

STATES OF PLAY

Nordic Larp Around the World

Edited by Juhana Pettersson
The official book of Solmukohta 2012
Pohjoismaisen roolipelaamisen seura

STATES OF PLAY
NORDIC LARP AROUND THE WORLD

The official book of Solmukohta 2012, published in cooperation with the Solmukohta organization.

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A young Mike Pohjola watches as Mika Lojonen burns his *Manifesto of the Turku School* at Solmukohta 2000. Photos: Onni Qvickström

INTRODUCTION

My first Solmukohta was in 2000.¹ It was a pretty different event from what it is today. Apart from a few cosmopolitan trailblazers, most Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian and Danish larpers and roleplayers were gawking at each other and wondering at how different our larp cultures were. Most people had never been to a game in a foreign country, and the traditional Solmukohta books collecting articles from around the Nordic countries and the world were still in the future.

We didn't know anything about larp in Russia or Italy. Even the Swedes seemed like exotic aliens, their speech almost understandable if you concentrated hard enough. Solmukohta was all about Nordic cultural exchange, trying to learn from our neighbors.

I remember people sleeping in classrooms and playing crazy Norwegian art larps. Someone told me they involved putting your hand into broken glass, so I didn't try them out. Later, I discovered that this was not true.

I was working as the janitor at a concert venue, so I missed big parts of the conference, but it was an impressive experience. I heard about wonderful games like the Swedish *Knap-pnålshuvudet* and *Carolus Rex*, both from 1999. My friend Mika Lojonen burnt in protest *The Manifesto of the Turku School*, by Mike Pohjola. In his manifesto, Mike argued that immersion in the character was the purpose of roleplaying, a view widely ridiculed at the time. Later, this idea has become almost conservative in Finnish larp discussion.

I got involved just in time. The next few years saw the birth of some of the most important works of the Nordic Larp canon: *Europa* in 2001, *Hamlet* in 2002, *Mellan him-mel och hav* in 2003. After Norway's initial prototype *The Book*, the first proper Solmukohta book was also published in 2003, by the Danes. It had the appropriate title *As Larp Grows Up*, and it collected many of the creative manifestoes that had been published so far, as well as new articles.

1 The annual Solmukohta event is called Knutepunkt when in Norway, Knutpunkt when in Sweden, Knudepunkt when in Denmark and Solmukohta when in Finland. It's a roleplaying conference mostly dedicated to Nordic larp design.

THE IDEA

Thinking back to those times, you can see a scene being born, flaring brightly with the excitement of all these new ideas. With time, things changed. Instead of gaping at each other, we started working together, going to games in other countries, and finding common ground. We started to understand the things that made Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian and Danish games into what is now known as Nordic Larp.

Instead of being a venue for Finns to marvel at what the Norwegians *are* doing, Solmukohta became the epicenter of a design movement. The original scene as it existed in 2003 died and was replaced by something new. Nordic Larp, codified into a canon in the book of the same name by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros, became untethered from its geographical moorings and started to spread to Italy, Germany, the Czech Republic, the U.S. and many other places around the world.

Here, it's important to note that Nordic Larp is not the same as the larps played in the Nordic countries. Indeed, most Nordic larps are not part of the Nordic Larp design movement. This leads to the bizarre situation where the Nordic Larp movement can enter into dialogue with Finnish larp the same way it can be in dialogue with Russian larp.

In the Solmukohta of today, I'm no longer astonished at what the Danes or the Norwegians are doing. They're fellow citizens of the Nordic Larp community, doing ambitious projects based on a strong tradition of Nordic larp design. Nowadays, the truly new stuff comes from all those Italians, Germans and Americans who have taken some of the ideas of Nordic Larp and made them part of their own artistic practice. Thankfully, instead of just assimilating stuff from us, they're sending ideas back, becoming the new creative frontier of Nordic Larp.

Examples abound in this book. Designers like Emily Care Boss, Andrea Castellani and Michał Mochocki write wonderful articles where you can see the influence of the Nordic scene, but which build upon these ideas in a truly original way.

(For those convinced of the design supremacy of the Nordic Larp movement, I suggest Aleksey Fedoseev and

Daria Kurguzona's article "Songs and Larp". Its description of song-based game design will shake your convictions. For those who fear Nordic decline, I suggest as a remedy JP Kaljonen and Johanna Raekallio's documentation article on the game *Dublin2* or Tova Gerge's ethics probe "Larp and Aesthetic Responsibility".)

Nordic Larp has become an idea that's being exported to the rest of the world, an ideal of ambitious game design ready to change the world, for fun, for art, or for more idealistic reasons. It's a dynamic idea, ready to incorporate anything and everything into itself, as long as the result is a game like we've never seen before.

THIS BOOK

This book provides a snapshot of a design movement at a particular moment in time. It's a forum for new design ideas, but also an attempt to document the games we are making for posterity. By necessity, it's a confused collection, since making sense of what's happening now is a luxury that's only available to us after the fact. Because of this, the categories of "Art and Design" and "Documentation are joined by "New Frontiers", articles that explore concepts and phenomena new to the Nordic larp scene.

As befits the collective, collaborative and co-creative nature of roleplaying, most of the ideas I've had about this book were stolen from somewhere else. The documentation articles follow the lead of the Danish *Do Larp* book and Stenros and Montola's *Nordic Larp*. The physical dimensions of this book were cribbed from *Larp, the Universe and Everything*, the Norwegian Knutepunkt book of 2009. The variant covers were inspired by the ultra-rare "white edition" of the 2011 Knudepunkt book *Think Larp*.

Along with all this there's a DVD of video documentation and other larp ephemera included with this book. If you get tired of reading, give it a shot.

This is but the latest in a long line of Solmukohta books. During the years, the idea of what a Solmukohta book is has changed and mutated, following various ideals and necessities. As *Larp Grows Up* in 2003 collected manifestoes and other documents in one place. *Beyond Role and Play* in 2004

fought hard for respectability, even academic credibility. Last year, the Danes published a trio of books: *Talk Larp* for rants, *Think Larp* for academic articles and *Do Larp* for documentation.

There is freedom in making a Solmukohta book after so much has been accomplished. Academic writing about role-playing games has its own venues, leaving us to take a more essayistic approach. I'd say the fight for credibility has been won, so we're free to focus on what's truly interesting.

It is my hope that there's something here that makes you think, something that makes you want to play games and make them, and something that makes you angry, delighted or inspired enough to write an article for next year's book.

*Juhana Pettersson
Helsinki, 1.3.2012*

MISTAKES

In Knudepunkt 2011 in Denmark, Rasmus Høgdall had a wonderful presentation about the mistakes people had made in larp design. It was fun and surprisingly educational, so I decided to have some mistakes in this book as well, as a part of the category "Good Game Bad Game". The category is about personal experiences in larp, both good and bad.

Since it was Rasmus' idea, here's his introduction to the subject of mistakes in this book:

"Mistakes. What a wonderful thing. For they are by far the most useful thing we have when it comes to learning. The only problem with mistakes is that they have gotten quite a bad rep. That is why I am so psyched by the fact that there's mistakes in this book. I think it bodes well for the future. Last year, I had the opportunity to give a presentation on the topic. Not the first time any of us to shared our mistakes with someone, but normally we do it over a beer or a cup of coffee while talking to friends. To let it all hang out in front of an audience was amazing. First of all, it was a boundary that we, the presenters, had to cross. Second, there were, I think, small nuggets of gold in every tale that the audience could take home and use as guidelines for their next larp."

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Before and after.

CATEGORY: GOOD GAME BAD GAME

HIGH ON HELL

WORDS ELIN NILSEN, PICTURES PETER MUNTHE-KAAS

I've got an addictive personality. It's in my genes. I can analyze my life in view of the constant hunt for means of intoxication. I read books, play computer games with manic enthusiasm, travel more than I can afford, have sex, juggle too many projects, indulge in food, alcohol and wild parties – all for that ultimate high. This is also the reason why I make larps and participate in them.

Immersion was the buzzword when I started larping in the late Nineties. Oh yes, it was very important. In fact, before my first larp – and this is completely incomprehensible and a tiny bit embarrassing – I had some weird idea that I would become my character. Instead, I had read my 1,5 pages of character description, been too shy to contact my fellow players, and was petrified when the game started and I really didn't know what to say. My parents' names? How would I know? So I walked around for three days, pale as a ghost, saying as little as possible while trying to be invisible. It was horrible. But observing the cool, cool wizards, the fun stu-

dents, the mystical tribal people and the scary rituals was enough of a kick for me to give it another shot.

Nowadays I'm very picky when it comes to larps. The games I choose to attend need to be well designed, have a theme that I actually care for, and ideally they should rip my soul out, chew on it for a while, and put it back in in a different state. I'm seeking out more and more of the games that will actually do that, by letting me deeply explore important feelings like friendship, loyalty and love, or the darker sides of humanity, like I did with *Kapo*.

PRISON HIGH

Kapo was, as you most probably know, a near future dystopic game about a prison camp run by the prisoners themselves. The social dynamic in the camp was impressively well planned and it worked, together with a repetitive, cyclic schedule, to really get under each player's skin.

I played Camilla, an innocent (?) Norwegian who had been arrested at the Copenhagen airport returning from charity work in Nepal. I arrived at the camp with some friends and my boyfriend, stripped of all rights and not given any information. We were, together with a bunch of others, led through a corridor of absurd noise and light, and thrown into a metal cage.

Outside the cage were people. Or, it seemed, something that had been people once. They were throwing water at us. Paint. Shit. They were making frightening noises and sleazy suggestions, trying to grab our clothes through the grids, or pull our hair. A woman said to me, in my own language: "This is hell. You are going to hell now. There is no hope, you have no rights." Her voice was tired, cracking up, and her gaze was completely empty. I saw a familiar face, a friend from the outside. She didn't seem to recognize me, laughing crazily as she saw someone stick his arm in through the grids and steal my eating utensils. I yelled her name, and tried to look her in the eyes, but there was nothing there. "This is absurd", I thought. "These are not people. This is not humane. Where is my embassy?" I was so scared in character, and so excited as a player. "What the hell am I in for this time? This larp is going to stick."

Later we had been split up and put into the different groups of the camp – the builders, the chalkers, the normalized, and the lowest of the lowest, the rats. I still had this overwhelming feeling of disbelief, of utter unfairness, and that somehow there was a mistake, I would have to be saved by my embassy, so that I could alert the rest of the world and help these people. Even if they were monstrous terrorists. (How would I know?)

And then started the integration phase. I was, together with my fellow apprentices, abused both verbally and physically, forced by the old prisoners to do hard, meaningless work. Whatever reply I gave to a question would be the wrong one. No work I did would satisfy my master. I would be punished for things he made up. And even though I soon realized that the easiest way was to try to obey, on the inside I was filled with hatred, spite and a sense of injustice that made me nauseous. But I learned. I learned the rituals, the cycle, the work, the dynamics in the camp. At some point I was severely punished for losing my master's glove. I was gangraped *Ars Amandi* style, bad enough in itself, but for me, the truly humiliating part was being forced to caress a metal stand while calling it by the name of my in-game boyfriend. I broke down. Completely. And then they comforted me.

LIKE ME

I, as Elin, was surprised to experience a new feeling: The need to do good, the need for them to like me, the need to be a part of the group. I, or a part of me, experienced a real Stockholm syndrome. After this incident I became the most adaptable builder, with a loyalty and a pride I couldn't have imagined, in or out of character, only minutes before. The meaningless rituals (like carrying around danger signs just to put a nail in a wall) suddenly made sense. And a few hours later, when new prisoners were to arrive, I thought "I'm so going to show them!" And I was at least as mean to my own apprentice as my master had been to me. Or maybe worse.

This sounds, and was, a horrible, deeply frightening experience.

I experienced the way too short journey from being a victim to being an abuser. I know, not only with my intellect, but with my emotions, what Stockholm syndrome really is. But it was a safe way to learn. Elin was never lost in the process. She was observing. Shocked and in disbelief at how easily these feelings got hold of me, I still knew that this was a game. It was an opportunity to explore the darkest sides of humanity.

When larping, we are given the chance to test out things we cannot or should not do outside of the safe frames of the game. If I had been in a situation similar to this in real life, I would have fought these feelings with my ethics, my intellect and my ideals. But because it was a game, I could let these emotions and impulses show me what kind of a person I hope never ever to become.

And that knowledge, and the process by which it was gained, was a hell of a high.

LUDOGRAPHY

Kapo (2011): Anders Berner, Kim Holm, Juliane Mikkelsen, Peter Munthe-Kaas, Frederik Nylev, Rasmus Petersen, Copenhagen.

A man wearing a dark beanie, glasses, and a grey jacket is looking upwards in a dark tunnel. Above him is a large, glowing, metallic dragon sculpture. The scene is dimly lit, with the primary light source being the dragon's glow.

