as president of the United States, but the so-called War on Terror had not yet begun. The Gothenburg police had just forcefully beaten down the demonstrators around the WTO Summit. Increasingly popular voyeuristic reality television series were considered a disgusting American phenomenon

that was just starting to get imported into the Nordic countries. *inside:outside* was created in this cultural context.

inside:outside was also influenced by writings of Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, George Orwell and Jean-Paul Sartre, as well as the films *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and *The Cube* (1997). At the core of the dramaturgy of *inside:outside* were two dilemmas of game theory:

The Prisoner’s Dilemma: Two people are arrested, but there is not enough evidence against them. They are separated, and the officials offer both a deal. If one testifies against the other, the betrayer goes free and the other gets a ten year sentence. If neither testifies, both are only sentenced to six months. If they both betray each other, they both get five years. What would you do?

Wolf’s Dilemma: Ten people are put in separate rooms for five minutes. Everyone has a button: If nobody presses the button, everybody gets €100,000. If anybody presses the button, then everyone who did so gets €20,000, but those who didn’t push, don’t get anything. Can you trust the strangers?

A big part of the larp was the very stylized aesthetics, including the white cube, the white overalls and an oppressive ambient soundscape. The characters were skimmed down to the bare minimum. *The Cube* was a strong influence on the visuals, while *A Clockwork Orange* affected the tone of the Judge and the monologues.

I liked the simplicity of the environment and the design. The costumes were excellent. I was bothered by the walls being soft. (player, 10th run)

Journeys in Imprisonment

The player experience was designed to contain a ritualistic entrance into the game, and an exit from it. At the start of the event, the players would receive outlines for their characters, and fill them out by answering a list of questions. “Where are you from? How do you deal with people whose views differ from your own?” After that there were drama exercises to establish the characters’ daily routines and physical mannerisms. Then the players would close their eyes and be escorted one by one into a dark room. As a voice counts from one to ten, you become the character.

In this game you don’t play a character but a situation. The moment and momentary emotions make the character irrelevant for the experience of immersion, since it doesn’t really matter who you are because most western people would react in a similar fashion. (player, 9th run)

Could the players play themselves? At first I thought that

Setting up the surveillance system for the game at Kunstneres Hus. (Behind the scenes, Frode Dybvad)



The game masters and the audience could observe a live feed from the cell. (Diegetic, Frode Dybvad)



Game masters playing the Judge in the control room. (Behind the scenes, Frode Dybvad)

the roles were not important, and therefore could have been removed. Now I have changed my mind. The game was so good partly because it had such a clear focus on ethics and morality. Playing oneself in the midst of all this would have introduced so many new elements that this focus would have been lost. The roles were thus not important in itself, but served as a way to create distance and concentration on the game. (player, 7th run)

The larp begins with the characters sleeping. As the lights go up they wake up in a white room surrounded by strangers in white uniforms. The last thing they remember is going to sleep in their bed after a normal, uneventful day. How long have they been here? No-one admits to knowing anything. There are surveillance cameras in some of the corners and people yell for help, but nothing happens.

After a while a female voice comes from the loudspeakers. "Prisoner 0036, please enter the courtroom." One of the prisoners goes in the other room, a similar white cube, but **with a mirror** hanging from the ceiling. There is a guard standing in the corner, face covered with a black hood and sunglasses. He never speaks.

A male voice identifies itself as the Judge, and explains the prisoner needs ten points to get out. The prisoner is taken back to the cell, and another is asked into the courtroom. One by one all the prisoners go in and come back. At first they're told to give points to each other. "Give two points to one of your cellmates." "Choose five points for yourself and none for the others, or one point for everybody else but none for you." The questions get harder and harder, and there is no right answer.

What *inside:outside* shows is that these all-important basic questions can be proposed in the shape of a game and that the participants are forced to actually dig the bottom of their psyche to find the answers. (player, 4th run)

Everyone is sweating in their uniforms. People fight with each other, sometimes the Judge tells them what the others have chosen. Some lie to other prisoners about their choices. Many try to guess who built this cell and who the Judge is. The police? The government? A Japanese TV show? A psychological laboratory? Some hope of release if they manage well in this cruel game, but it is also apparent that not everyone will survive the prison.

After several hours the first player is called back in. The guard is still there, in the same spot, staring. The Judge speaks. "You have eight points. You need ten points to go free. You are given one final dilemma. You will get two points and will be set free, if you choose one of your cellmates to be killed."

The prisoners in the cell hear the dilemma, but don't hear

the reply. People are anxious: could she betray them? Who will she choose?

After all the prisoners have visited the judge at least once, the game ends in one of the following ways: One possibility is that one prisoner dies, and is removed from the cell. Another is that one of the prisoners is set free. The prisoners might also refuse to cooperate, rebel and take down the guards. Alternatively one group of prisoners could ally themselves with the system, and kill the rest. *inside:outside* was staged ten times, and these are all actual endings from different runs. If no other ending was in sight, the game masters playing the Judge would end the game with all the characters having to face a dilemma together, choosing one prisoner to die and another to go free.

For some reason I felt that what happened was completely random and that no prisoners would do anything to influence the situation, while organizers claimed that all they did was the reaction of the players' choice. I do not know why I did not see the game as interactive. (player, 7th run)

After that the lights go off. A voice counts from ten to one, and the players slowly become themselves again. They are taken out of the cell, and the debrief begins.

The game was good fun, but it would have had to be considerably longer in order to get full points from me. Now it felt a bit hurried, probably due to the fact that our characters managed to mess up the organizers' schedule with their resistance. (player, 10th run, four hours)

In advance, I was skeptical of this style of play, but *inside:outside* has made me change the attitude. Because the game was so short and because so many external factors provided the intensity it was okay to relax and just see what happened through the role. (player, 7th run, eight hours)

Larp Art

inside:outside was an odd bird. It was talked about quite a bit at the time, and had an effect not only on the medium, but also on the scene. Since then there have been several artistically ambitious convention larps, such as *Luminescence*, taking the medium farther and farther from its roots.

inside:outside was different from previous art larps, such as *.laitos* (.institution, 2009), *Knappnålshuvudet and Amerika* (200) in two ways: First, it was played ten times over more than a year, so it had sufficient time to build word-of-mouth. Second, it was played and discussed internationally. Juhana Pettersson wrote

at the time in a column on rpg.net:

inside:outside was also produced to Ropecon, and has the singular honour of being something of a death blow to the debate whether roleplaying games may be art. The most popular, and practical, definition of art that also has academic credibility is that everything presented in an art context is art. This means that Duchamp's *Fountain* is transformed into art when it's moved from the men's lavatory to the art museum. This also means that *inside:outside*, originally commissioned by Kunstnerens Hus, the museum of modern art in Oslo, is art. Since it's also a larp, by extension any larp may be art. Or rather, at the bare minimum, any larp presented as art is art.



The inside:outside fliers emphasized the themes of oppression and surveillance. (Promotion, Eirik Fatland)

inside:outside

CREDITS: Eirik Fatland and Mike Pohjola (creators, under the pseudonym Emir Zweik), Irene Tanke (producer), Rune Haugen (scenographer), Erlend Eidsem (video), Arvid Falch, Cath Røsseland, Frederik Hossman

DATE: 2001-2002 (ten games)

LOCATION: Oslo, Norway; Gothenburg, Sweden; Stockholm, Sweden; Espoo, Finland

LENGTH: 4-8 hours

PLAYERS: five to sixteen, usually about twelve

BUDGET: €7,500

PARTICIPATION FEE: €10

GAME MECHANICS: Almost none

Further Reading

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Players dress up before the game. Diegetic cross-dressing gave them significantly more options when choosing their costumes. (Pregame, Charlotte Lindström)

HAMLET

SOMETHING IS STILL ROTTEN IN THE STATE OF DENMARK

Karl Bergström

OVER EIGHT HUNDRED EUROS WORTH of early 19th century revolver misfires, thus failing to put an end to the nemesis of my cousin. In a way, we're all very lucky that it does; as it happens, it is the only fully functional revolver in the larp, and also the only legal one. It is promptly tossed across the main hall of the bunker like a pair of discarded underwear and clatters over the concrete floor; I should care more, since it is my revolver, but I don't. I don't care, because I am experiencing Hamlet. Three days of pure bliss; never before, nor since, have I experienced its equal in all of larpdom.

◀◀◀ *Extravagant accessories were a part of the court fashion.*
(Pregame, Charlotte Lindström)

◀◀ *The decadent setting allowed the use of often extensive makeup.*
(Pregame, Charlotte Lindström)



The food started out normal, but later on you were served, for instance, an entire dinner consisting only of desserts. (Pregame, Charlotte Lindström)



King Claudius and his advisors make war. The telephone was used to communicate with generals in the frontier. (Diegetic, Bengt Liljeros)



The live action role-playing adaptation of Shakespeare's classic took place in an alternative 1940s where Denmark had risen to prominence. With the failure of the bourgeois French Revolution came a Europe comprised of industrialized feudal monarchies. Germany was never united and remained as squabbling states. The blatant misrule of King Claudius had ignited the fires of red revolution, and the entire court now takes refuge in the bunkers below the crown castle, convinced that they'll be able to go on as usual while the unrest burns itself out above their heads. Nobility and heads of state now live side by side with whores, sycophants, and anyone and everything that has managed to get in before the doors closed. Claudius' secret police sees socialist sympathisers in every shadow while the nobles plot and scheme and the little people just struggle to survive.

The game was played out in three acts, loosely modelled on acts two, three, and four of the original play – each with a distinct theme. The first was *Decadence*, where the court did its best to party the night away, the second *Intrigue*, where suspicion, paranoia, and cloaked daggers ran rampant, and the third *Ruin*, the logical conclusion to the many very sordid histories taking place in the bunker twilight.

Drinking, Fencing, Swearing, Quarrelling

I am awoken in the dead of night by the sound of drums pounding in the dark. Wearing only nightshirt, nightcap, and a pair of slippers with a flickering five-armed candelabrum in one hand and my revolver in the other, I seek the source of the infernal Negro music; being a member of the nobility I am of course biased against such. When I come upon the drummer I realise that he is merely the accompaniment to a throng of people engaged in – well, what happens in *Hamlet* stays in *Hamlet*, that's the rule.

Dubbed “the first full frontal nudity larp” by one of the organizers, *Hamlet* boasted an especially luscious atmosphere, especially during the first act. Even if I doubt the veracity of this statement it cannot be denied that people ate, drank, danced, gambled, and copulated like their world was ending – which, incidentally, it was. Reels of vintage pornography were displayed to a receptive audience and the haze of illicit drugs was ever present. What the nobles lacked in access to their resources whilst in the bunker they made up in sadistic ingenuity; at one point fortunes were lost and made when a race was staged with servants as horses, whipped onwards by their lady jockeys.

A fortuitous clearance sale at Kungliga Dramatiska Teatern in the weeks preceding the game had refurbished the larp with costuming of unprecedented quality. Participants could show up at the larp and pick out a costume from the laden racks of vintage clothing available. Not that this kept the players from

spending steep sums themselves; many spent €200 or more on costume, props, and accessories. That all norms concerning appropriate attire for men and women were cast out at court gave rise to cross-dressing aplenty, adding to the already laissez-faire environment.

If anything, *Hamlet* showed that partying with character is many times more fun than without. Only a few real life festivities ever reach this level of revelry. After all: how else would you find a restless aristocrat playing double barrel twelve gauge pot-shot cat-and-mouse with a meddlesome journalist amongst the crowd? A normal party already contains the embryo of a fully fledged magic circle; a party at a larp takes it all the way.

But please don't think that the abandonment was complete: People (usually) kept at least their carnal activities (somewhat) discreet. All this took place before the larp and kinky-crowds met in the warm, latex-uniform-and-handicraft embrace of later years, and one can only speculate what a game such as this would have been like today..

Bloody Deeds

The two harlots must want my noble seed, I know it. Why else would one of them ask for my hand in marriage? But two, or in this case three, can play that game. First off, I agree on one condition only – that I get to marry both her, and her sister. “It is against the law!” they protest, but am I not the minister of justice? A few pen-strokes and a word to the king, and such restrictions are no longer a problem. But my plot goes deeper still; on the marriage night I shall secretly exchange myself for my domesticated negroe manservant, ensuring tales of my virility and giving the women anything but noble seed.

Intrigue was the theme of the second act, and intrigue there was. With so many personal trajectories set to collide, harried by the incessant roar of the mobs above, everyone did their best to ensure they would come out on top, solve whatever grievance had brought them to the court in the first place or act out age-old feuds. The act quickly descended into a frenzy of mistrust, deception, scheme, and stratagem – all taking place alongside the pre-set drama of the original characters.

The peripety of the act arrived in a hail of bullets as Laertes and her revolutionaries broke into the bunker, guns blazing (not “pop-pop-cap gun fulminating powder”, but “bang-bang-fully automatic blank firer cordite”), bent on regicide. Just like everything connected to the original play, this was *look don't touch* for us regular players, and as Laertes was wooed by the King's deceitful words the game of intrigue continued with renewed ferocity.

Much of the excellent gameplay in this act was enabled by the way the game handled the outside world; though the game was restricted to the bunker, the participants were constantly

The queen mourns Ophelia, who is still frothing at the mouth from whatever killed her. (Diegetic, Bengt Liljeros)



fed information through multiple channels. Couriers appeared with private messages and announcements, newsreels showed images of the events taking place in the kingdom and beyond, and the players could communicate with whomever they wished (and had informed the organizers about beforehand) by letter or phone. These parts were played by a special cadre of actors standing by outside the bunker, prepared for a multitude of roles from a distant lover to the captain of your forces. Generals and pundits of all sorts could gather around a war map to play out and witness the fall of the city to the red rebels blow by blow. All this had the effect of blurring the boundary between scene and setting, making the bunker feel like just a small part the wider world.

The rules have changed in this act and it was now possible for your character to die, if you so desired. Acts of violence which would have been shrugged off in the first act suddenly became lethal, but the player was still in charge of his or her character's fate – a fact which is about to change.

Mad as the Sea and Wind

I am strangled to death by my cousin on the concrete floor over a careless remark. I am shot in the heart by Claudius' agents after my monologue of penance to the crowd. As I play the game twice, I get to die twice in *Hamlet*. Someone is kind enough to cover up my exposed private parts; I'm shot in my nightshirt. I lie waiting for the meat-cart which works non-stop to ferry corpses out of the bunker, but it takes almost an hour: I'm not the only one to die.

When asked afterwards, many players said that they actively sought death in the last act, seeing that their characters did not deserve to live. Given that the players mostly portrayed the very pinnacle of the worst of society, it is hard not to agree with the sentiment. The rules wholeheartedly supported this wish; in the last act, every bit of aggression, poison, stray bullet, case of indigestion or what-have-you, led to certain death. People fell like ninepins; an admiral spoon-fed herself cocaine, a thirsty guard downed the wrong goblet, a desperate man found a way out for himself and five others in his .38. Vendettas ended in death for anyone involved.

In a way, this was the only way a drama true to its Shakespearean roots could end. Many games do not put as much emphasis on theme and language, but *Hamlet* made a conscious effort to infuse the game with its source material. All players were required to write a treatise on their interpretation of their character beforehand, how that character would fit with the themes and established dramatic arc. Many players made an effort to use Shakespeare-style language throughout the game, and eschewed the all too common naturalistic dialogue

of most larps. Some might question everyone's ability to deliver lines that were up to par, but the effort was enough to create a distinct and dramatic tone throughout.

That the entire game was permeated by a socialist ethic and perspective – quite intentionally by the organizers – was hopefully not lost on anyone as the drama came to a close. For the final scene of the duel between Hamlet and Laertes, all players were present, even if their characters had perished earlier. We all got to witness the rebels (led by Fortinbras, reworked as a 40s Che Guevara) finally taking the bunker and encountering the few survivors. Hamlet, having stood against the tyranny, posthumously received the honours and accolades of a Comrade.

To Be or Not to Be?

As established family tradition dictates, we cut a five-pointed star of cocaine and stick our noses in it with reckless abandon. Since my only experience with snorting comes from popular culture, I am rapidly humbled in my ambition to make it look graceful, while my fellow players suck it up like vacuum cleaners. All I can think of as I ponder the mess I've made, is exactly where and how they acquired that particular skill set...

There must never be another *Hamlet* like this one. Not because we *could* not, but because we *should* not. The concern for safety was almost zero, there was too much alcohol – any amount of alcohol in combination with firearms is too much, even if they fire blanks. Rumours of real drugs, compared to the dextrose commonly used as a cocaine stand in, circulated for a long time. The use of pornography is highly problematic, even if it is vintage; in my opinion far more so than (semi) public sex by consenting adults, which was criticized after the larp. This text has mainly focused upon what made Hamlet so successful, but it is far from difficult to find things to criticize.

That said, for me *Hamlet* will always remain the flagship of Swedish larp, where pieces of perfect fit – and good-looking pieces to boot – danced together in a symphony of evocative environments, stunning costume and the magic of Shakespearean drama and dialogue. In the words of Johanna Koljonen (2004): "The game was massive, intense, beautiful, tragic, life-changing. It is, even today, a top contender for the greatest larp of all time".

Ofelia's vigil, lit by the candelabras that created much of the Hamlet atmosphere. (Diegetic, Bengt Liljeros)





Early in the first act, a courtier tries to impress the nobility with his musical ability. (Diegetic, Bengt Liljeros)

CREDITS: Martin Ericsson (larpwright, lead writer, handouts, films, music selection, props), Christopher Sandberg (larpwright, lead producer, gastronomy lead, sanitation, lights, props, set design), Anna Ericsson (larpwright, live music, costume lead, phone, telegraph) and Martin Brodén (larpwright, alternate history, ghost lead, phone, telegraph) with Olle Jonsson (handouts, writing, phone, telegraph), Daniel Krauklis and Holger Jacobsson (original concept, characters), Johanna Koljonen (additional writing), Craig Lindley (film footage), Patric Erikson (illustrations, handouts), Martin Olsson (music, sound effects), Henrik Summanen (ghost effects), Pia Niemi (live music, phone, telegraph), Jonas Lindh, Karl Bergström and Margrete Raalum (props, costumes), Jonny Hjorter (transportation), NCID (on-site production), Tobias Wrigstad (phone and telegraph lead), Karin Tidbeck, Tova Gerge and Adriana Skarped (phone, telegraph), Mathias Gullbrandson, Anders Wendin (original concept). Interaktiva Uppsättningar and Riksteatern JAM.
DATE: Two games; 17-19 May and 24-26 May, 2002

Hamlet

LOCATION: Vitabergsparken, Stockholm

LENGTH: 60+ hours

PLAYERS: 60 in each instalment

BUDGET: €15,000+

PARTICIPATION FEE: €120, discount for playing in both games

GAME MECHANICS: Fateplay, monologues, dramatic rules

Further Reading

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ZOMBIE RÆDSLERNES NAT

ATTACK OF THE UNDEAD OCCULT NAZI SOLDIERS

Valdemar Kølle

*The old fortress provided a perfect cinematic setting for the larp.
(Promotion, Frederik Høyer-Christensen)*

IT'S DARK AND DAMP in this old fortress. I crouch in a corner, feeling the cold wall on my back, trying to catch my breath. It feels like I have been running for hours. In the distance I can hear the screams of the other survivors. I gulp down the last bit of my Reich Chocolate and wash it down with a last sip of Coke, just to try and get that energy boost to keep me going. I hear the shuffle of the dragging feet and the moaning as yet another monster approaches. I must get up. I must keep running. I must keep running.



1886 1891

GARDERHØJFØRTET





The demented doctor and his zombie serum. (Promotion, Frederik Høyer-Christensen)

Inspired by B-movies and computer games, *Zombie: Rædslerne nat* (later played in English as *Zombie: Night of Terror*) combined horror and satire in a larp run in an old abandoned military fortress in Denmark in 2002.

The narrative backdrop for the larp was Denmark in the near future, where widespread global terror and the persecution of terrorists had made the world an unsafe place. The nationalist Dansk Folkeparti (the Danish People's Party) had won a decisive victory in the last election and was now enacting a series of laws to ensure the safety of the Danish people. Among these laws was the introduction of a general military draft, in which all able-bodied people between the ages of 18-30 had to participate. Failure to attend was considered a crime.

The participants of the larp played *conscientious objectors*, who were sentenced to community service due to refusing to comply with the draft. They were sent to re-establish the former glory of an old fortress, Garderhøjfortet. In reality built in the late 19th century, Garderhøjfortet was obsolete by the time it was finished. It was financed privately and lent to the Danish military. In the fiction of the game, the fort held some nasty old secrets from the Nazi occupation of Denmark, watched over by the sinister Dr. Braun.

From Dusk Till Dawn

The game started with the characters arriving at the local "drafting station", where they were prepared for their assignment: the restoration of a military property. They were escorted to the fortress by military personnel, subjugated to various forms of physical and emotional military hardships and abuse (push ups, standing at attention etc.) before the real work could take place.

Little by little it became clear that all was not well at the military installation. Doctor Braun was an undercover Nazi scientist experimenting with a secret zombie serum – only to accidentally taste his own medicine along with the soldiers. As the conscientious objectors learned about their captors' newfound hunger for human flesh, they realized that they had to work hard to stay alive through the night. As more and more people fell victim of the zombies and their animated corpses swelled the ranks of the undead, the situation grew grim and hopeless.

As the set game world started to break down and authority disappeared, it was clear that to get the best zombie experience you should begin to dig into the conventions of the genre and not do what a thinking sane person would do. So, we split up into smaller groups, constantly bickering and backstabbing each other to get to the better safe-spot or get the better weapon. (player, male)

In the end there was no escape. At the dawn after the night of terror the zombies had completely overrun the fortress. It was



The aesthetics of Zombie referenced both survival horror films and first-person shooter video games. (Promotion, Frederik Høyer-Christensen)

only a matter of time before the infection would spread to the surrounding area.

Zombie Production

Zombie: Rædslernes nat was a collaborative project between zombie genre enthusiasts, special effects people and amateur filmmakers. Inspiration came from many media: movies such as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968 and 1990), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and computer games such as the *Resident Evil* and *Wolfenstein* series. Clichés and iconic ideas were mined liberally: Nazi occultism was a given, but there were even power-ups reminiscent of computer games, in the form of neat stacks of Coke cans and the infamous Reich Chocolate.

As organizers, we felt that we needed to keep the player group relatively small, in order to control events and to give everyone a real, personal zombie experience. This was an economical challenge, as we still wanted to have a game with a cinematic feel. Indeed, the high production values of *Zombie* set it apart from most Danish larps of the day. Running the larp three times in a row on two consecutive weekends solved the financial dilemma. Such repetition was, and still is, quite unusual; in Danish larp culture a huge amount of resources are poured into a singular experience for players and organizers. Sequential larps, where players and organizers return to a tried and true setting, are much more common, but even in those games each game is

separate and based on previous events.

Repeating the game also meant that we could adjust the game along the way, based on previous experience and from player comments. Finally, we even recreated the game for the international audience at the Knudepunkt 2003 convention.

In addition to being run three times, *Zombie: Rædslernes nat* was an atypical Danish larp as it did not have a medieval fantasy setting – and it did not focus on personal stories and heroic aspirations. *Zombie*, however, was true to its tragic inspirational sources. This did not leave room for the participants to affect the final outcome of the story. The turning-points in the game were scripted and planned carefully to follow genre logic, but also coordinated so that the players would not notice or mind the railroading.

Entering the world of *Zombie* was exhilarating and fun. In every game world there are rules which are not defined by the organizers but from the genre. It was very clear that these genre-based rules drove the story forward and provided motivations for the players. (player, male)

To set the right tone for the larp, each player received a CD-ROM with practical information, narrative setting and diegetic material. These included background information in the form of newspaper clips, showcasing the steady decline in international stability, including the invasion of Iraq, the India-Pakistan war, nuclear attacks on Palestine by Israel. These often darkly



A striking film trailer was created to attract players and to set the tone of the game. (Promotion, Frederik Høyer-Christensen)

humoristic newspapers also included snippets of alternate history to further enforce the alternate future where the whole world had gone mad with fear. *Zombie* was one of the first larps in Denmark to use a cinematic trailer for promotion and player communication.

Nazi Zombies are the Best Zombies

Zombies are tragic, but they are also funny as hell. Zombies are caricatures of their former lives: The mailman zombie still tries to deliver bloodstained letters, the soldier zombie still reacts to simple orders, and the hobo zombie looked like a zombie even before becoming one. Striking a good balance between the horrific, gory and comic elements was a central challenge in the design. We wanted to amuse players with silly slow zombie walk, but also to use their false sense of security to sneak up on them, grab them by surprise and shock them for real.

For this to work, the zombie attacks needed to be truly horrifying. Traditionally zombies are slow, lumbering monsters. They do not appear to be a direct threat as long as you can outrun them. The strength of zombies lies in their numbers and relentlessness – things that we could not use due to lack of time and manpower in the larp.

This was solved with two techniques: First, some zombies

were strategically placed to wait in surprising places where players did not expect them. Second, the players who played the zombies were allowed to move as fast as they could *when no one was looking*. This mechanic mimicked cuts in films where the monster is able to suddenly appear where you least expect it.

Also, to ensure conflict and mistrust between the players – setting them up for zombie attacks – non-player-characters were planted in the player group. These people, usually players who had already played the game, did their best to get players to split up and to push for other classic genre decisions.

Reception of the Clichés

If the players were to unite against the zombies, they could overcome the threat. Yet, the zombie genre demands that the living act against reason and die due to trivial interpersonal conflicts. In addition to informed players, pre-written characters were given to each participant. In a crude but effective way most of them were written as antagonist to each others. Character depth was the price of this solution, which frustrated some players such as Mikkel Bækgaard, who wrote in *Hareposten* in 2002:

Heino was the name of my character. A classic biker type without a hint of depth or personality [...] It would have been nice if the characters had risen slightly above the worst

stereotypes and given an opportunity for real role-playing. The characters had been written for functionality, not for immersive depth. Also, it was obvious from the start that the characters were going to become zombies during the game anyway, so there was no need for long term character exploration and development.

It was also interesting to note that as soon as the zombies appeared, the political satire went out of the window. The focus changed from an immersive experience of mental and physical abuse, to action and adventure.

Zombie was supposed to end badly for the players – three out of the four times it did. But in one session the players organized themselves well and were reluctant to let themselves be trapped by the zombies. It was simply not possible to overcome them. As organizers we considered the weakest link of the game to be the situation where players could not resist the desire to survive or the desire to *beat the game*.

It was very difficult as a player not to beat the zombies to a pulp, in your manic and fear-induced state. This was of course not possible because the zombies were real people and not flesh-eaters. Still, the disappointed feeling of this could not overshadow the immense fun it was to be overrun by a horde of zombies craving your brain and eaten alive! (player, male)

Preparing a flayed chest.
(Behind the scenes., Tue Söttrup)



A Spectacle for the Senses

Zombie: Rædslernes nat was well received for its visual effects, the make-up was unprecedented, as were the trailer and player preparation material. The old spooky fortress provided a perfect setting for the horrors that lay within. Nooks and crannies ensured plentiful opportunities for zombie ambushes. The initial abuse, coupled with the cold and the dark, worked well to ensure a level of stress that heightened the sense of fear. The little goodies and hints like the Reich Chocolate that players discovered were also well received.

Fear did also come into play since walking alone, or in small groups, in a near dark military installation knowing there are monsters out to get you gets scary really fast. (player comment)

Zombie was an interesting spectacle, with numerous even contradictory puzzle pieces that could not be reduced to a single reading. Though occult Nazi doctors are inherently comic there was a serious side to the Nazis.

In the political setting of the game, they were a natural choice to portray a caricature of the militaristic, nationalist, frightened society that mirrored the confusion and frustration that many of us felt at that time, in the wake of 9/11 and the impending War on Terror, which had given further rise to an already nationalistic tone in Danish politics. This satire never really developed past a caricature, but it ensured that the game had some thought-provoking ideas beneath its gory surface.

As a proper zombie game should.

Zombie— Rædslernes Nat

CREDITS: Jesper Bruun (head organizer, CD-ROM, practical arrangements), Tue Söttrup (movie trailer, zombie trivia), Anders Lerche (make-up, special effects, costumes), Valdemar Kølle (game mechanics, concept), Xenia Salomonsen (characters), Morten Gade (budget, practical arrangements), Nicolai Matz (setting) and Thomas Duus Henriksen (psychological safety)

DATE: Played 3 times in autumn 2002, and once internationally at Knudepunkt in spring 2003

LOCATION: Garderhøjfortet, Copenhagen, Denmark

LENGTH: 7 hours, plus 2 hours of debriefing and dezombification

PLAYERS: 25 players, 10 organizers per game

BUDGET: €11,000

PARTICIPATION fee: €35

OTHER MATERIAL: zombielive.dk, Trailer at

www.arcanafilm.dk/produkter-andet-zombielive.html.

Further Reading

BÆKGAARD M (2002) Uhyggelige zombier i fugtigt fort.

Hareposten #21. www.eidolon.dk/uploads/documents/hareposten21.pdf





PANOPTICORP

BRILLIANT NEXSEC MINDFUCK FAILURE?

Ole Peder Giæver

YOU EXIT THE SLEEPING QUARTERS, *after a few hours of DownTime since the last Proj. In the showers, G is shaving his eyebrows. You talk to each other loudly. "Feeling Hot? Feeling Edged?" "You know it, baby." The water feels cool against the skin. Slogans, jingles and ideas run through your mind. Outside the showers, Pyro is working out in the gym. Passing the HotNot meter in the lobby, you note with satisfaction that your score has gone up. But that's just to be expected, you being so NexSec and all. You adjust your mirrorshades, tuck in your shirt and feel the weight of the bracelet against your wrist. Time for some CreaProd.*

◀◀◀ *Every moment is a photo-op. Never let your guard down. (Diegetic, Li Xin)*

◀◀ *Curus, Corporate Gurus, are known for their understanding of NexSec. Best treated with awe. (Diegetic, Li Xin)*

◀ *Each Corper had to stay Edged at all times. Personal style had to be Hot, or your CorpCred would plummet. (Portrait, unknown)*



PanoptiCorp was a dark satire about our media-saturated post-industrial society. Imagine a turn of the millennium new media office, a brick and concrete building done up with steel fire escapes and spacious wooden design. Some three dozen people are busily scuttling about, ideating, receiving memos and gathering in groups to work. For four days in July 2003, these people formed the newly founded PanoptiCorp Oslo.

PanoptiCorp is the world's leading PR-Marketing-Advertising firm. Through labels such as Eisenstahl Media and NexSec Subvertising, and units in every major city of the industrialized world, we are able to provide comprehensive solutions in the fields of brand building, market manipulation, public opinion engineering and civil society redesign. (www.panoptiCorp.com)

CorpSpeak

Through Orwellian manipulation of language, the organisers effectively conveyed their vision. The most important written material provided for the players in advance was the CorpDic, or Corporate Dictionary. In fact, it was the only written material provided, except for a relatively brief character description. The cover resembled a pixelated version of Joseph Stalin hugging a child, smiling. Not *1984*, but 2003, not Newspeak, but CorpSpeak:

NexSec: Abbrev for "Next Second", NexSec means something that belongs to the next and unpredictable second – an emerging trend, a not-yet-analyzed phenomenon, a tendency through which new Memes may appear – whether it is a political revolution or a new preference in shampoo.



The PanoptiCorp offices were not quite as glamorous as the players pretended. (Diegetic, Li Xin)



Concept art for Kriisi EverVirgin ad campaign. (Diegetic, Li Xin)



Concept art for a virtual world organized around physical toys, based on “emo com” communication. (Diegetic, PanoptiCorp Oslo)

CorpFil aims to anticipate the NexSec, cultivate the NexSec, embody the NexSec and – ultimately – manipulate the NexSec through CreaProd. Intuitive understanding of NexSec is what puts Corpers above Comps and Munds, and makes our services desirable to Custs.

On it went, hammering in the message of obedience to the company and the philosophy it stood for: “Mastering CorpSpeak is not just a question of ‘fitting in’ but a measure of one’s understanding of how PanoptiCorp works”. One player noted after the larp:

The most interesting thing about corp speak for me was that it made clear that language is ideology. All of a sudden, it is possible to think “face time”, it is even possible to iBill people for being social. And I found myself reflecting upon people as creative/unproductive units, not because of a character, but because it was possible. Worse is: now I’ve got these words, and I have to fight their ideology if I do not want to think the thoughts that they allow. Sat on the plane last night next to an alcoholic mother and her extremely disturbing son, thinking “munds”, wanting to kill myself in a quick and merciful way.

