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Foreword

Jaakko Stenros

In July of 2011 I participated in a larp that has stayed with me for over a decade. This impactful and deeply meaningful experience helped me address and approach questions of history and identity; it made me appreciate my own life in a new way; it rendered the art of consciously and thoughtfully designing experiences visible through its example; and it thrust me in loving, visceral, and heart-breaking social situations with people – many of whom have since become close friends. That larp was *Just a Little Lovin’*.

The work is surprisingly easy to explain. *Just a Little Lovin’* is a larp – meaning that it is a live action role-playing game – about the beginning of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the early 1980s. Played over four or five days, the larp depicts three 4th of July parties on consecutive years in upstate New York, where two groups of people – a group of “fags and dykes”, and a group of cancer survivors – come together. The central themes are desire, friendship, and fear of death.

Just a Little Lovin’ was played for the first time just outside of Oslo, Norway, in the beginning of July in 2011. The larp, designed by Tor Kjetil Edland and Hanne Grasmø, has since been staged seven additional times with some additional writing and fine-tuning in Denmark, Sweden, Finland, France, United States, and the United Kingdom. Each run has had 54 -70 player participants, a production crew, and either Edland or Grasmø or both present. Over the years *Just a Little Lovin’* has gathered a reputation as an impactful, harrowing, and particularly well-designed larp. It is a *Nordic larp* in the sense that it draws from this specific design and play tradition that uses concise bespoke mechanics, emphasises the thematic aspects of the setting, a shared dramatic arc, continuous and realistic social interaction, and the embodied player experience of “being there”. In many ways it is the epitome of a specific Nordic larp design philosophy: It is an original creative work aimed at adults that is specific and deeply meaningful, has substantial real-world relevance, and contains no fantastic genre elements.

Now, after tending and caring for this work for a decade, Edland and Grasmø have decided to release the larp. This book contains the larp script as well as reflections of how and why the larp was made, how it has been produced, and what is important in staging it. In addition, the book collects reflective essays that the experience of the larp has inspired. In this foreword I contextualize the work, explore its meaning and impact, and grapple with my own experience with it.

A Decade Ago

Before the very first staging of the larp, the website of *Just a Little Lovin’* described the setting of the larp in the following way:

Two groups of friends from New York City celebrate the 4th of July in upstate New York. The 1970s have been a decade of women's liberation, youth rebellion, anti-war protests and sexual promiscuity. This changed America forever, but the early 1980s is also a time of a resurging conservative movement which President Ronald Reagan is the sunny face of. Gay men are migrating to New York to become part of the vibrant and hedonistic scene in Greenwich Village. Unbeknownst to everyone however the HIV virus has started spreading in the city. An article in the New York Times last summer described a mysterious "gay cancer", but its cause remains still unknown.

The backstory of the larp outlined that in two neighbouring upstate New York cabins two groups had traditionally gathered to celebrate Independence Day in the United States. In one a group of gays and lesbians attended Mr T's celebration and in the other a group of cancer survivors, many of whom were hippies and swingers, gathered to reaffirm and strengthen their pact to support each other and to live life to the fullest. A year before the larp's beginning the two groups had mixed together for the first time and since that had been fun. At the beginning of the larp the fence separating the cabins had been removed and the two parties had been combined. The larp website continues:

During the larp we play three 4th of July parties of 1982, 1983 and 1984. Every morning after breakfast there is an act break where we find out what has happened with the characters and their relationships the following year before the next act starts one year later. When the game starts neither the players nor the characters know who will become infected by the virus, but the lives of all the characters will be deeply affected by the epidemic. Our goal for the game is that all the characters will have friendships that are important to them, experience a little bit of lovin' at the summer parties and feel the fear of death as people around them start to become infected.

The larp consisted of three acts, each portraying a consecutive 4th of July party. All the parties had a similar structure (arriving, barbeque dinner, an assortment of program items usually including a drag show, fireworks, sleep, breakfast, etc.), which provided a familiar structure to play out the drama (as discussed by Eleanor Saitta in an article in this book). Each act started around five in the evening and went on until eleven on the following morning. Between the acts, mechanics were used to determine who would get sick and die, the players negotiated what had happened during the year, and criticism was voiced as to what had worked during play and what had not, enabling players to make corrections. In the end characters who died were put in caskets, and the lids were closed. The runtime of the larp is followed by debriefing, discussion, contextualizing knowledge and advocacy about the HIV/AIDS epidemic today, and an afterparty. In total the larp lasted four days (five for later runs), counting the preparations and debriefing.