CATEGORY: DOCUMENTATION

VALVE

THE GRAND ADVENTURE

WORDS ANTTI KANNER & KATRI LASSILA, PHOTOS TUOMAS PUIKKONEN

T (Topi Pitkänen) pondering the dragon in an abandoned railway tunnel.

You know nothing of the game: no character, no scenario, only a starting point in a park.

Then a car pulls up and you find yourself kidnapped.

Valve is a three-year pervasive larp campaign, held in the Helsinki area running from spring 2011 to autumn 2013. The game utilizes the urban environment and everyday life as the building blocks of its fiction. The borderline demarcating the boundaries of the game is not fixed, but blends softly with the surrounding cityscape.

Valve has around 30 players and it is played three or four times per year, mostly during the summer months. Individual games last from 6 to 8 hours. The genre of the game is a fantastic epic set in modern Helsinki, played in the adventurous romantic style¹.

PLAYER CATEGORIES

During the early phases of the design process it was held that *Valve* would have as small a number of real player characters as possible, only around ten or so. These players would start the game with minimal knowledge of the game and its world. This was to produce an authentic "down in the rabbit hole" experience for these players: they would be jerked in to a parallel mystical world existing behind their everyday reality. The Idea is familiar from works such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *Neverwhere*, *The Matrix* etc.

For example, in the first part of the game two players started their game knowing only when and where they were supposed to be, without having any information whatsoever about the game itself, the characters, the world or the other players involved. No information about the game was on the internet before that day.

A group of characters kidnapped them in a car, took them to their secret hideout, initiated them in a Gnostic cult and took them on to their secret mission to imprison a god. All the cult members perished on the mission, save for the new recruits, who now had to run for their lives and try to save the old secrets and traditions of this now deceased Gnostic cult. All of these events were scripted beforehand and timed precisely. Everything worked perfectly, probably because neither of the two suspected that all the events were orchestrated just to introduce them to the campaign.

To achieve these kind of effects, most of the participants were asked to play auxiliary characters with some game managing duties so that the mystical world would feel alive and populated when the newcomers stumbled in. Many of

¹ Lassila, 2008.

the game practicalities, such as participation fees, reflected this view. The intention was that some players would learn everything there was to know about the game, in-game and off-game, from the other characters, with no briefing whatsoever. The supporting players had access to material produced by the organizers and to textual sources within the game world.

We thought it would be interesting to see players play the game with only secondhand information about the world and its mechanics, already interpreted or even biased.

Originally *Valve* had two groups of players. The other group, referred as *creative players*, would help in creating the illusion and would be in close contact with the organizers and their plans during the design process. The idea was to establish a player group whose game would go beyond the usual role of a supporting player but who would also have an idea of the whole game, in contrast to the *blinded players*, the other player groups.

The division between the different player groups didn't work, mainly because the organizers weren't able to communicate directly enough what was needed on the part of the creative players and because it seemed that most of the players wanted to play their characters and concentrate on them, without extra knowledge of the ideas behind the scenes. Thus the division lost its function before the end of the first game.

PERVASIVE CHARACTERS

Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of *Valve* for players to play and the designers to both direct and write, is the complex relationship between player and character. The goal was a relationship that would allow the players to choose the mode in which they wanted to make the game visible in a public space. It gave more options for the experience of dropping out of character, which is usually considered problematic or even catastrophic.

These situations are very difficult to avoid entirely in a city game, especially if there are fantastic elements present. Having the player and the character present at the same time and sharing the same body (or even being the same person), the experience of dropping out of character receives a plausible in-game explanation and does not break the game.

It has been our intention to build a fictional world which



The Phoenix (Senja Kuure) and Mr Weasel (Mikko Meriläinen) discussing the latest kidnapping.



Leino Lukki (Mikko Mänttari), the representative of the mysterious Virasto agency, leaving the Alvar Aalto Tiilimäki studio with a group of the awakened.

can overlap almost perfectly with contemporary Helsinki. This requires numerous safety valves where the banalities and restrictions of everyday life can flow out and not disturb the fiction. The key attitude in the design process has been making virtue out of necessity, of which the simultaneous presence of the in-game and off-game identities of the player is one example.

This has so far met only limited success. The characters most resembling traditional roleplaying game or larp characters have clearly been the easiest to play, and also to deal with by other players and the game designers as well.

VIRTUE OUT OF NECESSITY

The specific challenge of an urban larp with big fantastic elements is to harmonize the fantastic expectations derived from the background material where the fantastic is present, with the actual game environment, where it is not. In *Valve* this harmonizing has been done mostly with a sort of "chewing gum and duct tape" approach mixed with ad hoc explanations and even straightforward bluffing.

However, retrospectively, the construction so far has been surprisingly cohesive and logical, evolving around the idea of identifying the dream or illusion central to the game fiction with knowledge and information and leaving the material world quite as it is. Since only the firsthand experience of material things at present are positively really real, this leaves us the whole of history and future, the limits of the material world and the laws of nature not immediately witnessed to play with.

In addition, the off-game world is present in the game fiction. It has the role of the dream or illusion in which the sleeping humans are incarcerated. On the other hand, to the players of the human characters, the game itself is analogous to the in-game world. Incentive or willingness to join the game is essentially the same as the will to step into the mystical reality represented by it and to free oneself from the oppressing dream.

The dream in turn is created by the godly player characters, who are more motivated to keep it up and running than to disturb or disrupt it. In a normal situation the supernatural power of the player character manifests exactly when nothing extraordinary happens. Fantastic manifestations are signs of the waning powers of the gods to control the dream. To avoid scenes where the narration of the game would have to step into diegetic mode (the mode of telling, in contrast to mimetic mode of showing), we have ruled that more propping and more effects automatically means more magical powers. If a godly aspect wants to use the full extent of her powers, she would need at least prop horns and wings and probably some pyrotechnics. Given enough time to organize, we would gladly provide the pyrotechnics if any player would want to wield them.

WORK IN PROGRESS

Valve was launched in a situation where there was intentionally very little fixed or defined game material in existence, let alone available to the players. This was especially the case with the players of the godly factions, who were left alone to collectively define their shared history and the conventions of how the world works.

The problem we wanted to solve was how to communicate game material to the players. In many games the background material is overwhelming and rarely exactly hits the spot so that only useful material would be communicated. The solution we opted to try was that there would be a minimal amount of material and the gods would make up the rest as the game went on. This seemed well suited to the fiction of the game, as the characters were gods after all.

This overly optimistic goal was attained only in part. To most, the game felt frustrating and confusing. There was no common ground, no fixed point to start from. From this, however, we learned precisely the specific questions the material produced for the next season has to answer.

This led to a reformation of the game design ideology behind *Valve*, which is based on constant refinement and evaluation of the project. New ideas are tested in the campaign and their best qualities are brought out by iteration. As such, *Valve* will hopefully be finished in the last games of the third season.

Most of the debriefing and planning with the players is handled through personal meetings, not with email. This has proven to be a good decision, and we hope to extend it to have more party or character group meetings.

In the future we hope to drive the events of the game more and more in the direction the players want them to go and make it possible for them to do things they consider cool, fun and extraordinary. By using the actions players want to perform with their characters as the basic building blocks of the game, we also hope to change the structural or semantic role of the player characters in the game from reactive objects to subjects with intention and agency.

When one of the character groups said it would be fun to kidnap people in a crappy van, all we had to do was to rent the vehicle and point out the targets. Next season, we hope to have a hostage drama, a hidden village under the city and a monster rampant in the town. As the game directors our challenge is to make this happen and fit these things in the same game with adequately cohesive fiction.

When one player group gets their shiny moment, they are usually willing to participate or even take responsibility for organizing events for others. For example, the players of the two Gnostic sect members initiated in the first game spent roughly a third of their second game hiding a treasure in a flea market and then waiting for another party to show up ostensibly by coincidence and then pretending to be non-

chalantly looking for the treasure only to see the other party grab it from under their noses.

The same event led to another curious insight: being able to plan ahead the actions of their characters and then in the real game act out the plan freed the players to express how their characters would be like, since they had no pressure to make the right choices (plausible to their characters) on the spot.

ARTISTIC AMBITIONS

The main part of the campaign was meant from the beginning to be fun for everybody. As in every game, this is a goal impossible to reach for everybody in every part of the game, but because of the three year campaign schedule there was a hope that it would be easier than in a one shot game. The fun part for the organizers was to include as many interesting cultural experiments in the design process as possible.

We decided that in every game of the campaign there should be a large cool object, whether an exhibit where the characters could go to find secrets behind paintings, a well propped laboratory of the mad scientists, a fireworks show, a 12 meter dragon in a tunnel, or something else.

The artistic ambition consisted also of the written texts, designed to end up as parts of the fiction of the game as well as good stories in themselves. The campaign is planned to be an underlying source of inspiration and storylines for works of art to come. For that purpose, the games are documented thoroughly, with video and photography.

Music and sound have been strongly present in *Valve*. In some scenes there's been a secret DJ, creating an ongoing and changing ambience which reacts to the characters' interactions. There's theme music composed specifically for the campaign and a street musician has been present in one game.

The Alvar Aalto Society, an active Finnish architectural society, became interested in the themes of the campaign and came along with the hope that through a larp it would be possible to test how people experience a cityscape and architecture. The theme of architecture is present in the game and it will develop further during the campaign. Some scenes of the campaign have been played in buildings designed by Alvar Aalto and owned by the society, or their surroundings.

There are two foundational texts used in *Valve*. One is the Spanish poet and playwright Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *La vida es sueño* (1629–1635, *Life is a Dream*), a play which tells a tale about an ill fated prince, imprisoned by his father, who for one day gets to experience his life in a palace, freed from prison. The text questions human experience and mixes up dreams with reality.

Another type of foundational text are short stories and texts created by the game's designers. They are based on the

alter ego characters and affect the history of the characters, consisting of extracts of mythic epics, poems, science fiction short stories and travel diaries. Those texts are revealed little by little during the progression of the campaign and reveal for the characters their history and true identities.

CONCLUSION

As stated before, *Valve* is a work in progress. From our perspective the work so far has been quite progressive and experimental. Our main ambition has not been in experimenting, but writing and directing a game that we feel is exhilarating, fun and cool. Where the campaign will go in the following two years, we have only vague conceptions.

*What is life? A frenzy.
What is life? An illusion,
A shadow, a fiction,
And the greatest profit is small;
For all of life is a dream,
And dreams, are nothing but dreams.*

Pedro Calderón de la Barca

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CATEGORY: GOOD GAME BAD GAME

THE JOY OF KIDNAPPING

WORDS JUHANA PETTERSSON, PHOTO TUOMAS PUIKKONEN

The Kidnapping Van in action.

Thanks to larp, I have experienced how much fun kidnapping can be.

In the summer of 2011, I participated in the first three larps of the *Valve* campaign. My character was a thug, in the company of other thugs.

Valve is a city game played in Helsinki. It's set in a dream version of modern Helsinki, distributed across the urban landscape. In the second game, we had a van. Let's call it the Kidnapping Van.

The first thing we did in the game was pick up a guy in broad daylight, in the middle of the street, in front of his friends, and hustle him to our van. There are amazing photos of this kidnapping, where you can see that when our victim's friends realized what was going on, we were already walking down the street.

We threw him in, drove away, and roughed him up. We were not big on planning, so we only had a vague idea of why we had to pick him up. We were engaging in exploratory kidnapping.

UNKNOWN PLEASURES

Larp has taught me that kidnapping is fun. After that first kidnapping in the beginning of the game, we realized that we must kidnap again. Our characters had a low threshold for violence, so it wasn't hard to motivate such acts.

We met a couple of other characters in a thrift store as a part of a treasure-hunt style portion of the game. We asked if they wanted to have lunch. They refused, and after we left, they followed us for a while. We went to the Kidnapping Van and drove away.

By chance, we notice those same three people on the side of the road a little later. They didn't see us. We stopped ahead of them, and as they walk by, we jumped out of the car and threw them in. In the middle of Helsinki and in broad daylight, of course.

We explained that they would come with us to have lunch. They don't believe that we could have kidnapped them for such a trivial reason, but it was the truth.

"Do you want a beer?"

"No, I don't want a beer! You kidnapped us!"

"Why must you always keep harping about the kidnapping? Couldn't we just get over it?"

It's hard to explain why kidnapping is such fun, but everyone in our group felt the joy. We've found that the more trivial the reason, the more fun it is. A serious kidnapping where we know our victim and what we want to achieve is okay, but a random kidnapping where our first question is: "So who are you?" is so much better.

There is something delightful about the intersection of power and absurdity that brings these moments alive.

WITHDRAWAL

I'm sitting inside a gas station with my fellow thug. We're having coffee, and a sad Finnish song is playing on the radio. It feels like a scene from a melancholy movie. We're in withdrawal. Our last kidnapping was somewhat unsatisfactory, and we don't have another planned.

We slipped off-character a while ago, but we're still deep in the game. Bleed holds us in its grip. I send a text message to the organizers and ask for a kidnapping victim. They react quickly, informing us of a suitable victim and his probable whereabouts. We drive across town and settle to wait in the cafe of Helsinki's World Trade Center building.