Fake Smiles and Iron Elbows

Most of the characters in the larp were Corpers, their backgrounds sketchily consisting of different media and PR-experience. The majority were trainees and upstarts, and competition was fierce. Others played drop-in characters: customers, members of test groups and even a stylist, who came by to give the corpers that extra NexSec edge with a makeover. People were working at all hours, accepting ridiculous assignments with deadly seriousness, and acting (subtly) as truly unpleasant people.

Edged: The mental state of working at full mental and physical capacity. Most corpers with any CorpCred to speak of are Edged around the clock. (CorpDic).

Developing the CreaProds was the backbone of the narrative structure. The projects were provided by the organisers and

assigned via diegetic memos. The corpers had to produce NexSec concepts at a breakneck pace. At first the projects were relatively low-key, like coming up with slogans for milk companies, sexing up the *Eurovision Song Contest* for the Western Europe youth demographic or altering the public perception on land-mines.

As the game progressed, the projects became more and more questionable in goals and solutions, like selling skin whitener to black women, or leveraging child pornography to collect funds for a save the children agency. During the last part of the game, the projects accelerated to an absurd crescendo, topped off with the Chicken McNakbah-project, designed to foster hatred against Arabs and promote anti-Semitism around the world. The industrious corpers plotted to construct a “9-11 for the Nordics”, faking terrorist incidents with real victims in order to promote this goal.

Corpers (people who think they are PanoptiCorp employees) think of themselves as the luckiest, coolest people in the world. They are so cool, so trend-aware, that even the words “cool” and “trendy” are a bit below them. They communicate through a bizarre slang, CorpSpeak, and spend most of their ProdTime, FaceTime (social life) and even DownTime (sleep) in the office. Working hours are a thing of the past. They are available for the duration of their contracts, 24/7. (Webpage before the game.)

Constant deadlines and peer pressure helped reinforce the hectic atmosphere at the corporation. Employees didn’t just work at the firm – they lived there. DownTime was enjoyed in a black box area of the office, but there wasn’t much time for that. Projects could start at 03:00 hours. One player wrote in a debrief:

The most striking and scary moment for me in the game took place in a toilet. When I was brushing my teeth alone I caught myself adjusting my sunglasses because I noticed that they were slightly off. What was this game turning me into? Or what was it releasing inside me? Fear had replaced vanity.

Everyone who worked at the company was constantly being evaluated by their peers. After each project everybody would rate the other participants on a number of areas. In addition there was an intranet where everybody could vote on who is Hot and who is Not every eight hours. Based on these ratings, CorpCred was calculated daily. The results were projected on the lobby wall for all to see. This binary way of looking at people seemed to be at the core of the *PanoptiCorp* experience. To paraphrase Kant’s categorical imperative, people were a means to an end, not ends in themselves.

Attention to detail helped strengthen the illusion of corper life. Upon arrival, the players received a complementary bag containing the CorpDic, business cards, notepad, pen, and a condom. The corporate logo, to be put on mobile phones, had already been sent to the players in advance. The reception was staffed at all times, there was an in-house bar for partying, good food was served on time, the papers had corporate letterheads,



a working intranet was set up with discussion forums and the peer-rating system etc. These details made PanoptiCorp feel like a real company. As the players came from numerous countries, English became the business language, supporting the corporate atmosphere.

Severe Satire

PanoptiCorp was parts *1984*, parts *No Logo*, with some *Verfremdung* of cyberpunk literature blended in. The game was created by members of the same group that also created *Amerika* (2000), *Europa* and *inside:outside*, which all deal with alienation in one form or another. *PanoptiCorp* can also be viewed through Marxist lenses, as a critique of contemporary producers of meaning, with a strong anti-capitalist bent. The lifeworld of the corpers was completely colonized by the instrumental rationality of the capitalist system, as Jürgen Habermas might put it. Parts of their language itself were substituted with CorpSpeak, and the demands of work were on 24/7. You could even be billed for being social.

Gabriel Widing (2004) has explored the way language was used to construct the larp:

The participants of live-action role-playing events are often denied the possibility to partake in the designing of the milieu, rule system and dramaturgy of an event. *PanoptiCorp* took this even further. The participants became deeply manipulated by the clever organisers as they gave away their language and thus their thoughts. After just a day many participants were thinking like binary machines: hot/not, lassec/nexsec, upcard/downcard, always judging co-workers as effective or worthless. It took weeks for me to erase the thinking of dividing people into useful or non-useful out of my mind.

This is not a matter of morals. The organisers of *PanoptiCorp* made their point very clear. It was a brilliant mind-fuck and an indispensable learning experience. Unfortunately the structures of *PanoptiCorp* are not just fiction, they are real.

Many players have noted how *PanoptiCorp* explored real phenomena. Having spent my working career in online news media, the game sometimes comes back to haunt me. Both when I think about the way the language of public relations and media worlds construct and redefine social reality, and when considering phenomenon such as rating articles by the clicks they get. The popularity and efficiency contests of real life obviously are not as vulgar as the HotNot rating system, but they are still very much present. *PanoptiCorp* was intended to be played as contemporary satire:

PanoptiCorp is meant to be a satirical reflection of the early 21st century, seen through the eyes of a trendier-than-thou transnational advertising/PR corporation. Central concepts for the LARP are: generation Y culture and pop culture, the new workplace, mechanisms of power and control in “network” organisations, the ethics (or lack of such) of creativity,

and – obviously – that tired old dog called “capitalism”. (www.panoptiCorp.com)

Yet one of the organisers, Eirik Fatland, has written on his home page that he considered the larp to be a failure:

PanoptiCorp was, for me, an attempt to do something a bit more contemporary and a lot more light-hearted than – say – *Kybergenesis* [1997], *Europa* or *OB 7* [2001]. Something to show that LARP can deal with serious issues through play and humour rather than tears and existential crises. It failed. [...] For many players, *PanoptiCorp* became an event of sheer horror at the Self. The LARP ended with many players as broken and shocked as they were after *Europa*, without the same level of psychological security to deal with it.

At the same time, a significant minority of players was playing humouristically, light-heartedly, and exited the LARP with a smile on their face and a hunger for beer.

I am not sure of the reasons for this discrepancy between vision and reality, player and player. One explanation might be that when [our names] appear on an organiser list, a certain kind of player will appear and play a certain way. [...] while some players use a significant ironic distance to their characters, others don't.

PanoptiCorp was described as “a brilliant mindfuck” by one of those who immersed and “a really great LARP” by one of those who didn't. Still, in my quest for a lighter style of contemporary (“political”) LARPing, it was a failure.

To my mind the most brilliant failure of the early 21st century larp. Hot.

PanoptiCorp

CREDITS: Irene Tanke, Jared Elgvin, Eirik Fatland, Kaisa Lindahl, Cath Røsselund, Espen Nodeland, Rune Haugen, Trine Lindahl and Erling Rognli

DATE: 17-20 July 2003

LOCATION: A culture school in Drammen, Norway

LENGTH: 72 hours

PLAYERS: 25 players, 8 organizers, and 15 drop-in players

BUDGET: €6,000

PARTICIPATION FEE: €100

GAME MECHANICS: Freeform larp with almost no game mechanics

OTHER MATERIAL:

<http://web.archive.org/web/20030807004455/>

www.panoptiCorp.com/index.htm

Further Reading

FATLAND E (2003) *LARP CV*. In

www.efatland.com/display.php?cat=larp&gr=sc_larp_cv

FATLAND E (2009) *Excavating Amerika. Larp, the Universe and Everything*.

VARIOUS (2003) *Eval Form – PanoptiCorp*. In

<http://laivforum.net/showthread.php?t=6610>

WIDING G (2004) *Post Panopticon. Beyond Role and Play*

The Norwegian army was a PanoptiCorp client. Dozers, employees doing menial tasks, were played by game masters, and only allowed to wear white. (Diegetic, unknown)





MELLAN
HIMMEL
OCH HAV

EMBODIED AMOROUS QUEER SCIFI

Jaakko Stenros

IT IS MORNING, *time for breakfast, communal exercise and quiet housework. I sit silently crocheting a wool poncho in vivid burgundy for my one surviving spouse. Aur still sleeps, as is proper. It is the day of the marriage of our child. I am proud of soui, but also saddened. Tomorrow sou will have a family of sous own. We sit together.*

“The personal is political” was one of the key slogans of the second-wave feminism. *Mellan himmel och hav* (Between Heaven and Sea) was a larp where the implications of this phrase were intimately explored. In the game the players created a science fiction society built around love and marriage – in a world where physical differences between sexes are meaningless, the social genders are very different from what we are used to, and a marriage would always be between four people. The game questioned family, gender, heterosexuality, and monogamy.

From the beginning, *Mellan himmel och hav* was set firmly in the tradition of Swedish drama larps such as *Knappnålshuvudet*, *Hamlet*, *De tusen rosornas väg* (The Road of a Thousand Roses, 2000) and *OB 7* (2001), but also as a reaction against them. The aim was to create a game that would concentrate on emotional rather than intellectual analysis, on sensuality rather than violence, on love rather than revenge or despair.

Ursula Le Guin’s gender-conscious science fiction stories served as inspiration and as a starting point. As a genre, the advantage of science fiction is that nothing needs to be taken as given. In a game set in the far future on a distant planet, everything can be created from scratch. The creative process is more taxing, but allows for truly unique societies to be built.

At the time it was typical for players to spend most of their preparation effort creating costumes and props for a larp, but in *Mellan himmel och hav* much of this energy was directed to building a strong *ensemble* out of the players. The larp was preceded by three weekend workshops that explored the game world, brought the players in as co-creators to sharpen the vision of the game.

Politics of Marriage

The workshops started with a crash course on feminist theory, with the aim of analyzing gender as a construct. The exercises and discussions dissected masculine and feminine behavior and attitude: How do men walk, how do women sit, what behavioral expectations are gendered, how to perform a drag show, etc. The organizers, headed by Emma Wieslander, had an open political agenda, influenced by feminist, queer and polyamorous writings.

Role-playing games and larps are a fitting tool for drawing attention to reality as a social construction; it is one thing to discuss the matter and a whole other to live it and experience it bodily. Yet rarely has the message been as thoroughly thought out and political as in *Mellan himmel och hav*.

The deconstruction of gender was essential for the reconstruction done in the larp: The diegetic culture was defined in a way that obscured physical manifestations of sex. Everyone wore scarves, long skirts and turbans. Men had to shave their beards and women were not supposed to shave their armpits. Ideally, it would not be possible to distinguish sex from one’s appearance.

Mirroring LeGuin’s work two new genders – *soltids* – were created to take the place of male and female. *Morning people* wake up early, wield power over the domestic and practical space, and are the active sensual subjects. *Evening people* stay awake at night, hold power over the public and political space, and are the objects of sensuality. In this world morning people desired evening people, and vice versa, reproductive organs had little meaning. People mated for life, and marriages always included

◀ *The food, prepared by players during the game, was otherworldly. In this picture a dessert Aulao Head from the marriage celebration. Food designed by Jonah Elfdahl. (Detail, Emma Wieslander)*

The remaining two parents and their soon-to-be-married child (back to the camera). (Restaged, Oskar Henriksson) ▶







◀◀ *The Heart was the domain of the sunnivas. During the nights, the dreams of morning and evening people were played there. Light installations by Benedikte Lindström. (Detail, Oskar Henriksson)*
 ◀ *A morning person wearing sensible blue and green. Notice the practical, yet suggestive, pushed up sleeves. (Portrait, Oskar Henriksson)*

four people: a morning woman, a morning man, an evening woman and an evening man. The physical sex of a person was not discussed, but this constellation was used as procreation still had to happen in the diegetic world – and because it was more interesting and challenging for the players. In a marriage, from our point of view, each participant would have a heterosexual relationship, a homosexual relationship and a friendship; all were bisexual.

Breaking from LeGuin, queer relations, such as same-soldit sex, were an unthinkable taboo, whereas extramarital sensuality was normal. In addition to morning and evening people there were childish shaman-like *sunnivas* who were of both and neither soldit, and the *socially dead*, who were ignored by everyone but *sunnivas* and children who did not yet have a soldit. The dead were inspired by the angels in *Knappnålshuvudet*, a device allowing the game masters to enter the play area. Socially ignored, they could influence the living by touching their hands, supporting them or leading them to the right place at the right time.

The Art of Making Love

In an average larp, it is much more probable for a character to die than to have sex. There are numerous systems to simulate violence, but few satisfactory ones for amorous interactions. A new method, *Ars Amandi*, was developed for *Mellan himmel och hav*:

The lovers restrict themselves to touching only each other's hands, arms, shoulders and necks as part of the lovemaking. Above armpit and below earlobes is permitted. To make this exciting they use eye contact, a lot of focus and vary the touch in sensual, rough or playful manners. [...] Since the hands are very sensitive, most of the emotions that can be present in an amorous situation can be conveyed in this fashion. Only the hands, arms and neck are to be used in touching the other person. If mouth, tongue or teeth are employed it could easily get too intimate for the player/character distinction to be made. Sound, breathing and other body language communication is however possible means of amplifying the experience. (Wieslander 2004)

The idea was that characters could have sex with each other without the players having to worry about the impact of such things on their off-game relationships – or whether they actually fancied the other player. This was also defined as the way the people of Gilaa made love. In this game *Ars Amandi* was no simulation – in the diegetic culture the hands, arms and shoulders were the primary erogenous zones. This had a huge effect on the social interactions and culture: showing a bit of the arm or casually caressing someone's elbow suddenly had enormous

impact.

This alternate society was partially built through “brainwashing” techniques: The personal pronouns were changed to *aur* for morning people and *sou* for evening people. The day cycle was shortened by controlling the lighting. The food was weird, mixing colors, substances and tastes, and the menu included things like edible clay. New social norms were established and enforced. The ensemble was instructed to be very supportive of each other, in a fashion similar to *love bombing*.

We thought that since we were using these methods openly and knowingly that we would be immune to them. We were not; for a while, we were a bit of a cult.

Life in Gilaa

The game portrayed a four-day slice of life in Gilaa. There was a loose plot, centered on an upcoming wedding. Four had found each other, but the marriage was as much built on politics as love. In *Another Story or A Fisherman of the Inland Sea*, Le Guin describes the challenges of setting up a four-person marriage – and essentially paints the backdrop for the events in the game:

So rigidly structured a marriage, where each of the four people must be sexually compatible with two of the others while never having sex with the fourth – clearly this takes some arranging. Making [a marriage] is a major occupation of my people. Experimenting is encouraged; foursomes form and dissolve, couples “try on” other couples, mixing and matching. Brokers, traditionally elderly widowers, go about among the farmholds of the dispersed villages, arranging meetings, setting up field dances, serving as universal confidants. Many marriages begin as a love match of one couple, either homosexual or heterosexual, to which another pair or two separate people become attached.¹

The biosphere of Gilaa was built in a black box of Riksteatern, thus the society was staged on an actual stage. In addition to the controlled lighting of the 18-hour day cycle, the game featured a 72-hour ambient soundtrack consisting of stylistic sounds of the biosphere equipment and the sea. Composer Henrik Summanen (2004) recalls:

Riksteatern had an 8-channel professional concert system, which meant extensive possibilities to do exactly what was needed. Usually that kind of equipment is not available for a larp.

The *Ars Amandi* method worked beautifully. It made it possible for amorous interactions to be subtle in their meaning, but more importantly, it felt real enough. If both parties pretend that touching arms is sexy, instil each touch with eroticism and mean it, and most importantly, look each other in the eye, then the

¹ *Mellan himmel och hav* was inspired by three short stories by Ursula Le Guin: *Another Story or A Fisherman of the Inland Sea*, *Unchosen Love* and *Mountain Ways*. In the foreword to her book *The Birthday of the World* (2002) she describes these as “comedies of manners”, just in a different society.



All the food was prepared in the first house. Many props were found from Ikea. (Staged, Oskar Henriksson)

touching becomes akin to foreplay. Yet they are “only” touching each others’ hands. Thus play was an alibi for transgression, and that just made it more titillating. In Cindy Poremba’s (2007) terms, *Ars Amandi* is *brink play*. Like the enticing physical closeness of *Twister* or the drunken flirting of *spin the bottle*, the play gives an alibi to break social conventions. Over the years *Ars Amandi* has become a well-known but rarely used method – possibly because some players find it too real and thus intrusive.

The game was supposed to have a rising, empowering dramatic, what the organizers called *positive power drama*, where everything would be building up towards the wedding on the fourth day. Instead, an Aristotelian dramatic structure emerged. Gilaa was not a utopia or a dystopia, not good or bad but *different*. The players felt oppressed by the tight community, even though their characters were not supposed to find it problematic. The social roles were liberating, but also frightening. Also, the dramatic structure where a satisfying ending can only come after adversity is very ingrained in the players. Tova Gerge (2004)

recalls:

[H]alfway through the game, people were drowning in tears. Diegetic farewells turned into black holes of abandonment. Families quarrelled; lovers turned the back on each other, deadly illnesses occurred out of nowhere. As for the people behind the characters, several groups and individuals were so sad and shaken by what was happening to the characters, and by the nonfictional questions these events raised, that they found it necessary to cut the game to be able to fight against the spreading sorrow.

Though there were dark moments, the game was a profound experience for many players. My character, Kidou, was a mute morning elder in charge of a household. The unhurried life was seductive; taking care of the chores, administering elaborate tea ceremonies, and just *being*. The social roles were easy to slip into, and the physicality felt very visceral after attending innumerable larps about talking heads.

The friction between the oppressive community and



Practicing the Ars Amandi. (Workshop, Emma Wieslander)



An evening parent with souis child. (Portrait, Oskar Henriksson)



The three remaining parents with their soon to be married child. (Staged, unknown)

bombardment of love was not essential for my play; a mute elder of a prestigious house rarely ended up in disagreements. Also, my life was rather uncomplicated, as two of my spouses had died already. However, after the game re-entering the ordinary world was a culture shock: How could our world be so disconnected, oppressive, unequal, busy, loud and loveless?

Making a Difference

Mellan himmel och hav had a strong effect on its players. The intense shared experience created a clique: Though we believed no outsider could possibly understand us, we just would not shut up about the game.

In a way the whole project was like the process that precedes coming out of a closet, when a person who realizes that she is not straight re-evaluates the “truths” of society. Now that the personal horizons had shifted, many had to take long hard looks at their own lives. It is perhaps symptomatic that most participants who were in relationships before the game started, had split up six months after the game.

The same ensemble put together another game a few months later, *Ringblomman*, which explored similar issues in the context of 1970s commune. Yet, over time the group dissolved. Other larpers had started rolling their eyes when “the cultists” talked, and slowly the participants were able to put the experience in perspective. But as the game had made it clear that societal, or at least communal, change was possible, utopian talk was thrown around. The question was whether, as Gerge put it, “political isolationism or political confrontation is the most effective tool in the ambition to utopia”.

In the years that followed, the politically aware Nordic games chose the confrontational approach. The lasting legacy of *Mellan himmel och hav* is that it set the bar high for political larps. It

politicized the personal, gender and sexuality in the Nordic larp scene, cemented a presence of feminist thought and even had an overall queering effect. Finally, it viscerally established the body both as a playground and a political site in larp.

Mellan Himmel och Hav

CREDITS: Ars Amandi, Emma Wieslander and Katarina Björk (game masters), Henrik Summanen (ambient music), Benedikte Lindström (light art) with numerous others

DATE: 20-26 October 2003

LOCATION: Theatre black box outside Stockholm, Sweden

LENGTH: 72 hours

PLAYERS: 70

BUDGET: €10,000

PARTICIPATION FEE: €100

GAME MECHANICS: Ars Amandi

OTHER MATERIAL: www.ars-amandi.nu/mhoh

Further Reading

GERGE T (2004) Temporary Utopias. *Beyond Role and Play*.

LE GUIN U (1994) *A Fisherman of the Inland Sea*.

LE GUIN U (2002) *The Birthday of the World*.

PORE MBA C (2007) Critical Potential on the Brink of the Magic Circle. *DiGRA 2007*.

SUMMANEN H (2004) Creating Music for Live-Action Role-Play. *Beyond Role and Play*.

TIDBECK K (2004) Infinite Possibilities. *Mellan Himmel och Hav From a Science Fiction Point of View. Beyond Role and Play*.

WIESLANDER E (2004) Rules of Engagement. *Beyond Role and Play*.

WIESLANDER E (2004) Positive Power Drama. *Beyond Role and Play*.

A glowing green silhouette of a human figure in a dynamic, athletic pose against a dark background. The figure is shown from the side, with one arm extended forward and slightly downward, and the other arm bent at the elbow. The lighting is soft and ethereal, highlighting the contours of the body.

LUMINESCENCE

ABSTRACTIONS OF BODILY EXPERIENCE IN 800 KILOS OF FLOUR

Juhana Pettersson

YOU ARE IN YOUR UNDERWEAR *in a tenement basement, waiting to enter the game area. If you are a man, you are dressed in boxer shorts or briefs. If a woman, then panties and a bra. They might not be white yet, but they soon will be. The floor of the game space of two rooms is covered in 10 cm of flour. There is a total of 800 kg of white powder best experienced barefooted on your naked body. You are dying of cancer, and now in therapy to accept the reality of death.*

Luminescence was an abstract, physical game about the inevitability of death. Its central tool was flour, acting as a tool the players could use to express themselves, or simply enjoy how it felt on bare skin. It was a symbolic, experimental game made to exemplify the physical, non-narrative elements of larp. When *Luminescence* was made, role-playing games were struggling to be recognized in both the Finnish mainstream media and among cultural elites. It was created to be an art larp that could be used as an example of the potential inherent in the medium.

Moonscape

Visually, *Luminescence* evoked something alien to human experience. When a player walks in the flour, it stirs up like the dust on the surface of an alien planet. When everyone is still, it settles down slowly. When there's activity, it spirals and moves in the green light illuminating the game. The flour feels sensual and abstract on naked skin. It is impossibly smooth and pleasant. It invites the player to experience it with the whole body.

A number of players reacted to the abstraction of the environment:

The main realization was how abstract the setting was, with the flour, the half-naked people, the lighting, the weird soundtrack, and how this invited to play abstract scenes. This was before the era of abstract larping, at least to me, so it was a new and liberating experience to grab hold of the abstract and play it out. I don't think I did it to the extent that I would have wanted, but I did some at least, and a lot of people really went ahead with the abstract, and it was very enjoyable. People still kept to the theme of the game, but played out metaphors and feelings surrounding the story rather than the actual "meeting people in some odd cancer treatment including flour".

inside:outside, the pioneer of abstract, art festival style Nordic larp, was also the single most important influence on *Luminescence*, showing that it was possible to stage a conceptual game. *Luminescence* is also a descendant of *inside:outside* in the sense that it brought many of the earlier ideas about scenography to a logical conclusion. While a typical ideal is to mirror reality as

accurately as possible, *Luminescence* went in the exact opposite direction, featuring physical elements that were strikingly at odds with the fiction of the game. Perhaps not surprisingly given the similarities, the two games share a co-designer, Mike Pohjola.

Another player compared the game to the big Swedish productions of the time:

Having been so involved in the rich and lush larps of the Swedish fantasy and historical genre, *Luminescence* was an inspiring contrast. Minimalist in its style, but very engaging in its execution. All the colours and scents of the forest, spaceships or urban sprawl of the common larp scene, were effectively reduced to a room, characters and a scenographic concept. The flour, with its direct tactile and auditory stimuli, really engaged me. I was able to be as immersed in this one element, as I might be in all the multitude of experiences in other larps. It really enhanced the inner journey to face and reconcile with the death that plagued my character.

The sound design involved abstract music by Steve Reich and Merzbow, as well as intentionally obscure voiceover material intended to provoke imaginative associations but resist active listening. All the elements of the game – music, voiceovers, harsh neon green light design – were built around the tactile experience of the flour. Physical experience has been a part of larp since the early adventure and combat larps. In *Luminescence*, the idea was to go back to that simplicity of experience. The difference was that while boffer fighting tends to be devoid of meaningful ideas, the flour was intended to provoke a new kind of physical experience, as discussed in this player comment:

If I should have any negative reflection – and this is really very particular – it is that the *scent* of the flour felt removed from the artistic stringency of the piece. This olfactory dimension was too warm, too familiar, to be a part of the text. In retrospect I think sand or stone dust, would have been a more convincingly abstract medium. But, then again, in the world of *Luminescence* perhaps the comforting recognition of the flour – reminiscent of baking with your mother – is part of the therapeutic method.

Open Metaphors and the Rule of Normality

The idea was to have the players interact freely with the flour, but not talk about it. There was a danger of creating a larp in which you only talked about the flour. To avoid that, the strange environment was declared *normal*, placed on the gray region between diegetic and non-diegetic. While the flour was not part of the fiction of the game world, it was available to the players as something they were encouraged to use as part of their game experience. To overcome the contradiction, the players were told to regard the flour as normal, something so trivial it would not become the topic of player interaction. The players were instructed to consider the flour and the green light as unremarkable as cheap chairs and linoleum floors would have been to a hospital patient. This is the *rule of normality*.

The game was about the inevitability of death, but we did not want to saddle the flour with any predetermined meaning. Instead,

it was an intentionally *open metaphor*, a tool the players could use to express themselves within the game. We hoped that there would be emergent meaning for the flour within the game, given by the players during their creative engagement with the game. These two key design concepts structured *Luminescence*.

The theme of the inevitability of death was communicated through the characters and the fiction of the game. The game was set in a therapy session for people dying of cancer. The characters were short, and focused almost exclusively on things relevant to the theme. An example character:

A married teacher who had a loving and supportive husband, who told her the news of the brain cancer a long time ago. First she refused to believe, and eventually left her husband who kept talking about the cancer and forced her to undergo tests and treatments. There's lots of possible explanations for the continuing headaches. Now she has reasoned that even if she had cancer (which she doesn't), it might still go away, if she doesn't think about it. After all, brain waves must affect brain cancer in some manner, and thinking you have cancer would probably just make the cancer more powerful. Now it will all go away. She misses her husband, and wishes she hadn't left him simply for making one small mistake.

Another rule used in the game was that the players were only allowed to talk to each other when they physically touched. The idea was to favour intimate discussion and discourage large group dynamics. This rule also reinforced the sensual aspect of the game.

The players were all almost naked, covered in white flour in an alien space. The flour feels pleasant, almost erotic on the skin. One player even described the scene as kinky:

The flour gave everybody's skin a special texture. It was much easier touching people. I think we rubbed each other with flour after awhile. Since the flour was between yourself and the person you rubbed, you felt you could rub almost anywhere on the body. I think me and [another player] (our characters ended up as some sort of buddies) rubbed a few of the girls together. Felt like a ménage à trois.

Grainy Air

Luminescence is best seen in the tradition of Nordic and Finnish art gallery larps, productions that often seek to bridge the gap between larp and contemporary art. It accidentally solved one of the problems that plague art games: player apathy.

Larp is a participatory medium. This means that the key concepts in a game have to engage the players on a creative level. This is a fundamental difference between larp and traditional, passive media. It is possible to watch a movie without understanding any of it, but it is not possible to participate in a game in any meaningful way if you do not know what you are supposed to be doing.

If a game is off-putting or scary, if it makes the players unwilling to act out, if it fails to provide them with the tools to engage in the experience, it fails. Popular genre games are easy to engage with because their concepts are well known. A more unusual game requires something very concrete to act as the creative entry point to the game. This time, it was the flour. One player lists the possibilities:

1 – The flour as sand-like, mud-like substance used for the treatment of our cancer.

First, we were barefooted so we were treading in the flour. I remember me and [another character] were talking as if we were in some sort of treatment center. A bit like a sports gym, standing side by side on a treadmill. We were standing in one spot treading the flour under our feet. Later we sat down and started rubbing it onto our skin, as if it were some kind of healing mud.

2 – The flour as clouds of flour in the air. Grainy, bad air.

After a while the flour began to float around in the air. It was both visual (as the strong sidelight made the room look like it was wreathed in smoke) and physical, because it made us cough. The flour in the air reminded me of lung cancer.

3 – Making stuff, the flour like it was clay or snow.

Interactive. We had some kind of snowball warlike fight with a few of the boys.

One player used the flour to simulate his testicular cancer by stuffing it into his underpants. Another made a snow angel in the flour, and described afterwards how he could feel his body heat dissipating from the flour while his touch destroyed the form he had created, a powerful reminder of mortality.

From the World of Flour

I have taken some of these ideas forward in other games. In *Muovikuppi* (Plastic Cup, 2008), the main tool of expression was a ceramic coffee cup that could be bashed to the floor. In *En kadu mitään* (I Regret Nothing, 2006), there was a wide range of gimmicks, including the use of bed sheets to simulate combat. If you are covered with a sheet, you are paralyzed, but a friend can pull the sheet off. In both larps, the players were offered something enjoyable and fun to do to help them be creative in a strange situation.

Mike Pohjola used the ideas about larp as a physical experience in his tabletop role-playing game *Tähti* (Star, 2007), also published as a book. In *Tähti*, the player characters are a girl band. The players would immerse themselves by eating sugary foods, listening to bubble gum pop, drinking alcopops and solving conflicts using fortune cookies. In typical tabletop fashion, the game was played as an abstraction, but the players were nevertheless subjected to a rounded sensory experience.

It is hard to image it now, but in 2004 the idea of an art game was not obvious. In retrospect, *Luminescence* is part of a movement within larp to engage with traditional high culture and to assimilate itself into the world of art.

Perhaps unavoidably, *Luminescence* has also become a symbol for a certain type of a wilfully strange game. After the game, the flour used in the production has had a strange second life in internet discussions, often used as an example of the weirdness found in dark corners of the role-playing world. Some more traditional role-players have used *Luminescence* as an example of what they do not want their hobby to become.

Maybe this is not a bad thing. The game was made to provide a new and strange experience, so perhaps it's appropriate that the strangeness lives on in anecdotes and stories told by people who were never there.



*The players were instructed to always touch the person they were talking to. The images are stills from a documentation video.
(Restaged, Juhana Pettersson)*





Luminescence

CREDITS: Juhana Pettersson & Mike Pohjola (design), Mikko Pervilä (production). Also Samantha Rajasingham (additional voiceovers). Solmukohta 2004

DATE: 16 February 2004

LOCATION: Helsinki, Finland

LENGTH: 3 hours

PLAYERS: 20

BUDGET: €300

PARTICIPATION FEE: None

GAME MECHANICS: Rule of Normality

OTHER MATERIAL:

www.juhanapettersson.com/works/luminescence

Further Reading

PETTERSSON J (2008) *The Age of Indulgence.*

Playground Worlds.

PETTERSSON J (2004) *Battle Against Primitivism.*

Beyond Role and Play.

PETTERSSON J (2004) *The Kingdom of Flour.*

[www.rpg.net/news+reviews/columns/](http://www.rpg.net/news+reviews/columns/nogood05mar04.html)

[nogood05mar04.html](http://www.rpg.net/news+reviews/columns/nogood05mar04.html)

PETTERSSON J (2005) *Roolipelimanifesti.*

POHJOLA M (2005) *School of Flour. Dissecting Larp.*

POHJOLA M (2007) *Tähti.*



A group of children in medieval costumes are participating in a sword-fighting activity in a grassy field. In the foreground, a child in a red tunic and dark pants is lunging forward, holding a sword. Other children in various costumes, including one with a shield, are visible in the background. The scene is set outdoors with trees and a blue sky in the distance.

ROLLESPIL I RUDE SKOV

CHANGING THE WORLD ONE SWORD AT A TIME

Claus Raasted

GRATNAKK NAKK LOOKED *at his sorry band of orcs and groaned. Some of them were too dumb to remember their own names, while some thought they were smart enough to become the chief of the tribe. Finally, his large, green ears picked up a sound that made him smile. It started out softly, gaining strength as the chanting humans approached: "Demoncult! Demoncult!" Gratnakk Nakk smiled again: It was a sound the orcs love with a passion that few outsiders could understand. It was the sound of battle soon to be joined.*

In the history of Nordic larp, there are some games that stand out from the crowd. Some larps are talked about for years because they challenge dogmas, change conceptions and introduce new standards. Other larps make their impact as part of a movement, and while they are interesting to discuss individually, it is as part of something greater they really come into their own.

Rollespil i Rude Skov (Role-Play in Rude Skov) belongs to the latter category. Even though few larpers talk about the first children's larp in the Rude Skov forest, its impact on the Danish larp scene has been tremendous.

The first *Rude Skov* larp took place on April 24th, 2004. It had 15 adults running the show and some 70 kids participating. Today the *Rude Skov* games are organized every second Saturday with around 200 kids participating. Over the past six years, thousands of kids have played in *Rude Skov* or in its imitators.