The repeating structure of the days, and the time jumps between the different days, brings the focus on the characters and their interpersonal relationships. The themes – desire, friendship, and fear of death – are constantly present; the characters are linked through friendships, they are also looking for love and sex in the party atmosphere, and fear of death is pervasive both from cancer and HIV/AIDS. Specific mechanics are in use for death (each morning there is a simple lottery, where each character expresses how dangerously they have lived by selecting how many tokens to put in) and for sex (the "phallus method" of simulating sex). While metatechniques are in use, the play is mostly uninterrupted and a strong feeling of being there emerges as participants perform and inhabit their characters.

Playing the Larp

Understanding the impact of *Just a Little Lovin'* ten years later is difficult as so much has happened in a decade. When the larp premiered, the self-understanding of Nordic larp as an artistic tradition was developing rapidly and designers were pushing boundaries of what larps design could do. *Blackbox larps* were just emerging and the impact of freeform role-play scenario design was strong. *Metatechniques*, designed operations to enhance the experience by breaking the boundary between the player and the character, were a relatively new innovation. *Bleed*, the word for the common experience of emotions of the character affecting the player (and vice versa), had just entered the common lexicon a few years before. Larps about specific issues, experiences, and themes were all the rage, but for example feminist thinking and queer theory had not impacted larp design to the extent that is common today. This was also before the emergence of the *blockbuster larp* formula, creating big and loud larps inspired by specific films or television shows.

Just a Little Lovin' uses a number of techniques to create the experience. It is not a continuous three-day larp, but divides the time in three acts, all taking place in different years. Between these acts there is time to reflect and workshop the events of the next section of runtime. The larp also features a meta room (called blackbox at the time), where it is possible to play out past and future events, as well as dreams and alternatives. Then there is the lottery of death to bring in the impact of the “gay plague”, the invitation and consent mechanic of the feathers, the phallus method for playing out sexual encounters, the monologues spoken out loud after sex to gesture at intimacy, and the midnight drink to enable changing one’s characters direction (all explained later in this book). Some of these mechanics were adopted from other larps, some were created specifically for this work, but this bespoke combination is consciously created to foster a specific experience in a way that is also aesthetically coherent.

Just a Little Lovin' is a mature work of larp by two designers who know their form of expression very well. It addresses foundational human experience without the scaffolding of distancing through allegory, fantasy, or relying on well-known existing intellectual property. Furthermore, it is a confident work in that it does not wink at the audience or make apologies for its earnest handling of the topic. This makes it demanding to play. A player needs to commit to the work and show something real of themselves to make the nuanced human interactions come alive. The stakes are high for each participant.

This was not the first Nordic larp with gay characters, but *Just a Little Lovin'* was the first larp about the gay experience. This was clear already from the website, which did not look at gays from the outside. Importantly, the characters were written with respect towards queer history, from the point of view of queer experiences with era appropriate words, not through a straight gaze or with the language of 2011 (let alone 2021). However, the larp was not aimed at only gay players; everyone was invited to join. This time playing gay was not about parody, comedy, and stereotypes, but about empathy. Recognizing the shared humanity and capturing a sliver of a possibility of a lived experience.

The setting and scenography of the larp are important in transporting one to a specific moment, but *Just a Little Lovin'* is not aiming at an authentic environment, but a

dramatically compelling and thematically appropriate, real-enough simulation. The point is not to play the exact right pieces of music and to drop correct pop cultural references, but to inhabit a version of the past. What makes the larp feel meaningful and impactful and real is the other people. Human experience is at the core of larp – and it is the hardest to describe in rules, to show in pictures, or to capture in writing.

Pretending to be someone else for three days, with people who are also pretending that you are this other person, can feel very real. And even if everything else is pretend, the human connections, the human interaction, is real.

I have tried to write about this play experience for a decade, for *Just a Little Lovin'* is my most meaningful larp experience, but I am still unable to express in words why playing Mr. T, a gay man working in advertising, had such an impact on me. He was the host of the party, devoted to his guests, friends, lovers, and job. The everyday life, the chats and conversation, the celebration and the petty fights were meaningful in their full recognition of the queer experience. But as the young friends and lovers and protégés of my Mr. T started to die, it felt like the death of the future. This annihilation of a way of living, of culture, was almost more than I could bear. I contemplated quitting the larp, as it resonated so strongly with my own experiences growing up gay during the death sentence era of late 1980s and early 1990s.

And the hardest part to talk about is the impact of the other players. How a specific conversation or a post coital insult, a drag performance or a hug, a haunting look or a shared cry form a tapestry of pretended reality, that nevertheless feels real. I miss these people, even now.

This is a larp where I felt seen, where experiences that I had not been able to name and put into words were not only treated as real, but processed. It resonated, in a very profound way, with my thinking about shame, anger, fairness, self-worth, parenting, and legacy. It remains my most profound larp experience.