Unknown to us, the game is experiencing emergent content and our victim is late. By the time he appears, the moment is gone. Off-game considerations force us to abandon our plan.

Normal life in a western society offers limited options for kidnapping. Without larp, I might never have experienced the joys our Kidnapping Van had to offer. I didn't know how much fun it could be until I tried it.

The only sad thing is we can never go back to the joy of our first kidnapping.

LUDOGRAPHY

Valve (2011-): Katri Lassila, Antti Kanner & Petri Leinonen, Helsinki.

Dragging a headless body out of the woods in Neonhämäri.



CATEGORY: ART AND DESIGN

THE GOLDEN RULE OF LARP

WORDS SIMO JÄRVELÄ, PHOTOS TUOMAS PUIKKONEN

The ethicality and safety of larp is often taken for granted. Participating voluntarily is taken as a sign of agreement that you are willing to endure what is going happen. While the vast majority of larps are entirely safe, simply assuming so is potentially dangerous. There are social dynamics involved, that all responsible organizers and players should take into account.

This essay is about ethical considerations in larps. They are closely related to safety issues, both mental and physical. While the risk increases, it usually becomes more and more ethically questionable. Questionable does not necessarily mean unethical – often the risk level rises and nothing bad happens and the increased risk is constantly acknowledged by all participants. Some levels of risk could be deemed unethical even if nothing bad happens. This issue is not black and white, it's more about odds, questioning what's being done and awareness of what is about to take place. Everyone draws his or her own line somewhere.

THE GOLDEN RULE

The primary basis of larp ethics is: things *informed adults do consensually amongst themselves* are acceptable. The idea is that if everyone involved knows what they are getting into and they voluntarily participate, whatever then happens is morally acceptable. It is the same basic idea as in sadomasochism or boxing. The two main areas in larp where questions of ethics and safety mostly arise are naturally sex and violence, and their handling in the game.

The criterion is fourfold:

- 1. Informed** – The prerequisite of doing anything consensually is being informed about what is going to happen.
- 2. Adults** – Mostly a legal issue; the person must be able to decide for himself.
- 3. Consensually** – No one should be forced to do anything she is not willing to do. This agreement can be explicit or implicit – so can disagreement. The acceptance must be continuous.
- 4. Amongst themselves** – Outsiders tend not to be either informed or consensually participating in the game.

DISSECTING THE RULE

The above notion is a good rule of thumb to begin with and for most larps it is entirely adequate. However it does not automatically guarantee safety, and none of the points above are as clear cut as they seem. Most problematic are the requirements of being informed and of consensus.

BEING INFORMED

Being informed means that all participants have a good idea of what they are getting into. This is strongly built on presumptions based on previous larp experiences and the information provided by the organizers. It is typical, and often necessary to maximize the emotional impact of the game, that the organizers do not reveal everything beforehand. Controlling the amount of information is one of the most basic tools of game masters. The secret elements could include both the situations the participants will be put into and the manipulation techniques that will be used on them. In addition, the chaotic nature of larp will cause unforeseen dynamics in the game which cannot be completely taken into account beforehand. It is about odds.

There are strong assumptions that the larp will follow established and common dynamics very similar to previous larps, unless there is some information that would contradict this assumption. Typically games use rules for communicating the suitable boundaries and to guarantee safety. Most games have rules how to handle violence, but notably fewer games include rules concerning sex. When the game proceeds in a roughly familiar manner, most ethical questions have been solved already beforehand and no moral conflicts or safety issues arise. It is however possible that none of the organizers or participants could foresee where the game or a certain event goes.

In many games the organizers utilize powerful techniques (e.g. solitary confinement, dehumanization, deindividuation,

authorities, separation from real world, social pressure etc.) adapted from various real world contexts (e.g. rituals, cults, prisons, war etc.)¹. However, few organizers or participants are thoroughly familiar with those techniques, and their effectiveness can be easily overlooked in a well-intending attempt to create a powerful experience. Assumptions of inherent safety and naive or ignorant attitudes towards these techniques can lead to unwanted and questionable results.

Thinking that everyone will be safe just because no one wants to harm anyone and because everyone is a responsible adult is potentially a dangerous attitude. Situational forces can easily override personal qualities if the context is strong enough - which is the aim of most larps. Ultimately the biggest threat to informed consent is the unfamiliarity of and ignorance toward the manipulation techniques used. If the organizer or the participants are not aware of their potential, they cannot be informed.

Another aspect is that the players should constantly be aware of the dynamics in the situation. This is difficult as in a larp there is a strong emphasis on directing the whole capacity for attention of the players to the fiction, not the meta-analysis of the situation. It is especially challenging in intensive scenes that require a lot of cognitive resources from the players. The increased state of bodily activation, including increased adrenaline (and other hormones) levels, also hinders many cognitive processes, which makes it more or less impossible to retain a cool headed outsider perspective and evaluate ethics or safety issues objectively.

CASE STUDY 1: GANG RAPE VS. FAT MAN DOWN

Both of these games use powerful techniques to create an intense and uncomfortable experience for the players. The crucial difference between these games is that while every participant in *Gang Rape* must read all the material beforehand, in *Fat Man Down* there are nasty surprises and even abuse of trust regarding safety words. In *Gang Rape* everyone is informed of the techniques used and thus can imagine what the game will be like and participate consensually, while in *Fat Man Down* this is made impossible on purpose. The closing remarks of *Fat Man Down* clearly show that despite the apparent contradiction, it is made like this on purpose: "Also make sure that everyone, especially the

1 Larps have notable structural similarities to the classic Stanford Prison Experiment, which was a psychological study on how certain techniques can be used to create a situation that overwhelms personal dispositional attitudes of individuals. It is both inspirational and a cautionary tale for larp organizers. See Philip Zimbardo's The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil for a detailed description of the experiment.

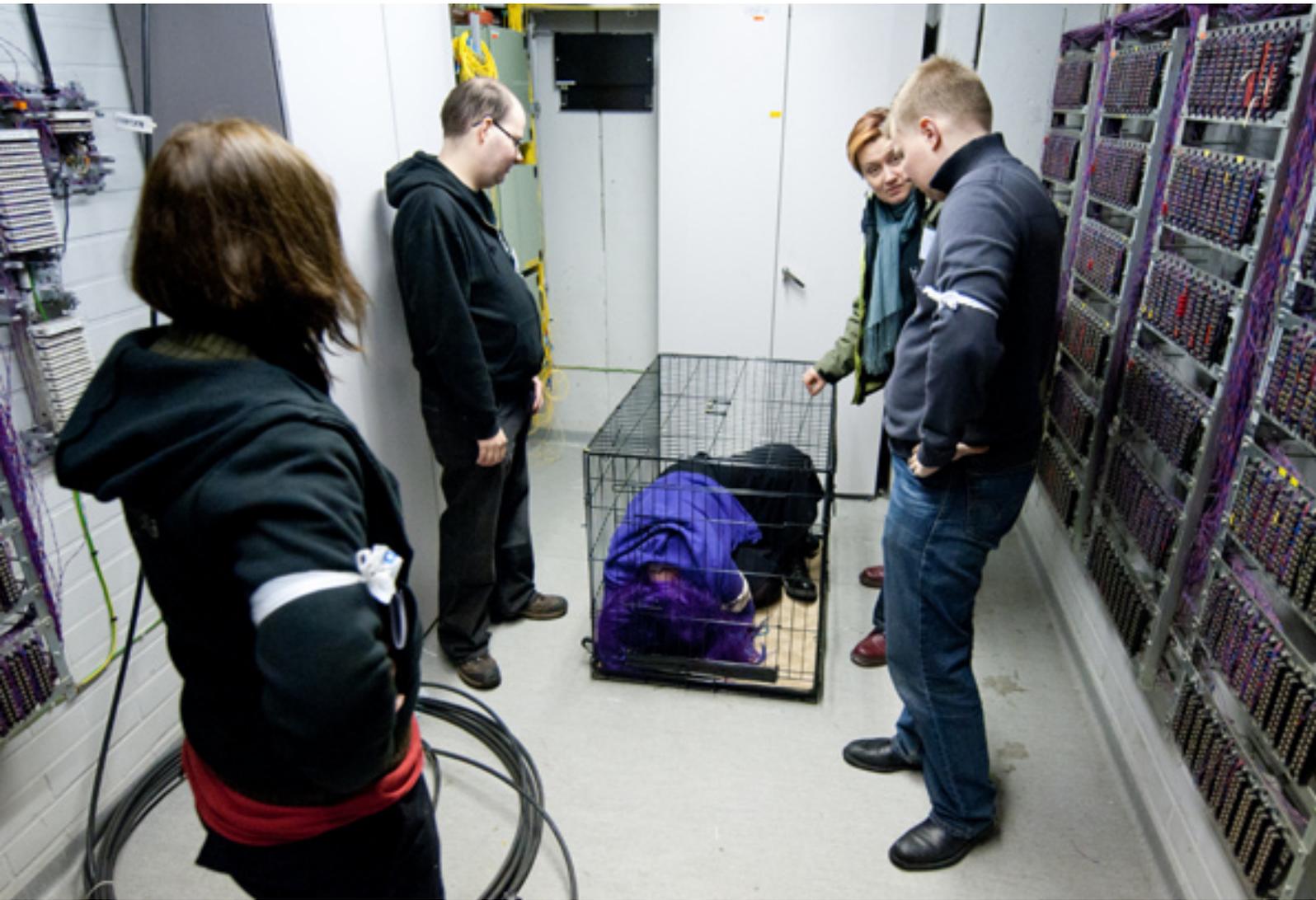
player playing the Fat Man, is in on what is going to happen. Ganging up on one player is a powerful tool, roleplay-wise as well as psychologically." At the same time, it can also be argued that just reading the rules of *Gang Rape* does not prepare the participants thoroughly enough, as very few players are capable of imagining what that combination of game mechanics and themes will create just by reading the rules. Overall both of these games aim for such an extreme experience that extra caution is required to avoid unethical or unsafe choices. A clear difference in how informed the players are when playing makes *Fat Man Down* more questionable compared to *Gang Rape*. However, these are not the most unethical games around: they both clearly state their nature in the game material.

CASE STUDY 2: GANG VIOLENCE IN NEONHAMÄRÄ

In our street larp campaign *Neonhämärä* skinheads and trolls met in a remote parking lot to rumble. It was the middle of winter, minus 20 degrees, dark and the ground was covered in snow and ice. Headlights of the cars were the only light source when roughly a dozen characters stood in two rows opposing each other and throwing insults to provoke the other side. Despite the build-up, the violence burst suddenly. In a few seconds the skinheads were beaten, and after a quick aftermath the trolls left.

I was playing one of the skinheads. It was intense. Afterwards the troll players reported various symptoms relating to very high bodily arousal states, such as tunnel vision, memory distortions and shakes after the adrenaline rush wore off. It was only then that I realized what the actual risk level of physical injury in that scene was. Nothing happened, but the risk was there. A bunch of players in a state where they are not in control of their finer motor actions and certainly not actively thinking about safety issues, wrestling on a icy ground. Excess force was used, and with just a little bit of bad luck people would have actually got hurt. Hurting other players definitely was not anyone's intention, quite the contrary, but the control that would ensure safety in such conditions was not there.

I wonder what would have happened if instead of being supporting cast the skinheads would have been played by players with equal amount at stake as the troll players? We were chatting and joking totally off-game, before the trolls arrived. No build up. What would have happened if we were as psyched up? Even with best intentions and among friends, intensive scenes elevate the risk level of physical injury.



City worshippers and a caged troll in an old telecommunication center in Neohämärä.

ADULTS

This requirement, the age of consent, is technically a legal issue, meaning that the person is legible to participate and make autonomous decisions. However, it is also closely related to informed consent – with limited life experience one cannot be automatically presumed to be as informed about various dynamics and adult themes. This of course does not mean that underage persons (especially as this is not precisely an age issue) could not participate, just that some extra measures need to be taken. Also, naturally, not all content is suitable for all ages. The topic of ethics in children's larps or children in larps is vast and my lack of expertise on that field prevents it from being covered here thoroughly.

CONSENT

Consent is based on the information provided to participants (e.g. rules, game material) and by general assumptions. Continuous consent is an obvious requirement for ethical larping. It can be presumed that if participating in a larp, consent is given by default. It is when during the larp situations develop into a surprising and unwanted direction that consent is at stake.

Agreement on the suitable level of physical or psychological involvement requires communication. It is easiest to define limits before the playing starts, but some negotiation is always required during the actual play. That is challenging because often the aim in a larp is to avoid breaking the illusion with meta-level communication. Safety words are an explicit method for declaring limits, but players often prefer using more implicit methods.