This is the best day of my life.
(player, 9, at his first *Rude Skov*)

Innovating with Kids

To understand that impact, a short history lesson is in order. In Denmark, you had to be at least 15 or 16 years old in order to participate in larps up until the turn of the millennium. After that more and more campaigns started allowing younger players in. Campaigns were still run the same way as before; they were created by young volunteers for youngsters. Even though they now allowed even younger people to participate, the style and structure remained unchanged.

Rude Skov changed that, by introducing a few key innovations.

First of all, it was a larp designed by adults, and played by children who were led by adults. This was a huge break from Danish campaign larp tradition, where the norm had been that you could show up at a larp dressed up as whatever you felt like (as long as it fit the game world) and play along.

In *Rude Skov* everybody was forced to play in one of the pre-defined, archetypal groups – Orcs, Elves, Vikings, Demon Cultists, and so on – and each group was assigned an adult leader from the organizing team.

Secondly, the bar for admittance was lowered. Instead of requiring a minimum of costuming and weaponry from new players, the organisers provided simple uniforms and latex weapons for those without them. This made it easier for new players to try out larping, and combined with the structure of adult-lead play it created an environment where newcomers could easily have a good time.

The third innovation – and the most controversial one – was the decision to pay the adult group leaders for their work. At the time, experiments with paid larp organisers in Denmark had been few and far between, and the idea of having a campaign run by paid crew was considered unthinkable. The work wasn't in any way well-paid (around €70 for a nine-to-five stint on Saturday), but compared to volunteer work it was quite a bit for the students in the team back then.

These three ideas were quite powerful together and really had an impact.

Lowering the bar made the larping much more accessible. Suddenly the comparison with soccer teams where you could borrow soccer shoes was not only used, but also applauded. Also, by focusing on fun and action instead of immersion and storytelling, it became possible to reach a new target audience. Contrary to the dominant Danish larp dogma, the *Rude Skov* players were not only allowed to beat up each other all day long, but were actively encouraged to do so.

For many children this entry into the world of larp provided them with a glimpse of the possibilities. Comments like: "It's like *World of Warcraft* – except for real!" and "I was so excited I peed my pants!" did pop up through the years.

To parents, the adult-lead play approach to organising was a big thing. Handing off their kids to adults with obvious child-handling skills was for many parents easier than just allowing them to roam alone in the forest – as was done in traditional larps. Since the beginning, the parents have been staunch supporters of the *Rude Skov* model, and even the most worried of parents have left with a smile on their face once they realised that their kids were in good hands.

Since the adult organisers were paid to work, there was extra motivation to do a good job and to make sure the events ran smoothly. For the first game this was not an obvious advantage, but as time went by and the same crew stayed on, it became increasingly clear that paying people was excellent for their long-term motivation.

And This Is How It Was, Children...

Before the first *Rude Skov*, most of the advertising for the event was done in the Arena role-playing store in Copenhagen. Flyers had been printed, a web page had been put together, and the people who ran the store told every curious kid and parent about this new larp we were putting together in Rude Skov, where you could borrow equipment if you had none, and could play cool

◀ *Holding the line during the final battle. (Play, Christina Molbech)*



Player briefing before the game. (Pregame, Claus Raasted)



The small but bloodthirsty orc team of first Rude Skov. (Restaged, Annette Jørgensen)







Preparing for the final battle. (Play, Claus Raasted)

◀ *Making sure that the dead are okay. (Play, Christina Molbeck)*

stuff like Elves, Orcs and Demon Cultists. Also, we had produced some simple boffer weapons and a few hundred modest tabards made out of fleece and in various vivid colours. A crew had been gathered – some with experience with children’s larp, some without – and a mini-van had been rented to transport all the gear to the forest.

The day went like this:

10:00 The crew meets up at the store and loads the gear into the van, and gets taxis to the forest.

10:45 The organisers arrive at the forest, and unload the gear.

11:00 The kids form an orderly line, pay the participation fee, and receive a uniform and a weapon of their chosen faction.

11:20 A 15 minute briefing is held, explaining larping, discussing the rules for hitpoints and respawning, and laying out some ground rules about playing nice. Respawning rules were simple: The leader would rant for a minute or two about how revenge would be had, and then all the dead would be raised to fight once more.

11:35 The groups go their separate ways, and after short rousing speeches by the group leaders the larp itself starts. It consists of a lot of fighting, a little diplomacy and many humorous comments, but very little character play and no overall story.

13:30 Everybody gathers for a lunch break, where war stories are swapped and random duels let kids blow off even more steam. Each kid brought their own lunch.

14:00 The lunch break ends, and the adults gather their groups together for a new rousing speech, and more fighting, laughing and diplomacy.

15:30 Everyone is gathered for a final battle, which has all seventy kids on one side, and the fifteen adults on the other. After a few re-runs – one in which the adults foolishly start out in a circle and find out how painful it is to try to fall over where no room for falling exists – goodbyes are said and parents collect the kids.

16:00 The crew loads the gear into the van and leaves Rude Skov. Something extraordinary has been born.

17:30 After sharing a well-deserved pizza, stories from the day and ideas on how to make everything even better next time, the organisers each get their wage for the day from the game master. Most of them hit the town together to spend their hard-earned cash on cheap alcohol.

A Thousand Kids Can’t Be Wrong

The *Rude Skov* campaign still exists six years later and it gathers 200 kids in the woods every other Saturday. Its popularity peaked in 2007 when it had 350 biweekly players. Most of the participants are boys; the focus on fighting has kept down girls’ participation at 5-10%.

What started out as one guy and his friends running the campaign is now by far the largest and most productive larp organisation in Denmark, with over 1000 members, more than 70 larps per year, a 300 square metre clubhouse in Copenhagen, and an annual budget of more than €150,000. Rollespilsfabrikken (The Roleplaying Factory), as the organisation is now called, does

everything from children’s larps and projects for immigrant children to *Warhammer* larps for adults and to World War II larps for kids and their parents.

The *Rude Skov* formula is in widespread use among after-school institutions that have larp as part of their programme and amongst different larp groups around Denmark. Lars Andersen and I have travelled all over the country since 2004, teaching the *Rude Skov* model to more than one thousand pedagogues and teachers. The game model has even slowly started spreading to other Nordic countries.

Additionally, in a community as small as the larp scene, whenever something works, somebody else will try to copy it. And *Rude Skov* has been copied a lot – which I consider the greatest praise for our work. After all, it doesn’t take a great mind to copy the *Rude Skov* revolution. Unlike out-of-the-box, mind-blowing larps like *Trenne byar*, *Mellan himmel och hav* and *System Danmark*, there was very little glamour about the first *Rude Skov* larp; it was just simple, short and easy to produce.

What Was It All About?

Thinking back to the very first *Rude Skov*, there was no great story to tell, nor was there a grand visual illusion where everything looked amazing. There were kids and adults playing together in a forest. And yet a mere half a decade later thousands of kids have been to *Rude Skov* or one of its spin-offs, thousands of parents have told their friends about “those wonderful young people and the work they do”, and the media has told numerous stories full of praise about *Rude Skov* and the organisation behind it.

Some of the kids who started on 24th of April, 2004, have stopped larping years ago. Some will remember their time with a smile, and some have forgotten all about it. But others have gone on to become larpers in their adult life, and hopefully they have absorbed some of the tolerance, empathy and creativity that a life with larping breeds.

And it all started with children beating up their friends with rubber swords.

The First Rude Skov

CREDITS: Claus Raasted, Christian Frostholm, Jesper Kristiansen, Bjarke Pedersen, Valdemar Kølle, Kasper Friis, Troels Barkholt, Peter B. Madsen, Niels Quaade, Joakim Balsgaard, Nicholas Bjerre, Christian Maslak

DATE: 24 April 2004

LOCATION: Rude Skov, Copenhagen, Denmark

LENGTH: 5 hours

PLAYERS: 70

BUDGET: €560

PARTICIPATION FEE: €8

GAME MECHANICS: Two hits and you are dead, one minute to respawn

OTHER MATERIAL: www.junior-rollespil.dk





SILMÄPUOLI MERIROSVO

FEMINIST ZOMBIE PIRATES, AHOY!

Laura Kalli & Katri Lassila

In Anno Domini 1717 Our Lord at long last so decreed that the Moment of Final Judgement was upon Captain Benjamin Van Oort; the most Notorious Pyrate that this Vale of Tears ever had the Misfortune to Gaze upon. He turned from no Vice and there was no Crime he did not commit. He thought it nothing to Strike a Man dead in Cold Blood, and torture most foul was his wont. It has been said that the Dastardly Bunch of Cut-Throats that were his Crew were such Louts, that even the Devil Himself would loath to sail with them. But they all feared Van Oort, for even after his Passing-On, there never was a Night when His Crewmen could Sleep Soundly in Christian Peace...

Silmäpuoli merirosvo (The One-Eyed Pirate), a pirate larp in the style of *adventurous romanticism*, was played on the Tavistholmen island in Finland in July 2004. The stranded players were treated to every pirate cliché from hidden treasure to the witch-woman and zombie captain. Inspired by classic swashbuckler stories, such as R.L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) and Captain Frederick Marryat's sea novels such as *Mr. Midshipman Easy* (1836) and *Pirate* (1836), as well as the film *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003).

Especially the haunting *Treasure Island* is an important novel for us both. On the surface it is pure pirate adventure, but strange and disturbing undercurrents of past sins and retribution run beneath it. The most powerful character of the book is the traitorous sea cook Long John Silver, but it is the fearsome presence of the long-dead, monstrous Captain Flint that truly propels the story. Flint fascinated us enough to propel us to make the main character of our game not only a non-player character, but also a no-show one. Our Flint was the missing Pirate Captain Benjamin van Oort, the worst human being who ever lived, and the titular One-Eyed Pirate.

The game itself revolved around the search for van Oort's buried treasure. Crews of three rivalling pirate ships and a captive crew of a vessel from the Royal Navy landed on the treasure island at the same time. The crews consisted of six or seven player characters each. The quest was perilous, as the late van Oort was said to have been too much trouble for even the Devil himself, and restlessly haunted his treasure.

Hints and clues to the location of the treasure were distributed among the characters. For instance, a part of the treasure map was tattooed on the bare back of the Governor's daughter's

wet nurse. The poor lady was eventually skinned. The first stages of the game consisted of gathering and combining the scattered pieces of information, followed by the actual race to the treasure. Duelling, swashbuckling, ransacking and shivering of me timbers were grandly encouraged by the game masters. During the treasure hunt, unexpected and unplanned events started to emerge that surprised both the player and the game organizers, such as each of the crews in turn getting lost in the woods.

In the grand finale, the uncovered treasure chest flowed its golden innards to the cursed ground, omens of the imminent return of the loathed van Oort, such as his flag and personal belongings, mysteriously appeared and finally the zombie captain himself emerged. The captain, planned to indeed stay a no-show character, was cast on the spot and played by a player whose own character had died. To defeat the captain and to avoid the terrible fate of joining his undead crew, the rivalling groups had to set aside their feuds and join forces against the One-Eyed Pirate.

Sins of the Past

To keep the game flowing rapidly and to avoid empty moments of uninformed waiting, many of the players had pre-planned scenes and plots, even to the extent of clouding the distinction between traditional player and non-player roles. Every character had the first and foremost obligation to work as a story engine, to drive the plot forward and generate drama.

The character backgrounds were focused around their relationships with the One-Eyed Pirate; every character had some kind of relationship to him, but the nature of that relationship depended on the actions of the player *during* the game: *The*

◀ *"They was the roughest crew afloat, was Flint's; the devil himself would have been feared to go to sea with them."*
– R. L. Stevenson, *Treasure Island* (Portrait, Katri Lassila)

Roundshot-Tom shows the right attitude of Yarr! (Portrait, Katri Lassila) ▶









◀◀ *Bloody Molly's "knowing look". She was known of her incredible powers of mind. (Portrait, Katri Lassila)*
◀ *The formidable crew of Fortuna Iuvat, along with the mysterious nun, Sister Caritas. (Portrait, Katri Lassila)*



The beginning of the game. The captain of the king's ship is whipped by the pirates. (Play, Katri Lassila)



Poor prisoners from His Majesty's Fleet, along the princess in disguise. (Portrait, Katri Lassila)

present could change the past.

This was possible, due to the multiple story paths laid out for the larp: For example, the player of the Voodoo Priestess was directed to alter her character's background story depending on the players' reactions and interpretations of the events of the game. She might have been either van Oort's lover in the past, or an impersonal force of nature with agendas totally incomprehensible to mere mortals. Since the Priestess was an ancillary game master character, her role could be altered on the run, to shepherd and provoke players in such scenarios that would keep the game from stagnating and becoming boring – and she could be revealed to *always have been* whatever was deemed necessary.

Also, if the players came up with something cool that we had not thought of, it was integrated into the play. For example, one of the players assumed that her character was the long-lost daughter of the evil sea captain. We had not had such intentions, but the idea was great – so we rewrote history on the run. When it comes to larps, there is little reason to keep the past rigid. For an adventurous romanticist, the liveliness of the game is paramount. However, to keep sense of wonder intact, players should not notice the fluidity of history.

Adventurous Romanticism

In our experience, a stereotypical larp consists of a bunch of strangely-clad people having a fancy conversation in “an impressive dining hall” of “a great castle”. Basically, nothing much happens. However, when children play, they are all over the place. Kids run and hide, seek lost treasures and fight untold hordes of horrible enemies. They do it all physically and strive to be as “real” as possible.

After a few of these *Vampire*-style games, we wanted to shy away from talking heads games and formulated the agenda of adventurous romanticism. The main principle is to cultivate and cherish the child within us all, to preserve it in the pressure and stress of adult life. We want to make games that resemble our own past adventures in the lands of make-believe. We want movement and action, shortness of breath, physicality. Doing something with your own body is always more effective than simply talking about it.

It was like those adventure games we played as a child. I got to actually dig the treasure from the earth! Everything else worked, but the people who drew our map thought that we were smarter than we really are. We got very lost at some point. (female, pirate captain)

In *Silmäpuoli merirosvo* the treasure-object of the game was an actual treasure. We dug a chest of cheap jewellery and spray-painted old pennies into the ground, and one of the peak moments of the game was when the pirates had to dig it out again.

The game bordered on satire many times but never fell to the wrong side of the genre. It had everything I had come to expect from a pirate story – including evil zombie pirates, voodoo witches and buried treasure. Blustering generic con-man pirating worked extremely well. As a pirate captain

without a ship or crew, just speaking your way through classic pirate hardships was as delicious as could be imagined. (male, con artist)

The gaming area was also set out to be as comfortable as possible in a soaked and cold forest island. There was a warm and dry indoor space and catering accessible to the players at all times. Our ideology regarding the practical arrangements of the game is that uncomfortable and unenjoyable surroundings are demotivating for the players. While the characters were heroes accustomed to hardships and toil, the players do not need to be such to enjoy the game.

The first adventurous romanticism games *Imperiumin viholliset* (Enemies of the Empire, 2003) and *Norsunluukosketin* (The Ivory Key, 2003) were pulp amalgams of steampunk and Edgar Allan Poe – lost hearts beating in mouldy ruins, velvet curtains hiding the entrance to the secret cloning laboratory et cetera.

The games have certainly developed: Genre consciousness has become better, and players' understanding on what can happen or not tends to be better than earlier. Also, the playfulness of adventurous romanticist games has become more pronounced, removing inappropriate competitiveness (very common in larps) from the games. (male, pirate captain)

The focus was in the action. In the design of the adventurous romanticism any boring parts are cut to make more room for the fun parts, the stuff you see in pirate movies: fights, daring escapes, digging for buried treasure, fighting recently deceased best friends. Since the parts about waiting and talking do not exist in the literary genre, they should not exist in larp genre either.

One important part of this physical action was empowering female players by providing resourceful and powerful characters for the distaff side. All too often female characters suffer from the *fisherman's wife syndrome* – being living props for the male-dominated larp. In our games, no girl is sidelined as a fair maiden without personality. Including key female roles also presupposes a clear-cut stance on underlying literary genres of the game: Most of our rowdy and evil pirate captains were women, as were the abolitionist liberator, the brave and kind-hearted Governor's daughter, the cruel but fair cutthroat and the unfor-giving accountant. We concentrated especially on the physical side of game play, providing female players opportunities to run, duel, seek treasure and command troops.

After the Yarr!

The universe of adventurous romance has continued to develop after *Silmäpuoli Merirosvo*. Beduins, snake pits and the Saharan desert in 1939 provided the backdrop for *Amazonien kuningatar* (Queen of the Amazons, 2006). Robin Hood, fairies, trolls, Nazis and time travel took *Albiön* (2008) to the Sherwood Forest of 1189, and the adventure continued in a western setting with Butch Cassidy, Sundance Kid and a South-American vampire cult in *Korpinsydän* (Crowheart, 2009).

Methods used in adventurous romanticist larps have varied during the years, but we have never used numbers or points. The

only rule is the *rule of maximal drama*: The players are supposed to react and resolve conflicts in the ways that maximise drama, be it losing a fight, surrendering, getting caught or triumphing spectacularly. Other organizers are also picking up some of the ideology and methods of adventurous romanticism, as players have noted:

One specific thing the larp community seems to have already copied from AR games has been in genre training - how players are given specific instructions and tips on how to act in the game. (player, male)

I think that AR games might ease up the community a bit.

Put the fun back in larps. (player, female)

Being the third in the series of adventurous romanticism games, *Silmäpuoli merirosvo* saw many of the recurring themes of the genre emerge. Using the possibilities of turning the traditional player character / non-player character distinction into a smooth and flexible continuous stratum, and emphasizing dramatic over diegetic coherence established themselves as cornerstones of the method. However, taking the first steps out of the intrigue and drama-based designs with emphasis on dialogue into physical action and outdoor adventure environment proved out to be more challenging than expected. While committing strongly to the ideology of comfy entertainment, *Silmäpuoli merirosvo* was probably the most unpleasant and uncomfortable adventurous romanticist game to date.

The reason that *Silmäpuoli merirosvo* is remembered with more than just nostalgic ridicule, is that the ideology and values governing adventurous romanticism were already in place and have remained stable ever since. For the game organizer the central value is responsibility. Responsibility for the influence their game has on the participants: The chance to inspire a fellow human being and to provide empowering experiences.

Silmäpuoli Merirosvo

CREDITS: Laura Kalli and Katri Lassila, with Antti Salovaara (additional writing), Heli Aho and Markku Wächter (practical arrangements)

DATE: 17 July 2004

LOCATION: Tavistholmen, Finland

LENGTH: 12 hours

PLAYERS: 25 players, 3 game masters, 4 supporting players

BUDGET: €700

PARTICIPATION FEE: €25

GAME MECHANICS: The rule of maximal drama

OTHER MATERIAL:

<http://koti.mbnet.fi/lkk/merirosvot/silmapuoli.html>

Further Reading

LASSILA K (2008) Adventurous Romanticism.

Playground Worlds.

LASSILA K (2009) Fun for All.

Larp, the Universe and Everything.

LASSILA K (2010) Campaign directors A to Z. *Playing Reality.*



ONCE UPON A TIME

EVERYDAY STORIES FROM THE OLD WEST

Asbjørn Rydland

Dappled sunlight falls on the waking Main Street. The barber whistles as he whets his razor, customers sipping coffee while they wait their turn. A telegraph operator hurries down the boardwalk and knocks on the door. In the distance, the sound of metal rings from the blacksmith's.

Morning turns to evening. The clang of iron is replaced by the din of voices and clinking of glasses from the saloon. The pianist teases tunes from his off-key instrument. Lamps and fires light among the tents of New Town, silhouetting the inhabitants against canvas. There are no such shadows playing on the walls of Madame Starr's Boudoir, but the cries and groans emanating from the tent leave little doubt about the activities within.

Once Upon a Time was a Western larp set in the fictional town of Gibson, Wyoming, 1887. Inspired by an assortment of stories and archetypes from both history and Hollywood, it was a hybrid of realism and romanticism. This duality gave the larp a broad scope of ideas and a multitude of stories and conflicts, and turned Gibson into a varied and believable community. Add to that the incredibly detailed costumes, props and set design, and you'll get some idea of what it was like: While *Once Upon a Time* was not the first Norwegian larp going for a high visual standard, the scenography stood out for its level of detail, and for being purpose-built for the larp. Every element was designed and placed to add to the illusion.

In addition to story and character writing starting a year and a half in advance, physical preparation for the event took months, ranging from creating small details like bottle labels and hymnals to building the town itself. From April to August, organizers and volunteers put thousands of hours into setting the stage for the small town drama, and the whole process was a testament to how even the highest ambitions can be met when players and organizers work together. The larp was played around a permanent outdoors stage area for *Western Shooting* (a sport featuring period guns, costumes and old west events that can include staged shows with stunt riding, gunfights, fist fights, etc.), with a dirt street complete with building fronts (but little or no interior), a small saloon and a field. During the weekends

over the course of three and a half months, dozens of volunteer players helped the organizers refurbish and double the size of the saloon, and turn the field into a town.

The saloon and the café were the heart and belly of Gibson, the bank and mining company offices were the town's financial hubs, while the barbershop and the general store were the gossip hotspots. Overseeing the store fronts and covered boardwalks of the Main Street were the *Gibson Gazette* and the Sheriff's office. Towards the outskirts of town were the tent streets. In addition to family homes, there were the doctor's, the undertaker's, the photographer's, and last but not least; staring each other down from either end of the street were the brothel and the church. In addition to the saloon and café there was a total of six barracks and storefront buildings and some 30 tents.

I've done a quick estimate, don't really want to do the math: For this larp I've put down between 300 and 400 work hours since April. It was worth it. (the construction foreman)

The painstakingly thorough work in designing and decorating the town paid off in suspension of disbelief. Walking down the Main Street, everything around you would pull your mind into 1887 and make you completely forget about the 21st century. To strengthen the illusion further, all play was in English. "This town ain't big enough for the both of us" just doesn't sound right in Norwegian. This language policy also made it easier for non-Norwegians to participate.

◀◀ *Trouble between local and roaming cowboys was one of the main conflicts. (Portrait, June Witsoe)*

◀ *The larp kicked off with one of the work crews returning from the mine. (Portrait, June Witsoe)*



A smith at work. Hairpins, hobnails, hooks and other useful objects were made to order throughout the larp. (Play, Anne Isene)



*Confederate soldiers wait their turn in front of the barber's. The barbershop was an important gathering place.
(Play, Kaia Spilhaug Torkildsen)*

Low-Key Atmosphere

The typical Western is a story of the lone hero that stands up against oppression and injustice, and after varying degrees of bloodshed eventually saves the day. Most characters in Wild West fiction are bystanders or victims, which of course makes the genre stereotypes actually a poor basis for a larp. *Once Upon a Time* gave each villager a background, a personality and a story to play out, while at the same time keeping the western character archetypes very much present. As most of the characters were townsfolk, the mysterious strangers ended up – from the organizers point of view – as supporting cast. Their function was as catalysts and story triggers. The game contained café workers and lawmen, miners and outlaws, clerks and prostitutes, soldiers and cowboys, outlaws and gamblers and it was and is hard to say who had the best experience.

Dozens of inspirational sources could be listed, from *Dr Quinn, Medicine Woman* (1993–1998) to *Deadwood* (2004-2006), and from *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) to *Tombstone* (1993) and *Unforgiven* (1992), and the little Wyoming mining town had elements from all of them. With the large majority of plotlines consisting of rather realistic everyday conflicts, mixing the good with the bad, and the morally upstanding with the corrupt was important to ensure *Once Upon a Time* would still be dynamic.

The bank manager's romantic courting of the brothel owner, the former local cowboy who had now joined the drifters, the rancher's son who had left home to become a deputy and the siblings who ended up on opposite sides of the law are all examples of low-key dramatic choices and crossroads that caused ripples through the character web and kept it constantly in motion. Gibson was in many ways a typical small town, with all the different groups and sub-cultures you'd imagine, and because of the sheriff's election and other events that involved the whole town, groups that normally might have avoided each other didn't have that option.

Story-wise this diversity and the general attention to character detail were the strongest points of *Once Upon a Time* – and probably also the weakest. No larp consists of just one story, but particularly in this case the individual, low key stories were the most important ones. This led to a lot of emotional interaction and enforced the illusion that Gibson was a real community, but at the same time it meant that few really noticed what was going on outside their own sphere of play, and this occasionally gave the impression that nothing much was happening.

Various parts of the town and cast were used to focus on different sides of the Western genre, ranging from the salt of the earth miners and café-workers to the dysfunctional, violent and altogether darker atmosphere at the brothel. Heavy themes like prostitution and abuse were treated with the same realism as the rest of the larp, even causing some controversy over topless prostitutes and the portrayal of sex in the brothel.

I found it interesting to see the effect of the preparations the brothel group did. We met up for a weekend some weeks before the larp. During that time we talked and discussed and dreamed about what we wanted to do during the larp.

We practiced how we would simulate fighting and fucking and humiliating each other. We practiced using [safewords] and the in-game codeword *Nebraska* – an “I need help to play myself out of this situation”-word. And most of all, we spent time together playing, eating, cuddling and building trust within this group of eight people. I think this was the reason why we could play such a nasty brothel. (player, female)

Mechanics of Realism

Even while aiming for immersion and realism, some things must be simulated. *Once Upon a Time* had a number of fields where this was important: alcohol, sex, fisticuffs, gun fights and money. In all five cases efforts were made to make things look as real as possible while ensuring safe playing conditions for the players.

The alcohol policy at *Once Upon a Time* was that moderate drinking helps more than hinders immersion, primarily because the sensation and taste of certain types of alcohol is hard to simulate. The saloon and brothel served both beer and bourbon, but to avoid players getting too inebriated there was an alternative non-alcoholic beer, and the bourbon was watered down to approximately a quarter of the strength.

Sex was simulated with realistic sounds and movements, but players stayed at least partially clothed. Rape scenes were not allowed unless agreed upon in advance. Most of the town consisting of decent Victorian era Americans, sex was largely a private matter between married characters, or took place at the brothel.

All characters were given fighting and gun skill statistics, that dictated how well they would do in a brawl, and how fast and accurately they could fire a gun. For example, discrete hand signals allowed duellists to read each others' skills without interrupting play: A novice gunfighter would stand with hands hanging loosely at his sides, while a more experienced one would casually hook his thumbs in his belt. Once the signals were noted, each duellist was free to move as he wished, until the more experienced one drew first.

Finally, the larp economy involved trading both diegetic and non-diegetic resources. Food and drink, for example, were very real goods that had to be bought with Norwegian kroner. In addition, printed copies of period dollar bills were used for gambling and services. As goods were priced with combinations of play money and real money, you needed to have play money to be able to spend your real money.

A lot of careful planning also went into balancing the various groups of the larp. Social influence, economic resources and capacity for violence were some of the factors that were taken into account when setting up the various lines of conflict. Whether or not this balance was skewed towards giving the law too much power was a matter of some debate after the larp, but the fact of the matter is that *Once Upon a Time* turned out more peaceful than intended. The tension was there, but there were few fights and no killings.

I could easily have stayed on for another two weeks. Prior to the larp, when I received my character, I was slightly less enthusiastic; after all, this was a western larp, so if you're a



Madame Starr reasons with the sheriff to get her doorman out of jail. The law could be lenient when needed, and he was back on the job in no time. (Play, Kaia Spilhaug Torkildsen)





The Gibson Gazette printed three editions and consisted of personals, advertisements and news stories made before and during the larp. (Detail, Anne Isene)

◀ *The brothel was the main provider of smut and indecency. (Detail, Anne Isene)*



Gibson Main Street. Clockwise: The bank, the general store, the café, the sheriff's office, the mining company, the barber's and the Gibson Gazette. (Play, Anne Isene)



The hardest-working volunteers put hundreds of hours each into building the town. (Construction, Asbjørn Rydland)

guy, you want to live out all those dreams from when you were a kid, right? Gunslinger or sheriff, some sort of bad-ass toting a pistol and instilling fear in the populace. As it was, I was cast to play a cocky Irish miner with marital problems, gambling problems... just problems in general - and I *loved* it! The Irish had their own little gatherings around the campfire, singing and 'shooting the breeze', and as the cheerful lot we were, we tended to be welcome most places, be it brothel, church or saloon. Besides, as a more 'regular' townsman, watching the creepy outlaws out from the corner of one's eye was all the more exciting. (player, male)

Another factor in reducing violence was the relatively large percentage of female participants and characters at the larp. Compared to both the reality and Hollywood there were far more women in Gibson than what was normal. Wyoming already had women's suffrage in 1887, which made it a better setting for such a town than most, and that historical basis was used to give women a more important position than the genre normally allows. Women could be miners, deputies, business owners and cattle hands, to name a few, and of the ten most influential characters in town life, more than half were women.

That is the trade-off. More violence and character death leads

to disruption of the character web and excessive mourning periods that no-one can or wants to play. A narrower focus and stories truer to the movie genre lead to the cast being separated into main and supporting characters, restricting the drama and most interesting stories to only a few.

In the end, *Once Upon a Time* wasn't about gunfights and lone heroes, but about all the figures we know and love from all the Westerns we have ever encountered.

Once Upon a Time

CREDITS: Asbjørn Rydland, Anne Isene, Margrete Raaum, Geir Carlstrøm (game design), Thomas Nes, Kristian Spilhaug, Espen Nodeland (set design and construction), and a score of other helpful players

DATE: July-August 2005

LOCATION: Ås, near Oslo, Norway

LENGTH: 5 days

PLAYERS: 120 players, 4 organizers

BUDGET: €18,000

PARTICIPATION FEE: €110

GAME MECHANICS: Simple rules and replica firearms



ENHETSFRONT

A COMMUNE FOR DISILLUSIONED IDEALISTS

Marthe Glad Munch-Møller & Aksel Westlund

THE LIVING ROOM IS WARM, *and the fumes from the kitchen make Tove regret that she, on principle, demanded that men did the cooking. She is doing her best to avoid the gaze of her partner Sean, and hides her legs under the chair to avoid him constantly kicking her under the table. He's trying to tell her something, maybe a cue for the card game. Or perhaps he's just punishing her for her lack of enthusiasm about Trotsky last night. As their opponents keep piling tricks, Sean lets out a telltale sigh. Tove gets up and leaves before the round is over. He grumbles, but as she closes the door behind her, they have already started a new game.*

Enhetsfront (United Front) was a game about the early stages of a new commune being created by a group of old friends and new acquaintances in urban Oslo in the year 1978. The game intertwined personal plots and political disputes with the themes of personal choice and the sense of self-worth in an increasingly tough political and social environment.

Enhetsfront was the second larp organized with the *collective method*. The method was formulated during the creation of the game *Kollektivet* (The Commune, 2004), named after the commune serving as setting for the game. The idea was to create a larp that dispensed with the traditional role of the organiser, and to redistribute the responsibility and power equally among all participants. Equal distribution is always a challenge, and it was something that several of the players found problematic before the larp process started. The workload was shared on a series of participant meetings and discussions were held on how to make sure that all the participants stayed part of the process. After *Kollektivet*, Martine Svanevik presented the method in detail in *The Collective's Little Red Book* (2005). *Enhetsfront* was a test on whether the method was useful.

The Collective Method

Collaboration is an end in itself, both practically and creatively; creating larps is just as much fun as playing them, and fun grows in the sharing. When the *Enhetsfront* process started, all the

participants were young and relatively new to the Nordic larp scene. Some did not feel confident to take the step into larpmaking. Others had noticed that when people signed on to a larp it was more important who the game organisers were, than the theme of the larp. We thought that a larp where the participants all created the game together would create an environment where good ideas could be developed, and where names and track records would be less important than in the rest of the larp community. By avoiding terms like *game designer* and *organiser*, we simply wanted to appeal to people who wanted to create and participate in their dream larp. To quote the *Little Red Book*:

By “taking the power back” and distributing it evenly among all participants, one demystifies the role of the organizer, clearly demonstrating that a great larp can be the product of great participants rather than great organizers.

We also wanted to play in the games we made. Many of the problems of organisers playing in their own games, such as having possibilities to influencing plots and power structures not available to average players, are eradicated when all players become organisers. The method has other strengths as well: Since the plot structure is distributed, there is no big picture, and the plot gains complexity and organic unpredictability of a real social network. Any structures emerge in play; it is pretty much impossible, and undesirable, to enforce any particular theme or plot structure before play starts. As one participant put it during the

◀ *This bedroom was the home of one married couple and a third person, who slept on the couch. (Play, Agnete Brun)*

post game discussion:

The collective method is the best foundation for a game that is created individually by each participant, with the individual visions becoming a larger whole. My experience, in any case, is that this method creates a larp that is fundamentally immersionist, where all narrativism is individual and gamism almost non-existent.