Identity Politics

As the larp addresses sensitive and still raw experiences, it has prompted discussion on if it is okay to play on HIV/AIDS, who can stage this kind of play, how to ensure that the different intersections present are accounted for, and how to ensure that the play is “respectful”. Already before the very first run of *Just a Little Lovin'* was staged, the website of the larp prompted a discussion in the culture pages of the Swedish yellow press paper *Expressen*. Critic Philip Teir opened the discussion where he compared theatre and larp and expressed worry that the director and the playwright are replaced by game designer. Theatre treats its subjects with care, Teir argues, but larp (partially as it lacks audience), maybe does not do that. Teir asks pointedly who has the right to play being sick. This led to a debate between numerous critics, commentators, and the larps designers. (Tova Gerge’s account of this debate can be found in the book *States of Play*. It serves as an interesting time capsule from a moment when larp was just knocking on the door of art establishments).

Teir’s question, however, is interesting and has come up several times in different forms since. Is this grief tourism? Is this just frivolous 1980s nostalgia? Who gets to inhabit these stories?

These points of criticism often contain the idea that larps are games and games are incapable of handling sensitive subjects. On this larp designers and players tend to disagree. However, the cultural stigma of play and games as frivolous is strong – as is the notion that an artist relinquishing power and agency to the participants to meaningfully co-create to the final work diminishes their potency as an auteur. Participatory works carry a stigma – and they are also often treated as not-art.

However, that larps are able to tackle sensitive issues in a nuanced way does not mean that they are always successful. A larp script is a vulnerable document as by nature larp is co-creative, meaning that integrity and compassion cannot be guaranteed by the designers. Organizers and players need to commit to the work. This larp certainly has a surface of 1980s nostalgia in a way that can be read as a celebration of an era or as a superfluous fashion choice. The design goal here is to link to traditions of Pride where the connection between glam and politics has a rich history in queer resistance. A player also tends to get out from a larp what they put in; it is possible to engage with *Just a Little Lovin'* without honesty, integrity, or commitment.

A good rule of thumb in addressing minority lived experience is the ideal from policy making: *Nihil de nobis, sine nobis*. “Nothing about us without us.” However, with a larp touching on a number of topics including HIV/AIDS, LGBTQ people, New York, cancer survivors, not all of these intersections were present in the original design team. *Just a Little Lovin'* is created by queer people about queer people, by people who have worked extensively with HIV/AIDS, and who put in significant effort to research the themes, topics, and experiences addressed in the larp. Furthermore, the different runs of the larp have been since played by queer people, New Yorkers, people with different experiences with and around cancer, and HIV positive people. These co-creators have contributed to the emotional honesty of the piece.

Reading players' reflections of the larp shows that it has not been an excuse for a nostalgic theme party. Sarah Lynne Bowman's article in this book contains numerous quotes from players, for whom the larp was intense, meaningful, and mind opening. This book also contains Erik Winther Paisley's deeply personal reflective essay on the larps impact on him as a gay man. There are numerous other accounts of play, such as *The Book of Just a Little Lovin' (2013 Denmark Run)*. Furthermore, in an article I co-wrote with Tanja Sihvonen, “Queer while Larping. Community, Identity, and Affective Labor in Nordic Live Action Role-Playing” *Just a Little Lovin'* comes up repeatedly as a key experience of queer larpers – and has even served as a key turning point in players' gender transition.

What these accounts echo is glimpsing what it might have been like to live in a time when one's whole community starts to unravel through death, but also in recognizing a queer community one is part of and its history. Being seen fully in one's queer identity and having that identity reflected back also comes up again and again – indicative of the drought of queer larp and queer play before *Just a Little Lovin'*.

As *Just a Little Lovin'* has become “the gay larp” or “the queer larp”, other aspects of it have received less attention. The experience of the cancer survivors has been debated much less. The largest change to the work was done before it was staged in the United States. The runs in Europe did not foreground race and racialization. Yet,

the idea of New York queer scenes that is mostly white, or where race does not play a significant part, was inconceivable in the American context. Thus, the workshop manuscript was updated, and the player characters and workshop manuscript were partially rewritten for the 2017 run to adapt them to the racial identities of the players by request.

The lasting legacy of *Just a Little Lovin'*, however, is probably not just in showing that larps about queer topics with queering metatechniques can be successful and meaningful, or in the design excellence it showcased, or even in the portrayal of a specific historical moment. All of these are clear in Edland and Grasmø's work, and it is wonderful that they have made the larp available for everyone through this book. The legacy of *Just a Little Lovin'* is in trailblazing a site for queer identity exploration and community building. For a decade it carved a place for queer play and queer players, and in the process built a community of international queer players who have then taken these lessons to other larps and player communities. A larp about desire, friendship, and fear of death created a community forged through these foundational human experiences.

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