While players are absolutely entitled to leave the game and use safety words or meta-level communication when a situation goes too far for their tastes, it is not necessarily easy to do so. The peer pressure from other players and one's own commitment to uphold the illusion can make it very hard indeed to stop everything, break the illusion and say "stop, this is too much for me". In addition to the peer pressure coming from outside, the player's own identity as a good player who does not spoil the experience for others can be extremely hard to overcome, even for one's own safety. Upholding the illusion is something that has been practiced repeatedly by all players over the years, while using safety words is something only a few players have ever done. Assuming that saying "no" is easy in intense situations is stupid. The pressure is often so high that it is easier to go farther than preferable instead of interrupting the flow.²

In recent years the admiration for hardcore gaming has diminished but it is still a prevailing attitude beneath the

2 Similar dynamics have been discussed recently in Sweden in the context of sexual abuse under the civil movement Prata om det which was initiated by Johanna Koljonen. <http://prataomdet.se/>

surface. There is also a strong emphasis on liberal values among larpers. These two together increase the peer pressure and make it more difficult to say out loud that something is not acceptable and that you are not willing to go that far in a simulated larp situation.

One critical prerequisite for consensus is that each player knows his own limits. In the middle of an intensive scene it is impossible to start thinking about your personal limits for the first time and hope to come to a reasonable conclusion and then communicate it to others in time. It is irresponsible towards other players to not know your limits as you are then practically enabling them to go too far, which is something that they do not want either.

In extreme cases of course it is impossible to know beforehand, but players should be aware of their default limits. Only then it is possible to communicate them to others and to maintain them when they are in jeopardy. Many players larp partly because they want to find out their limits or to expand them. It can be a method of self-discovery. However, it would be polite to inform the co-players about not being entirely sure and also wise to be mentally prepared to stop when needed and to go through the mental gymnastics to properly contextualize your experience afterwards.

The communication on these issues is challenging and therefore should be supported by the organizers. While it is the responsibility of each individual player to be clear enough on communicating her own limits to others, it is also the responsibility of the organizers to support this and provide the players an arena before the game where to do it. Structured discussion about suitable limits will ensure that everyone involved is aware of others' (and their own) limits.

At the same time, the use of safety words and other safety mechanisms should be talked over and encouraged. It is highly unlikely that players would start using them too casually and thus any inhibitions regarding their use should be removed if possible. In practice, all supportive actions and the creation of a safe trust filled team spirit must be done before the actual play starts – afterwards it only gets harder.

AMONGST THEMSELVES

Larps are typically something played within a magic circle among those participating without any outsiders. Oblivious outsiders cannot by definition be informed volunteers as they are not entirely aware of what is going on. If they are, they are not outsiders anymore but within the magic circle. This is primarily relevant in pervasive games³ where outsiders are witnessing and partly involuntarily involved in the game. Naturally the larp does not immediately turn unethi-

3 Ethics of pervasive games has been discussed in Markus Montola, Annika Waern and Jaakko Stenros's book Pervasive Games: Theory and Design.

cal when outsiders are drawn in as a part of the fiction. It just raises the risk of somewhat unethical things taking place. It is something that should be thought out.

Most larpers aim for powerful immersive experiences. Many of them use momentarily negative feelings to create intensive experiences. Remarkably, most of the time the participants regard these experiences positively in the end. This is a more or less familiar and accepted dynamic to all larpers. However, to ensure that intensive experience is well contextualized and mentally processed, especially if players' everyday boundaries are crossed, the organizers (and perhaps other players) should utilize debriefing methods after the game. In most cases for most players, they are not necessary. But occasionally it is part of the responsibilities of the organizers to properly debrief the experience. Besides, it could be fun for everyone.

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CATEGORY: GOOD GAME BAD GAME

A MOMENT OF WEAKNESS

WORDS YARASLAU KOT

What would you do if a man came up to you and told you, with supreme confidence, that it would be better for everyone if you just stopped the game?

This is the story of a larp which broke down because its lead organizer broke down. The game was played in Minsk, the capital of Belarus. It was a city game, spread all over town. The lead organizer was not local, but had a lot of experience with what he did. He enlisted a few people, those he had come to know in the local scene, to help him.

Together, they made all the necessary preparations for a city game. 80 players, three websites designed for the game with teams updating them during the game, a bank and a banking system, a police department, a pub, a hospital. 20 locations, in total. Three short films expressly made for the game, and countless other documents. It was supposed to last for two days and two nights.

When the time to play came, the game was set in motion. The mechanism went on in fits and starts, but it worked.

CONFIDENCE

Two hours into the game, a player who's late walks into the organizers' HQ, an apartment where the organizers watch over the phones and the net to coordinate the game. We'll call this player Liavon. Liavon came to check in with the organizers so he could join the game.

The lead organizer, a foreigner to the local scene and to Belarus, was alone. All the other organizers were out on location or other tasks. Liavon is a bit of a mystery in this story. Perhaps he considers himself a great authority on larp production, perhaps he suffers from an inflated sense of self-importance – we will never be sure.

After a brief conversation with the lead organizer, noting his stress and nervousness, Liavon proposes that the entire project be halted immediately.

As the lead organizer mulls over this surprising idea, Liavon decides to add significance to his advice. He calls a "third party", a person who is in no way connected to the project. The "third party", a friend of Liavon's, offers his independent opinion in support of Liavon's advice to stop the game.

The lead organizer is shocked and confused. He doesn't know who these people are. He doesn't have anyone to ask.

Their confidence unnerves him. Perhaps this happens all the time in the local scene?

In a moment of weakness, he capitulates. He stops the game. All locations receive the signal to stop playing. The game is over.

CONSEQUENCES

50 of a total of 80 players were already in-game. Many others were preparing to go in character. The command to stop playing came as a shock to all. All the players had contributed to the game in some way. Lots of effort, time and resources were lost. A game which might have been was not.

What Liavon did in this game is known in the larp practice of Russia, the Ukraine and Belarus as "mock game master syndrome" (Синдром ложного мастера). The syndrome is demonstrated by a player who begins to consider himself something like a game master in the larp. Mock game masters turn up for a variety of reasons: Perhaps a player is more respected than the organizers. The game design might have a serious flaw, and a person outside the organizer group assumes authority by fixing it. A player has an inflated sense of ego and considers himself more advanced and proficient than the game masters, thereby imposing his own will on the game.

There are two lessons to be taken from this story. Many games are very much dependent on one person, the lead organizer. That person is the heart of the project. It's important for the players to believe in the game, but it's also important for the lead organizer to have psychological support, to know that people want this game. You cannot judge a project until it has had its chance to shine.

However, as important as the lead organizer is, at some point the game stops being a child of the desires and whims of the organizers. All participants and interested parties have a stake in the game, and all of their interests should be taken into account while making crucial decisions. After the game commences, the organizers are servants of the mechanism.

CATEGORY: DOCUMENTATION

DUBLIN2

THE EU'S ASYLUM POLICY IN MINIATURE

WORDS JP KALJONEN & JOHANNA RAEKALLIO



Footage was projected onto a wall at night during the game. Photo: Haidi Motola

After two days in the container, the truck stopped suddenly and the sounds of sirens filled the air. Like mice we hid ourselves behind the cargo. The hatch opened and a flashlight beam wandered long on walls until it spotted a little girl who was travelling with us. Police dragged us to their vehicle and after two hours we reached a city. The car drove next to a large building. We were escorted inside and locked in a cell. Scared but excited, I hoped that we had finally reached Europe.

Dublin2 is a larp balancing between a game, a public artwork and an activist framework. The game took place in one of the central plazas of Helsinki, merging the urban environment and the people walking by into parts of its scenery.

As background, there's the Dublin II regulation, which was executed to integrate the EU's asylum policy. The Dublin II regulation was built up to prevent an asylum seeker from submitting asylum applications in multiple member states. Due to the regulation the EU country where a person first arrives to is responsible for dealing with the application. If the applicant tries to seek for asylum from another member state, the regulation entitles the state to deport the person back to the first country.

The larp was designed both to criticize and provoke public debate on the faults of Dublin II. The regulation places excessive pressure on border areas, where most of the asylum seekers enter the European Union. Many of the border states can't provide access to an asylum procedure and are often the least able to offer asylum seekers support and protection. Rising fascism, lack of work, lack of ID papers or a lack of shelter set off many refugees to continue their way to inner Europe.

Those who manage to cross the borders and apply for asylum from a more stable state often face a deadlock. Either they are deported to their home countries or back to the border states. Some avoid deportations by fleeing underground, while others escape to the next country aiming to receive their asylum there. Since the first country holds

the responsibility, the applicant is stuck in a desperate limbo of running away from the deportations from one country to another.

TOWARDS THE INTERVENTION

The larp's plot simulated the Dublin II limbo and shed light on the conditions that the refugees face at the border states. Most of the players had the role of an asylum seeker. The roles were written based on real life stories. By taking the role the players got a chance to study the refugees' backgrounds and empathize with their daily life. A very different picture was drawn for the players in the roles of the Frontex officials. Their duty was to control the borders, which gave them a profession-based starting point to explore the theme.

The interaction between the players and the non-players was one of the larp's main ideas. The game mechanics were planned to create situations where the characters and the people of Helsinki could meet. Through these encounters, the bystanders had a chance to know more about the characters and to discuss the game topic. For the players the meetings offered ways to proceed in the game, and to have in-game conversations with real life people.

The game design included a real lawyer, journalists and supporting characters from the NGO scene. They were invited to participate in the larp as themselves. The lawyer and NGO participants, who worked in real life with asylum seekers gave the players insight to their work and supported the game's authenticity. The journalists' presence worked

in two ways. On one hand it spread the public debate on the theme and brought non-players into the game; on the other, journalists are known visitors at the refugee camps in the border states. Their presence gave the players another viewpoint to the refugees' reality.

IN SEARCH FOR AUTHENTICITY

The reality-based theme gave the larp a documentary character which required extensive background research. There was a survey made for Frontex – the coordinating body of European border control – but there was no response. As Frontex runs joint operations with different EU countries the Finnish Border Guard Agency was found to be a substantial resource for the characters. The survey included questions about everyday work at the borders, but also more personal matters, from life values to hobbies and other interests. Because the survey material had a distinctly Finnish flavor the characters were redone to fit fictitious backgrounds around the EU.

The other officials of the larp were supporting characters. Their instructions were written based on an interview with the Finnish Migration Office and a job description from the staff of the refugee reception center.

The backgrounds for the asylum seeker characters were collected by interviewing refugees living in the Finnish reception centers. Skype was used to interview some of those who lived in other countries. The result was a set of memoirs, which carried interviewees' experiences from childhood to the present. The stories had a lot of gaps related to diverse political situations and the history of the interviewees' home countries. These gaps were filled by reviewing different reports and analyses on the internet. This background work brought up web links, and the most relevant and accessible were attached to the character briefs. The material was individually selected for each character and included links to news clips, video lectures and resources for cultural and religious understanding. Another important resource for the players was the larp's website, which has links to the themes and different institutions and people related to the game world.

In addition to the background research in Finland, some of the studies were done in Greece. The Port of Patras worked as one of the models for the game's setting. It's Greece's main domestic port and many refugees travel there to continue their way to inner Europe. The refugees try to smuggle themselves inside the port area and hide in the trucks heading to Italy. Getting into the trucks is very difficult and many migrant camps have appeared in the port area. The visits in the camps, conversations and the time spent with the undocumented refugees played an important part in designing the game world.

The larp's documentation was done collectively. It was

designed not just to produce visual material, but also support the game's authenticity. Almost all of the players had a personal recording device or other media written for their character. The asylum seekers had mobile phones or pocket cameras. The surveillance cameras were used to monitor areas related to the authorities, and the journalists or officials used their cameras in the way they would in real life.

SOUTHERN EUROPE IN A MARKET SQUARE

Lasipalatsi Square is one of the central squares in Helsinki. It is an area of occasional, culturally oriented events surrounded by functional architecture: cafes, terraces and small businesses. The relatively calm block of buildings is in the middle of the busy commercial city center, next to the terminals of public transport. This environment was adopted to be the setting of the larp, with all the usual city life within.

The self-formed camp of irregular migrants who arrived at an unnamed South European city had formed in the middle of the square. The camp rose between a clock tower and two small trees that gave shelter. There were around fifteen tents and self-made shelters cobbled out of waste construction materials. Some were settling in the abandoned-looking tents and some had brought tents of their own. Used canisters, clothes and plastic bags were lying around. Next to the camp was a two meter high barb-wired fence, partly covered with tarpaulin. It gave some shelter from the eyes of onlookers having a beer on the terrace of a nearby bar. A bit further were two wide openings in the fence and signs marking the border area. Near both of the openings stood four meter tall watchtowers flying big EU flags. The border guards in shift would climb up to monitor the area when not patrolling by the fence.

The citizens were able to walk freely around the whole area, but if the migrant players were spotted approaching the border, they would be stopped and interrogated. The border guards' office was just around the corner – a small sweaty booth with humming electronics, a wall full of hanging wires and grey office furniture – where the suspects were taken for further investigation. If there were no resources to investigate the case the suspects could be taken to wait in a nearby lockup cell. The cell was a container where only one window gave light and a bare mattress on the floor offered a chance to sleep during the undefined time of detention.