Even when aiming for equality, someone needs to start the process: Usually a group of *initiators* write down an idea, a *framework* for the creative process, usually no more than a page of text. The initiators are often also tasked with deciding the time and place of the game. To ensure that the participants get the creative freedom needed to create the game collectively, the framework is kept fairly vague. As Svanevik (2005) wrote: “The initiator’s job is to set the scene, time and place for the larp, not to organize it”.

The collective method has largely been a way of making larps rather than playing them. As the method has matured, focus has shifted towards how the gameplay can be improved with the collective method. *Enhetsfront*, the second collective game, was still largely a traditional immersionist larp, created in an unconventional way.

A Unified Vision for a Unified Front

Kollektivet was about a group of hippies, communists and malcontents attempting to start an independent and self-sustained farming community deep in the woods outside Oslo, whereas *Enhetsfront* dealt with a more fractured and nuanced group, living six years later within city limits and involved in activism rather than escapism. The characters cooked, played cards, flirted and discussed politics; the game depicted a week like any other, with no cataclysmic events or turning points planned. All characters shared some of the same experiences, and in 1978 took part in the same discussions as six years earlier. But the passion was gone. Some had lost interest, some had been caught up by their own choices, and some were just plain tired of fighting the same fight and sad their years of struggle had failed to bear fruit. Beneath the surface the commune felt more like a last spasm of an idealism that belonged to the past, and less like the ideal solution that all pretended that it was.

During the game, the social fabric of the group started showing some serious tears; every discussion was more weary than the previous, every card game more tense. Still there were small drops of sunshine – a quiet morning where one player read aloud from a book, a discussion that managed to rekindle some real enthusiasm, people falling in love for the first time – and others deciding to start a new life somewhere else.

Roughly half of the characters had already been present at *Kollektivet*. Much time was spent on deciding what had

happened between games, while connecting new characters to the old ones and involving new participants in the process. As the characters took centre stage, a theme started to emerge; how the characters dealt with their lives, their past, and their relationships. Plots dealt with characters, often fundamentally lonely, trying to change their lives for the better or dealing with consequences of past choices. For example, a failed musician and adamant hippie Chris, who had spiralled into self-destruction and ultimately had overdosed in *Kollektivet*, was now struggling with the isolation and soul-numbing boredom of his clean lifestyle. Hard-nosed realist and teetotal communist Tove, who had stayed behind as her friends travelled to India to find themselves, was trying to convince herself that her choice had not been a mistake, whilst dealing with a crumbling marriage.

Although the game dealt with politics as part of its subject matter, and several players were decidedly leftist, the game had no overreaching political message. The characters’ own struggles with their ideologies were more important than the relative merits of those ideologies.

In a collective game, everyone is expected to create material for the game. This involves more than simply creating one’s own character: Plots, relations and hierarchies need to be created, research on the era must be carried out and contextual background needs to be written. As the game was set in 1978, period newspapers, magazines and books were readily available, which meant that some research could be done in-game. The latest newspapers were brought in each morning, and literature and magazines from the last few years were available as well, providing a springboard for in-game discussion.

Originally, *Enhetsfront* was intended to be a more direct sequel to *Kollektivet* dealing with a generational conflict between the older hippies and the new punk movement. The framework of the larp was to look at how the idealism of the early seventies was fading; characters were growing up, compromising, and ending up in conflicts with a new generation of radicals poised to take over. The initiators had shared this vision during the start-up, but as players started signing up, it became clear that the idea of friction created by a generational divide had little appeal: Nobody wanted to play the younger punks.

Enhetsfront was the first larp where the initiators’ vision of the game was collectively overruled. Flexibility and humility are essential if one wants to survive the creative process. Still, aside from some bruised egos and no small degree of frustration, this shift in vision underlines the truly collaborative and healthy nature of the process, and crystallized the role of an initiator. An initiator is not an organiser who gets to design the themes of the game, but simply the one who gives the first push.





Two part-time players relaxing with members of the commune. (Play, Agnete Brun)

The Mood of the Game

The five-day game ran during a regular working week, which meant that some players left the game to go to work adding to the slice-of-life feel of the game. Several players signed up for shorter visits, showing up at the house when it suited them. All in all this created a fairly realistic portrayal of a commune, and meant that the characters varied from day to day. This was both a strength and an occasional problem; the house was a bit empty in the mornings, and some participants were bored by such downtime. On the other hand, the constant influx of characters gave the full-time characters several social constellations to interact in. On the surface, *Enhetsfront* consisted of day-to-day activities: Cooking, going to work, playing cards, reading and discussing politics. To a casual observer, the game would have come across as cosy and homely; a group of friends sharing a house, and to some extent political views and a general outlook on life.

Beneath the façade, many of the characters were lonely, conflicted and depressed. Most relationships were dysfunctional, few were content with their lives, and many clung to the past with increasing desperation. The memorable scenes often

happened in private, as characters confided in each other, comforted each other, had awkward sex and tried to sort themselves out as best they could. All in all, at its best the game was very intense and moving.

The game was also criticized by some players. Some characters missed most of the action taking place behind the façade, and thus spent a lot of time doing nothing. The game was hurt by a few no-shows that left some characters without strong relations to base play on. Even in a collective larp, it is imperative to make sure that all characters are well integrated to the social network, and have many avenues of action to pursue.

After Enhetsfront

The method tested in *Enhetsfront* worked well in practice and has been in continuous use and development since. The original method has evolved into an even more flexible approach, which is tailored to the game in question.

Konstantinopel (Constantinople, 2006), influenced by the science fiction television series *Firefly* (2002), had the participants create the entire setting of the larp from scratch, guided only by



Gambling was considered oppressive, which led to heated debates when someone wanted to make the evening card games more interesting. (Play, Agnete Brun)



The whole collective gathered for a Saturday dinner, prepared by the men in an attempt to show gender solidarity. (Play, Agnete Brun)



Books that had been read during the game were scattered everywhere. (Detail, Agnete Brun)



This record, discovered from one player's parents, became the soundtrack of the game (Detail, Agnete Brun)

a short mood piece written by the initiators. It also had more than twice the participants and more effort spent on scenography. For *a Fistful of Thyllium* (2009) expanded the *Konstantinopel* universe, focusing on how to generate plot collectively. Here we used an off-game area where players could communicate, spread rumours and even design plots and messages for each other. They wrote story hooks during the game to involve each other in plots, informed other players of pre-planned scenes, wrote plots in sealed envelopes for other players to pick up and integrate in their characters. One player even asked for someone to kill his character, with the caveat that the murderer kept her identity hidden from him – he intended to return later as a clone of his old character to investigate his own murder. The off-game area was a running commentary on play as it unfolded, allowing the players to shape the narrative structures in new ways.

As the collective method has progressed, the style of play has also become more collective. The players now spend more playtime actively shaping the game: writing plots for other characters as well as themselves, planning and staging scenes, and generally paying more attention to the narratives of the game itself. As the method develops, participants utilise it more fully, seizing the distributed organiser power.

Enhetsfront

CREDITS: Marthe Glad Munch-Møller, Audun Moss, Martine Svanevik (initiators), Øystein Sjøtveit, Ole Marcus Mærøe, Aksel Westlund, Håkon Lundwall, Martin Rytter Hasle, Julie Therese Kristiansen, Amund Riise Eckhof, Britta K. Bergersen, Aina Lakoue Skjønfjell Dakou, Cathrine Martinsen

DATE: 14-18 September 2005

LOCATION: Britta K. Bergersen's house in Oslo, Norway

LENGTH: Five days

PLAYERS: Roughly 15

BUDGET: €600

PARTICIPATION FEE: €40

GAME MECHANICS: Ars Amandi

OTHER MATERIAL: <http://collectivelarp.wordpress.com>

Further Reading

SVANEVIK M (2005) *The Collective's little red book.*

Dissecting Larp.

HARVIAINEN J T (2006) *Testing Larp Theories and Methods – Results of Year Two. Role, Play, Art.*

WESTLUND A (2005) *Experiences from the Collective.* In <http://collectivelarp.wordpress.com>





SYSTEM DANMARC

POLITICAL ACTION LARP

Peter Munthe-Kaas

COUNTER NUMBER ONE. *Clearly confused about the process, she moves around nervously. People behind her start shouting. "Are you stupid or something? Have you never been at a System office before?" She tearfully stutters that actually no, she just moved here today. A guy with a piercing laugh introduces himself. "I'm Stefan, I fuck the system." His pupils are big and black and he constantly bites himself in the lip. Disregarding his looks she tells him how her father recently died and she can no longer afford to live in the B-Sector. Stefan offers to help, if she just agrees to meet with him later. "Don't worry, babe. I'm going to show you around."*



◀◀ *A White Punk girl.* (Play, Michel Winckler-Krog)

◀ *It took a month for 50 volunteers to build the set.* (Construction, Kim Hr. Holm)

◀ *C-Sector by night. Non-players are wealthier Copenhageners who pass the undesirables without a glimpse.* (Play, Prokop Suchanek)

In October 2005, 350 paying participants aged 16-42 experienced a dystopian future of Denmark where the weakest citizens had no part in the welfare society, no influence on the society they lived in and were confined in special low priority zones. It portrayed a Class C zone in Copenhagen, reserved for the citizens deemed useless for the society: A future Denmark, where democracy had degenerated.

For me, the worst part of it was the acceptance, the stagnation and the indifference that hit all the players. Violence became something that you tried to avoid, but overlooked. The hate was directed to other people in the same situation and anger got expressed to the ones closest to you. (player, male, post-larp evaluation)

System Danmarc was a political larp, criticizing the contemporary Danish society by giving the participants an experience of a future world with a serious democratic deficit. It was inspired by our personal experiences with the Danish social security system and sought to oppose contemporary political apathy. The goal was to communicate the importance of democracy, participation and to outline societal problems in an exciting fashion. The organizers hoped to leverage the frustration and powerlessness prevailing in the larp to inspire the participants to take action in real life.

System Danmarc remade its chaotic and disorganized predecessor *System Danmarc – Det sidste vers* (The Last Verse, 2001). The game design was oriented around violence, crime, drugs and so on – we called it a *political action larp*. Though we used extremes to convey the message, we also wanted the larp to depict everyday life – indeed, play centered on daily life instead of, say, revolution. The players were clearly told that the story was about apathy and depression, and thus no one should end the larp being happier than when they started.

The game had an elaborate marketing campaign. There was a trailer depicting an action-packed day in a C-Sector: Cleaning up chemical waste, partying, getting into a fight with a rival gang, and using drugs and freaking out in a bathroom. We kept updating the Danish role-players with new artwork, design sketches and photos during the process. We also organized a pre-party, where the White Punk hangout of the larp was used to showcase the game. The larp was marketed as an experience well suited for “ordinary people”. For about 10% of the participants, mostly friends of organizers or other players, *System Danmarc* was the first larp experience.

Building the System

More than 50 people worked on *System Danmarc*. Nine months of preparation, one month of production and two months of post-production were used to create the 52-hour larp, an 8-hour open house at the set, and a documentary DVD. All construction work was done by volunteers, some of whom were professional craftsmen.

All participants were expected to participate on one weekend workshop, where they were briefed about the central concepts

of the larp, worked with their groups and developed characters. The participants chose their groups based on play style overviews: For example the Hansen family had 40% intrigue, 30% show, 30% immersion and 0% action. The main focus of the workshops was to define status relations in the groups, develop relations, using impro exercises to test game situations beforehand and to prepare scenes for actual use in the larp.

Organizing workshops for 350 participants around the country was a massive task requiring six weekends in total. While the workshop approach had been used earlier in Nordic larps, *System Danmarc* was one of the first games to import it to Denmark.

The C-Sector

The game was played in a container city built on a public square Toftegårds Plads, in a residential area in Copenhagen. It was only separated by a plastic-covered fence, which served to enforce the feeling of being outside society. We were worried about interference from the outside world, but it was limited to a bicycle being thrown over the fence, and a group of policemen who insisted on taking a tour of the set to check out what the hype was all about.

The set of *System Danmarc* was divided into four main parts: the butcher district, the conservative district, the minority district and the party district.

The butcher district was the top of the sector. The metropolitans ruled the sector from a roof terrace in the middle of the set with a view over the whole sector. Their henchmen were former meatpackers and butchers, who, after their plant was closed, had nowhere else to go. Due to old contacts the butchers were still able to serve decent food in their street restaurant. A charismatic old coach had a boxing school in the district, hoping to offer another life to some of the young and talented people.

The conservative district housed people refusing to acknowledge that they were living in poverty. The Hansen family kept up a living by having a contact on the outside that provided them with cigarettes, sold at steep prices in the sector. They kept up their façades, hoisted the Danish flag, hosted traditional family suppers and so on. The Home Guard, a nationalist vigilante group, protected the area from the outside scum.

The minority district consisted mostly of small groups made by the players themselves. These people tried to make a living despite the odds, by putting up enterprises such as a tattoo parlor and a restaurant. Several cyberpunk-style gangs inhabited the edges of the district.

The party district was there partly to serve the needs of the inhabitants in getting their frustrations out, but was also oriented towards the rich A-kids of the outside world going slumming and throwing money around. The district featured sex shops, bars and a concert hall that was sometimes converted into a boxing ring. The district also hosted a sect, in which people gathered around their love guru.

There was also a group of *hyperslummers* without a district connection that lived on the streets and in makeshift shelters.

This group wanted and got a hardcore experience: We invited former drug addicts to share their past experiences about living on the street with them. During the game these players slept on the street or in makeshift sheds and were beaten and humiliated by other players. Some hyperslummers were even urinated on while sleeping.

In addition, The System, a kind of social security office, was located in a five-story building at one end of the container city. The general experience of going to the system (and you had to, if you could not get money elsewhere) was of endless waiting for case management, group therapy and generally the feeling of being just another number for the well-meaning social workers.

Also, many practical arrangements were handled by a group of volunteer janitors who only had instrumental characters. Similarly, a non-player character police force served as a game master tool for solving issues during the game.

My *System Danmarc* was a future dystopia, based on my own potential. To die as the cat-lady in the hands of incompetent doctors, with a few crying alcoholics outside the door is a shadowy path, that I fear. Her last thought was “at least it is almost like dying in a hospital”. (player, female, 23, post larp)

Living in the Slums

The game kick-started in the middle of action, with stage-setting scenes that the groups had prepared at the workshops. This was a very effective tool of getting the ball rolling and generating events right from the start. No other rehearsed scenes were used in the game. The starting scenes were very different for each group, and generally the play experience varied depending on which group a participant belonged to. While the White Punks were out partying and wreaking havoc, the Hansen family tried to uphold the clean façade despite their issues with domestic violence, psychological torture and even incest.

The main focus of the larp was on the interaction in and between the groups, but *System Danmarc* also included a lot of staged entertainment and events, such as police raids. During the larp almost all participants had to visit The System, a bureaucratic hellhole where the lucky could get their social security payments, but the most were sent around between offices for hours. It was also possible to volunteer for day labor and be driven by bus to a far away field where you would clear away rocks. The nightlife took the form of live concerts by bands and DJs, and events created spontaneously by the participants.

During the larp a few groups of non-player guests from the press, the police, the fire department, and the government were brought in and shown around. Within the game, these groups were presented as Class A citizens and followed around by a large number of diegetic policemen.

The larp ended on Sunday afternoon as all the participants were gathered by the police and directed into a big room, which had been used for concerts and fights the day before. The players were then shown a documentary where real Danish prostitutes, drug addicts, homeless people, professors and bureaucrats talked about their thoughts on social inequality and preventing



*Cyberpunk cool and dystopic aesthetics of garbage went hand in hand; the nurse is equipped with a riding crop.
(Play, Michel Winckler-Krog)*







Even though full-force boxing would be doable in a larp, the System Danmarc boxers had to pull their punches. (Play, Michel Winckler-Krog)



◀ *The punk band Narkodart started in System Danmarc, but went on playing after the larp. (Diegetic, Christoffer Lorang Dahl)*



The people of C-Sector had containers for homes. (Play, Jakob Brasch)

social exclusion.

It is unavoidable that the weakest will be dissatisfied, because they feel inadequate. You can do whatever you want, but they know and you might as well make them recognize it. They are third rate citizens. They are Class C and they can never become Class B. We can make them more content by telling them that in time, if they work hard, they can become B. But you are C, you live in C, you've been in C, you have chosen C, you have been made C, your talent is C. You are a loser. (Non-diegetic interview with a business professor, post-larp movie)

The purpose of this ending was to show the participants, who in general had had a rather light experience of living in the slum that their experiences had parallels in the day-to-day reality of contemporary Copenhagen.

I was ready to cry watching it. I wanted to help all these people. Because my character was that way, only now the filter was gone, and it was me wanting to help. (player, male 26, post-larp evaluation)

Generally the ending was received very well and many participants

afterwards mentioned the film as a central part of the experience. On the other hand, some participants found the ending to be manipulative and politically colored.

A few weeks afterwards, the set of *System Danmarc* was presented to the general public during a culture night in Copenhagen. A few thousand people came to see the set, to talk with the participants, and to see pictures from the larp.

Impact of System Danmarc

Several newspapers and magazines covered *System Danmarc*, it was featured in TV news, mentioned in a book about subcultures, and there was a radio show with diegetic reportage from the larp, featuring interviews with central characters. Yet even though *System Danmarc* got some media attention, it failed to trigger the public discussion the organizers hoped for. Though the larp did not have a significant societal impact in this sense, it played a central part in the ongoing movement to present larp as more than orcs in a forest.

◀ *System employees watching C-Sector from above. (Play, Michel Winckler-Krog)*



A scrap dealer in the minority quarter. (Play, Jakob Brasch)



White Punk trash were a central element of the streets of C-Sector. (Play, Michel Winckler-Krog)



Grim reality on the border of society. (Play, Jakob Brasch)

Approximately half of the participants answered questionnaires both before and after the larp, about expectations, experience, learning potential and democratic values. For instance, 56% of the players said that they were challenged physically and 69% were challenged emotionally/psychologically during the larp; 82% had an experience of democratic deficiency, 97% had an experience of social injustice during the larp; 97% viewed the game experience as positive.

System Danmarc has had a major impact on Danish larp. It remains one main point of reference when talking about best practices in game design, production and marketing of larps. After *System Danmarc*, workshop methods have been used in many Danish larps such as *Totem*, *Bolvaerk* (Bulwark, 2008), *Helteakademiet* (The Heroes' Academy, 2008), *Babylon* (2009), *Agerlund* (2009), *Delirium* and *Sin City* (2010).

Still, in the end, *System Danmarc* perhaps left its greatest impact on individual players:

The last nights I have dreamed about my character and awakened with a bad taste in my mouth. I must admit, that I

liked playing my character, but the more I think about which life the person must have had, I feel bad. After seeing the post-larp movie it has dawned to me, that this life is reality in Denmark. When the movie was over I was about to cry, I still am. (player, male 22, post-larp evaluation)

System Danmarc

CREDITS: Opus

DATE: 7-9 October 2005

LOCATION: Toftegårds Plads, Valby, Copenhagen

LENGTH: 52 hours

PLAYERS: 350 players, 50 organizers

BUDGET: €55,000

PARTICIPATION FEE: €50

GAME MECHANICS: No rules for violence or sexuality aside

from safewords, rules for modeling an economic system

OTHER MATERIAL: www.systemdanmarc.dk, including an

evaluation report in Danish. Videos in

<http://sysdc.mkromann.dk>



DRAGONBANE

TANGIBLE FANTASY, PLAUSIBLE MAGIC
Johanna Koljonen & Tiinaliisa Multamäki

I HEARD THE DRAGON GIVE OUT A HEART-RENDING SHRIEK. *The sky exploded, and pillars of fire shot up behind the temple. The Dragon died – and at that moment it became truly real. The odd angle of the head looked like the twisted position of one who has expired in pain. And its skin, when I rushed in, wailing, towards it, felt slightly warm to the touch.*

Dragonbane was a story about a community that had received great magical powers from a pair of dragons in exchange for total obedience. The game portrayed the end of the dragons' authoritative although largely benevolent rule. At its ideological core, it discussed how even in seemingly utopian societies the rule of might over right is oppressive to individuals.

For five to six days, about 325 players lived in or around the village of Cinderhill, in the world of Valenor. Three cultures were represented in the story – the collectivist villagers, the itinerant dragontamers and the mysterious witches. Their differences in lifestyles, beliefs, social codes, dress and behaviours were geared specifically towards setting up the narrative with social conflicts for which violence would not be the immediate solution.

Visually, the larp-makers' ambition was to create an environment that would not make the players think of *The Lord of the Rings*. In mainstream fantasy larps, the prevalence of visual and plot cues associated with the derivatives of that work is now an aesthetic method. Fantasy larping is typically a simulacrum, with each signifier (pointy ears, capes, final battle) pointing to other fantasy texts, other fantasy games, rather than to the constructed "reality" that the fiction pretends to portray. This is actually not a bad strategy for creating the feeling of another world, but it tends to saddle that other world with built-in assumptions about social order (feudal, authoritarian and anti-feminist) and the kind of stories it accommodates (heroic, epic, conflict-driven). To give individual players maximum freedom to

choose their characters' paths, all cultures were also designed to be gender-neutral. From the deliberately sexless Cinderhillian dragon deities, to division of labour, cultural positions and dress, there was uniformity between the sexes.

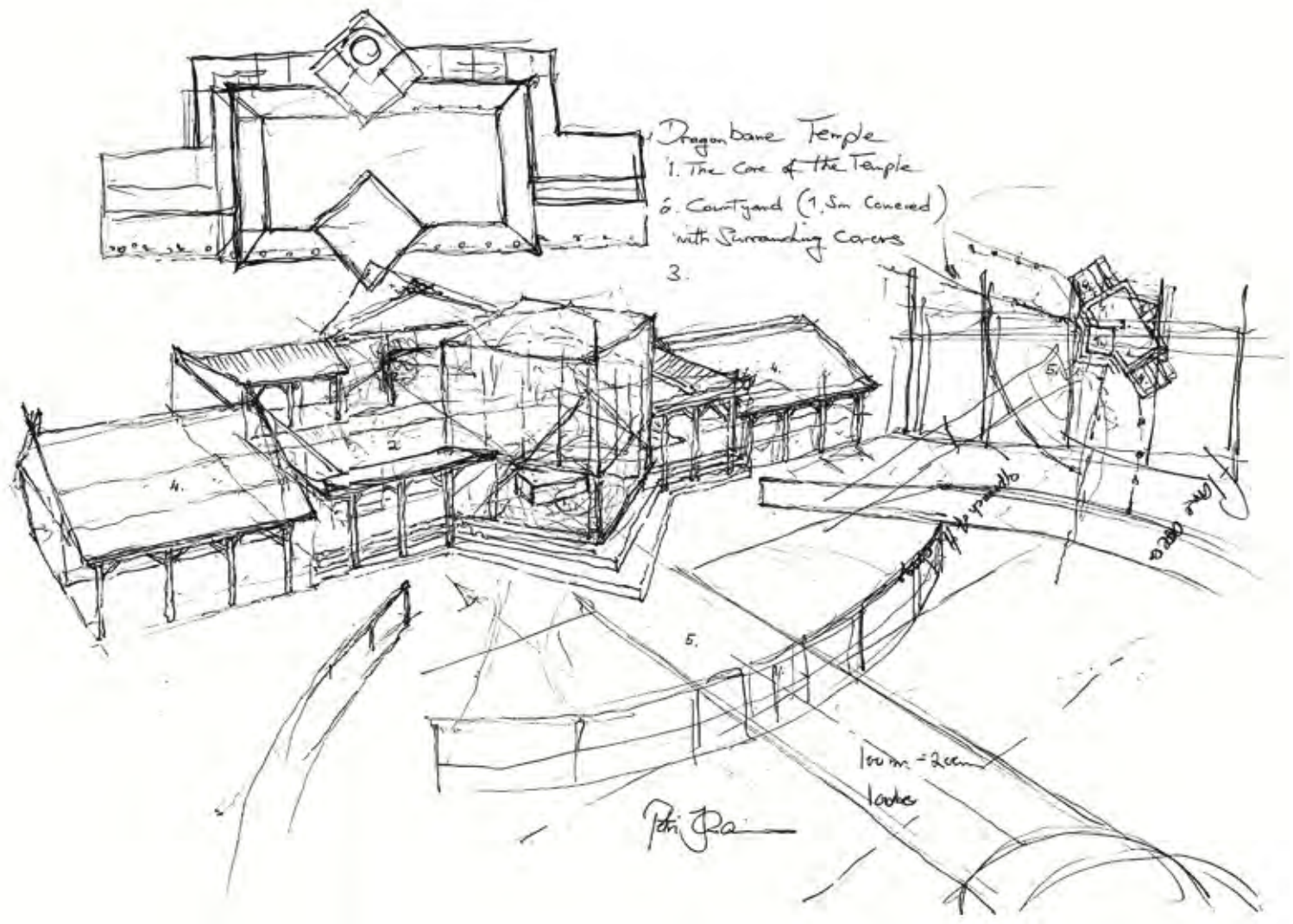
As *Dragonbane* was designed to focus instead on collectives, diplomacy, and equality, it became vital as far as possible to give the total environment a unique design. An architect designed the long-houses that volunteers built in the two summers prior to the game. A costume designer created look books for the different cultures, and a class at a textile design school turned the pictures into patterns in a range of sizes for the players to use. Enormous amounts of props were created by volunteers in the year before the game. Players were unable to use almost any of their existing fantasy larp costumes or equipment, forcing them to invest more into game as they prepared for it.

Anti-Fantasy Fantasy

Dragonbane was an attempt to recalibrate the very sense of wonder that many larpers feel they lose over time, as the excitement of being in a magical world deteriorates into a rote response to visual cliché. But the game had two more unique selling points. It was a truly international project, created by and to accommodate larpers from all over Europe and beyond. And it boasted the greatest draw imaginable: a solid, habitable world with functional magic and a fire-breathing dragon the size of a house.

In an intentional reversal of the fantasy larp cliché the action

◀ *After days of anticipation, Red came to the village to die. (Play, Janne Björklund)*



Production and backstage work. Clockwise: Architect's sketch for the Cinderhill temple. The treasure chest took four men to move and four keys to open (Restaged, Sampo Sakari Korhonen). All modern tools were removed before play started (Pregame, Janne Björklund). Final assembly of the dragon at Älvdalen (Construction, Saara Kähönen). The players pitching in to get the village finished before the beginning of the game (Construction, Saara Kähönen). A model of the temple.



of *Dragonbane* started a few days *after* an epic battle. The back story established that the dragontamers had already succeeded in killing one of the two dragon deities of Cinderhill. The magical energy released by the dragon's death had then confused the memories and senses of everyone in this very magical environment. This story device integrated into the narrative the challenge of acting believably in a very complex fictional environment. All characters had to begin the game by re-exploring their world and relationships and re-learning even such everyday knowledge as the names of their neighbours or the path to the nearest spring. The confusion device also conveniently made the exact sequence of the battle unclear, forcing players to focus on the event's central meanings (the cultural misunderstanding that had led to the battle and the death of the dragon god) rather than on individual grievances, heroics or losses.

During the game, the collective goal of the villagers became to convince the stronger and better-armed dragontamers that Cinderhill did not need rescuing from the remaining dragon. The dragontamers' goal was to decide whether their honour code about not harming humans should be interpreted in support of or in opposition to the villagers' wishes. And the witches needed to consider the cost and consequences of an offer from an oppressive far-away emperor to stop persecution of them within his realm in exchange for the remaining Cinderhill dragon's magically powerful heart. On the last evening of the game, the remaining dragon, Red, would arrive in the village to make a final speech to its followers.

Living the Dream

Even though not all buildings were finished on time, and the players ended up confronted with some modern equipment during the game, the world of Valenor did come alive. Fantasy realism ranged from having to fetch the water from a well and heat it over fire to baking bread every day in the bakery. The smiths had a working smithy, and catching the escaping sheep was just as fun and difficult in the larp as it would have been on a farm.

We had a working village! When we bakers realized we had bread and cheese, but nothing to slice the cheese with, one of the village smiths made us a perfectly good cheese-slicing tool!

Special effort was placed on making the game appropriate for children, and indeed many families who signed up for the game together felt safe enough to not always play in each other's company.

We got the best laugh when a worried father went to enquire about the well-being of his daughter, after having heard that she had cried with fear and excitement some time before. From among the bed sheets a laugh was heard as she exclaimed "Dad! I was role-playing!"

The wilderness of Älvdalen provided a stunning backdrop for the game. The game area included a large swathe of land that had recently been ravaged by forest fire, with coal-black charred tree-stumps and blood-red moss, an alien and terrifying landscape in which it was very easy to imagine that a dragon had

just died.

Some of us boys of the village were lying around on our backs, smoking our pipes, when we heard a girl singing in the most beautiful voice. We looked at each other, and without saying anything we all scampered to our feet and started running towards the sound. Finally we clambered up a hill and there she stood, singing something heart-breaking out over the battle-field, burned totally black before us.

All around the game area, weather added another level to the fully immersive surroundings.

My other witch-half and I decided at last to go and spy in the village and managed to sneak through in the darkness. I crawled in under a house and lay directly under the floor of the temple room where we witches were being discussed. The rain got heavier, and the crawl space flooded with cold water. I was completely soaked and completely happy, because nothing in the situation was simulated or fake. The cold, my fear of discovery, my excitement, the way sound carried through the floor.

But when the aim is perfection, every crack in the surface of the game is a potential distraction. Players felt, for instance, that the pyrotechnics staff in their orange safety garb, and the photographers documenting the project, discreet though they all attempted to be, hindered full immersion into the fiction.

Nightly sessions of singing and storytelling around campfires offered some of the best moments of the game. It was possible to forget all the off-game factors, like the photographer crouching in the moss who, with the clicking of their camera, succeeded at times to ruin the mood.

Prayers Answered

One of the design goals of *Dragonbane* was to dispense with game mechanics that require players to step out of the fiction to resolve questions related to clarity or safety. This poses special challenges when it comes to portraying magic. The magic system basically consisted of a single hard rule: Spellcasting would always be marked by a formal, channelling speech act signalled with the code word *veritas*. "Veritas – you will not speak of having seen us here until the sun rises". Veritas-instructions were to be obeyed absolutely, creating in effect a kind of social magic within the limits of the game. The design of a personal grammar of magic around veritas (gestures, incantations, props), was up to the individual player.

The special effects team could equip the magic users with scents, glow-in-the-dark potions, powders that burned with colourful flames, or liquids that would dramatically change colour when mixed together. They also timed fiction-breaking events (like a fire truck arriving with water) in ways that made these seem magical.

One of the most amazing moments was when the people in the village noticed there was no water in the well. The Adepts then decided to take the whole village outside Cinderhill to perform a ritual to pray to the dragon to fill the well. When the villagers returned astonishment arose: "Our prayers have





Caring for the sheep became part of the children's' duties. (Pregame, Janne Björklund)



The Dragontamers building a Wicker Man, which would be burned to honour their fallen. (Play, Janne Björklund)





◀ *Witches with a potion (Portrait, Janne Björklund), fire dancers at the dragon ritual in the village (Play, Sampo Sakari Korhonen) and the dragon in its death throes. (Play, Janne Björklund)*



All children and teenagers were placed in Cinderhill, since the village offered both creature comfort and the psychological safety of a home-like atmosphere. (Play, Saara Kähkönen)

“been answered! The well is full again!”
The fire-breathing, talking 20-metre animatronic dragon, built on top of a forestry machine, had been aggressively promoted for years leading up to the game. On the dragon’s maiden outing a week before the game, in Loimaa, Finland, it transpired that a fatal miscalculation had been made, which broke its neck, taking the hydraulic system with it. The organisers were able to keep the details of this disaster from the players and worked frantically against the clock to get the dragon repaired and to Sweden on time.

The arrival of the dragon in Cinderhill proved anti-climactic. Its legs were hiked up, drawing attention to the wheels; it had no wings or facial animation and it did not breathe fire. (The impressive low-temperature fire invented by the pyrotechnicians was used elsewhere in the game). Because only some of the dragon’s hidden cameras were operational, players were instructed to not try to engage with it too closely – making it impossible for the dragontamers to choose to fight it. The broken neck was cocked at an awkward

angle, giving the dragon a rather comical look, and a great effort of imagination was required for the players to assimilate this machine with their internal pictures of Cinderhill’s god.

But the dragon had come to the village to tell its followers that it was dying and that they should have to rule themselves from now on, and once that had happened – once Red was dead – the failed dragon machine immediately transformed into a very impressive prop. Its immobility and pained position suddenly made sense, the engine heat cooling through its skin in the night felt like life escaping the body. The grief of the villagers around their dead deity played out very movingly indeed.