The openings in the border fence led to a bigger commercial square Narinkkatori, which stated things that central and northern Europe offered. There was a better access for asylum procedures and also a refugee reception center to stay while waiting for one's case to be heard in the migration office. The reception center was authentically furnished with simple beds, a table and chairs. To many of the refugees to get this far was the goal – it was a chance to seek asylum, to find some relatives who had fled before them, to start a new life, to be safe.



The Red Cross talking to refugees. Photo: Mikael Kinnanen



Fascists attack the refugee camp. Photo: Haidi Motola



A citizen photographing the camp. Photo: Haidi Motola

FROM THE MIGRANT CAMP TO ASYLUM PROCEDURES

The game started at the EU border state where the Frontex officers were in their positions, either working in the office or patrolling in the area. Their duty was to control the border, catch illegal migrants and take their fingerprints. The officers examined the migrant's identity, where they were from and how they had gotten in to the country. The ones who had no papers or a satisfactory story to tell were put into a cell to wait for further investigation. The orders to deport people would come from a higher level. Because of so many unclear cases, some people were also released when the cell got too crowded or someone's custody took too long. 48 hours in real life equaled 6 years of in-game time.

The asylum seekers concentrated on surviving in the camp and thought about what they would do next. Money was needed daily and also to pay the smugglers. Some of the asylum seekers had savings, some had nothing. There was a chance to get a job from the gray market – low paid work that some of the area's businesses were providing. A few real-world businesses had agreed to play along and give small tasks to players. The players could then earn game money that was designed to correlate with euros and typical fees for undocumented workers.

A program leaflet explaining the game that included game money was handed out to non-player passers-by. The players could talk with the onlookers and sell whatever they had to offer. There was a dealer for chocolate, which in the game's fiction stood for drugs. Condoms stood for sex and oranges stood for low-wage farm work. The players were originally instructed to talk with an accent to people they didn't share a common language with, but this was quickly reduced to speaking in English. The language barriers were important because they can have crucial implications on migrants' lives. To avoid conflicts with the passers-by, the players were advised to switch to off-game if someone was not in the mood for play.

There were several supporting players invited to present and introduce their work with asylum seekers. The lawyer assisted the migrants during the asylum process within the limits of his time. The activists from the Free Movement Network came to give advice when someone's application had failed. Red Cross volunteers visited the camp talking to people and letting them fill out the Tracking Service form for finding lost family members.

The game organizers observed the game and played supporting roles as smugglers, work recruiters and ID-forgers when needed. The neon-vested customs workers hung around the border area and from time to time transported some cargo trolleys over the border, sometimes with a migrant hiding under the tarpaulin. Many of the migrants tried to get false papers to go deeper into Europe after saving

enough money. It became clear that it is almost impossible to get asylum in the South. There was a constant threat of being jailed by the officials and also violence in the streets. A theater group was asked to play angry, racist locals and to make a surprise attack on the camp on a busy Saturday evening.

If migrants managed to get to inner Europe they would find their way to the Refugee Reception Center and leave their asylum request to the officials. In the reception center a supporting player took people in, following the basic instructions of a social worker. After having waited a relatively long time in the center, asylum seekers went into an interview with a migration office lawyer. If a person's fingerprints had been found in another country the case went to accelerated handling. The deportation was enforced by the Frontex officers who took the migrant, if necessary with hands behind the person's back, to the country where the fingerprints had been taken. This way the migrants returned to the camp – unless someone escaped and went underground. This meant surviving outside society in Southern or Northern Europe.

THE IN-GAME WORLD AT A GLANCE

In the beginning of the game, the migrant players had quite similar goals – to have asylum. It took time to figure out what would be the best way to achieve it. There was plenty of game content in just becoming the character and adapting to his or her vulnerable position. Most characters were traumatized or physically injured. There were several nationalities represented, cultural diversity and all kinds of personalities, but also a need to avoid conflict and come together for shelter in a foreign city. The border guards from different European countries were doing a joint operation and they had their vocational code to follow. Social pressure existed in both groups, but in different ways.

The border guards were completely tied to their tasks. They were only a few compared to the length of the border and the number of people they had to keep in control. During long shifts they worried about relationships with people at home and dealt with tensions between their officers. Some secretly hated each other and were just waiting for retirement or transferral. Warmer relationships evolved with the sharing of tough experiences and hunting a common enemy. A complex drama developed around a drug-dealing immigrant, a few officers and a bunch of other actors, ending in tragedy.

Many migrants got stuck in the camp trying to get money. Some tried to ensure a border crossing for the whole family and worked in shameful ways in secret from each other. There were also innovative products, like the plastic bracelets, developed for sale next to the ones suggested in the game material. Solidarity developed between unexpected

actors – a border guard might overlook a migrant's escape after respect had developed during the long interrogations.

The differences in handling the asylum requests in the game were designed to shed light on the divergence of the asylum procedures of the southern and the other parts of the Europe. In the game the supporting lawyer participated in the hearings in both South and the inner Europe. He gave credit to the players for their skill in portraying their characters in a credible and realistic manner.

In the end only a few of the characters managed to travel across Europe to Germany or Sweden. There they went into the limbo the Dublin II regulation usually leads to. One woman had already heard about the regulation and its impact and she decided to go underground with her children. Another woman was deported handcuffed after she had failed to escape the guards on a market square.

The players camped in the city center for two nights on a summer weekend. They got a lot of attention from the media, but also from people who were passing by. Someone took a leak next to the fence and there was a lot of shouting, obviously from people who thought the players were actual foreigners. Other people were sincerely curious to talk to the players. Many wanted to know what was going on, but others started to play along. One random non-player even took the role of a lawyer and negotiated his client out of lockup. Some of the players got tips on how to proceed from real asylum seekers who happened to pass by.

GAME, PERFORMANCE AND INTERVENTION

A player report by Mikael Kinanen, 22, a larper since 2006, student of fine arts (TAMK) and an artist working with new genre public art.

CHARACTER: Mehran Ali, Iraqi Kurd, 30 years of age.

I played a photo-journalist fleeing from Iraqi terror in Kurdistan. I wore a shemagh wrapped around my head as a turban, and my ill-fitting clothes were dirty with coarse rye flour. In my pack I had another scarf and an old Sony Digital 8 video camera. I began the game as a refugee in a foreign camp, in a foreign land.

The game was nevertheless slightly more of a performance than a larp. I find it more interesting to think of the piece as an intervention or a work of new genre public art than as a game. There were plenty of viewers and it found its place in the context of urban art readily through the parent URB 11 festival.

There were plenty of encounters with non-players, such as men trying to make a joke out of the situation or young people binge drinking in the night. Some made an effort to behave "correctly" within the offered framework. This "correct" behavior seemed the most demanding role for the onlookers to take: an attempt to immerse oneself

in the piece, or at the very least to act in such a way as not to disturb the stories being enacted around them. This didn't come as easy for the onlookers as taking on a role they have practiced for years – such as those enforced in accentuated racist comments or drunken attempts to keep an arrogant composure in this unfamiliar situation.

The nature of the piece as an intervention both in the place and the discourse was only strengthened by some of these encounters. I mean those that made even the participants feel a bit strange and which revealed bits and pieces of the Finnish discussion on immigration. I was lying in the shade of a tent when I heard a group of young newcomers yell to some other participants: "Do you think you are muslims? Don't pretend to be us. You are not, but we are." Later, after this confrontation with the pride that immigrants place on their identity, I watched from afar as a police car stopped at the edge of the fenced area. They were only interested in whether it was a Roma camp that had sprung up in the middle of Helsinki, or so I heard. Later a drunken man approached one of the watchtowers. He was adamant that the participants were not Finns, even after being repeatedly told otherwise. The man was quite hostile towards the people in the camp. Apparently someone of foreign origin had once mugged his mother.

The reactions of the surrounding, living society were perhaps even too interesting, as I found myself losing immersion repeatedly. It came together for longer periods of time only when I spent time at the camp with other participants, without contact from the non-playing world. I wouldn't say this was a bad thing: repeated disruption of this borderline was interesting in itself.

The larp was more game-like than others I've played in. Everyone had the same aims – to get into inner Europe as stated in the briefing of the game, and more or less unified means to achieve it. The meaning and use of money was to make it possible to get over the border, and contacts played by the game masters functioned the same way. I had a few means and methods special to my character which could aid in the passage over the border.

One morning I woke up in the carcass of my collapsed tent to a commotion – as if they were raiding the camp. I moved quietly, dressed, and packed my meagre things deeper into my rucksack. I opened the flap of the tent and saw no-one. I got up, visited the off-area, came back to the camp and walked through the border controls without anyone interfering.

The game was planned to the point, almost railroaded, and it was this scheme the organizers seemed to be concentrating on. Any gaps only led out of the game. Transgressing the given system and plans led to situations where the game just didn't go – empty spaces, situations and a game without rules or structure.

My solution was to take part in the game and act in the prescribed context. I didn't really care about the game of border crossing, especially as it was possible to succeed in it by exploiting an unscripted moment.

I came back to the game and the camp, because there was nothing else in sight early in the morning. Mehran Ali too would have had his reasons to come back – to document the situation in the camp, to continue with the journalistic project created after leaving the bus full of illegal immigrants and would-be refugees. Yet it was easier to construe my game in such a way that no "transgression" had ever happened.

The game aspect of the larp suffered when one could slither through its gaps. Mehran Ali finally escaped the system after getting as far as a German refugee reception center. A journalist contact had organized for transportation into Germany and there the structures built into the game led Mehran straight into the center. There he made an attempt to help another Kurdish would-be refugee, but they both were processed and turned back according to the Dublin2 regulation to Greece where they had first sought asylum.

Outside visitors brought their little uncontrollable extra to the game, as can be seen in this situation. Activists from The Free Movement Network advised to play against the game – to leave it. They came to meet those about to be deported. In the middle of a conversation the authorities came to take the other Kurd and the advice I quickly translated and whispered to her was: be difficult and make a scene in the airplane. Later I heard this hadn't succeeded because the flight was played in the Helsinki metro during normal hours. The advice they gave to Mehran was: go underground, disappear and try to find other Kurds in Belgium – the authorities will find you immediately if you stay in the refugee center or go back to camp.

I left and "won" the game. The game-masters could have decided my character had got caught and thus return me to the camp, but they didn't. So I spent my evening walking the streets of Helsinki all alone, projecting my memories of Central European cities onto too-familiar architecture, chain-smoking and immersing myself in the experience of a Kurdish male in a foreign country, foreign streets and all alone. I took off my turban for my own safety: it is easier to immerse oneself in the threat unfamiliar people and xenophobia pose if there is no real danger.

So the streets of my city of birth became threatening, empty and full of wonder.

Mehran Ali was a journalist. I had a viewpoint different from most of the people at the border crossing. This voluntary, internally construed game held interest even

after my character had left the system and the game itself had ended for me. The continuous documentation within the game was natural as my character had a diegetic reason to do it. The repeated attempts to hide the camera, the smuggling of the tapes in my underwear and the faltering interviews only helped build the character of Mehran Ali. Shooting in-character was actually far easier than shooting as myself, with all the luggage of professional perfectionism.

DUBLIN2

Designed and organized by: JP Kaljonen, Johanna Raekallio & Haidi Motola as part of Finnish Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma Theater URB11 festival

Date: August 5th - 7th, 2011 in Lasipalatsi Square, Helsinki, Finland

Duration: 48 hours

Number of players: 20 in the roles of asylum seekers and Frontex officers, 19 supporting players

Budget: 12 000 € (participation fee: 15 €)

More information: www.dublin2.fi

LUDOGRAPHY

Dublin2 (2011): JP Kaljonen, Johanna Raekallio & Haidi Motola, Helsinki.

CATEGORY: NEW FRONTIERS

WEDDINGS AND ANTI- CONDOM ACTIVISTS

INTRODUCING LARP IN PALESTINE

TEXT TRINE LISE LINDAHL





Alex (Hazim) trying to scheme Robin (Ayyed) into ditching TinTin (Ramzy), while Kim (Yasmin) is trying to figure out how to outsmart them. Photo: Sigve Indregard

In the summer of 2011 Fantasiforbundet started a project together with the Palestinian organization Peace & Freedom Youth Forum to introduce larp as an educational, informal training tool in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. This article describes the background of the project, what we've done so far and the possible future of larp in Palestine.

In July 2011 four Norwegians went to Palestine with the hope of spreading the gospel of larping to a group of students outside of Ramallah. A bit nervous about what to expect, some questions were running through our minds. Will they like it? Will they understand why this is a cool and useful medium? And if they do, what will they use it for? Will we communicate well? Or will we come across as ignorant, arrogant Westerners who think we can solve any of their problems through something as superficial as playing games?

WHY INTRODUCE LARP IN PALESTINE?

To go into the details of the political situation in Palestine is out of the scope of this article, but I will offer a brief summary. Since 1967 Israel has occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The occupation has been highly oppressive, with periods of war and insurgency. In the Nineties, the Oslo agreement was negotiated between PLO and the Israeli government, but the process was not concluded. The Palestinians today are subject to a number of breaches of human rights by the Israeli government, but also by their own officials. There is a great need for building democratic practices in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

The idea for the project came from two sources. Since Knudepunkt in Denmark in 2007, there has been a larp project between Belarus and Norway, with a focus on larp as a method for education about human rights and democracy building. Martin Nielsen has been involved in this project from the start, and it is presently run by Fantasiforbundet.

Last year Martin Nielsen travelled to the West Bank. Based on the experiences with the project in Belarus, he found that he wanted to start a similar project with a Palestinian partner. He launched the project through Fantasiforbundet, and formed a project group consisting of himself, Ane Marie Anderson, Sigve Indregard, Trine Lise Lindahl, Victoria Lofstad and Vilde Herning. The project, which is hopefully a pre-project for a larger one, received funding from the LNU (the national organization for youth organizations), North-South information fund and from the surplus left over from Knutepunkt 2009.

Fantasiforbundet is an organization working to make it possible for all humans to utilize their potential for fantasy and creativity. It is a harbor for projects and contributes with project training and a network for committed people who are working on a voluntary basis for a more fantastic society. The main activities are in Norway, but Fantasiforbundet is also working to create a funnier and creative world by working internationally for human rights, with specific focus on the freedom of organization and the right to participate in cultural life.

Our partner organization in Palestine is the Peace & Freedom Youth Forum (PFF). PFF is an independent youth initiative aiming at activating the Palestinian youth, giving

them their legitimate role as an important segment of the Palestinian society, strengthening their ties with their society and identity, promoting the concepts of a democratic, secular, nonviolent and diverse Palestinian society through practical activism, and finally working with youth on regaining their control over the future of their society.

Like Fantasiforbundet, PFF is totally dependent on volunteer work, since volunteer work and volunteerism are key elements in PFF's discourse and approach to change. PFF works both on an international level and a local level. Internationally, they are aiming their projects at promoting the issue of Palestine those citizens of the world who are not interested in politics, and who are more or less ignorant of international affairs. Locally, PFF aims at creating a grassroots network of youth activists and volunteers who are willing to work for their personal development and the development of the Palestinian society.

There are two goals for the project. The first goal is to introduce larp as entertainment and as an educational, informal training tool for PFF to use in their work. We hope that they will start a larp group that will become self-driven and that they start to play and produce larps in whatever way they find best. The other part of the project is to spread information about the Israel-Palestine conflict in Norway, especially in the larp community.

The second goal we have tried to achieve by holding seminars about the political and human rights situation in Palestine, both before and after the project group went to Ramallah. The first goal led us to Ramallah and a two day workshop with PFF.

THE WORKSHOP IN RAMALLAH

In July, Martin, Ane, Sigve and I went to Ramallah for a two day workshop on larp with members of the Peace and Freedom Youth Forum. They have a house in the village of Birzeit, with a garden surrounding it. The house is in need of renovation, but worked fine for the workshop and will probably work nicely for a range of different larps that might be held there. There were ten Palestinian participants, eight men and two women, but only one of the women participated fully. They were all in their twenties, most of them studying drama, arts or journalism in the University of Birzeit or Ramallah.

The workshop included an introductory lecture about what larp is and some examples from larps held in Norway and Sweden. We played four games, and in the end we had a crash course on important considerations when making a larp. We used *The Family Anderson* by Åke Nolemo and Johan Røkländer as an introduction to larp, then we went on to play *The Tribunal* by J. Tuomas Harviainen and *The Road Not Taken* by Mike Young and Aaron Vanek, and finished off with *When Our Destinies Meet* by Morgan Jarl and Petter Karlsson.

The first game we played was *The Family Anderson*. This is a brilliant introductory game, as it revolves around a topic most people can relate to: dividing the inheritance of the characters' parents. It also uses an interesting game mechanic: all characters are played by two players, splitting the playing time equally between them.

During this first game we became aware that we had a bigger challenge with the language than we had prepared for. We had been told that all the participants would be able to participate fully in English, but this turned out not to be the case. We noticed that some of the players withdrew from the game, and decided to solve it by pulling out the Norwegians playing the character of Anders/Anna. (S)he stormed out in fury, and the game language switched to Arabic. After this the playing became more intense and you could see the players immerse more in their characters. Watching from the outside, not understanding what was being said, was truly fascinating, especially how the body language became stronger when they could play in their native tongue. After this experience we ended up playing some games in Arabic only and some in a mix of Arabic and English. Lectures, workshops and debriefs were interpreted by one of the participants. It's obvious we need to translate game material into Arabic in the future.

The next games we played were *The Tribunal* and *The Road Not Taken*. These games were the winner and runner up of the Nordic Larpwriter challenge, a larpwriting competition designed to make games to be used in civil education in Belarus. They both deal with ethical dilemmas in different ways. They were well received, but we felt that our participants hadn't really seen the magic of larping yet. That happened when we were playing *When Our Destinies Meet*.

When Our Destinies Meet isn't really a game, but a set of methods to make and play one. The only things determined by the game designers is that the action will take place at a party of some sort, and that the characters are defined by their social roles. For instance: "The mother", "The romantic partner", "The boss" or "The blind date". There are methods for making the relationships and building out the characters and setting, and a set of dramaturgical game mechanics used by a director to focus the story and heighten the drama. It is played in one room, with tape on the floor to mark different parts of the game area.

We didn't think we had time to actually play the game and decided to just do the workshop to teach the participants how they can easily make a net of relationships and a setting that is playable, in just an hour. We also discussed how this could be used with adjustments to create larger and less silly larps.

We ended up with the framework for what one of the participants called "a fun Mexican soap opera". It was a BBQ

held in honor of the circumcision of the son of the Boss of Palestine. Among the guests were the attention-seeking first lady who worked at Dr. Durex' condom factory, Dr. Durex himself, and his blind date, a Mossad agent trying to infiltrate a group of Radical Anti-Condomists plotting to blow up the condom factory. Among the characters were the president's son and one of the many romantic partners of the president's secretary. By the end of the workshop everybody wanted to play the larp, and so we did and had loads of fun. The drama revolved around political intrigues, family conflicts and romantic drama, and the players immersed beautifully in their eccentric characters.

After the workshop we went out to eat and celebrate. I was eager to know what the participants thought about larp and if this was anything they wanted to explore more. I also wanted to hear if they had ideas for how they could use this medium in Palestine. The group was very elated and set a date for a planning meeting in August to decide how they wanted to form a group and what they wanted to do. After having tried out some games and discussed possibilities with us, they recognized larp as an activity the PFF can use to achieve their goals both locally and internationally. One of the participants, Mohamad Rabah, told me: "I have never participated in a larp before; it is a new experience to fill the character in your own way and to start playing it seriously and deeply. I would like to learn more about larp. I think the Palestinian people need this medium to add a new item of informal education in a fun and interesting way".

As for the entertaining aspects, Hazim, a drama student, told me: "In these two days you have shown me something my theater teacher hasn't been able to show me in three years of drama school: how much fun acting can be!" He wanted to do more of that, allowing himself and others to be silly and just have a good time.

Another participant, Mujahedi, a journalism student, told me that he has been doing art projects in a refugee camp, giving the kids a chance to express themselves through working with mosaics. "But now", he said, "after learning about larp, this is what I want to do. Mosaic is OK, but larp is so much better! These kids live under great strain. Apart from the bad living conditions in the camps, the real problem is the social problems within the family. There is a great problem with domestic violence, with women and children being terrorized by fathers who, being totally out of power over their own situation, turn on their families, acting as tyrants. Through larp we could give these kids a voice to speak with, expressing themselves and developing their own thoughts. Or just a space filled with fun, taking them away from the dreariness of their lives for a short while."

We left Palestine hopeful that the workshop participants would establish a group and start making larps. In order to increase their knowledge about larp and larp society, we

wanted to invite them to Grenselandet, to meet larpers and game designers, and to connect them with the Belarussian project.

PARTICIPATING IN RED OCTOBER AND GRENSELANDET

Grenselandet is an annual minilarp festival organized by Fantasiforbundet and Laivfabrikken Oslo. In addition to a range of short larps requiring minimum preparation from the Nordic countries, Poland and Slovakia, the finalists of the Belarussian Larpwriter Challenge were played. These were games that we thought might be interesting to the Palestinian group. Fortunately Grenselandet was held the weekend after the larp *Red October*, which gave the Palestinian delegation consisting of Mohamad Rabah, Janan Adawi and Shadi Elias Sader a chance to participate in a larp running for three days and not only the short larps we played at the workshop in Ramallah and at Grenselandet.

Red October was a larp about the Maoist movement (AKP-ml) in Norway in the 1970's. This movement had a strong connection with Palestinian groups both on the West Bank and the surrounding countries in this period, so it was natural to cast the Palestinians as members of different Palestinian resistance groups, and Ane and Martin as members of the AKP-ml Palestine committee. After the larp I asked Shadi what he thought was the most memorable thing he experienced at the larp, and he told me about "the speech".

"I was playing a character called Faris, who was a member of the People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), which was a very radical, pro-terrorist movement. During a presentation about Palestine, I was talking about the work the PFLP was doing, hijacking planes, attempting to blow up Israeli embassies and so forth. I could see Ane's and Martin's characters becoming quite flustered translating what I said to characters who didn't speak English, and they translated my statements into something like 'They are very active in resistance fighting'. I went on to talk about how we thought gender equality was very important, and that women should also participate in the fight for freedom. As an example I talked about Leyla Andrawes, the world's first female hijacker."

This speech created a lot of commotion in the larp, and the Palestine committee had a lot of smoothing over to do for inviting a terrorist. Mohamad and Janan played characters who opposed the methods the PFLP were using, and wanted to distinguish themselves from them. Comrade Faris ended up being quite alone, and for the last day of the larp nobody wanted to talk to him apart from a very young, very radical self-proletarized Swede, eager to learn techniques for blowing things up. At some point one of the organizers came up to him and cut the game to check if he was all right.

"I was actually having a good time, playing on the feeling of exclusion, but it was nice of him to check on me, giving me a chance to play myself back into things."

Red October was Shadi and Janan's first larp, as they did not participate in the workshop in Ramallah. At the larp afterparty I talked to Janan about what she liked about larping and she promptly answered: "The chance to be someone else!"

She elaborated: "When I was at the *Red October* larp, I felt that I had the possibility to be someone else, it is the possibility to talk and to behave as a different character and not myself. So, I didn't need to take into consideration what others would think about me because that was not me. That was my character. This also makes it easier for me to accept criticism from others.

"In addition, as an entertainment tool, it might sound ridiculous, but I think it also gives me the opportunity to be someone that I want to be, but cannot be in my real life because of my age or social class: a teenager, or a prostitute, a mother, a grandmother, to have a different profession, to be a criminal, etc. I'm just trying to say that what makes larp very unique in comparison to other simulation games is that it can deal with any issue and not only the political. It is a complete story and not only a representation of different countries or committees. It is more personal."

Mohamad had participated in the workshop in Ramallah, and after playing a PLO member who had gotten a Norwegian girl pregnant while visiting Lebanon, he said that: "I think long larps are something interesting to participate in. You have to go deeper into the character and you have time to adjust the way you are playing the character based on feedback you get, and how it works out for you. I had a lot of fun, but also moments that I really felt were serious. One thing was that I was playing an official member of the PLO at this meeting, and I really wanted to portray him truthfully. On the other hand I had to decide what we were going to do with the pregnancy of the Norwegian girl, whether to keep the child or not. We went to the dream room and we played two scenes set 15 years into the future. In the first one we had decided to live in Norway and in the other one we had decided to move to Palestine. It was real drama."

During their stay in Oslo, the Palestinians got to attend the 2nd anniversary of Fantasiforbundet. The first part of the celebration was used for having a lecture about the Palestinian UN bid for statehood. The lecture was held by Jørgen Jensehaugen, a PhD student in History at NTNU, with comments from Mohamad Rabah of PFF. This lecture strengthened the aim of both PFF and Fantasiforbundet to educate people in Norway about the Palestinian political situation.

At Grenselandet the Palestinian group got to play more short larps and to discuss larp with several game designers and players. As only half the larps were in English, the lan-

guage barrier prevented them from playing all the larps they wanted to. But from his experience Mohamad drew the following conclusion: "I think organizing larp is not as easy as it seems. Some larps seems perfect on paper, but when you try it, it doesn't work the way you think it will."

In addition to the minilarps, Grenselandet also facilitated a short seminar with all the participants about the way our partners see they could use larp as an educational tool in both Palestine and Belarus. We also had a café dialogue where the participants could contribute with ideas on different questions regarding larp as an educational tool and Fantasiforbundet's international work.