That *Dragonbane* did not deliver the dragon the players had been promised was to a great degree the consequence of its broken neck. As a measure of the creative miracles worked by teams of hugely knowledgeable and passionate young volunteers in the Nordic larp community it was still an enormous achievement.

Connecting Larpers

The production of *Dragonbane* was co-ordinated from Finland and the game was played in Sweden, but over 500 individuals from 20 different countries participated in the production. One example of vital international assistance is the group of Italians taking on the main burden of village-building in northern Sweden during the first production summer. The game took four years to produce and the post-production (cleanup, village administration, documentation) is expected to take about as long.

As players and organisers were spread out across Europe, building a web tool for character creation was necessary. Through NEST, character coaches collaborated with players, creating biographies, dreams, ambitions and networks. The process encouraged the players to engage actively with the idea of every-day life in Valenor well in advance of the game, and enabled them to create relationships and establish common history regardless of geographical distance.

The game was organised and played primarily in English, but the challenge of the players’ different language backgrounds was also met with a beautiful game design fix: in Valenor, first language is an individual property, like eye colour, with which one is born. Growing up, children would of course also pick up other languages, so players were free to play in all languages they knew.

The largest communications challenge prior to the event was a question not of language but of culture: the different views in the participating countries on what larp can be. The game generated plenty of interesting debate even in player communities from which no-one ended up participating. To some, the idea of sleeping in character was astonishing, while others found the religious rituals inappropriate. In the end, the greatest contribution of *Dragonbane* to larp in Europe turned out to be not a re-booting of the fantasy genre, but the insertion into the canon of a multi-lingual game text, built in the Nordic tradition, shared and learned from by players from a variety of communities.



The witches mostly kept to themselves but offered atmosphere where they appeared (Play, Saara Kähönen)



Witch play was in great part constructed around the brewing of potions. (Detail, Saara Kähönen)



Some of the players and production crew after the game. (Group portrait, Janne Björklund)

Dragonbane

CREDITS: Timo Multamäki (producer), Elge Larsson (contacts in Sweden), Christopher Sandberg (game design), Heiko Romu (scenography), Esa Arbelius (props and building), Henri Sareskivi, Sanni Turunen, Essi Santala, Fredrik von Post & Eero Alasalmi (dragon), Anna Nummi (costume design), Niki Bergman (PR & media), Tiinaliisa Multamäki (finance), Mike Pohjola (world design), Morgan Jarl, Maija Nevala, Lillebjörn Rugstavold, Tiina Kuustie (player manuals, characters), Janne Särkelä (sounds & music), Timo Leipold (boot camp, Supplementica Valenorica), Jussi Syrjä (video), Mikko Mähönen (3D), Stamp (NEST), Janne Björklund (photography), Martti Ervasti (masonry), Jarno Kantelinen & Simon Farsi (graphic design), Stefan, Keijo, Kukka, Tomas Wiklund, Karoliina Artjoki, Team Spain, Gruppo La Greca (Cinderhill construction) and a large international team

DATE: 27 July – 4 August 2006

LOCATION: Älvdalen, Sweden

LENGTH: 6 days

PLAYERS: 500 participants in the project in some way, 325 players

BUDGET: €500,000

PARTICIPATION FEE: €145

GAME MECHANICS: Veritas, simple magic rules. No combat rules.

OTHER MATERIAL: www.dragonbane.org

Further Reading

KOLJONEN J (2008) The Dragon Was the Least of It. *Playground Worlds*.

KOLJONEN J, KUUSITIE T & MULTAMÄKI T (2007) *Dragonbane – The Legacy*.

POHJOLA M (2003) *Myrskyn Aika*.

A person is seen from behind, hiking on a dirt trail. The scene is set at sunset or sunrise, with a large, dark tree in the foreground on the left and a bright, hazy sky on the right. The person is wearing a red shirt and a backpack. The overall mood is serene and adventurous.

THE WHITE ROAD

WALKING THE LINE BETWEEN REALITY AND ROLE-PLAY

Bjarke Pedersen, Kristin Hammerås & Lars Munck

YOU ARE STANDING in the supermarket, trying to figure out how much money you can use on beer and how much to leave for food. The calculation is difficult since you have been drinking for 20 hours straight. Your focus is suddenly lost when your drunken friend drops a big glass of curry sauce and it breaks on the floor, leaving sticky sauce all over. You look at your friend frowning: "Lets get out of here! If they figure out it is us, they will not let us buy the beers!"



◀ *The beautiful Danish countryside served a photorealistic background for the larp. (Diegetic, The Road Knights)*



Kristin Hammerås (left) as herself, conducting ethnography and making a documentary on the real landevejsriddere, summer 2007. (Non-larp, unknown)



Kristin Hammerås as Bambi in The White Road. (Diegetic, The Road Knights)

The White Road was a collectively organized pervasive larp where the participants played *landevejsriddere*, Road Knights, members of a romanticized Danish drifter culture. The six designer-participants lived a weekend as drunken hobos on the open road, interacting with bystanders oblivious to the fact they were part of a larp.

The story was simple but compelling: The hobos were taking the ashes of their recently deceased friend for the last journey. Even after his death this nameless person was a symbol of hope and enlightenment to the characters, with different, but special relationship with each character: He was a guide, a father figure, a lover and a friend. His cremated remains were carried in an old milk bucket, and were scattered to the sea at the end of the journey. The point of the larp was to explore the carefree world of the Road Knights, to play characters that had hit rock bottom and only recently had begun the process of rebuilding their existence.

Preparing the Walk

The project was initiated by Lars Munck, who shared his concept with the group. While most larps are designed by a group of organizers, *The White Road* was created in a collective fashion at meetings with all players present. The purpose was to break the traditional hierarchic structure of the larp scene, and instead give the creative power back to the players.

In order to simulate real world relationships and real memories, no game fiction was written down: What the player remembered was what the character remembered; just as in real life people can have conflicting memories of the same events and experiences. This made the characters and the narrative more

natural. The minimalistic pre-production took only 15-20 hours: The players only needed to concern themselves with character relationships and concise backgrounds. In addition, costumes and iconic Road Knight props such as the baby carriages had to be obtained.

The White Road was about moving larping closer to reality, trying to reach a purity of human interaction. The initial thoughts circled around exploring the everyday stories and roles of the real world – especially those of the Road Knights.

The Road Knights follow a strict code: They do not accept any governmental welfare, do drugs, steal or beg for money, and to be initiated you have to sleep outside for a full year. Especially to the older generation of Danes they represent a simpler, romantic rural time, when people helped each other. This positive attitude extended to the players portraying Road Knights when they interacted with “real world people”.

The Road Knights’ use of roles and alternative identity was interesting to explore as a larper, as it lies very close to what larpers do when entering a game world. To many people, life and identity constitute a seemingly fixed frame, which you either choose actively, or are given. But Road Knights are a fascinating group as they oppose the given role as “homeless”. They de-victimize themselves by reinventing their role in society, playing on a familiar and respected vagabond archetype.

The important difference is that to the Road Knights this is not a game, but a serious matter of not regressing into oblivion. It is a proud counteraction to the established society they cannot and will not return to. The life on the border between reality and self-made reality was the focal point of *The White Road*.



The game began as the players woke up in hangover. This afterburner method highlighted the whole experience, as the characters were sipping beer all the time. (Diegetic, The Road Knights)





Farewell to the friend at the end of the road, as his ashes are scattered in the sea. (Diegetic, The Road Knights)



Washing the sweat and dust off after the funeral. In the Nordic countries, skinny dipping is not as transgressive as in some other other parts of the world. (Diegetic, The Road Knights)

In the Game and the Real World

Merging the game world and the ordinary world gave endless possibilities to the players, since the playground is vast and the players could do anything they please. Forty kilometres of roads were chosen as a backdrop to bring about some structure for the event.

Like in most pervasive larps, we had to prepare for the interactions between players and outsiders. Instead of trying to work around the bystanders we invited them into the game. We tackled the obvious ethical considerations – non-players participating without knowledge or consent, running into real knights during the larp – by taking responsibility for the interactions. A golden rule of positive story creation was set: Interactions with non-players should only stimulate and benefit the outsiders' experience of our shared reality. As long as we created good and positive stories, it didn't matter whether it was "real" or not. The authenticity of the experience would remain just as valid.

The evening before the larp, we met and finished the last bits on the costumes, talked about our characters and got quite drunk. The next morning at 08:00, with a massive hangover, we ventured forth on the roads towards our destination. The time was spent mainly walking, drinking and talking. Since it is quite difficult to plan ahead when, hung over or drunk we set small goals easy to reach, such as walking to the next village six kilometers away before having a rest. Often you found yourself walking alone and realized you had not talked to anybody for a long time. Boredom was a part of the larp, but if it got to you, all you needed to do was to interact with the other players or random people passing by.

One of the great surprises of the game was the way the real world forced the characters upon us. When trucks passed us by, the drivers honked and waved, and expected the knights to wave back. This ritual confirmed the kinship of truckers and Road Knights, two tribes living their lives on the road. During the larp, outsiders never exhibited any mistrust; in their eyes, the characters were real. This left no room for the players to react without the character: The players did not have to *perform*, we could just *be*.

Several players have after the larp described the experience as just as real as their ordinary lives. Once started, we felt there was no way of stopping the game, due to the pressure from the outside world. Also, the simple life was very appealing, as one player notes:

When we agree that the larp has finished, I somehow cannot let go of the blissful drunken feeling from the road, wishing to go back to it. A simple and thoughtless life. For every hour that now goes by, I feel increasingly depressed, and once the last of the alcohol wears off, I start to get physically ill. By the time we meet for dinner and debriefing, I have a cold sweat, and my hands are shaking uncontrollably... but it stops when I drink my beer!

It is quite shocking to me that the larp could have physical as well as existential consequences that extend into my own real life. This made me ponder upon the idea of being "truly happy".

Life on the Road

For one of us, Kristin Hammerås, the larp was only the beginning an adventure, as she went back to live with the knights afterwards, conducting an ethnographic study and making a documentary film. She recounts her experience of the larp and the reality:

The White Road was a very realistic experience for me. Walking the road, mildly intoxicated by a regular intake of beer and spirits, meeting people in their everyday life that responded to us as real people, not as actors. The feeling of being my character Bambi was total. I felt like her, I lived like her, I was soaked in the same blurred reality, smelling of booze, tobacco and sweat. I wondered whether it was possible that a fictitious experience could feel more real than the real thing?

After the larp I got in touch with a group of Road Knights at their biggest gathering at *Dollefjelde Musse Market*. I met an open and friendly group of people who heartily invited me into their community. After two days of taking a sip from every beer I got, I rediscovered the constant inebriation, a familiar from the larp. The knights' generosity was limitless when it came to beer, and that helped me relax and get to know all these strangers I bumped into. Still, I had to focus if I wanted to make the documentary and gather the observations for my thesis. Staying somewhat sober coloured the rest of my stay with the knights: They tried to adopt me into their life while I tried to keep at least a few centimetres of distance. Still, they often told me to make sure I got off the road in the end: "Remember that you have important things to do in your life – don't stay with us". They told me stories about a girl who came to make a film and ended up as a road knight.

Over a period of 4 months I shared the life on the road. I had a dual role as an observer and a participant, and quickly started to look like a real Road Knight: My clothes were dirty, my pram was colourfully decorated, and I had medals and badges on my hat.

During the larp, my experience was one of total surrender to the present moment on the road, but when I lived the real thing during the fieldwork, I felt like an observer. I was a friend from the outside trying to understand, and learn from someone that knew more than me. As Bambi I could embrace my role without being afraid of losing myself, doing it wrong or being ridiculous. During my fieldwork I was sometimes asked if I was a Road Knight, and I always emphasized that I was a Norwegian student. The line between an observer and a participant is thin, and I needed the safety of detachment.

The Reality of Larp

In *The White Road* there were no breaks in the illusion, the game world equalled the real world. Since the larp took place in the present, and concerned a subculture where people choose their identities, we faced an interesting dilemma: If we all are playing roles in our life what is the difference between the knights playing the roles as Road Knights, not being in a larp, and us as



Hvalrusen (left) maintains his inebriation by downing a beer on the road. (Diegetic, The Road Knights)

larpers playing the roles of Road Knights in a larp?

The real knights are very conscious about their role-playing. In their life on the road they clearly distinguish between when they are “on the stage” – meeting Mrs and Mr Denmark, and presenting the proper image of a Road Knight – and being with the family of other knights or biological family. They have road names and costume-like uniforms, worn when presenting their road character.

When the knights start walking the road, they usually put the former life behind and start over with a clean slate. This can be compared to a player going to a larp and trying to think and act as her character, *not* thinking about experiences as “herself”. For the knights, the need not to think about a past that might bring up disturbing and painful memories is accomplished partly by drinking. As we experienced in *The White Road*, the steady inebriation helps reach a state of mind where past and future become blurred and the immediate present is sharpened.

So, what distinguishes a larp character from the real world role of a Road Knight? Like real knights, we took road names and wore costumes. We shared the same roads and the same stage, and sought to forget our past and focus on the present. Like the knights, we had to face the immediate consequences of our actions.

The only big difference was the long term consequences of our actions. Like tourists, we were not stuck with the life on the road; we could leave it after three days. Nobody would judge our performance as bad or good, and we would never come back to the same spot for help or a place to sleep. Also, the nature of the past we were trying to forget was different.

The White Road was very different from most larps in the way the theme and the setting were set so close to reality. The larp highlighted the thin line between illusion and reality, and the similarity of role-play in larp and everyday life.

The White Road

CREDITS: Collectively organized by the player-participants Troels Barkholt-Spangsbo, Pia Basballe, Kristin Hammerås, Lars Munck, Bjarke Pedersen and Linda Udby.

DATE: September 8th-10th 2006

LOCATION: 40 km of road between Copenhagen and Fredriks-sund, Denmark

LENGTH: 42 hours.

PLAYERS: 6 player-creators.

BUDGET: 300 DKK.

PARTICIPATION FEE: 50 DKK

GAME MECHANICS: None.

OTHER MATERIAL: <http://recap.dk/road.html>; Hammerås K (2007) Knight of the Road. Documentary film.

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Dissecting Larp.



PROSOPOPEIA BARDO 2 MOMENTUM

PERSUADING WITH PERVASIVE POSSESSION

Andie Nordgren



The resistance movement was based in secret headquarters (Restaged, Staffan Jonsson), but it also operated around the city of Stockholm (Promotion, Staffan Jonsson)

ELECTRICAL SPARKS FLY, and the alarm siren goes off in the abandoned nuclear reactor cavern under Stockholm. The air is vibrating with white noise from the spirit communication equipment in the reactor pit, as we prepare to be willingly possessed by the spirit of a dead activist. I'm channelling cybernetics researcher Gregory Bateson. Next to me transsexual activist Sylvia Rivera and magician Jack Parsons are entering their vessels. We're on a mission now.

Players have marked powerful sites on map. The players searched for a dead drop in the rain for hours in the wrong part of town after botching a triangulation puzzle. (Detail, Staffan Jonsson)

Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum was staged in Sweden during the fall of 2006. The game was a combination of full immersion larping, alternate reality gaming and urban exploration. 30 players dove into a world where spirit communication and Enochian magic tied this world and the next together, in a battle against power-hungry, reactionary forces working on both sides of death to destroy the world.

The adventure lasted for five weeks, and the game experience was woven into everyday life and public spaces. Players moved seamlessly between immersive play of the possessing spirit (the fictional characters of the game), role-playing the player-self-as-being-possessed, to pushing the game almost out of mind when dealing with daily life in the outside world. This possession model of player-character relations took the merging of game and life to a new level.

The core game activity was finding meaningful and powerful locations, magical nodes, around Stockholm and performing rituals there that would tip the battle between forces in the spirit world in a favourable direction. The nodes were discovered through online research and decoding heavily garbled or encrypted messages from the spirit world. For this work, the players employed diegetic technology developed and built specifically for the game, such as a node-reading glove and a listening device for sounds of ghost events.

The game play intensified on three weekends, kicking into high gear with missions where the spirits, aligned into four groups according to the four elements, had to help each other in order to turn the tide of the rebellion underway in the spirit world. Players had 24/7 access to the game headquarters in the abandoned nuclear reactor cave, complete with communication equipment, computers, research material, ritual space and relaxing areas.

Momentum was the second instalment of the *Prosopopeia* series, scaling up a design that had been tried out in *Prosopopeia Bardo 1: Där vi föll* in 2005. These games more or less defined the genre of pervasive larp as a type of game that blurred the borders of game and life while using immersive role-playing as a strong component.

Possession

The core design element was the *possession model of role taking*, which allowed merging the game with players' everyday lives, and playing it ceaselessly for a very long time. The point was to bring in mechanics and aesthetics from alternate reality games, where players generally do not have characters, but still immerse in the game "as if it was real".

As a player, I entered the game as myself, with all my skills and knowledge, with one exception – I acted as if the game world was real, and that the supernatural was possible. I started playing the game as my magical self, and worked with the other players to share tips on how to best prepare for the possession we had willingly accepted would happen. We had been told that a skill we already had, that of role-playing a character, was excellent for smoothing the way for the possessing spirit and helping

it to gain a foothold in this world, in our flesh. We just had to intensely role-play these real, dead people, who would then possess us through that role-playing. They would not take over completely, just gratefully share our bodies for a while, performing the important work of saving the world.

I was possessed by the late Gregory Bateson, a kind teacher and scientist of worldviews, and I still see the world through his eyes today. Other spirits were more volatile, and had raging debates with their hosts over issues like racism, sexism or veganism.

The method served several purposes in the game. It enabled players to stay in the fiction for the full five weeks of game time. It also made it possible to introduce alternate reality game style tasks, research and puzzles since the skills of the players could be employed to solve them, not only the skills of the spirit characters.

The spirit would often have opinions and provide direction, while the player would do things like write code to process a ciphertext or google for Enochian spells and spirit communication technology to better understand scrambled communications from the dead. In a traditional immersive larp, having a poet born in 1860 drive a modern car would break the illusion but with the possession model, game activities could be handled by either the player or the possessing spirit in a flexible way.

But the model also forced us to face philosophical questions about personality, spirituality and reality. What is a person – a body, thoughts or behaviour? What if role-playing someone real could be seen as channelling their spirit? Trying to your fullest to think like them, act like them, and dress like them; could it be said that you actually become them?

I am not my name

I am not my body

I am not my mind

I am not my thoughts

I am not my breath

I am not what I create

I am not my memories

I am not what I forget

Then what am I but motion and flicker
in the mind of another.

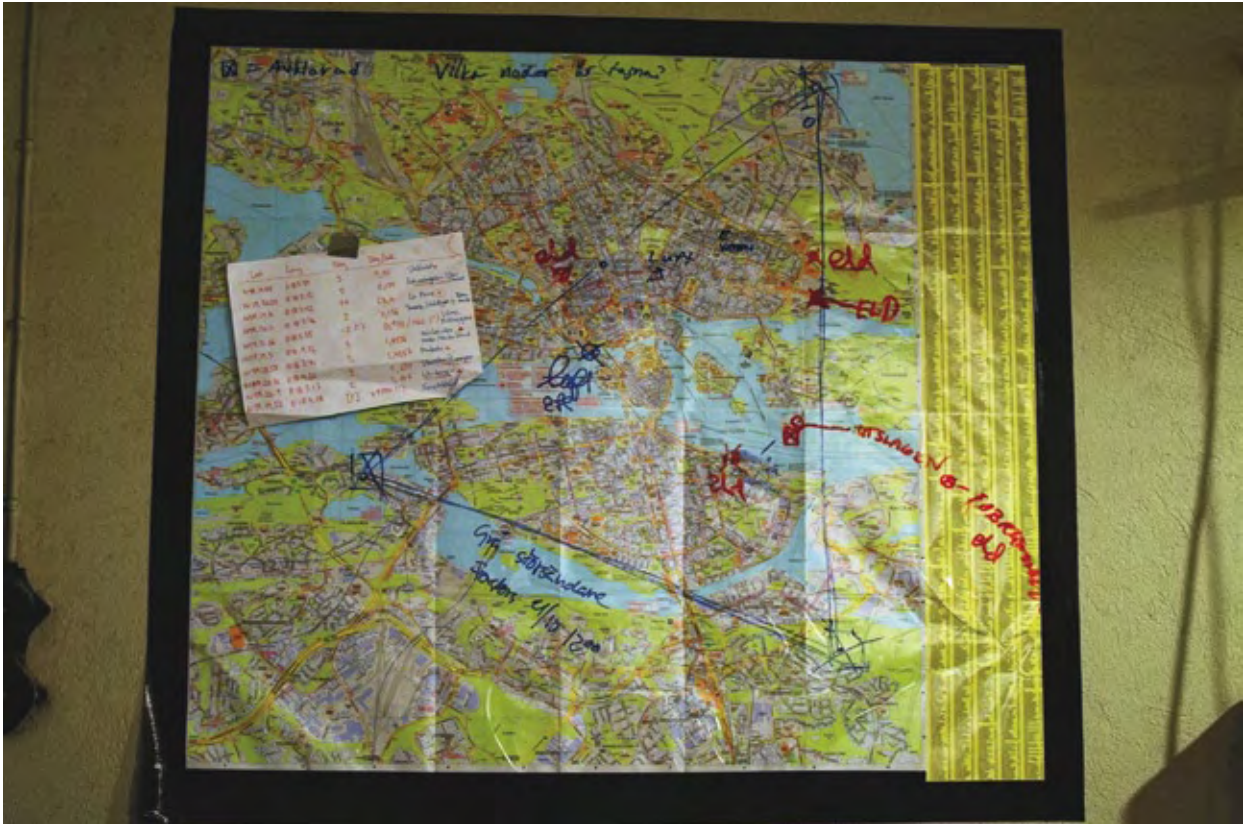
(diegetic character diary)

The game aimed to tear down the wall between life and game, and a deep political theme was posing questions of what reality is, how it is created and by whom.

Reality Game Reality

The alternate reality game aspects of *Momentum* were taken to extremes to create as seamless a merge between life and game as possible – blurring the boundaries to the point where anyone and anything could potentially be a part of the game. There were a lot of twists, turns and layers: For example, once I had signed up, the game itself was revealed to be a cover for the real but secret operation – bringing the spirits back into the flesh.

The game story and content used reality as a source book as much as possible. We read real books, surfed real websites



and researched real things, knowing that they would be useful in the game; sometimes there was indistinguishable fictional information planted in the real sources. For example, some spirit characters had a real history in the research on *electronic voice phenomenon*; they had been real people who had seriously studied spirit communication.

The nodes where we needed to perform rituals were places with a strong history or current symbolical meaning, like a memorial to Swedes who fought in the Spanish civil war or a piece of public art in the heart of the posh party district. The rituals used to purify or strengthen these places of power were designed by the player groups based on their research about the location and ideas on what would give the most powerful effect. The effort and courage players put into the rituals affected how powerful the effect on the game story was.

The rituals included very real, scary, exhilarating and possibly offensive actions in public spaces. It was in these situations that the negotiations between game and reality were really put to the test – how do you explain to curious passers-by why you are drawing chalk circles and chanting magical protection spells at the site where prime minister Olof Palme was murdered, while trying to retain immersion into the spirit character who needs to perform the ritual? This active engagement with outsiders was new territory.

Playing on the edge of reality is a very powerful experience that forces players to question both their sanity and their understanding of reality in general. Challenging common notions of what should be perceived as real brings up issues of power over consensus reality and the power to define it.

The game style of *Momentum* was very different from a traditional larp with clear boundaries marking both the start and finish of the game, and the difference between game and reality. But as a pervasive larp, *Momentum* also followed in the footsteps of Swedish immersive role-playing tradition – the aim for creating a game world that provides an all-encompassing illusion, a game world so rich it engulfs the player, offering them a powerful launch pad for full character immersion.

Through its bleeding into the vastness of all of reality that could potentially become part of the game, *Momentum* aimed to give players the most powerful immersive game experience yet. What could be a more perfect and complete illusion than not being able to see the difference between the game and the rest of the world?

For this to work, it requires players to immerse on a slightly different level – to throw themselves fully into playing as if the game was real, letting all the synchronicities, patterns and potentials feed into their experience. As a player, I was not only immersing in my spirit character, I was also deeply immersed in the life-game merger. The game asked us questions like “What if magic was real?” and then presented the promise of a compelling experience if we accepted that scenario as reality. It put our bodies in the streets, running, breathing, chanting, taking up space. All real, all happening to us, right here, right now.

The real world can completely melt away when you are deeply

immersed in a traditional larp character. But for long moments when playing *Momentum* reality did not just melt away, but blurred and diffused into a realm where nothing and everything was true.

Techno-Occult Game Mastering

As *Momentum* was organized as part of a research project on pervasive games, it was also designed as a trial run for pervasive gaming technologies, both augmented artefacts and citywide game mastering systems. Custom systems were built both to facilitate surveillance of the players and to enable a combination of automated, semi-automated and manual game master interventions in the game.

For example, the techno-magical rig in the reactor core had a range of pre-recorded messages that could be triggered by a player searching on various channels and changing parameters on the equipment. But players could also sometimes find spirits live on the line and interact directly with them by transmitting messages over audio or a text interface.

An important design choice for the use of technology in the game was to not try and hide the inevitable technical glitches and problems in the equipment used by players, but rather design these into the game experience as spiritual interference. This gave the players a way to get interesting game play from malfunctioning cool technology, instead of having it ruin the experience.

Other important game mastering methods were the numerous online characters played by the game masters over email and different instant messaging systems, as well as the four players secretly acting as spies for the game masters.

Pervasive Ambition

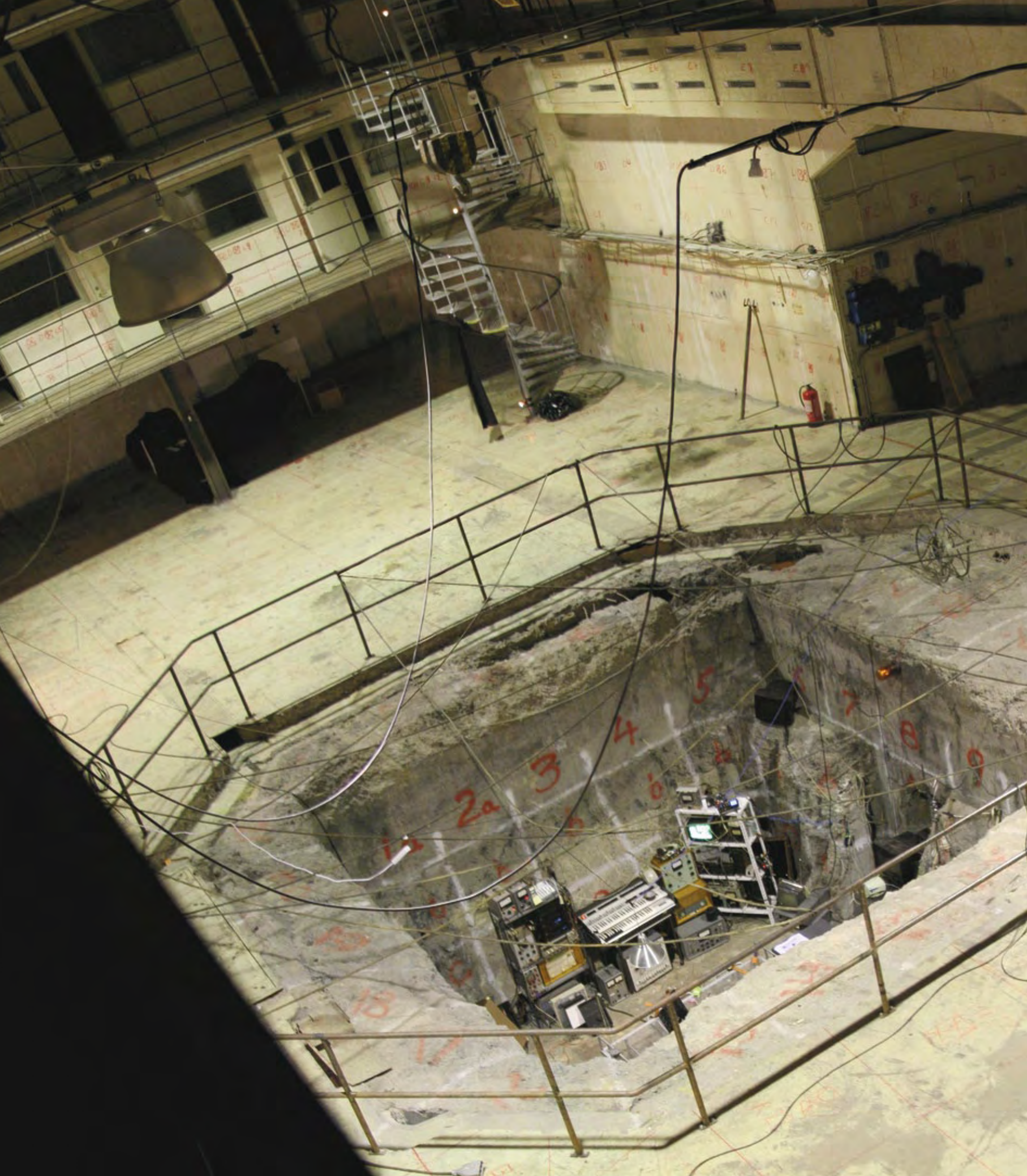
Momentum was the peak of a fascination with blurring the boundaries between life and game in parts of the Nordic larp scene. The topic had been previously explored in games like underground street game *Scen 3* (2001-2004), which questioned the rules of the cityscape, and *Där vi föll*, which tested the possession role-taking model for the first time. The concept of *game-sustained life*, a dream of a class of people making their living from playing games, was also inspirational. Other sources of ideas were alternate reality games like *The Beast* (2001) and *Majestic* (2001), as well as the urban exploration movement.

Interactive Emmy winning participation drama production *Sanningen om Marika* (2007) was an unofficial sequel to the two *Prosopopeia* games. Set partly in the same story world, it used some props, game documents and story elements from the previous games while focusing on topics of conspiracy theory and the possibilities of choosing a life outside society.

Momentum was not the first game to use many of the components in it, but it became the first to combine them on a grand scale, making it one of the most ambitious productions in the genre to date.