THE FUTURE

It is important to the project that it is the group in Ramallah deciding what they want to do, what sort of larps they want to make, and what sort of issues they want to deal with through larps. The role of the group in Oslo will be to help, support, teach them the ropes and cooperate in making the first Palestinian larp.

At the Grenselandet seminar Janan Adawi presented the thoughts of the Palestinian group. As they see it, every little thing in a Palestinians' life is affected directly and indirectly by the ongoing Israeli occupation and the challenges this causes with the security situation, the internal struggles of the Palestinian community and difficulties with poverty, lack of education, difficulties with marriages, unemployment and so forth. It is obvious that larping won't solve these problems or secure a peace agreement. But their hope is to use larp to make Palestinians less narrow-minded and more open to seeing these struggles from different perspectives. The hope is that this will lead to people being at peace with themselves and between themselves, and then maybe they can find solutions to ease their situation.

There are some specific issues they see that larps could deal with, and through this educate people on how to deal with this in their real lives. The first one is the issue of gender equality. Women in Palestinian society are far from being treated as equal to men, either when it comes to how many women have higher education, independent work or how much they earn, or in the way they are treated by Palestinian men. As Janan says: "Maybe affirmative action can help a woman get a job, but it will not educate her male colleagues on how to treat her as an equal. Maybe larping could?"

Another issue is that the Palestinian communities are getting more fragmented, separated by physical borders. The Palestinians in Gaza, on the West Bank, in East Jerusalem and inside Israel are not all able to actually meet each other, due to travel restrictions imposed by the Israeli government. This has led to these groups developing in different ways, and the differences are increasing. They can be seen in levels of education, socio-economic situation and

the way of thinking and talking about the occupation and future solutions for the Palestinian people. Obviously these groups have a lot in common, but they also have different challenges and different dilemmas to deal with.

Between and inside these sub-societies, religion constitutes a serious internal conflict, between groups of Muslim and Christian Palestinians, but also between highly religious people and more secular groups. This also borders on the issue of traditions that regulate what people can and cannot do, for instance regarding traditions of early marriage, mixed marriages between Christians and Muslims, how this is linked to religious beliefs and the different viewpoints of liberal and conservative groups when it comes to these matters.

Last, but not least, the unstable political situation and the problems it causes for transportation and the economic situation leads to crime and violence between teenagers, and between teenagers and adults even within the same groups.

So how do they think that larp can contribute to change in these areas? One thing is that larp can be used as a training tool in developing different skills, such as dialogue, leadership, social networking and so forth. Having people from different sub-societies and age groups attend the same larps can increase the interaction between these groups. The fact that the players are speaking through their characters might help them to more openly express their emotions and opinions, or to try out different opinions, not having to worry about what people will think about them. This could lead to more understanding and respect towards others. Larp can become a meeting ground for discussing different political, religious and social views.

There are challenges that need to be worked around. For instance, it would be out of the question for a lot of Palestinian girls to participate in a larp that required them to sleep at the larp site, due to social stigma. There can be problems with how the girls are treated by the guys in the group and with the level of active participation. The students from the Ramallah Acting Academy told us that the drop-out rate for women at the Academy was 100%, and that this is connected to actresses still being seen as less honorable women.

With a goal of bringing together people from different groups, the larps cannot be too biased in either a religious or a liberal direction. The same is true for extreme political views. These things need to be taken into consideration when designing the larps.

Another big obstacle is that you can never know if it will be possible to travel to the larp site, especially if there are participants coming from all over the West Bank and even from inside Israel. If something happens, which it does quite often, the checkpoints or roads could be closed, and the participants will not be able to join the larp. This could be very challenging, requiring a larp design that will work more or less well without some of the players or even organizers.

But right now, maybe the biggest challenge to having a viable larp community in Ramallah is that nobody knows what larp is. As far as we know, there is no larp community in Palestine and really no gaming culture either. This means that the usual suspects for recruitment just aren't there. So the first challenge to overcome is for the group in Ramallah to introduce people to larps and to make them want to join "this crazy thing", as Janan puts it.

The project group in Ramallah has started to plan their first larp in cooperation with the project group in Oslo. Their idea is a larp revolving around a wedding between a Palestinian woman and a Norwegian man, with family and friends from both countries. The game is planned to go on for three consecutive days in the summer of 2012. During the spring they will hold some smaller larps, to recruit more players and to learn more about the medium.

I love the idea of a wedding larp, and see great possibilities for play on a personal level, but also on social, political and cultural differences between the guests. It's also easily accessible for inexperienced players, as most people can relate to a wedding.

One of our experiences with starting a larp community somewhere where no one even knows what larp is, is that there is a lack of material out there explaining the true basics of how to make and play a larp. It would be brilliant to have a booklet or a blog or something aimed at people who want to start making their own larps. We also see the need for more introductory games, easily available games for people who haven't larped before. So, we are setting up a new Larpwriter challenge, this time with the aim of getting a bigger repertoire of introductory games for anyone to use.

The questions that ran through our minds on our way to Ramallah seem to have been answered. The Peace & Freedom Youth Forum have been introduced to larp and are eager to use this for promoting their goals in Palestine and in Norway. We are all looking forward to seeing how our plans turn out and if this will contribute to making a more fun and fantastic world.

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CATEGORY: NEW FRONTIERS

LARP AND AESTHETIC RESPONSIBILITY

WHEN JUST A LITTLE LOVIN' BECAME AN ART DEBATE

WORDS TOVA GERGE

Between March and May of 2011, something quite uncommon happened in one of Sweden's biggest newspapers, Expressen: a relatively long-running debate about the artistic values of a larp.

The larp was Just a Little Lovin', a game with the tagline "1982: It was the summer AIDS came to New York City". The debate – initiated by the art critic Philip Tier and continued by among others me and the game's designers, Hanne Grasmø and Tor Kjetil Edland – was both about the specific characteristics of larp as an art form, about what artistic responsibility is, about who has the right to retell what parts of the AIDS epidemic and in what way. Though the debate was touching on highly explosive subjects, much more could have been said, and some of the in my opinion most important questions disappeared in the usual linguistic noise between larpers and non-larpers. Thus, I will now use this media event as a stepping stone for elaborating on questions about larp, responsibility and the privilege of interpretation.

CONTROVERSY

On the 30th of March 2011, Philip Tier writes in an article that he is troubled by what he perceives as a sort of AIDS exoticism in the game *Just a Little Lovin'*. He asks if it is really

up to anyone to play ill, and suspects that the urge to do so is mainly about basking in the soiled glory of an aestheticized tragedy in queer Greenwich Village. He also writes that what he appreciates about Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* – one of the most famous fictive accounts of the AIDS epidemic's outbreak in New York – is how it makes itself visible as a written construction all the time through constant references to philosophy and religious theory.

He seems to draw the conclusion that this is something a game cannot do, and that, because of this, no game can take responsibility for a history as sensitive as the AIDS epidemic. Furthermore, he makes reference to a theater performance that premiered at Teater Galeasen in Stockholm during the spring of 2011, *Bli en däre! (Become a Loony!)*. This show used some interactive elements to explore the world of psychiatric care, and as Tier understands it, both the director and the dramaturge in such a set-up are replaced by the game designer. This seems to worry him.

Anxiety about the dissolution of a clear and stable au-

thorship is for me a much less valid remark than the question about who owns the history – who can play ill – because I think this question should be asked more frequently not only by organizers, but also by players. Larpers are all about using histories that are not exactly their own, but we talk very little about what this means to both ourselves and others. In fact, I have hardly even approached the subject since one of my very first larp debates, maybe because it did not work out very well that time. It started with me doing a blunt attack against a group of girls who used to play prostitutes in medieval and fantasy larps. I wanted to know from what angle they explored the worlds of sexual abuse and human slavery that they were toying around with in their character descriptions, and I was concerned with the contrast between that reality and what I could only perceive as an enactment of “the happy whore” in a fantasy setting.

After some angry emails back and forth, the conversation ended with me asking for forgiveness for being so aggressive. I probably would not have been capable of taking it any further without putting my own position at risk – like everyone else I knew, I had written into character descriptions that my parents died in orc battles (or whatever), and no one ever had any remarks about that except that it was lacking in originality. What if instead they would have asked me what I knew about that sort of situation, having your parents killed in a war? Or why I used that image and how I thought it would affect me to play with that for a week? If this would have been the case, fantasy larps would have been something completely different than what they were, and maybe a lot of people would not have dared to attend. There can be a lot at stake when you larp, not least your social position, and to have it scrutinized before entering a game might be a major turn-off for many. Still, I think there is really something to gain in asking ourselves more seriously what kind of pleasure and what kind of politics we engage in when we larp. This not only because we live in a time when gamers become artists, artists become gamers, and where the concept of game is highly political, but also because it is so much easier for me as a fellow larper to hit the right spot if I know what to aim for.

None of this was in my response, published the 1st of April, to Teir’s article. Being sheepishly loyal towards the larping movement whenever there is an attack from the “outside”, I focused mainly on giving a different account of how aesthetic responsibility functions in a larp setting, defending the format of collective autonomous storytelling that seemed to frighten Tier. I stated that there is nothing inherently more defensible in staging Kushner’s *Angels in America* or Strindberg’s *Miss Julie* the hundredth time than in making a three day game about AIDS or about the Swedish culture of honor. Additionally, I pointed out the fact that larpers often spend weeks doing research about their role

and its historical context (if there is one). I proposed that this would make larpers less likely than, for example, theatergoers – who have just a few hours to grasp a complex story – to simply reproduce worn-out clichés. I thus argued that understanding how players invest personally and emotionally in a story – that is not made to be shown, interpreted or understood by someone outside the game – must be at the base if you want to formulate an accurate critique against a larp. I also took the occasion to briefly flunk *Bli en dâre!* both as a game and as a piece of theater, since I considered this performance an example par excellence of an aesthetic experience that did not take responsibility for the story that it used.

NEW PARTICIPANTS

Johan Wennström, a right-wing journalist with no specific qualification within art or larp, entered the conversation on the 4th of April with the main concern that contemporary culture is strangely fascinated with suffering and illness. For him, there is no difference between a subcultural event in Oslo and a theater performance in an established venue in Stockholm as long as they focus on the dark sides of being human. He also seems to have lost the capacity for doing an internet search, since he ends his article by asking where one can find art that shows “the best sides of life”.

The 7th of April, the organizers of *Just a Little Lovin’*, Grasmo and Edland, responded to the two critical articles. Regarding Wennström, they argue that the romantic comedy is not under threat of extinction, and that the contemporary art scene needs something else than showing the best sides of life, otherwise it becomes too flat and makes too little friction. They thus implicitly establish a norm for art as a zone for examining conflicts, and they explicitly point out the first outbreak of the AIDS epidemic as an event that is interestingly charged because of how it touched the Western world’s conception of death.

When it comes to Teir’s initial remarks, they answer that although it is important to treat sensitive questions with respect, there is also a need for creating new fiction about AIDS, fiction that takes risks in both its form and content. They consider larp an art form, and as such particularly useful in how it incorporates the subjective experience, rather than prescribes or controls how a media consumer should feel. At the same time, they address the fact that larp is a subculture where fantasy games represent the norm, and where a larp about AIDS is very much in the avant-garde of a scene that is undergoing drastic changes.

For me as a larper, Grasmo and Edland’s attempt to contextualize *Just a Little Lovin’* points towards other subcultural issues, such as what kind of statement it is to make a game with mainly male homosexual roles in a larping community where the vast majority of the fictions that players

enter reproduce a heterosexual and often profoundly sexist world order. Of course, this choice has not only an aesthetic or story building value, but actually breaks with a long gaming tradition of aligning the character's gender and desires with what is perceived as the player's biological sex. And as the casting debate around the Stockholm version of the tango larp *In Fair Verona* showed, this is certainly not a logic reserved for medieval and fantasy genres.

This larp set off discussions when the organizers stated that players should sign up with an opposite sex dance partner, and explained this by saying that queer desire was off-topic. After having this decision questioned in various ways, the organizers eventually changed the registration rules so that you could sign up for playing man/leader or woman/follower in a heterosexual couple regardless of how your body was perceived in everyday life – meaning, they admitted that heterosexual tango clichés can be portrayed also by players who do not align their characters with their assigned real life gender. This change in policy must be considered rather exceptional. In most cases, the question is not even raised. A larp like *Just a Little Lovin'* does not only show how strong the heterosexual larp norm is by being an exception, it also forces those who don't fit into the category of "male homosexual" in everyday life to do what any gender wildcard has always been forced to do in mainstream scenarios: work to pass.

What a game or a performance does to the social field in which it is inscribed is for me as an important criteria for a "good" aesthetic experience as happy endings seem to be for Wennström. This leads me back to why I considered the theater performance *Bli en dâre!* irresponsible in how it approached its theme of institutional mental care. Not only did I think that this play tried to make things light and fun in a superficial way, not only was I provoked by how it reproduced all possible clichés around mental illness and hospitalization – most of all, I was upset with how clumsily it covered any visitor's own experiences of psychiatric care by inserting a vague element of "interaction" that allowed almost no freedom for visitors, but a lot of chances for actors to improvise generic craziness in between the long sections of set, badly written material.