“Don’t forget the dead revolutionaries!” During the last night of the game the players staged a demonstration through the city ▶ of Stockholm. “The dead live!” (Diegetic, Jaakko Stenros)

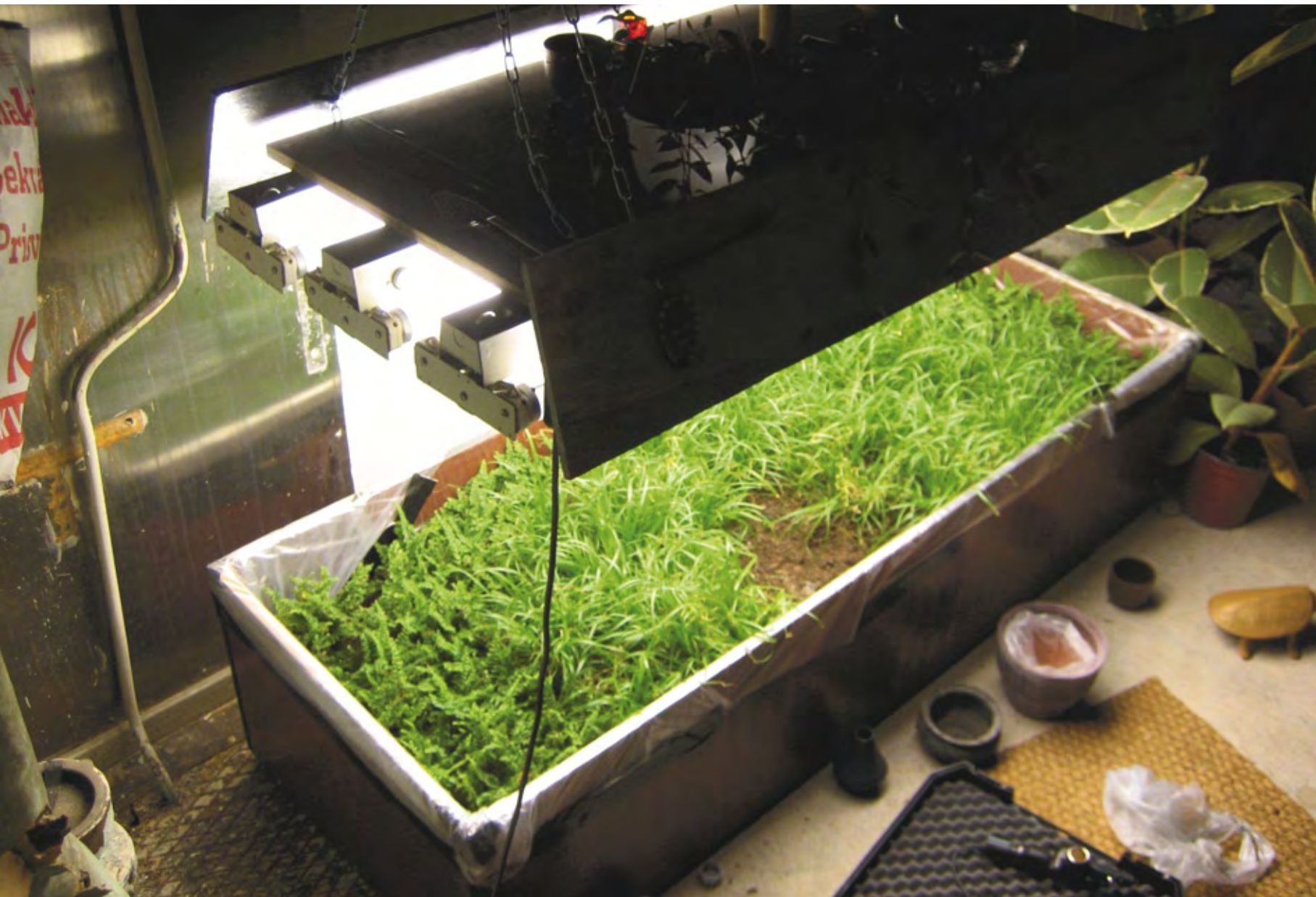








The EVP rig, located where the nuclear reactor used to be, was used to communicate with the dead. (Detail, Staffan Jonsson)
◀ The player headquarters used to be a nuclear reactor. (Detail, Alexander Graff)



*As the headquarters was located 30 meters underground, there were no windows. Yet there had to be plants in the Earth room.
(Detail, Jaakko Stenros)*



*After the demonstration the players celebrated. The party was open for non-players, but the players stayed in character.
(Diegetic, Jaakko Stenros)*



Momentum combined the aesthetics of occultism, urbanism and technology. (Promotion, Anders Davén)



One of the tasks of Fire faction was finding the jamming stations and main antenna of the Grey – and destroying them.
(Detail, Staffan Jonsson)

Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum

CREDITS: Staffan Jonsson (producer), Emil Boss, Martin Ericsson and Daniel Sundström (design), Henrik Esbjörnsson, (locations) and Annika Waern and Christopher Sandberg (executive producers); Karl Bergström, Niclas Lundborg, Pernilla Rosenberg, Sofia Stenler, Torbiörn Fritzon and Tobias Wrigstad (scenario design), Anders Muammar (props), Karim Muammar (rules), Linus Gabrielsson, Henrik Summanen and Jonas Söderberg (sounds), Anders Daven (graphics), and Moa Hartman (costumes), with a technology team including Karl-Petter Åkesson, Henrik Bäärnheim, Sofia Cirverius, Anders Ernevi, Pär Hansson, Niclas Henriksson, Tony Nordström, Erik Ronström, Olof Ståhl, Anders Wallberg, Peter Wilhemsson and Maria Åresund

DATE: 1 October – 5 November 2006

LOCATION: Mostly in and around Stockholm, Sweden

LENGTH: 36 days, incl. 3 weekends of intense play

PLAYERS: 30 players, 5 game masters, a dozen supporting cast

BUDGET: A few hundred thousand Euros, mostly spent on research work – not directly contributing to the larp

PARTICIPATION FEE: €100

GAME MECHANICS: Play as if it was real. Possession Model, prototype technology with diegetic interfaces
OTHER MATERIAL: <http://momentum.sics.se>

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TOTEM

BODY LANGUAGE AND TRIBALISM IN HIGH DEFINITION

Peter Munthe-Kaas

MÅ WAS PAINTED THE FIRST TIME *by her love from last summer. It became a last fleeting memory of what had been, and a sort of good-bye ritual for the two. When Må woke up on the second day on the ritual site, somewhat late, she knew that it was now allowed for her and the other females in the tribe to take mates. Ulv, the alpha female had taken three mates, and since there were only seven men in the tribe and four women all in all, Må quickly realized that if she wanted to keep her position as second in command, she needed two mates for herself. One she took out of love, the other for pure status reasons.*¹

◀ *The initiation rituals marked the transformation from youth to adulthood. (Play, Mathias Kromann Rode)*
The players practiced Ars Amandi (above) and Ars Ordo (below) in workshops. (Workshop, Peter Munthe-Kaas) ▶

Totem was an experimental post-apocalyptic larp about tribes. The players experienced a rite of passage in a society without civilization, in a tribal culture where taboos and rituals dominated life. The play focused around body language, status and hierarchy, aiming for an intense experience.

At the core of *Totem* was a story about coming of age. The young from two tribes, matriarchal *KaNappa* and patriarchal *BoSoto*, had been sent to the ritual grounds, where they would shed the easy life of children and take on the responsibility of adults through a series of rituals. In the rituals, every initiate had to find their place in the hierarchy of their tribe.

Totem was a tragedy, a story about mankind forgetting its culture. But it was also a story of personal tragedy for the characters seeing their former lovers taken as mates by others, or ending up at the bottom of the hierarchy. In the liminal ritual where the young become adults and the old leave the tribe, everybody shared the burden of knowing that one day, when they themselves were ending adult life, they would pass on the fragments they remembered from the rituals to the children.

The post-apocalyptic setting was only used to emphasize the premise of *Totem*; that the process of civilization had reverted and was now at the last stages of degeneration. The players would enact two tribes who had travelled far to gather on their sacred ritual grounds, where the young from each tribe would enter adulthood through a rite of passage.

We have come far from beyond the point of no return and even though mankind is not threatened with extinction, the things that made us human are disappearing. Consciousness, soul or free will, whatever it is that made us different from beasts, is almost gone. [...] We want to create a story about a degenerating culture. Mankind made it further than we could have ever dreamt of, but the tide of progress turned and civilization started to degenerate. In this future people again live in nomadic tribes without written language or significant remnants of the lost civilization. Instinct takes over where rules and explanations no longer exist. Meaning and depth are redundant, words are forgotten and songs are hummed instead. (*Totem* website)

Coming of Age on Sacred Ground

The larp was played at an old burnt down farm, which was chosen as much for practical reasons as because of the requirements of the setting. The ritual grounds were divided into spaces with different functions and atmospheres. Eating and cooking were done by a common fireplace featuring numerous ways of displaying status, with seats placed at different levels and with different possibilities to overlook the area. The players slept in a shed, on hay with fur covers. A few areas were also set aside for simple play and competition, such as a tree for climbing.

Totem was driven by planned rituals, competitions and moral dilemmas led by elders of the tribes, played by the game masters. The elders were the carriers of culture and tradition, leading the young into adulthood. As the larp proceeded, the role of the elders diminished, until the participants were left alone with the full burden of adult life.

The first day of the larp was oriented towards introductions of the area and the common and different traditions of the tribes. One tribe was defined as matriarchal and the other as patriarchal, partly to create interesting dynamics of a culture clash, partly to provide both genders with dominant and submissive roles.

The participants were purified in the sweat lodge, where they also went through a spiritual dream journey to find their totem animals and names. During this day the young also learned to mix the sacred colours used in body painting, symbolising adulthood and the right to mate. Constant painting and repainting of each other's bodies was a central activity during the rest of the larp.

The second day evolved around the exploration of the possibilities and responsibilities of adulthood. Every initiate crafted a symbol of youth, which was burned at the end of the day. They crafted necklaces out of rocks to symbolize adulthood. The elders removed their masks, symbolizing their social death: From this moment on, the initiates could fight, love and mate as adults. One player later described that the necklace would bounce against her chest every time she was climbing and playing, thus reminding of her adult status.

The last day was about the tribal life, mating and stigmatizing. The higher status members of the dominating genders chose partners, and conflicts arose as people had to leave their tribes for a new and different existence in another. One member of each tribe was declared unwanted for mating and traded to the other tribe, and one dominant member of each tribe was declared *Non*, never to become adult.

The day ended with a big feast after which the characters had to decide on how to end the physical lives of the elders. The *KaNappa* tribe sent one elder lovingly away and killed the other in anger; the *BoSoto* alpha proved his worth in battle against one elder, and strangled the other with respect. After the ritual, the tribes returned to their homes as adults.

The Arts of Love and Status

Totem was preceded by a half a year of collaborative preparatory work of players and organizers. Three weekend workshops were staged. The first working with and the central aspects of the larp (body language, love, hierarchy and status), the second with relations in the two groups and the third one was mostly used for small-talk about the game and making costumes. The



Players constantly repainted their arms and bodies, thus upholding the status relationships. (Play, Mathias Kromann Rode) ▶



Concept art was used in costume design. (Promotion, Kristoffer Thuroe)

methods used were inspired partly by experiences as participants in other larps (especially *Mellan himmel och hav*), partly built on the organizers' previous work in *System Danmarc* and partly inspired by Augusto Boal's *Forum Theatre*.

A central part of the workshops was creating a safe environment for the participants to work and play in, in order to prepare the players for the demanding larp. Work was carried out on creating positive group dynamics and empowering and including the participants in the creative process. Both body language and spoken language were worked on, as the idea was to hamper the use of speech without reverting to "caveman language". Thus, it was decided that only the present could be addressed in speech, as the ability to think hypothetically was lost. Body language was practiced by creating still pictures (drawing on *impro* exercises) of potential in-game situations. The participants worked with postures and physical expressions, producing a collective understanding of how they wanted body language to work.

The cultures were developed from A4 presentations to something that the players had an intuitive sense of, rather than a set of rules and norms. The workshops and the big effort made to work with cultures and matching of expectations had a central role in making the larp as successful as it was. (player, male)

The workshops also introduced the diegetic tools of the larp. *Ars Amandi* was used for amorous interaction (from *Mellan himmel och hav*), and *Ars Ordo* was created for resolving violent conflicts.

In *Ars Ordo*, social status is tested through masculine staring contests, which escalate until one party gives up. These status fights were only carried out within genders, never between them. The challenge starts with casual eye contact: In most cases, one party yields quietly by lowering her gaze before the contest gathers more witnesses. If neither contestant looks down, the contest escalates; the contestants move towards each other and start to draw an audience. As the contestants begin to growl, snarl and try to overpower each other by looking as big as possible, they get the full attention of the entire tribe, and the social investment grows large. If the contest still remains unsettled, the witnesses start to take sides, shaking the entire hierarchy of the tribe.

The beauty of *Ars Ordo* is that one party invariably yields, and the losing side of the contest feels the loss very personally: After all, this kind of a contest is always also a non-diegetic contest between players.

I looked at Tyr and he looked back. At first I looked away, but he looked angry so I looked at him again. We gained eye contact and stared at each other for a long, long time, and I





◀ *The current alpha of the matriarchal Ka-Nappa tribe is displaying her status by the fireplace. (Play, Mathias Kromann Rode)*

think people noticed. He stood up, and I jumped down from the tree I was sitting in and stood before him. We stood there for a long time. Then he raised his arms and I followed... then I started to snarl and he shouted, we growled and snarled for a long time, while we held each other's heads...but I was the first Nappa, I was Ulv's first mate. So I had to win.

We shouted and walked around each other [...] and pushed each other. It went on for a long time. Then the Ka started to stand up...first Ild placed herself behind Tyr and I got angry and shouted even louder. Then Må placed herself behind me, then Lo and then Eg. [...] First he stopped shouting, then he collapsed and suddenly he was sitting on the ground howling and hitting the ground.

I turned around while the Ka sat down. I looked down at him and I growled at him. I stood above him. Then I snorted and snarled while I walked around him. He still howled submissively. I took a hold of him to get him up, to get him to stop. He was still the second Nappa, but he did not want to. I wheezed at him "stop behaving like a Non". (player, male, matriarchal tribe)

The body-painting was also a central part of the hierarchy in the larp. As painting oneself was a taboo, the amount of attention given to your paintings was a visual status symbol. Also, the dominant gender established ownership by painting their sign on their mates.

These two elements, in addition to several other aspects, made *Totem* a very real experience, a tangible and visceral experience for the participants constantly aware of each others' actions as part of the status game. Andie Nordgren (2008) has named this detailed interaction as *high resolution larping*. She argues that building a strong *ensemble* through diegetic rules and workshops enabled a lot of high resolution interaction, as the participants received both a framework and tools to manoeuvre in the larp.

When the relationships in the game feel real, the game world feels real. You have the ability to pull the action in the game from the clunky levels of kings and politics, down into the very subtle shifts and processes in the group. (Nordgren 2008)

◀ *If no one cared for you, the rapid degeneration of body paint signaled a drop in status. Here, after a dramatic fall, a young male is reaccepted into the flock with a fresh wash. (Play, Mathias Kromann Rode)*

Beyond the Rite of Passage

The wall dividing the participant from the character in *Totem* was very thin and thus many participants were very personally affected by the experience. A lot of focus was put into the immediate debrief, to allow the players to resume their everyday identities in a calm and safe fashion.

I wish I could explain it to outsiders, but I doubt if they will ever understand. They have missed so much and therefore [*Totem*] will always have a special place in my heart. We have experienced this with and against each other. We have built up and torn down, but first of all we have done it together. (player, female, patriarchal tribe)

It was very hard to let go of *Totem*. It has been wonderful to get some distance to it. I am now thinking that it was a positive experience. I have no doubt that it was the craziest experience in a hundred years. I did not know that a larp could hit me this hard. It was a brutal experience. (player, female, matriarchal tribe)

In the context of Danish larp, *Totem* was a bold experiment in exploring how far you can push your players physically and mentally. The notion of workshops as a central tool of communication and planning of larps has also spread and one of the most significant outputs from the larp is the workshop handbook describing the thoughts and tools behind the workshops in a simple and practical way.

Totem

CREDITS: Peter S. Andreasen, Rasmus Høgdall, Peter Munthe-Kaas, Mathias Kromann Rode and Kristoffer Thurøe

DATE: 18-22 July 2007

LOCATION: Burnt down farmyard near Randers, Denmark

LENGTH: 54 hours

PLAYERS: 28

BUDGET: €6,500

PARTICIPATION FEE: €150, €300 with costume

GAME MECHANICS: Ars Amandi and Ars Ordo

Further Reading:

NORDGREN A (2008) High Resolution Larping: Enabling Subtlety at Totem and Beyond. *Playground Worlds*.

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EN STILLA MIDDAG MED FAMILJEN

FIRST PERSON BOURGEOIS DRAMA

Johanna Koljonen

IT IS MIDNIGHT *and I am standing by the French windows. Incomprehensibly, some kind of conga line has just made its way through the building. Enforced mirth, surely? I scan their faces, a little too drunk, smiles a little too stiff, eyes rather desperate – Julie looks mortified, friends won't meet my gaze. Gbatokai is nodding, urging me on, but he is not family and I am waiting for Christian, making sure he is with me. Our little sister Linda's suicide note is shaking in my hands.*

En stilla middag med familjen (*A Nice Evening with the Family*) was a larp adaptation of seven classic theatrical plays from the tradition of Nordic bourgeois drama. The youngest of these was Thomas Vinterberg's *Festen* (*The Celebration*, 1998, originally a film), in which horrific family secrets about incest and suicide are revealed in speeches at the patriarch's 60th birthday dinner party.

Festen was employed as the narrative frame of the game. In the mansion and around the table, woven into the story as family members, guests and staff, gathered the characters from Henrik Ibsen's *Et dukkehjem* (*A Doll's House*, 1879) and *Gengangere* (*Ghosts*, 1881), August Strindberg's *Leka med elden* (*Playing With Fire*, 1892) and *Fröken Julie* (*Miss Julie*, 1888), Anne Charlotte Leffler's *Sanna kvinnor* (*True Women*, 1883) and, charmingly, Tove Jansson's *Pappan och havet* (*Moominpappa and the Sea*, 1965).

These stories all engage with bourgeois family values and especially with gender within the rigid constraints of class, conduct and expectations. In addition, *En stilla middag* was designed to explore and exploit the similarities between larp and theatre, as well as those between larp and avant-garde freeform role-playing. The game was played four times. The last of these performances – the one I attended as a player – was in English and had an international cast.

Imagining the Upper Classes

Vinterberg's *Festen* is in some ways a farce as well as a tragedy, and the four performances of *En stilla middag* reflected this to differing degrees. With most players immersed into characters who were going through or processing personal traumas, playing the individual plots for laughs was obviously undesirable as well as very difficult. The game was structured on the cardinal rule of etiquette to always keep up appearances, to maintain a

stiff upper lip and save face regardless of the cost.

For the player watching the events unfold from a first-person position, however, the very absurdity of trying to continue a birthday dinner after a speech detailing sexual abuse perpetrated by the host – not to mention the unfolding tragedies of the other plays, triggered in this production by the Klingensfeldts' secret being revealed – could create an undertone of dark comedy.

In some cases, observing and enjoying this absurdity was as appropriate to the characters as to the players. For other players, perhaps identifying very closely with their characters because of class background or other personal reasons, it would have been very difficult to experience the game as satirical at all. The degree to which the game was psychologically harrowing depended quite a lot on both the characters' and the player's distance to the events of the plots.

After a century dominated by social democracy and strong unions, the Nordic countries today have a rather flat class structure, in which traditional working-class jobs are often better paid than traditional academic middle-class positions. Like in most of Europe, old money has also been heavily taxed. Where economic hierarchies have been partly deflated, class identities survive instead as loci of cultural capital and tradition. The larp organisers' observation was that – as Vinterberg's text demonstrates – when it comes to gender and power within the *haute bourgeoisie*, surprisingly little has changed since the late 19th century. Because of the social group's remaining hold on to social, political and to economic power, its traditions of propriety still affect everyone within the broad Nordic middle classes.

That said, the social environment in which *En stilla middag* was set was directly familiar only to a fraction of the players, since in the Nordic countries, the live role-playing movement is dominated by the children of the academic middle class.

◀ *Helge Klingensfeldt (of Festen) enjoys a cigar with Moominpappa. (Diegetic, Bengt Liljeros)*

Façades were perfect in the beginning: The hosts, Else and Helge Klingenfeldt, a few hours before their son will publicly accuse him of child molestation. (Diegetic, Natalie Sjölund)

Although there are exceptions, Nordic role-players are also generally aligned with left-leaning political ideologies, ranging from the romantic and revolutionary to the stolidly pragmatic and parliamentary. As highly educated, driven and flexible individuals in largely meritocratic societies, however, Nordic larpers do pride themselves in their potential for social mobility. It is a common trope that larping prepares you for all social situations – parallel in its self-congratulatory tone to the upper-class dictum that good breeding enables you to interact with anyone no matter their circumstances.

Four Acts

En stilla middag was played at a villa representing the family home of *Festen's* Klingenfeldt family, and each cast (ensemble of players) remained at the site for about 43 hours. To avoid everyone clamouring for the role of Miss Julie or Moominpappa, casting had been resolved by the drawing of lots. Minor characters from some of the plays were conflated to give them more weight and to tie the stories together.

The players prepared only by reading or seeing the play or plays from which their character was drawn, and by bringing a few changes of clothes appropriate to their role. During the first evening on location, the players gathered to re-read their respective plays together and to break each plot line down to the most salient events. The groups could choose to discuss character motivation, to do a collective reading (analysis) of the play's meaning, and to change details to adapt the stories to a contemporary setting. Then the play texts were discarded. The next morning was committed to drama exercises, further preparation, and a brief fourth act, entitled *Rebuilding the Scenery*. This was set the morning after the events of the game and offered an opportunity for the players to try out their characters in a scene that they could then choose to disregard in the game itself.

The actual game, which started in the early afternoon and ended after midnight, was divided into three acts with the self-explanatory titles *A Family Act*, *The Façade is Breaking* and *The Demons are Out*. The turning points of the seven plays were divided out over the hours of the game, providing the players with an outline of a schedule. For instance, the surviving daughter of the Klingenfeldt family would read her dead sister's letter to the party at midnight, signalling the start of the third act and triggering the culminating events of each play. In the end, the players retired to bed in character, to wake up as themselves for breakfast and debriefing the following morning.

Fate and Control

In the Nordic larp tradition, the plot is typically a surprise, left for the players to discover as the events unfold around them and through their individual choices and reactions. In many local gaming cultures, therefore, a premium is placed on secrecy in regard to in-game events and motivations. But the relatively recent game style to which *En stilla middag* belongs has moved away from secret plotting, evolving an attitude more akin to the theatre, which can accommodate fresh productions of familiar

texts as easily as new plays with twists and surprises. This development can in part be traced back to the concept of *fateplay*, introduced by Eirik Fatland in 1998. In *fateplay*, players at a larp are given precise instructions for certain key actions that they have to perform at specific moments – like the instruction I as a player had received to read a specific letter aloud in a specific room at midnight.

Fateplay was employed in Sweden as early as in 1999 in *Knappnålshuvudet*. Positive experiences of the technique paved the way for textual adaptations such as *Hamlet*, in which players portrayed peripheral characters within the play's fiction but generally followed the structure of the play in their individual narratives. In *En stilla middag*, the skeletal plot mined from the play text by each player group in preparation operated exactly like the fates of *fateplay*, determining some actions or locations – but no more than a handful of times over the course of the 12-hour game. In addition, the players were instructed to follow the key events of the play where possible, but had free rein to make their own interpretations and fill in what was between the lines as well as everything happening offstage or between scenes.

Just as classic plays adapted on stage are no less powerful because their twists and endings are expected, players here did not seem constrained by the pre-ordained plot. Placed in the lives of their characters, interacting with peers from other plays in similar situations, the players experienced the stories as fresh, vivid and surprising. Their readings of the plays often shifted during the game, on occasion even affecting their outcomes. In one of the four performances, Nora of *Et dukkehjem* decided to go to law school – and that leaving her husband would thus be economically impossible.

One game mechanic that nodded both to the tabletop role-playing tradition and to the theatre was the presence of non-diegetic game masters providing input for the game. This is rare in Nordic larp, where organisers usually prefer instructed “non-player” characters or other diegetic media to steer the running game. These *directors* of *En stilla middag* were inspired in part by the angels of *Knappnålshuvudet*. They were dressed all in black and not visible or real to the characters. The director of each play helped his group stay on schedule by making sure that no-one was prevented by circumstance from performing plot-necessary situations, and discreetly interfering where necessary. A director could also nudge or whisper to players just to give them fresh impulses during the game. He could act as audience to the single player at times the character was alone – even interacting with her, sometimes even acting out the inner voice of the player's character. In large group scenes the directors would occasionally act together as a sort of intensifying Greek choir. The directors also guided the players in the dream spaces, of which more below.

Reorganizing Space and Time

A typical convention of Nordic larp is that space and time are generally represented on a 1:1 scale during the game: Physical distance is mapped onto the game location and events progress in

The players brought two sets of clothing, the smart casual for the mingle and “kavaj” (pictured) for the dinner. Specific rules enabled visible transgressions. (Diegetic, Natalie Sjölund)





*A workshop exercise aiming to discover the way to walk as a character. The Follökna manor in the background.
(Workshop, Johan Rökländer)*



The food and drinks were an important part of the bourgeois setting. The desserts not only looked good, but they were clearly not store-bought. (Diegetic, Natalie Sjölund)



Anders Hultman runs a pregame workshop, where the players study their plays, identifying central turning points and motivations. (Workshop, Natalie Sjölund)



The black-clad director (left) pushes Nora and Torvald Helmer towards stronger drama. (Diegetic, Natalie Sjölund)



*In *The Demons Are Out*, the players were instructed to play in an immediate and honest fashion. Here, Leif Klingensfeldt and Julie Bark. (Diegetic, Natalie Sjölund)*

real time. Some games have experimented with briefly breaking the play to allow the narrative time to jump hours or weeks. Very rarely, games have been divided into sections that are not played in chronological order. Since relatively early in the tradition, some games have employed a dream space, in which events with a less linear relation to the diegesis of the game can be explored. At *Europa*, characters' visits with the bureaucrats represented fears, dreams, or possible futures. At *Knappnålshuvudet*, the angels spirited players to an abstract space called the Womb, in which they could confront their fears and commune with God. At *En stilla middag*, there were several such spaces, including the *therapist's office*, the *black box*, and a pocket of time called the *meta hour*.

The Klingensfeldts obviously did not employ an in-house therapist, but there was nevertheless a room in the building, to which players could at any time retire "for therapy" with a director. At the therapist's, the players enacted hypothetical conversations about their character's situation or past. Typically these were performed in character, but at least one director challenged the players to also share their personal reflections about the choices they were making on behalf of their characters within the fiction.

The black box was an empty room, like a black box stage at a theatre, with possibilities to work with lights, sounds and music – but no props or special costumes. Players were extracted from the main game and invited into the box to explore scenes that took place earlier or later than the events of the game, featured other characters, such as the parents of their own, or represented dreams, fears or fantasies. Players and player groups were also welcome to request specific scenes. Some of these were played out in a very realistic manner; others were symbolic, like the passionate tango danced by all the lovers of the game to represent sexual and emotional intercourse.

These and other methods were adapted for the game from the progressive end of Swedish freeform role-playing, specifically the Jeepform tradition (see Wrigstad 2008). This kinship became most evident between the first and second act, when the main game was paused for the meta hour. Divided into their groups, the players went into different rooms to play *flashback*, *what if* and *flash forward* scenes together, with their group members as an audience. For groups with strong reactions to the game content, the meta hour offered opportunities to reconnect with the player-self and re-establish the trust within the group. For groups whose game had gone off to a lackluster start, the meta hour offered opportunities for the directors to add intensity.

Based on these kinships with free-form role-playing and the theatre, the creators of *En stilla middag med familjen* like to say that their game was not a larp. In the common-sense way, as they obviously know, this is blatantly untrue. That said, avant-garde productions in all fields of the arts naturally attempt a distance to the mainstream of their tradition in some way. In this case, the claim to be challenging the limits of the traditional form is not unfounded, regardless of its many precedents within the Nordic canon.

En Stilla Middag med Familjen

CREDITS: Anna Westerling (project management, game design, directing, literary compendium), Anders Hultman (project management, game design, directing, economy), Elsa Helin (game design, directing), Anna-Karin Linder (game design, directing, music), Tobias Wrigstad (game design, directing, web) and Patrik Balint (game design, logistics), with the help of a team including Caroline Andersson, Alex Kjell, Malin Neuman, Fredrik von Post, Erik Stormark, Frida Åhlvik (logistics), Fredrik Axelzon, Caroline Holgersson, Daniel Krauklis, Emma Öhrström, Joel Östlund (directing), Martin Brodén (directing, literary compendium), Torgeir Husby (graphic design), Olle Jonsson (web), Johanna Koljonen (translation, proofreading), Sofia Nordin (proofreading), Natalie Sjölund (graphical design) and Karin Tidbeck (translation)

DATE: Four times in August 2007

LOCATION: Follökna Manor, Flen, near Stockholm, Sweden

LENGTH: An evening of preparation, a day of game time, and debriefing the following morning.

PLAYERS: 38 players, seven directors and six kitchen staff players

BUDGET: €35,000 (total for four games)

PARTICIPATION FEE: €100

GAME MECHANICS: Fateplay. On-set directors. Meta play. Black box gaming. Jeepform.

OTHER MATERIAL: www.enstillamiddag.se

Further Reading

FATLAND E (1998) The Weaving of the Fate. *Panclou #2*.

FATLAND E (2005) Incentives as tools of larp dramaturgy. *Dissecting Larp*.

HULTMAN A, WESTERLING A & WRIGSTAD T (2008) Behind the Façade of A Nice Evening with the Family. *Playground Worlds*.

WESTERLING A (2008) Producing A Nice Evening. *Playground Worlds*.

WRIGSTAD T (2008) The Nuts and Bolts of Jeepform. *Playground Worlds*.







KRIGSLIVE V I KEJSERRIGET BLEV JEG FØDT...

WARHAMMER FANTASY BATTLE IN 1:1 SCALE

Kåre Murmann Kjær & Søren Lyng Ebbenhøj

The army came marching downhill through the dust clouds thrown up by 230 marching pairs of feet. Saluting the singing, chanting, marching soldiers the knight stood erect with the banner of the emperor held high. The entire army stopped. The almighty “click” broke the silence as the lock chained the Emperors banner around his body. They were ready. He gazed upon the army, beckoning them to follow. “Sons of Sigmar! To the death!” “To the death!”

The name of *Krigslive V* translates to “Warlarp V: In the Empire I was Born...”. This larp was not about the diplomatic games of kings and emperors, nor of the threat of war or the titanic implications for nations and politicians. This was about war as it always was and always will be, seen from the perspective of the soldier on the ground doing and experiencing it first hand, in the “kill or be killed” of way. It was a larp about being a minute cog in the epic machines of war, living the rush of adrenaline before the battle and the fear when your friends and allies flee and fall around you.

The *Krigslive* series is inspired by the *Warhammer Fantasy Battle* strategy games and set in the Old World depicted in that game. The first instalment, organized in 2006 for almost 200 players, was an instant success, and every game in the series has been larger than the earlier ones since then. The fifth game was set at the start of the Time of The Three Emperors – a civil war that ravaged The Empire of the *Warhammer* world for a thousand years.

The legally elected Emperor, the Grand Duke of Stirland went to war on the usurper, the Grand Duchess Otilia of Talabecland, who claimed the throne for herself. The Stirland army is on the heels in the midst of a fighting retreat trying to delay the larger Talabecland armies in their march for the Stirland capital of Wurtbad to allow reinforcements to move into position. This war was not about two nations fighting for land and resources, but a civil war about politics, faith and ultimately the throne. People once neighbours, friends or even family find each other on the opposing sides of the conflict, encountering familiar faces at the business end of a three metre pike.

The subtitle of the larp refers to an army song sung by Imperial soldiers on the march written for the *Krigslive* series on the tune *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*, serving as a grim reminder that each and every soldier was born in The Empire, a country that has been broken by the very war they are fighting.

In the Army Now

The 9th Stirland Halberdiers and the 23rd Hochland Heavy Infantry are deployed side-by-side. The enemy is up front. It is death or victory: There is no other way. We are at the tip of the spear, if we break all will be lost. The signal is given: “Forward – March!”

We are closing in on the blank steel promising sorrow and death and the forces clash in an inferno of screaming and blank noise. But thinking back, the clearest thing I remember

is the constant reminder we screamed at each other: “Hold the lines!” (player comment)

Enactment of fantasy war is the heart of *Krigslive*. For most players – the grunts of the fighting units – the series is about life as a front-line soldier in the grim *Warhammer* world. Other aspects of participation include tactical gaming (for the officers), playing a soldier in a war or simply chilling with your friends getting a good beating once in a while.

In *Krigslive V* the participants fought the skirmishes and battles between the opposing forces. Both armies were encamped at either end of the woodlands setting the grounds for the sweeping assault of the Talabecland forces. Both armies were organized in units of 10-30 soldiers. Playing styles varied from unit to unit as most people signed up in groups of friends forming their own regiment. The regiments belonged to battlegroups of around 75 soldiers and officers. Additional staff, commanding officers and a few non-combatants such as cooks and prostitutes completed each contingent of around 230 of the Emperor’s finest.

The first day of the larp was coordinated by the organisers to make sure that the Stirland side was performing a fighting retreat with the action taking place in interesting tactical locations. The organisers instructed the generals and officers of the two armies on where to place the individual battlegroups to ensure the first encounters felt like opening skirmishes. The second part of the larp saw a few battles on a greater scale. This phase was controlled by the commander players. However, they chose to coordinate across the two armies anyway to maximize the amount of fighting compared to idle time waiting for the enemy. The game ended in an epic face-off in the form of a pitched battle on open field where the Talabecland forces routed the Stirland army.

Death and the Rules

The experience of *Krigslive* is about marching in military formations, shouting battle cries and singing war hymns. It is about slaying the enemy on the field of epic battles with your friends next to you and some deity watching over you. And it is about chilling in the camps at night getting the last hours of simple pleasures before dying horribly in the epic battle of the last day.

Simulating violent confrontations with boffer weapons is central to translating these themes into visceral action. Before the *Krigslive* series began, it seemed boffer battles were too often dull, ugly to look at, and implausible. The typical way of fighting in most large battle larps had deteriorated to variations of two rows of large shields supported by spears, fighting each other in

◀ Well positioned Stirland Regiment of Foot stem the advance of a Talabecland spearhead on the march in a bottleneck in the woodlands. (Play, Kim Aagaard)

◀ Part of 2nd Talabheim battle group: Talabheims rock. There were seven battle groups in the game. (Group portrait, Kim Jacobsen)



Stirland trooper tending to the wounds of a fallen comrade. (Play, Kim Jakobsen)



*Life of the soldier in the camps before the fighting of the day. A great part of the Krigslive experience is related to the time of camp-life.
(Play, Kim Jakobsen)*



A tight unit of Talabheim swordsmen falters at the tips of the front line of spears defending a small bridge. (Play, Kim Aagaard)

a somewhat dangerous and rather drawn-out affair that rarely was any fun.

Krigslive aimed to change this by setting up an out-of-the-box set of rules for weapons combinations, fighting formations and morale, enabling entire units to surrender or flee the battle. The larp series also re-introduced a tactical element to battles in an attempt to make fighting more interesting. The downside is that *Krigslive* has a relatively large set of rules taking up 8 pages. Thus the main characteristic of *Krigslive*, and probably the main reason for its success in Denmark, is that fighting is a fun and tactical affair that enforces a certain game balance on unit combinations and weapons.

A character death against the will of the player is a problem in many larps where players are allowed to kill each other without prior agreement. Two rule mechanics allow *Krigslive* players

to stay in the game until the end:

First, *Krigslive* features morale points instead of hitpoints: Each character has a number of these depending on her armour and unit type. These points decrease with every hit, until all points are gone, and the character is defeated. This leaves the player to choose to flee, surrender or act wounded. Fleeing and surrendering as game elements have made *Krigslives* more varied, fun and especially safer than other boffer larps, and also throughout the series as the concepts have been properly implemented. This was especially clear in *Krigslive V* as the civil war setting with civilized soldiers on both sides meant many would be inclined to spare their old neighbours quarter as compared to crazed fanatics or barbarian warriors of other fantasy armies.

Secondly, people do not die when choosing to fall wounded. They simply cannot take part in the same battle again, but may

participate in the next fight – preferably with someone tending their wounds in between or at least with a good rest in the shade and a lot of water.

Military Logistics in Larp Organizing

To simulate war, you need armies with lots of people. This is a reason why *Krigslive* has been working hard to grow large by Danish standards. The key has been to make participation simple. While you can spend a lot of money to create custom gear, *Krigslive* has embraced the mass-production of uniforms and weapons for entire regiments. Still, most regiments do spend a lot of time before the game on impressive gear. According to a poll, an average participant spent almost €300 on equipment: uniforms, weapons, shields, camping gear.

As for the gear, instead of complex and unique characters, in *Krigslive* you can manage with only a name and a military rank – unless you choose to create a deeper character for yourself. Preparatory work of the individual units is usually distributed by the players responsible for each unit, usually also the people who lead the regiments to war in the game. Due to the simplicity and work distribution, *Krigslive* is comparatively easy to organize: A lot of organizing and communicating is delegated on the unit coordinators.

Apart from contact and coordination, the main logistics in large fantasy larp organizing are food logistics, building the set and housing the players. The *Krigslive* players sleep in tent camps, the food is pre-cooked and distributed through the diegetic military system. Both solutions, along with communication based on the military structure of the larp, reduce the workload of the organisers, making it easier to organise huge events with a few organisers and helpers.

The final important characteristic is that no two *Krigslives* in a row have been organized by the same group. The concept is well-established and the logistics are rather simple compared to other larps, so it is comparatively easy to organise a *Krigslive* compared to inventing a concept of your own. The new organizers bring in their own ideas, concepts and energy to the project, and establish it in their social networks. This has enabled the event to grow, and have a major impact on the Danish larp community.

Krigslive in the Danish Boffer Scene

Krigslive is a social event; many participants consider the increasingly ambitious afterparties at least as important to their experience as the larp itself: *Krigslive* is a place to go to meet friends, an event “everybody” in the scene participates in. The series connects larpers from across Denmark and has a grand community-building effect.

As a major continuous campaign and an important meeting point, *Krigslive* has influenced the gaming cultures across the whole country. Though this is a slower and somewhat elusive process, it is evident at several points: First, *Krigslive* forces everyone to participate under a common set of combat, safety and weapon rules, which gradually helps harmonize such systems

across the country – mostly because people spend a lot of resources acquiring equipment for *Krigslive*. This equipment, which meets the *Krigslive* rules requirements and safety standards, is reused in other games. Such standardizing influences make it easier to participate in larps organized in different parts of the country.

Secondly, and more importantly, players from different cultures or regions get to know each other and start participating in each others games, which is exemplified by young players from Copenhagen welcoming players out of Jutland and vice versa. Also some simulationist players especially from Jutland are welcoming the more narrativist or dramatist styles primarily found in Copenhagen, influencing the larger larps in Jutland these years. Whether this is because of *Krigslive* is hard to tell, but it is definitely part of the trend.

The above was especially clear for *Krigslive V: I Kejserriget blev jeg født...*, the most epic and most beautiful larp of the series thus far. It was the biggest larp in Denmark for several years, and surely a game to be remembered.

Krigslive V

CREDITS: Allan Davidsen (game design and participant contact), Kåre Murmann Kjær (logistics, project organization), Sune Jensen (logistics and food) and Thomas Aagaard (game design, participant contact, economy). **Helpers:** Bo Karlens (logistics and food), Kim Aagaard (logistics), Christina Cecilie Sørensen (first aid), Anders Kramer (homepage), Michael Gärtner Nielsen (props), Morten Hagbard and Amy Hagbard (clean-up).

DATE: 7-10 May 2009

LOCATION: Tornby Klitplantage, Northern Jutland, Denmark

LENGTH: 36 hours of play

PLAYERS: 460, including the organizers

BUDGET: €26,000

PARTICIPATION FEE: €50

GAME MECHANICS: Boffer weapons. Rules for formations and morale. Rules-heavy compared to other Danish larps, but easy-flowing in the actual fight.

OTHER MATERIAL: www.klv.krigslive.dk/KLV







ANTIKRISTUKSEN YÖ

STEEL AND HOLY SPIRIT IN MEDIEVAL BOHEMIA

Jenni Sahramaa

“Ye who are God’s warriors and of his law, Pray to God for help and have faith in Him; That always with Him you will be victorious.” The singing was stopped after only few verses by the commander: “Can’t you sing like you mean it?” he asked, blue eyes narrowing in the bearded and scarred face.

The Hussite warriors, gathered from many different groups and units, straightened up, and started from the beginning. They were God’s warriors, fighting for their faith and for their homeland, feared by all the dogs of the Roman church. They would not give up.

Antikristuksen yö (The Night of the Anti-Christ) was a game about religious reform and war, fundamentalism and early nationalism. It was set on a Sunday before the feast of Our Lady, when Hussite war leader Baron Jan Rohac of Duba and Hungarian mad knight Bela Gorgei of the Order of Dragon had agreed to meet in a battle, in the year of Our Lord 1426, in the barony of Klingenburg in Bohemia. Religious war had raged since the death of a protestant church reformist and Czech martyr Jan Hus.

The heart of the game was a pre-arranged battle between fanatic Czech Hussite warriors and crusaders from Hungary and the German states hoping to return Bohemia back to the Mother Church.

The game started on Saturday evening with player character groups gathering from different directions. The fanatic Czech Hussite warriors met up with a sympathizing baroness who had lost her lands, and with the usurping knight who had taken

advantage of the lady in distress. While the nobles tried to make sense of the late baron’s will, the common soldiers took to the task of building small fortifications around the camp, and the servants worked hard trying to get everybody fed. At the same time at the other side of a little lake crusaders from Hungary and the German states were building their camp. They prepared for battle and the meeting of the commanders. In that meeting Baron Rohac of Duba, and knight Bela Gorgei agreed in a most chivalric way that the battle should take place on Sunday morning.

And so it happened that after porridge and the Eucharist were served in both camps, the two groups met up on a small isthmus where the Hussites had built their fortifications. Arrows flew, handguns and a small cannon were fired, and finally the two groups of footmen hit together. The battle waved back and forth around the Hussite battle wagon and a small timber

◀◀ *Firing a handgonne, a medieval black powder gun. (Promotion, Hannamari Vahtikari)*

◀ *Clothing example for middle class female characters. (Promotion, Hannamari Vahtikari)*

fortification before crusaders finally turned to flee. As was usual in Bohemian history, the Hussites won the battle – though it took four or five warriors to take down the enemy commander.

After the battle the wounded were treated, arrangements were made for the ransom of captured German soldiers, and the noble ladies, who had watched the battle from a safe place on the cliff, came down to meet the Soldiers of God. After hymns of praise the game ended. It was Sunday noon.

Some of the characters of *Antikristuksen yö* were based on real historical people. Jan Rohac died some twenty years after the events of the game as the last martyr of the Hussite cause, and the German commander, Boso von Fictum, is known from a libellous poem mocking his cowardice. Some of the main plots of the game were also based on documentary material known from the era. Besides the background work on historical sources, another major influence were Czech historical adventure movies from the 1950s like *Jan Hus* (1954) and *Jan Zizka* (1955). The nationalist pride of these excellently propped spectacles inspired larger-than-life plots of love and loyalty, pathetic scenes of inspiring bloodlust through battle hymns, and also the off-game competition for the best moustache of the game.

The Style of The Greywolves

Antikristuksen yö was played in 2009, as a part of series of historical larps organized by the historical re-enactment society Harmaasudet (The Greywolves). Harmaasudet started in the mid-nineties with generic fantasy larps, but soon moved towards more ambitious authenticity. There has always been a strong educational agenda in these games as the sources of historical knowledge are discussed. Today the society stands almost alone in the Finnish larp scene with its ideal of the historical setting. As Harmaasudet is a re-enactment society, the members enjoy activities such as sewing, cooking, fighting, singing, and sitting by the fire, both in and out of larps.

The society concentrates on Viking and Medieval periods, and most of the games have been situated in the same eras. This has provided the organisers with a growing body of knowledge, equipment and, most importantly, with a large group of players who already have some of the clothing and weaponry needed as the demands for authenticity is very high for these games.

The core group of organisers has created larps together for over ten years now. The series started with *Rautajoki* (The Iron River, 1999), a realistic historical larp situated in Viking Age Finland. *Hallayö* (The Frosty Night, 2001) was set in Southern Finland at a camp of over 100 refugees who had lost their homes and belongings in an attack by the so-called First Crusade. The saga-based *Savujen lahti* (The Bay of Smokes, 2005) introduced the concept of the *Dreamland*, where settlers from Greenland met native Americans in the spiritual world as well as the physical one. *Rotan vuosi* (The Year of the Rat, 2007) developed that idea further with most of the 13th century Russians, Tatars and Moravians who had business in the Dreamland with an evil

folk story villain, Koschei the Deathless. A different perspective to the spiritual and religious life was taken in *Hopeavirta* (The Silver Stream, 2008), where the legacy of a dead Viking chief was discussed in a big funeral party. *Antikristuksen yö* is the latest larp in the series.

Historical larp has been criticized as being serious and thematically gloomy. Indeed, at their worst, historical larps can be boring: sitting by the fire with nothing to do, save engaging in activities such as handicrafts, with fellow players and organisers pointing out every single little lapse in newcomers' clothing and other props. Yet it is these very same aspects, in a less extreme fashion, that keep the regular players coming back. A player joining a Harmaasudet game knows precisely what's in store, and thus can also trust that the other players are up to the same standards of dedication and propping.

Steel and Wool

One of the main characteristics of the Harmaasudet larps, besides the historical setting, is the use of blunt steel weapons based on historical models: The society practices the use of swords, axes, spears and shields every week. Most of the players of these games find boffer swords and latex weapons ridiculous and disturbing to the game experience. For safety reasons, soft padding must be used in arrows – even though it means that a player might not feel the hit through armour. Combat with steel weapons uses a system of slow-motion hits with a tap to mark the strike. The rules are simple, and based on the good sportsmanship of the players.

Though depictions of violence have been common in most Harmaasudet games, *Antikristuksen yö* was the first one featuring a major battle scenario. Characters were cast partially based on the players' combat experience and willingness to use weapons and armour in the game. The fighters were divided into three basic units on each side, and the standards of armour were different for these groups: for example at least some pieces of plate armour, a sword and a shield for heavy footmen, and a padded jacket, gloves and helmet for those fighting with a spear. Almost all crusader characters were male, but some women played male characters on both sides. The historical setting permitted some female Hussite fighters.

The result of the battle was scripted on the unit level and all participants knew it. Yet, the fates of individual soldiers were not decided; the players were told to prefer being wounded and leave most of the dying to supporting cast playing the losing crusaders. This method is typical in re-enactment battles, for example at the *Bitwa pod Grunwaldem* in Poland, a medieval event attended by a Harmaasudet delegation every summer. In *Antikristuksen yö*, character play was restricted only for the duration of the battle: The fighters were bound to follow the script, and those not participating to the battle were watching it from a hill.

Amongst the organisers and supposedly also in player groups the idea of a prescript battle was much discussed. Some feared





Singing rehearsal of the Hussites before the game. (Pregame, Nino Hynninen)



German archers advancing. (Play, Tanja Suokivi)



German knights under the flag of the Order of the Dragon, and archers under the Hungarian flag. (Play, Tanja Suokivi)



◀ *Players in the sun at the debrief. (Debrief, Nino Hynninen)*

that knowing the result beforehand would destroy the thrill, and others feared for safety – even when most of the combatants were quite experienced with their weapons, the risks were heightened in a mass combat situation. Aside from small bruises and cuts no harm was done to any of the fighters. After the game, some players gave descriptions of epic meetings of legendary warriors on the battlefield, but also frustrated comments about arrows not being felt through the armour and so left unnoticed were heard. From the organisers' point of view the concept of a multi-unit steel battle in a larp is worth further developing, and at least in comparison to boffer fighting, it gave a much stronger feeling of being in a battle.

The Finnish historical re-enactment culture is very materialistic. Endless discussions about wool and linen, sewing techniques and authentic ways of tanning leather can be heard whenever two re-enactors get together. There is always at least an implicit propping competition going on. The criteria for authenticity have changed over the years, as knowledge, craft skills and amount of existing props have grown. No committee formally oversees gear, but the organisers have retained the right to ban disturbing props if needed. This is rarely done; the organisers have usually been able to lend some extra gear for those players who have less interest in re-enactment.

Antikristuksen yö sought to turn the snobbism into a positive force. The organizers helped the players with costumes by providing advance information and organizing sewing workshops. 15th century equipment is largely reusable in many other medieval events and games of both historical or fantasy setting. Naturally these possibilities of pregame preparations and learning were mostly used by those already committed.

Being a Warrior of God

What was it really like? The aim of the organisers was to create a larp with a historical setting new to most players, with well-written and believable characters created by the organizers, with interesting plots, and a feeling of being there.

Antikristuksen yö received praise for its appearance: Both the characters and the scene looked good and gave a feeling of a medieval camp before and after a battle. While some players faced some of the typical glitches of larp – feeling that their characters were insignificant, ending up with unsatisfying co-players or simply not getting into the mood for the game – the overall feelings on the game were quite satisfactory. Actual fighting relieved the expectations raised by the long waiting: It was not only great fun, a test of skills, but also extremely intensive experience that left little time for thinking off-game thoughts. Hiding behind a huge shield, holding a flask of black powder, waiting for the right moment to shoot. Enemy warriors fall down as the huge bang echoes on the lake, but there is no time to cheer as the cannon has to be cooled and cleaned for the next shot. Seeing

with a side glance that our groups were doing well, then hearing the scream of a girl as her lover is struck down, wounded... I lost track of time, but it was all over in maybe an hour.

In a typical fashion for these re-enactment games, many players gave testimonies of small, powerful moments of *Antikristuksen yö*: Confessing the sin of being afraid before the battle, fearing for the life of one's husband, feeling helpless when facing the inevitable, combing one's hair by the lake in a still-peaceful morning. Small moments that give meaning to, and derive meaning from, the battle that is the heart of the game. There may not be a return to the events of Hussite wars, but the memory of *Antikristuksen yö* lives on.

Antikristuksen Yö

CREDITS: Konsta Nikkanen (main organiser), Jenni Sahramaa, Juho Lindman, Jukka Pajarinen, Julius Väliaho, Olli Hakkarainen (writers), Nino Hynninen, Susanna Huhtanen, Noora Salminen (props), Hannamari Vahtikari (graphics), Heikki Hyppänen (webmaster)

DATE: 23-24 May 2009

LOCATION: Linnavuoren eräkeskus, Masku, Finland

LENGTH: Saturday afternoon to Sunday noon

PLAYERS: 50 players and 20 assisting players

BUDGET: €1,700

PARTICIPATION FEE: €21 for players, €7 for assistants, discounts for members

GAME MECHANICS: Simple rules, steel weapons

OTHER MATERIAL: <http://antikristuksenyo.greywolves.org>

◀ *Player-game master discussion before the game. (Briefing, Nino Hynninen)*



DELIRIUM

INSANITY AND LOVE
BLEEDING FROM LARP TO LIFE

Bjarke Pedersen

WE WOKE UP IN RED LIGHT, *and unlike usual, the nurse was not around. "This is crazy" I said out loud, suddenly realizing that there was nobody to uphold The Rules! If I found The Judge, I could hold her in my arms for the first time since we were committed. And nobody would stop me! I saw her at the other end of the sleeping hall and I moved towards her quickly. I got close and my eyes met hers. I raised my hand, trying to remember how her warm, soft skin felt. But the light was fading. I screamed and raised my hand to touch her cheek, but the darkness descended and I was caught, all alone in my own delirium.*

◀ 110 spotlights were needed to light Delirium.
(Construction, Kristoffer Thuroe)

Delirium was a larp about love and insanity. The promise was that there would be no need to *pretend* insanity, but rather, the players would *feel* insane. To this purpose, a delirious environment was carefully built through scenography, lights and numerous techniques. Instead of creating a realistic world, the larp was a tangible simulation of a mad time-space continuum. To get there, *Delirium* had to deconstruct all the fundamentals of larp: time, space, setting and characters.

The characters were patients stuck in a mental institution, trying to cope with nonsensical rules and regulations and facing

*I'm standing on a stage
Of fear and self-doubt
It's a hollow play
But they'll clap anyway
My body is a cage that keeps me
From dancing with the one I love
But my mind holds the key*
– *My Body is a Cage, Arcade Fire*

endless therapy sessions that would drive even the sanest person out of her mind. The Institution maintained the norms of a “normal society”, creating an unsolvable conflict with the madness: Some patients insisted their food was cold even though it was hot, while others claimed that they were men instead of women. For The Institution, the characters were downright psychotic, but in the eyes of both the players and the characters, everything made perfect sense. The players only had to react and interact with their insane surroundings – just as they saw them.

Out of all the rules of The Institution, one dominated the game above all others: Male and female patients were kept apart, and no liaisons were tolerated. Lovers could only be united through a revolution. And in *Delirium* everyone was in mad love, in fact, all players had to sign up as couples, with someone to play romance with, someone not a current or an earlier partner. And thus a stage was set for a revolution against the society, a revolution establishing a new order. Of course, the new order would eventually turn into another oppressive structure.

Like *Totem* earlier by many of the same people, *Delirium* was a clear descendant of *Mellan himmel och hav* when it comes to collaborative character creation and workshop techniques. The two mandatory weekend workshops focused on building a collective understanding of the culture and traditions of The Institution, but especially to establish the necessary atmosphere of trust within the player ensemble.

Love and Madness

As the characters had a disjointed perception of time, *Delirium* was played unchronologically. As psychotics, they were supposed to treat the timeline as chronological, even though they

had to clean up after the psychologist's birthday party two days *before* actually participating in it. To keep the game on track, the players were told the basic story of the game in advance.

The characters had no backstory. The only things you remembered were fragmented memories of good and bad situations from the past: smells, faces, emotions and the like. This also applied to your partner so the deeper aspects of your relationship had to be explored from within the larp. It was never explained why characters were in The Institution, but it was established as a non-issue in the fashion of the normality rule of *Luminescence*.

The revolution was never played, but pieces of the time before and after it were played in an intermingled order. Scenes after the revolution were marked by bathing the room in red light, marking time when the rules of The Institution no longer applied and the segregation of men and women was not enforced. When the characters found out this was the case, the interactions between the couples changed from visual to physical. The chance to be in the arms of your lover became a strong goal for most characters in the early stages, when shifts between white and red scenes happened often. Sometimes different rooms were even simultaneously in white and red, and players could move freely between them.

Black, White, Red

Seven carefully illuminated spaces were set up in a pitch-black conference hall. The therapy rooms, canteens and sleeping halls were built into these rooms without walls. The physical architecture was garbled to the characters, but not to The Institution. For example the sleeping hall was physically built with beds in many levels, and with the line dividing it to female and male sections making a 90° turn. All this was only in the characters' minds; The Institution saw two long straight lines of beds in one level. When all the chairs in the dining hall were gone, it was very frustrating to be scolded for not sitting down, but The Institution insisted that there were chairs and thus there were, and you just had to find a way around it.

The negative space between these islands of light was dark, symbolizing personal delirium: When a player found herself in darkness, either deliberately or accidentally, her character was lost inside her mind and could not communicate with others.

The game masters controlled the flow of the game using light to activate and deactivate areas. And when the room faded to black, the characters were lost in delirium, only to return to consciousness in some other time and place. Almost every time a room faded out, and then later came back, the setup was somehow changed.

Sometimes the characters' inability to function in the world was underlined with *red objects*. For example, at one breakfast everybody got a white mug, except for one character who got a red one with tiny holes in the bottom. She spilled coffee all over the table, indicating that the character was not even able to drink like a grownup. She should try to behave, or the privilege of drinking coffee might be taken away. For all other characters,



*In the sleeping hall, there were two straight rows of beds, divided by a blue line separating male and female patients.
(Construction, Andie Nordgren)*



In the end, Delirium did not look much like the promotion photographs. (Promotion, Peter Munthe-Kaas)



Frozen moments is a workshop technique, where players construct still scenes to define relationships and experiment with interaction models. (Workshop, Kristoffer Thurøe)

The patients have redone the therapy room in red time, excluding the people not accepting the new rules. (Play, Andie Nordgren) ▶



The therapy room is behind the garden. The garden was never supervised by The Institution and thus served as a safe haven. (Construction, Kristoffer Thurøe)

the red mug was just a regular mug.

Even the sex of the player was not necessarily recognized. The Institution considered several players to be of the opposite sex, forcing them to act out their heteronormative opposite.

All this was made to allow players to play insanity without pretending it. The physical architecture, the chronology, and the use of three states of lighting *made* actions insane to The Institution – and The Institution defined sanity and madness. *Delirium* refined the *high resolution* larp philosophy (Nordgren 2008) that came out of *Totem*, and took it further. All input a player encountered was to be interpreted as important for the character's understanding of her own insanity, thus eliminating breaks in the diegesis.

My Body is a Cage

Audio tracks were used to powerfully influence players, both consciously and subconsciously. The soundtrack was mixed in real time through all the 50 hours of the larp. Characters' dialogue was recorded during play, processed and sent back through the audio system to push the players in specific directions. The voice of the nurse reading the rules on how to be upstanding citizen

outside The Institution were distorted and played over and over again throughout the larp.

Every evening before bedtime, which could mean lying in your bed for 10 minutes only to be woken up to go to the dinner, the game masters played clips from interviews recorded at the second pregame workshop, where the players talked about their own love life, first loves or first heartbreaks. Listening to players talk about personal issues made the players' feelings *bleed* over into the game, making the characters seem much more alive.

Lying in my bed, looking over at Clown played by Charles and listening to his story of being abandoned by his girlfriend, made me feel very guilty and a pain in my stomach appeared. I had earlier grabbed Clown's partner and abused her forcefully in front of him several times during therapy. This was the direct cause to my guilt, triggered by Charles' story about abandonment. Another cause was that I had decided to abuse her again at the next chance I would get. (player, male)

Every morning started with the theme song of the game, *My Body is a Cage* by Arcade Fire, reflecting the themes of the larp. When it was played at the final scene at *Delirium*, everything seemed to fall into place and the larp, the story, rebooting and



KÆRE

Dee

Jeg ser på dig og skoler
for du er den bedste i verden

Du får mig til at blive
som smør på en varm
Sommerdag



ACE

begun anew.

I am standing with Ark in my hands, her eyes in tears. Her voice shakes as she says “But it is starting all over again!” The beautiful shiny eyes are wide open and are staring right at me. A begging despair is shining back at me. I pull her close in one long embrace, before I let go and slowly place the netting I have made around her throat. She surrenders completely. The Ark I know is gone, worn down by the terrible darkness. She almost looks relieved. I slowly tighten the fabric round her throat. There are no feelings left in me at this point. This is the only way I can take her life, without feeling it. I gently place her on the floor while the last breath seeps from her. In the background the music starts. He sings: “My body is a cage”. It has never felt truer. (player, male)

Crawling from the Rabbit Hole

Many participants reported that *Delirium* was a game that influenced them profoundly. Personally I left the larp with an understanding that a larp is one of the strongest forms of expression when it comes to affecting people, especially when it is not bound by old genres, and uses powerful methods such as these to convey its meaning. *Delirium* was extremely demanding, and questions were raised if this was mentally safe:

When I look back, *Delirium* has been an incredibly strong experience. It is one of the specific kind of experiences I cannot leave unchanged, one that shapes me, and I am currently in the process of figuring out how I can use the energy there is in that. So I am not sad that I have participated. I am sure this will make me stronger, but I have a hunch it is in spite of the organizers, because your focus was not on how it develops us, but on the aesthetics [of the larp]. What I am left with is that you are either very cynical or naive. And I sincerely hope it is the latter. (forum post by a male player, two weeks later)

The deliberately thin characters left very little room for faking and pretence, and dealing with the strong main themes – status, intimacy, sanity – had to be played extremely close to home. The feelings and reactions bleed between the character and the player.

There was a full day of debrief after the larp, with players discussing with their partners and in small groups. This helped to

cast off the artificial characters and relationships, but even then it was difficult for several players to step back to normal life.

There is no reason to debate bleed and especially debating if bleed happens. I bled on myself, all over the floor, walls and ceiling. I bled on other players, my partner and I have not stopped yet. I bled the most in the months before the larp preparing with my partner. The larp was easy, it is the time before and after that is the hard part! (player, male, two days later)

Delirium aimed high. The organizers took settled conventions of Nordic larp, deconstructing them to figure out whether they were ideal for *Delirium*, or whether it was necessary to modify them to improve the experience. That process re-examined the medium in a way similar to *Dogma 99* more than 10 years earlier, showing that the form of larp must not be set in stone. Rather, it is important to question, debate and challenge conventions to develop larp into an even more powerful form of expression.

Delirium

CREDITS: Mathias Kromann Rode, Peter Munthe-Kaas, Rasmus Høgdall, Peter S. Andreasen, Kristoffer Thurøe, Sanne Haarder Flamant & Jesper Heebøll-Christensen

DATE: 22-25 July, 2010

LOCATION: Tinghallen, Viborg, Denmark

LENGTH: 50 hours, plus two mandatory weekend workshops

PLAYERS: 36 players

CREW: 15

BUDGET: €9,000

PARTICIPATION FEE: €200

GAME MECHANICS: Ars Armandi, Ars Ordo, Red Objects, Rule of Normality, use of audio and lights

OTHER MATERIAL: www.delirium.mkromann.dk


Further Reading

ANDREASEN P, HØGDALL R, KROMANN M, MUNTHE-KAAS P, THURØE K (2009) *Workshophåndbogen*.

MONTOLA M (2010) The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-Playing. *Nordic DiGRA 2010*.

NORDGREN A (2008) High Resolution Larping. *Playground Worlds*.

◀ *Ace wrote a letter to his love Dee, with a broken red pen. The Poet helped him, writing the parts in black, so the page would not be completely blank. (Diegetic, Ace & Poet)*

A photograph of a crowd of people at a concert or event. The scene is dimly lit, with a strong red light source illuminating the crowd from the side. Several people in the foreground have their arms raised in the air, suggesting they are dancing or cheering. The background is dark, with some blurred lights and a curved object hanging from the ceiling.

Nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced
– John Keats



NORDIC LARP: THEATRE, ART AND GAME

Jaakko Stenros

◀ *In order for someone to larp a rock star, others need to play the audience. The troll band Sysikuu plays in the New Weird larp Neon-hämärä (Neon Twilight, 2009-). (Diegetic, Sasa Tkalkan)*

Nordic larp is designed social experience. It is about visiting different worlds and slipping under foreign skins. It is about discovering what it is like to be someone else, a refugee, a Mafioso, a space pirate – in a coherent, thought-out setting with others who share and strengthen the experience. But is Nordic larp art, theatre or game?

Larps are temporary worlds superimposed on the everyday world. They are framed by their fictionality and the participant is present in the moment of playing as both a player and a character. Though deep character immersion has sometimes been hailed as the ideal way of playing (Pohjola 2000), to many players, games and gaming cultures performance or success in reaching one's goals is more valuable than the subjective experience of feeling your character's feelings.¹ Not even the most dedicated immersionist experiences exactly what her character might arguably feel in the fictive frame of the game. In fact the friction between the game world and the real world is often a central source of the meaning in a gaming experience (as argued by Pettersson 2006). The experience of playing in a larp contains both the diegetic experience, as mediated through the conduit of the character, and the direct experience of playing. Larp simultaneously simulates and produces experiences.

Though the goal in Nordic larps is often a complete illusion, and losing oneself in a character is often seen as desirable, in practice this only happens momentarily. (After all, complete character immersion would be more akin to psychosis than play). Finnish larp designer Ranja Koverola (1998) has described larp like a pearl necklace. The pearls are perfect moments in the game, when the illusion of the world is complete. Instead of thinking about playing a character, you are the character. Some necklaces have more pearls, some have less. The continuous pearl necklace is unattainable, but striving towards it is part of the aesthetic of Nordic larps.

The very impossibility of this goal provides much of the power of role-playing games, as creating it causes friction between the everyday and the diegetic, the player and the character. This flickering between modes, which attempting to stay in character entails, provides an automatic distancing, a built-in alienation effect like Brecht's *Verfremdung*. The participant will be able to view the events both inside the game and outside it, slipping between the different social frames (see Goffman 1974, Fine 1983, also Pettersson 2006) of the game and of playing. This means that even though a character may be overjoyed, hungry, or bored, the player will not necessarily feel that way. This distance is what makes it possible to use the form to explore experiences beyond enjoyment and fun.

Nordic larps need not be immediately satisfying. Indeed, instead of offering instant gratification they can be boring, infuriating or even painful for stretches of time. Yet the playing is meaningful for the participant, which can ultimately make even an uncomfortable experience a pleasure (Hopeametsä 2008, Montola 2010).

Theatre and Audience

In larps participants play character roles; they improvise freely within parameters established by the game design and the goals, background and personality of the character. Playing styles vary wildly from tradition to tradition and time to time: Sometimes the aim is to feel like the character – to become the character in an emotional sense. But the aim may just as well be to portray the character believably, with an outward emphasis like that of actors in the theatre. At times the players may strive to simulate a world and one person's place in it – at others to simply win a fair game challenge. Regardless of the style, larping is often performative.

Improvisation and performance are so central to larp expression that at first it may seem difficult to distinguish the

¹ Probably the most widely used typology of role-players divides players into three groups: dramatists, simulationists and gamists (Kim 2003). At times simulationism is replaced by immersionism (Böckman 2003).



Muovikuppi (Plastic Cup, 2008), a symbolic larp by Juhana Pettersson where a family negotiates about dividing of an inheritance. Ceramic cups were used as the principal means of expressing hidden emotions. (Restaged, Staffan Jonsson)

form from theatre. A larp might look suspiciously like boring Commedia dell'Arte (usually without obvious masks), a particularly obscure Theatre Game, untherapeutic psychodrama, a sort of Invisible Theatre, or amateur improvisational theatre. Indeed, from a spectator's point of view the closest relative to larp might very well be a long, uninterrupted impro rehearsal. But this is the key distinction: Larp is not designed to have an audience. Though larps can be witnessed by non-participants and judged as performances, that is not their primary nature.²

Larp is created by the players for the players. This should be taken very literally: Larp is not only performed, but created and experienced first hand. The participation is not limited to the way any performance needs to adjust to its audience, nor to participants making a few controlled or curated contributions as is often the case in theatre. Instead in larp each participant, each player, has control over his own narrative and a tangible possibility to influence not just her little corner of the story, but often the general direction of the whole piece.³

To truly appreciate a larp without taking part in it is impossible. Aesthetics of action and participation are completely

² Harviainen (2008) even questions whether performance is that central to larp. Some participants do not so much perform for an external audience, but simply do. At least parts of larps are no more (or less) performative than everyday life. Larp has also been called "interactive drama" (Phillips 2006) and "indrama" (Pohjola 2005).

³ Haggren, Larsson, Nordwall and Widing (2008) discuss larp as part of a wider participation culture.

different from the aesthetics of spectating and distance. In the context of larp the whole concept of audience needs to be rethought. According to Daniel Mackay (2001) in larp the audience and performer positions are internalized in the same person: "The participant playing a character is the performer, while the player after the fact, or even during the event within a down-keyed frame, is his spectator."

Christopher Sandberg (2004) calls this subjective audience the *first person audience*: "The piece is not merely 'finished' in the spectators' mind, it is created by the participants that can only fully meet the piece they help create, by becoming an intricate part of it." Like games, rituals and even everyday life, larps need to be entered, surrendered to and inhabited in order to be fully experienced. Though the game organizers often provide the setting, the initial set-up and the themes, players bring the larp to life through their own choices and action. The participants are players in two senses of the word, as players of a game and as players on stage, yet they also form the audience. The internal world and emotional turmoil of the character, perhaps hidden from the other players behind a poker face or a bourgeois façade, can become much more interesting than anything that is visible on the surface. The first-person audience requirement makes criticism of role-playing games thorny, since the critic must participate in the imagining and co-creation of the experience and is in that sense himself the artist (Mackay 2001, Ahlroth 2008).



Hamlet inifrån (Hamlet from Within, 2000) was a participatory hybrid of larp and theatre, played inside an inflatable castle. It inspired Hamlet, which has sometimes been called the director's cut. (Pregame, Portrait, Samantha Bonnevier)



Kuusysi Vuolle, in the troll band Sysikuu, plays guitar in the Neonhämärä larp series. The player learned to play guitar in order to be a rock star for a day. (Diegetic, Sasa Tkalcin)

Larps are, by nature, communal experiences. Each participant's experience is shaped by the actions of their fellow players. Kings need subordinates, prisoners need jailors and rock stars need fans. At the core of these games is *inter-immersion* (Pohjola 2004). It is the positive feedback loop of inhabiting the game world and the character, pretending to believe in the diegetic world of the game and everyone else in it, temporarily accepting it as real – and thus supporting the experience of every other participant. The king becomes a king not simply by acting like one; he is only truly crowned by his subjects who elevate him by responding to his social status.

Viola Spolin (1999) has written that without an audience there is no theatre, and that the actor should no more forget the audience than forget her lines. The fourth wall between the performers and their audience can be shattered: the architectural division between the performers and spectators is broken down, the audience distanced with *Verfremdungseffekt*, subjected to desensitizing sounds, lightning and gestures in Theatre of Cruelty, invited to perform in Forum Theatre or provoked into being unwittingly participating *spect-actors* in an Invisible Theatre. Yet there is still, at the core of theatre, a performance

by certain people for some others who do not really participate as equals.

In theatre, the performance happens for an external reason, it happens *for someone* (Kirby 1987), and there is a separation between the spectator and the performance (Schechner 1988). In larps, as in games in general, play is *paratelic* (Apter 1991): it is a goal in itself. Larps can certainly be viewed, but that is not really what they are for, nor can they fully be appreciated that way. This difference is so fundamental that from the point of view of larp most performance art and theatre look like the exact same thing. Both typically stage something in front of a live audience that has only limited input on the resulting performance. But there are strands in the tradition of performance art which do not necessitate the presence of an audience at all:

Allan Kaprow and others, however, do performances without any intention of showing them to an audience. They may be done alone, privately. Other performers may see certain portions. Sometimes there may be accidental spectators. But the performances are intended to be done – to affect the performer – not to be observed. These performances, which may be called “Activities,” are not theatre because they do not

have the intent to affect an audience. It is not the mere act of performance that makes something theatre; all theatre is performance, but all performance is not theatre. (Kirby 1987)

Performance art stems from the tradition of visual arts. Some individual game designers excepted, role-playing games, though they have numerous roots, cannot claim to be descended from that tradition. Even so, larp and performance art often take very similar forms.

Audience Participation and Performance Art

There is a tendency in contemporary art towards participation and collaboration. This tendency stretches back to at least Richard Wagner (1849), who wanted to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that would be a synthesis of artistic genres and a reflection of not just an artist, but the people (*das Volk*) – a goal he himself arguably failed to reach (Groys 2009). During the 1920s the Futurists and Dadaists staged provocative spectacles that offered roles for spectators and questioned artistic individuality, and even earlier Marcel Duchamp had reduced his art to an instruction of how to create the work – including his signature. Even so, it was not until the late 1950s and 1960s with Situationist International, Happenings and Andy Warhol's Factory that audience participation, as it is understood in the arts today, really emerged. Yet according to Boris Groys (2009) “[b]e it Wagnerian opera, a futurist scandal, a Fluxus happening, or a Situationist event what unites all of these events, each has the same goal: to unite the artist and the audience at a particular location.”⁴

It is possible to understand larp in terms of constructed situation specific works. Situations and Happenings are perhaps the closest relative of larp in the arts.⁵ Allan Kaprow wrote in 1961 that Happenings are “essentially theatre” and at that time the blurring of the line between audience and performers was limited to the architectural, to inhabiting the same space. Five years later he called for the elimination of the audience: events where everyone would be following the same scenario or score (Kaprow 1966). During the previous decade Guy Debord (1958) had already outlined the goal of breaking down the line between audience and actors:

The situation is thus designed to be lived by its constructors. The role played by a passive or merely bit-part playing ‘public’ must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors, but rather, in a new sense of the term, ‘livers’, must steadily increase.

The spectators were to be moved to action and the idea was to create ephemeral and unique perishable instants, “inseparable from its immediate consumption” (Situationist International 1960). These Situations lacked the anthropomorphic character constructs or *roles* of role-playing games (see Montola 2008). Their purpose as critical wake-up calls and artistic creations

also limited their scope in comparison to larp.

The most common motivations for including audience participation in art, according to Claire Bishop (2006), are *activation* and *empowerment* of spectators, ceding some of the *authorship* in order to be more democratic or egalitarian, and restoration of social bonds and forming of *community*. Though larps certainly can have such motivation behind them, the form was not built on such lofty ideals. Emerging as they did from tabletop role-playing games larps were always communal and participatory but historically they have more often been branded pastimes and hobbies than art.

The structure of many of the works in the tradition of participatory art is game-like. The artist creates an activity by providing a set of rules that produce an activity when they are adhered to. The experience and the art are in the enacting of the structure. Game events are both *consciously structured* by the game designer and *enacted experiences* that can only be accessed by participating in and contributing to them (Stenros & Waern 2010). Similarly, the psychogeographers’ *drift* (strolling around the city in a particular way), or the more formal *Abstract Tours* (Ruggeri 2001), are formalized play, like games are formalized play (Montola et al. 2009). Such participatory works of art are especially close to larps as there are no clear winning conditions and the experiences are often *internally validated* (Dansey et al. 2009), meaning that it is the participant herself who decides when the goals of the activity have been met. The central difference to larp is that there is no story world, no narrative and the participants are present as themselves instead of playing fictitious roles.

Participation challenges the cult of the artist. If the line between on the one hand the creator, the artists, and the auteur and on the other hand the audience, the spectator, and the masses in the other is blurred, then the special cultural position of art is jeopardized. Anthony Howell (2000) has warned against the shattering of the *homeostasis* of an artwork. “To acknowledge the audience destroys the performer, since it dissolves the difference between them.” This statement is based on fear, a fear that such an acknowledgement would demystify the performance. “One of the signs of weak theatre is that it is too willing to accommodate its audience – to acknowledge it – and thus for its performers to become ‘just like their audience.’”

But even works that require participation or co-creation are initiated by someone, who may also curate the piece or design the activity. In larps the game masters, the organizers, the designer and the initiators of the game are at times treated as auteurs and creators in a manner analogous to artists, directors and authors; and naturally there are movements to storm even that castle, as the collective larp design method used for example in *Enhetsfront* showcases. Different larps have different levels of co-creation and participation and these can be compared to the different levels of organizing structure in participatory pieces such as John Cage’s *4’33”*, the nude crowd photographs of Spencer Tunick, *The AIDS Memorial Quilt* and zombie walks. In *Open Work* (1962), Umberto Eco wrote:

4 For a more in depth look, see Groys (2009), Bishop (2006) and Frieling (2009).

5 Both Kaprow (1966) and Debord (1957) explicitly reference games and play in their key texts.

the author offers the interpreter, the performer, the addressee, a work to be completed. He does not know the exact fashion in which his work will be concluded, but he is aware that once completed the work in question will still be his own. It will not be a different work, and, at the end of the interpretive dialogue, a form which is his form will have been organized, even though it may have been assembled by an outside party in a particular way that he could not have foreseen.

Eco was writing on modern music, but his description also happens to capture the way game designers see their work today. They create the rules, goals, setting and story-worlds, and though each play session is different, it is still the same game – created by the designer:

As a game designer, you are tackling a second-order design problem. The goal of successful game design is meaningful play, but play is something that emerges from the functioning of the rules. As a game designer, you can never directly design play. You can only design the rules that give rise to it. Game designers create experience, but only indirectly. (Salen & Zimmerman 2004)

Game design is always second-order design, as any truly participatory art or activity design must be. The designer does not create an activity, but the rules and structures that foster it. The participants always bring in their contributions. Indeed, the challenge of co-creation is the very starting point for game design. Unfortunately there has so far been very little dialogue between games and art in this area.

Games, Art and Tradition

Historically games have not been considered worthy of the status of art, yet canonized art has mined games for inspiration for centuries. Though games are generally not seen as a form of art, it seems that it is possible for art to adapt the form of a game (Montola et al 2009). The move from being a subject of arts to being art perhaps started when Duchamp abandoned art to pursue playing chess.

As art evolved towards being more conceptual, games became a handy reference and a building block. Many of the well-known works created in connection to Fluxus are both playful and interactive. *Fluxboxes* contained instructions for the spectator-player to follow and directly referenced games – yet they were often left purposefully open-ended allowing for different sorts of enactments (Frieling 2009).

There is a tradition of games presented as art in the context of museums and galleries. But these *art gallery games*, a genre of their own, are a narrow tradition. They tend to be objects, artefacts to look at and to ponder, rather than platforms for actual play. When these games are described, the description will list what the piece looks like and what the rules are – not how it is played or what kind of activity it creates. Art gallery games are rarely designed to be good *as games*, as the very point of these pieces is often in their lousy functionality. They are subversive in the way they alter the implicit rules of all games. This is interesting, but often renders the games themselves unplayable.

Yoko Ono's *Play it by Trust*, aka *White Chess Set* (1966), is a prime example of an art gallery game. The work is a completely white chess set with the instruction: "Play it for as long as you can remember who is your opponent and who is your own self." Though the game can be played, at least for some time, it is not necessary for the viewer to play it in order to understand what the artist might be trying to say with it.⁶ The fact that many games staged in an art gallery have been unplayable or relatively amateurish from a game design point-of-view has probably contributed towards giving art a bad name in the context of games.

There are also games presented as art that are about playing, experiencing, and the activity they produce instead of simply being objects one contemplates. These kinds of works seem to be rarer, and they often pervade the city and only use the gallery as a point of entry. The British art collective Blast Theory has staged numerous game-like interactive installations in and around galleries around the world (see Adams 2009). The closest one to larp is probably *Kidnap*, a transmedia spectacle where two people won the prize of being kidnapped and held hostage for 48 hours by the artists. Perhaps participant activities, as they are designed indirectly through the medium of the game, are less likely to be recognized as being created by an artist.

Recently, Nordic larps have also been invited to galleries. For example *inside:outside* was commissioned by Kunstneres Hus in Oslo, and *LevelFive* (2010) was played at both Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and at the Zero1 Biennial in San Jose. Larps are sporadically invited to join art festivals, but it is rare that larps not created with an institutionalized art world in mind would make their way to galleries and museums. Whether these tailored larps will develop into a subgenre of art gallery larps remains to be seen.

Just like most situation specific participatory events, larps resist easy commercialization. Nothing lasting is created; there is only the ephemeral event and the experience. Residual works based on larps are seldom produced. But more importantly, larps require a strong commitment from the participants in order to be appreciated. Whereas contemporary art has become "yet another form of mass culture" (Manovich 2009), larp has thus far resisted being streamlined and packaged in this manner.

Nordic Larp as Art

Game designers and academics specializing in larps agree that live action role-playing can be art, but it is not always clear what they mean by that. Larp has been called among other things a medium, an art form, a social art form, a new performance art that creates a social body, and a subjective form of art.⁷ The

6 In some critical games the act of not playing is the only way to win. These games tend to criticise either violence and war or representations of violence and war in games. For example in *September 12th* (2003) every time the player bombs a terrorist, it creates new terrorists. *lose/lose* (2009) goes even further. It is a digital game that deletes a file from the user's computer every time she destroys another spaceship.

7 For different takes, see Harviainen (2010), Fatland & Wingård (1999), Vanek (2009), Bowman (2010), Flood (2006), Mackay (2001) and Pohjola (2003). Note that On the other side of the fence there is silence: no researcher of art has written on the subject..

uniqueness of the role-playing expression is concisely captured by Juhana Pettersson, who writes about larp as experiential art:

It is an experience consisting of active participation and creation, of being a subjective spectator, of engaging with both the in-game and the off-game levels of the game. It is an experience of negotiating a large amount of communication and complex, artificial social systems, out of which the game itself emerges. (Pettersson 2006)⁸

While books tell and theatre shows – the experience is conveyed through sympathy and empathy – larps make you enact and experience first hand. This takes place in a setting and a structure which is consciously designed, played with dual awareness of the game and ordinary life, and co-creative power in inter-immersion with fellow players who share and strengthen the experience. Role-playing is designed social experience as an art form.

The *cluster theory of art*⁹ provides a hazy set of criteria that any potential work of art is compared to and must meet in some way (Tavinor 2009). Obviously this is a fuzzy, debatable way of drawing the line between art and not-art, but the criteria art scholars have compiled are very revealing of the way “art” is constructed in our society. Berys Gaut (2000) lists ten properties that usually count towards something being considered a work of art – and the absence of which is seen as an indication of it not being art:¹⁰

(1) possessing positive aesthetic properties, such as being beautiful, graceful, or elegant (properties which ground a capacity to give sensuous pleasure); (2) being expressive of emotion; (3) being intellectually challenging (i.e., questioning received views and modes of thought); (4) being formally complex and coherent; (5) having a capacity to convey complex meanings; (6) exhibiting an individual point of view; (7) being an exercise of creative imagination (being original); (8) being artefact or performance which is the product of a high degree of skill; (9) belonging to an established artistic form (music, painting, film, etc.); and (10) being the product of an intention to make a work of art. (Gaut 2000)

With this kind of a list and the works presented in this book, it is relatively easy to argue that at least certain larps are art. Yet ultimately, even if a few singular larps or a tradition of larps fill enough of the above criteria – or are similar enough to canonized pieces of participatory art – that still does not make larp part of the art world, art in the *institutional* sense of the term.

It is one thing for the game designers and larp researchers to say that larp is art – meaning probably that it carries cultural significance, has social value, can generate strong emotions, and is a source of aesthetic experiences – and quite another for larp

to become part of the established world of fine art. The traditions and canons of art change and develop over time as a result of the field of power relations where the meaning of art is constantly negotiated. The central question is the *power and legitimacy* to define what art is. In order for larp to become a part of the tradition of art, someone in the art field needs to attain the power and the will to make larp art.

Tradition is an important consideration in defining art. In order to present a worthwhile piece, the artist is expected to know the relevant tradition and to position her work in relation to it – or at least seem to do so. In many role-playing cultures formal renewal is not necessarily considered a virtue. It is possible in many places to offer a larp constructed out of very similar building-blocks year after year – not unlike the market for popular genre movies.

Howard S. Becker (1982) has discussed art as a social, collective activity created not just by singular creators, but by larger *art worlds*. He has identified four different ways to stand in relation to these art worlds: integrated professionals, mavericks, folk artists and naïve artists. The first two refer to people who work or have worked directly in art worlds. The latter two are of interest in relation to larp. First of all, larp can certainly be characterized as *folk art*, as like quilting it is

done totally outside professional art worlds, work done by ordinary people in the course of their ordinary lives, work seldom thought of by those who make or use it as art at all, even though, as often happens, others from outside the community it is produced in find artistic value in it.

Many larp traditions deny that role-playing could ever be art and instead call it entertainment. However, the Nordic larp tradition has been self-identifying as art for some time. Becker’s category of naïve artists, or perhaps *naïve art*, is a slightly better fit:

Its makers work in isolation, free from the constraints of cooperation which inhibit art world participants, free to ignore the conventional categories of art works. To make things which do not fit any standard genre and cannot be described as examples of any class. Their works just are, and can be described only by enumerating their features. Once described, they cannot then be assigned to a class: each is its own class, because it was made without reference to anything else, and nothing else has been made in reference to it. (Becker 1982)

Though this description may work from the point of view of professional art worlds, it seems ill-fitting when viewed from the angle of Nordic larp. Nordic larp as a whole may seem like a text book example of naïve art, but individual larpwrights are certainly aware of each other’s works. Also, the ideology of building on previous work, of some sort of progress, has crept into the Nordic larps and established a tradition. Perhaps the best way, in Becker’s terms, is to characterize Nordic larp as an art world of its own.

8 Pettersson’s essay is titled *The Art of Experience*. Art in this context refers to art as in artistic, not craft (see also Pettersson 2005).

9 There are too many definitions of art to get into in the context of this essay. Cluster theory is chosen based on its practicality, approachability and the fact that it incorporates most angles on art in its criteria.

10 Gaut does not consider his list a definition, but many others, such as Tavinor (2009) and Dutton (2006) do. For a comparable list, see Dutton (2006).



The residue from larps and Happenings can look astonishingly similar. On top Robert Whitman's Mouth (1961) (Robert R. McElroy, quoted from Kaprow 1966), on bottom Hamlet (Play, Bengt Liljeros).

Play and Games

In this book it has also been taken for granted that Nordic larps are games. Yet this stance can be problematized quite easily. It is obvious that Nordic larps are *play*. But are they really *games*?

One oft-cited definition of a game is provided by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004), defining game as “a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome.” Role-playing games in general seem to fit this quite well: there are players who often have goals that are non-trivial or in conflict with each other, there are rule structures even if they are at times implicit¹¹, there is an outcome, even if it can be difficult to quantify that outcome. Yet the fit is not perfect. The authors of this definition have called role-playing games a “limit case” of games because they lack a quantifiable outcome (Salen & Zimmerman 2003).¹²

In essence, what Salen & Zimmerman are saying is that role-playing games do not necessarily have a clear winner. Each character may have her personal goal and purpose, and they need not be in conflict with the goals of others. Every character might succeed in reaching her goal – or it could be that no-one succeeds. Even more problematic is that the players’ goals may be in conflict with those of the characters’; a player may push her character to fail on purpose.¹³ Creating and embodying a tragedy, like in *Hamlet*, is as valid a goal as winning in the game. This is almost unheard of in games; games are almost always played to win, not to lose. Finally, the goal of the player can be just to simulate everyday life in a fictional setting, to inhabit and be someone else regardless of grand schemes, facetious goals and irrelevant plots.

If games are conceived of as systems, as artefacts, as objects, then finding the game in role-playing games can be difficult. The rules can change during play, the game master has considerable leeway, specific goals may be missing, the outcome of a session can be quite muddled, it can be impossible to say who won or lost. Indeed, it is also worth noting that Salen & Zimmerman were mostly discussing traditional tabletop role-playing games, not larp. The issues that are slightly problematic in tabletop role-playing game are magnified in larps; in tabletop games all the players and the game master usually inhabit the same room, but in larps the participants can be dispersed around a house or a city – and no-one has an overview of the game until it ends, if ever.

Even so, larps have traditionally been considered games – at least by larpers. Most consider them to be an offshoot of role-playing games – the kind of role-playing games that emerged in the early 1970s and which generally are said to be invented by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson. This is curious as history is rife with cultural practices that feature role taking: rituals staged

11 Or they can be “invisible” (Montola 2008).

12 According to Juul’s (2005) influential definition, classic games have six features: rules, quantifiable outcome, valorization of that outcome, player attachment to the outcome, player effort and negotiable consequences for ordinary life. He considers tabletop role-playing games a “borderline case” because the human game masters compromise fixed rules.

13 See Montola 2008 on exogenous, endogenous and diegetic goals.

by ancient pharaohs, the thematic naval and gladiatorial spectacles of the Roman Empire, Commedia dell’Arte, mask play and religious liturgy around the world, etc. Even during the 20th century there are numerous non-ludic uses of role-playing in at least the fields of psychology, social psychology, education, training and theatre.¹⁴ The list is long and varied, but it does show that the tendency to pretend to be someone else in the land of make-believe is something that not only children have done throughout history, but something adults have engaged in as well (Walton 1990). Role-playing is a fundamentally human activity.

What Gygax and Arneson did in 1974 with *Dungeons & Dragons* was to productize one form of role-playing, just as Jacob Moreno had productized another form into psychodrama almost a half a century earlier (Montola 2009). The form of role-playing that emerged in the 1970s was heavily tied into a tradition of gaming. *Dungeons & Dragons* was based on *Chainmail*, a miniature war game, which was based on the first modern war game outlined by H. G. Wells in *Little Wars* (1913). Wells was influenced by the German *Kriegsspiel* tradition of miniature war games that were used to teach military strategy. Following this thread leads to *chess*, the forefather of European war games – and thus one of the forefathers of role-playing games (Parlett 1999, Lancaster 1999).

If larp is an offshoot of role-playing games, then at least historically they are games, emerging from the tradition of games.¹⁵ However, in many larp cultures theatre, the Scout Movement and historical re-enactment have been at least as influential as games. Most larpers do see larps as part of a larger field of role-playing games and thus as part of games. Yet this affinity is at times and in some larp cultures more a function of history than a reflection of current practices (Mäyrä 2001). It seems that Nordic larps, though certainly related to games, are drifting ever further away from the core of game play as they absorb in influences from elsewhere. But it remains to be seen whether this means that they are becoming less like games, or if the whole realm of games is expanding.

The Borderlands

Though the core of larping can be clearly separated from ideal forms of theatre, performance art and games, it does not mean that there is no common ground or overlap between these fields. As influences travel, boundaries have become blurred.

There have been attempts to bring larp closer to theatre and to make it more spectator-friendly: for example *System*

14 For an overview of larp-like practices throughout the ages, see Morton (2007). However, the cultural contexts before industrialization were so different that not all activities having the formal traits of larp should be labeled as such (Montola et al., 2009). For an overview of role-play in the context of social psychology, see Yardley-Matwiejczuk (1997) and Henriksen (2007).

15 It is also interesting that most names that are today given to larp omit the word “game”. Live action role-play, live role-play, theatre style are all labels that have severed the etymological connection to games. Yet the instances of play are still referred to as “games”.



Garbage, the hidden excrement of consumerism. Amerika was about consumerism, liberty, capitalism, the American Dream and the gap between the rich and the poor. (Play, Britta K. Bergersen)



Walkabout (2009), staged by Teatteri Naamio ja Höyhen, combined pervasive games, larp, performance and theatre. Player-participants were slowly pushed into playing Tarot archetypes. (Diegetic, Matti Keltanen)



Tower Room (2010) by Johanna MacDonald had four stages: durational, performance, larp and theatre. Here, Icaros is sacrificed in the theatre stage. (Play, Pilar Andeyro & Alejandro García)

Danmark, Amerika (Fatland 2009) and *Kalevala: Vainovalkeat* (Kalevala: Warning Beacons, 1999; see Leppälähti 2009) were all staged in a way that made them visible to the public and some of them even offered tours of the gaming area for outsider spectators. Viewing is not the same as participating, but that does not mean that the spectators could not get something meaningful and worthwhile out of these games:

Amerika was walled off, but from the terrace on the north end of Youngstorget any pedestrian could have an excellent view of the larp. Some stood there for almost the whole duration of *Amerika*, following the movements of a hundred characters – reality theatre before the break-through of reality TV. [...] late at night, a stranger walked up to the organisers by the gates of the larp, and exclaims: “I’m so exhausted... I’ve stood up there and watched for fifteen hours... now I have to get some sleep. But I’ll be back first thing in the morning!” (Fatland 2009)

Though larps are sporadically staged and played in view of the public, this has not become common. Being looked at changed the larps. It emphasises the performative side of the playing and violates the privacy of these events. It is one thing to play a role in the safety of a group where everyone participates and quite another to subject oneself to the judgement of an audience.

The experience of watching and playing remain very different. Indeed, so far there has not been a successful way to fully bridge this gap. It is telling that neither *En stilla middag med familjen* nor *Walkabout* (2009), both marketed as hybrids between theatre and larp, tried to bring in an audience that was not playing.

Similarly, *Luminescence* could well be discussed as performance art. It was conceived of and designed firmly within the realm and tradition of visual and performance art, and it certainly has a suitable appearance. But even if the game world was represented in a very symbolic manner, there was little or no narrative drive and numerous methods of alienation were used to distance the players, the participants still enacted character roles in a fictive setting for themselves, not for an audience. Also, *Luminescence* was played in the context of the Solmukohta 2004 larp convention, not an established context of performance art. Of course, it has been argued that role-playing games are a new performing art (Mackay 2001) and even that larpers are Kaprow’s scions and that larps are “Happenings of the Future” (Harviainen 2008).

Consider *The Baudoin/Boudewijn Experiment: A Deliberate Non-Fatalistic Large Scale Group Experiment in Deviation*, inspired by the late monarch of Belgium, who absconded for one day to avoid having to sign a bill that allowed abortion while letting the bill pass into law. In this art experiment

... a space is provided to accommodate 200 people, willing to step out of their ‘usual life’ for 24 hours [...] The space will be

closed from the outside world and mobile phones, radios and TVs will not be allowed. This is to emphasise the group aspect of the experiment and to create a structure in which the ‘step-out’ can be done commonly. [...] basically the experiment will be to see what happens under these conditions; people are freed from their usual constraints, and yet confined in space and time. (Höller 2000)

The event was not recorded in any way. This set-up is quite similar to larps, especially to *Hamlet*, with the exception that in larps there is also a story-world and characters for the participants to play. Yet one might argue that the shared inspiration for the event created, if not a coherent world, a frame for the social context. And when a situation is so extraordinary, the social roles that people play can be hard to distinguish from characters. Martin Ericsson (2009), one of the designers of *Hamlet*, calls larps structured as separate spaces *ecstatic furnaces*:

These games used an isolated place and time, where extreme dramatic situations and hardcore attitudes were combined in order to make consensus reality vanish completely from the mind of the participants. To achieve this, I used the whole liminal-ritual-cultic bag of tricks including isolation, archetypal characters, elaborate costuming, life-and-death narratives, secrecy, intoxication, and militaristic discipline juxtaposed with wild abandon.

Another interesting case is Brody Condon’s *Twentyfivefold Manifestation*. This work has three aspects: At the core there is the experience of playing the game staged in a public park in the Netherlands in the summer of 2008 as part of the Sonsbeek sculpture exhibition. In the game, designed by Bjarke Pedersen and drawing directly from the Nordic tradition, the players form tribes that worship in various ways the sculptures created by the other artists featured at the exhibition. The second level is created for the spectators at the park; though they do not understand the game and have no access to that experience, the game is designed in such a way that it is interesting to look at – and the players have a way of relating to the spectators within their diegetic frame. Condon (2010) used the gameplay as a “generating engine” that produced a striking visual surface for the spectators. Finally, the project was documented as a film that shows the play as well as some of the interactions between the spectators and the players. Though the play experience of larp is not accessible to a spectator, some residue of the play, if the design takes that into consideration, can be presented.

Historically, the connection between larps and games is fairly strong and it is relatively easy to find larps with strong ludic elements. Yet whereas certain staginess and a tendency towards performance are inherent in most larps, the spectrum from clearly game-like larps to simulations with no victory conditions to more experimental, symbolic or hermeneutic “being-there”



LevelFive (2010) was created by the New York –based artist Brody Condon in collaboration with Danish and Swedish larpwrights. It was played twice, at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and at the Zero1 Biennial, San Jose. (Diegetic, Bjarke Pedersen)

marks a much wider territory. In Nordic larp, where immersion is a common ideal, the character failing to reach his goals is not undesirable but rather a platform for successful tragedy. Even talking about “winning” is frowned upon in many larp cultures, resulting in “games” that are not very ludic.

That said there are Nordic larps that embrace their game-ness. Heavily influenced by game theory, *inside:outside* is larp that could easily be not only viewed, but played with emphasis on the gamist elements. It also underlines how important the players’ contribution is; different instances of the game can have not only completely different endings, but the overall feeling and style of playing may vary greatly.¹⁶ Even so, *simulation* may be a more fitting term. Indeed, it has been argued that all role-playing is simulation and that the term *operating realities* might be a better fit for the more ludic simulations (Crookall, Oxford & Saunders 1987).

Erving Goffman (1961) has noted that games “are world-building activities”. Games contain roles, meanings, events and relations that make sense only in their own terms. Role-playing games and larps are a particularly illustrative example of this world-building. The characters that players play inhabit worlds custom-built for this very activity. The actions players take in these worlds need not be sensible or even comprehensible in any other context. Moreover, these games are not just worlds, they are populated by human-like characters who have personal histories, wants and needs, goals and hopes, and who are connected to each other. Larps are *constructed communities*, and they always create some kind of *social reality*.

It would not be too much of a stretch to approach larps as *social art*. The alternative social worlds that they build are not too far from the explicit agenda proposed by Nicolas Bourriaud (1998) in his discussion of relational aesthetics:

[T]he artist must assume the symbolic models he shows. All representation (though contemporary art models more than it represents, and fits into the social fabric more than it draws inspiration therefrom) refers to values that can be transposed into society. [...] Art is a state of encounter.

Larp, co-created by the game masters and the players, simulate, model and inhabit alternative worlds. Even at their least reflective there is a dialogue with society through the players – and sometimes even through direct confrontation (as discussed in the opening essay of this book).

Grant Tavinor (2009) has discussed contemporary videogames as art and done so in the context of philosophy of art. He has noted that the fictional worlds videogames offer for the

16 For example, *Prayers on the Porcelain Altar* (2007) by J. Tuomas Harviainen is designed in a way that it can be played as a murder mystery puzzle or an immersionist catfight, or as anything in between.

player to explore and interact with give us something new: “This seems to be something new in art: the representation of the player, their agency, and their aesthetic experiences, *within* a fictional world – videogames seem to provide an active exploratory aesthetics.” Larps offer comparable fictional *physical* worlds, where these new aesthetics of action are employed. If larps are positioned as art, they bring something new to the table and do expand the form art takes.

Similarly, if they are to be considered games, then the idea of a “game” needs to expand to accommodate them. Indeed, larps do seem to be part of a larger trend connected to the expansion of the fields of games and play. The core of games, the so-called *classic games* (Jul 2005), have been surrounded by an increasing number of cultural artefacts, practises and activities that are called “games” but which do not fit the tight systemic definitions. Just in the realm of digital games there are numerous party games with mimetic interfaces where performance almost completely overshadows scoring points (e.g. *SingStar*, *Rock Band*), massively multiplayer online worlds that are more like social places than games (e.g. *Second Life*, *World of Warcraft*) and toy-like never ending digital life simulators lacking clear victory conditions or even specific goals (e.g. *The Sims*, *FarmVille*).

Finally, there is the question of why. By looking at larps *as theatre*, *as art* and *as a game*, pondering the similarities and differences, we can learn new things about larp as well as about these three other fields. But why would one claim that larp *is* theatre, art or a game? Perhaps these labels can be used to bring in new players; maybe they lend status, legitimacy or societal acceptance to the activity. And they may, perhaps, bring respect and economic compensation for the people working in the field.

Coda

Larps are like improvisational theatre without an audience that is (not) performed for its own sake, rather than performed for an audience. Larps are Situations and Happenings that have been largely disconnected from the canons and traditions of art, set in internally relatively consistent story worlds that feature characters enacted by the participants. Larps are games set in simulated social worlds that do not necessarily have a winner – and even if they do, the players may still prefer to lose.

It is possible to situate larp in the fields of theatre, performance art and games, and to create larps that also fit under those labels, but larp in general cannot be reduced to any of those three categories. Illuminating though these approaches can be they all reduce larps to a framework that is ultimately ill-fitting.

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*How ridiculous I was as a Marionette! And how
happy I am, now that I have become a real boy!*

– Pinocchio



STEAMPUNK STARSHIPS.
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In the Nordic countries, live-action role-playing has developed into a unique and powerful form of expression. Nordic larps range from entertaining flights of fancy to the exploration of the intimate, the collective and the political. This incredible tradition combines influences from theatre and performance art with gamer cultures, in order to push the boundaries of role-playing.

Nordic Larp presents a critical cross section of this vibrant culture through 30 outstanding larps, combining stories told by designers, players and researchers with hundreds of photographs of play and preparations.

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