In this sense, *Bli en dâre!* did not give its community of visitors the change to take a critical passive position as spectators, nor an actively renegotiating position as players. What the piece then did to its social fields was in my opinion not to open people's eyes for the potential of interactive elements in stage art, nor to seriously question norms in the mental care system, nor to open a platform for the audience to present their own histories. Rather, it consolidated common place prejudices about both interactive arts and about madness.

After visiting the show, I came to think of Johanna MacDonald's article "There You Are, There You Ain't – Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart", where she gives an account of how she experienced SIGNA's performance *The 11th Knife*. MacDonald revisits her initial confusion with a game that seemed to be ongoing between the performers, but obscure to the visitors, who were presented with neither roles nor rules. However, she gradually found a way into the game, discovering only when her friends dropped by to look at the performance that playing had slightly altered her persona and made it uncomfortable for her to interact with people who knew her as someone else.

I briefly asked myself if *Bli en dâre!* could have allowed for something similar, but in my experience, this was not the case. Despite the fact that all spectators got either a caretaker's or a patient's coat when they arrived, the actors of the piece were not primarily playing a game with the audience or each other – they were not interacting, they were acting. So, to enter their scene would not have been a question of grasping their rules, but breaking their rules.

Once during my three hour visit in the seventy-two hour scenario (seventy-two hours that were really more like a collection of shorter sets with certain episodes looped so that all audience members would see them, and with the chance to do one or two ordinary sleepovers, without any theater during the night), an audience member interrupted a preset scene with a comment. This was tolerated but not actively acted upon – exactly what would happen in any theater setting where the fourth wall is not breached.

In my opinion, the most "interactive" parts of this performance occurred in the glitches between activities, when visitors were led from theater chairs to strictly framed but easygoing daycare activities or to contentless yes-or-no quizzes where the actors got perplexed if you answered something as elaborate as "maybe". Walking from one room to another in the company of a person who had no other task than helping to find the way, gave the opportunity to connect in a new way and have a non-scripted interaction.

Apart from these – most likely unintended – breaks in the web of fiction, I had a hard time seeing how it was possible to do a serious emotional or political investment in this kind of hybrid. Certainly no investment could happen on the same terms as the actors, who followed a script that was not open for hacking or resistance. The artistic team in this sense established themselves as an authority in interpreting mental illness, something that certain critics accepted, while others, especially people with a personal experience of psychiatric care, strongly disapproved. One of those was Ann Heberlein, who felt that the world of *Bli en dâre!* was disconnected from the reality of Swedish healthcare and had more to do with washed-out remakes of stories like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Girl, Interrupted*, *Shutter Island*

or other Hollywood productions about conditions that are profoundly different from the ones that matter in people's lives here and now.

GOOD OR BAD REFERENCES

I agree with Heberlein that whatever intimate experiences the makers of *Bli en dâre!* might have had of different types of illness and care, they most certainly didn't use it very convincingly in their theater work. Larp on the other hand can hardly avoid exposing intimate experience: we cannot shut out our own histories, sorrows and desires from a game structure that takes both our minds and bodies in possession. In this sense, larp cannot totally control and flatten the nuances of a storyline the way theater can, and this is at the core of the defense of *Just a Little Lovin'* that both me and Grasmø and Edland laid out in our articles during the spring of 2011. Still, I think that the next person that entered the debate, the journalist and author Johan Hilton, did an accurate critique of the framing of the larp.

Just like when Heberlein detected Hollywood dramaturgy rather than serious research in *Bli en dâre!*, Hilton is skeptical of the number of pop cultural references made on the homepage of *Just a Little Lovin'*. He points out that the inspirational material from the organizers and the pictures that illustrate the texts seem to be mostly nostalgic kitsch from or about the Eighties, such as Grace Jones' music or the films *Torch Song Trilogy*, *Longtime Companion*, *Tootsie* and *54*. If the game is indeed about having a subjective understanding of an era that passed, he wants to know where the documentary material is, or whether it was too repulsive and ugly to be fitted into this aestheticized disco world. Furthermore, he makes reference to Susan Sontag's text *Illness as Metaphor*. In this text, Sontag explores how tuberculosis, cancer and other illnesses have been used in fiction for expressing character, as if the illness resulted from a state of passion in someone's inner life, rather than just being what it is. Sontag argued that this may shame and discourage people with a real experience of illness from talking or writing about their lives outside the metaphorical frame.

As Hilton understands it, mainstream fiction has used AIDS as a metaphor very much in the sense of Sontag, for example in films like *The Hours*, the musical *Rent*, inspired by *La Bohème*, or the feel-good AIDS movie *Love! Valour! Compassion!*. In those, Hilton states, the subversive, artistic and marginalized become marked by death as a consequence of their way of life. As far as Hilton can see, *Just a Little Lovin'* takes no distance from such a logic in the presentation of the game. In his opinion, it is hard not to read in an exoticism and an apocalyptic romanticism in the imagery of young beautiful gay men partying while death knocks at the door. He therefore asks whether this narrative could supply anyone with a subjective understanding of what the

AIDS epidemic was and is. Furthermore, he doubts that the organizers of the larp would be interested in examining the tragedy of demographic extinction if they also had to leave the glamorous scenery behind and work with something less aestheticized, like the starvation disaster in Ethiopia, the Tsunami or the Srebrenica massacre.

I think that Hilton might be wrong in this last assumption – not only because I know that Grasmø and Edland discussed working with questions about AIDS in Africa before they settled on the plot for *Just a Little Lovin'*, but also because larpers in general tend to do scenarios about all kinds of things, including historical and contemporary events that are potentially very sensitive. This does not necessarily mean that this is done in a thoughtful manner, which is actually just another reason to take Hilton's remarks about reproduction of clichés seriously. However, in the specific case of *Just a Little Lovin'*, Hilton's critique is interesting both because it shows how much the initial presentation of the game was dependent on reproducing images from other fiction, and because it shows how unthinkable it was for Hilton to assume that someone involved with this larp could actually have a personal relation to the AIDS epidemic. The latter is of course a mistake, even if one can understand how he draws this conclusion from the presentation that he has access to. Nevertheless, I dare state that many of the players in *Just a Little Lovin'* had at least one foot in some kind of queer community and were born in the Eighties or earlier. This implies that many of those players are likely to have friends who lost someone dear to them before the antiretroviral medicines became more efficient, likely to have been involved with AIDS activism and likely to have dealt with the added stigmatization of non-heterosexual life that the AIDS epidemic caused. For me personally, it would have taken that kind of formulation to feel motivated to play *Just a Little Lovin'*. I would have to consider it some kind of memory work, a way of grasping what friends of mine have been through, in order to not feel that I could just as well have played *Cluedo*.

I don't mean this arrogantly. I am sure there are many ways to play this game with political insight into the sensitive position of AIDS and HIV in contemporary society. However, I will not try to list other examples, since I never had any longer conversations with players and organizers about how the preparations for the game and the game frames as such encouraged reflective and nuanced ways of examining illness, love and loss. I did not participate as a player and can thus only trust people to tell the truth when they say that *Just a Little Lovin'* was an important experience for them.

In Grasmø and Edland's answer to Hilton the 5th of May, they claim that what Hilton is doing is equal to reviewing a theater poster. Possibly it would be a better analogy to say that it is equal to reviewing a theater program written and

edited by the directors. This is not exactly a common critical practice, but in some cases it would be useful. How something is promoted is definitely a part of what it becomes as a whole, and even if one does not see the whole picture, seeing a part of something is also an aesthetic experience that can make you think and feel. In the case of Teir and Hilton, this homepage obviously made them react strongly enough to write invested articles outside critical conventions, addressing a subculture and an aesthetic practice that they don't know anything about.

In this sense, the argument "don't judge a book by its cover" is weak. However, Grasmø and Edland also defend their choice to flirt with apocalyptic romanticism, making reference to Juhana Pettersson's notion "The Necessary Zombie". Pettersson's idea is that larpers in general, because of how larp has developed, fear things that connote "art" or "experimental" in relation to larp. Organizers thus need something easily grasped, such as a familiar genre element (zombies), to lure their players in. The Necessary Zombie is about making players feel that they know what they are expected to do so that they become cooperative, open and emotionally invested. For Grasmø and Edland, Grace Jones and the iconography of the Eighties serve that purpose.

However, they also assure the readers that the process and the game will be about developing characters away from the initial clichés into complex human beings. They also return to the idea of how larp engages the whole body in a system of interaction that is not entirely controllable, and thus will always break down simplistic models of the world. Furthermore, they point out that they are not interested in making a correct interpretation of an historical epoch, but that the larp is about the life of the players and the Western World's avoidance of death. They state that their scenario is primarily about examining the dialectics between desire and death anxiety through the intermediate of strong friendship. What this piece of work results in, they argue, cannot be decided before the game and the documentation thereof has been concluded. Finally, they express a hope that the debate will contribute to better criteria for judging the artistic value of larps.

Hilton's short reply, also the last word in the debate, repeats the concerns with the choice to enhance every cliché there is about AIDS. Hilton is also skeptical of the argument that bodily participation changes the approach to the clichés no matter the initial context. He quotes his experience of doing improvisation theater sessions that reminded him of larp in the sense that they were situation-based and long in duration. In his final line, he sardonically states that this indeed did not make those sessions into art.

ART

I agree that context makes all the difference, but in a slightly different way than Hilton intends it. What was actually missing in order for Hilton's improvisations to become art was not a certain level of concentration or dedication – even if it is tempting to point out that larp is often quite different from improvisation theater in its pace, its presentation of self/character, its game logic and its set-up.

No, what was missing is the same thing that larp generally has never had: contexts that frame it as art. In their last arguments, both Grasmø, Edland and Hilton have chosen to ignore the fact that what gets to be called "art" is not what holds a certain "objective quality", but what is invited or invites itself to the venues, social circles and economic fields that define art. The iconic event of Marcel Duchamp signing an urinal and exhibiting it under the name *Fountain*, Howard S. Becker's book *Art Worlds* giving an account of how processes of recognition can happen in the art field, and many other artists and theorists, can serve as examples of how difficult it is to set up stable criteria for quality in art.

That both the organizers of *Just a Little Lovin'* and its critics still make reference to such a thing might be a sign that larp as a subculture has started to knock on the doors of the artistic establishment, and that some elements that are central to larp have become more interesting to established artistic fields. If this means that larpers in the future will be expected to take greater responsibility – also on a more official media scene – for how their games affect its practitioners and the surrounding society, I think this is something we should embrace.

Not because I necessarily believe that larp should be considered art or consider itself as such, but because this movement has nothing to lose from becoming more aware of its weaknesses and potentials. When art critics fail in having substantial things to say about our work, we should be capable of doing it better. Aesthetic responsibility has nothing to do with being accepted by journalists, artists or theorists. Rather the opposite: it is about being ready to enter in conversation about the politics of your desire with people who might not be in power over how their history is written.

So let us talk, not about abstract notions like quality, but about what larps do to us and our perception of the world, no matter if we are in it for the fun, the violence, the sex or the theory. If we manage to take into consideration what stories we are using and why – if we manage to accept the fact that we are not underdogs just because we have a slightly marginal hobby – then we will also be in a position where we may learn more than we ever imagined about which rules of reality can be altered and how.

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CATEGORY: DOCUMENTATION

FOLK FANTASY

ESCAPING TOLKIEN

WORDS MIKE POHJOLA

During the ritual, the shaman goes from person to person asking them if they want to go to the new world or die in the old. Photo: Olli Lönnberg

Täällä Kirjokannen alla was a contemporary fantasy adventure larp that tried to stay true to the spirit of the fantasy genre while reinventing it from local and national perspective. It was the dawn of folk fantasy.

The only thing worse than dying is living. That's what your mother taught you when your drunken father beat you up again. When he couldn't take the oppression of Kuovinmaa anymore, he hanged himself.

So it was up to you to answer the call for help from the Land of Pohjola in the north. The World Pillar had collapsed and the Bright Dome of Heaven was about to collapse.

You swore by your dark god, Black Kullervo, the patron of suicide and incest, to save the world even if it killed you. You traveled with your plain women and miserable men, until you finally reached Pohjola, the top of the world. Your only solace was your girlfriend, less ugly than most of the women you knew.

Walking on the forest path to the guardhouse near the Holy Mountain, you and your group were confronted by a warrior of Pohjola. She demanded to know your names and business. Once you explained who you were and what you were doing, she let you pass and even gave you directions to the house on top of a high hill.

Once there, you met revolutionaries of Sampola, lords and ladies of Kuovinmaa, golden maidens, the daughters of Pohjola, the colorful strangers of Tulimaa, and some dead folk who hadn't passed on yet. All were here to help save the world and find the pieces of the World Pillar.

You had to find keys to the Holy Mountain from inside a loaf of bread and the belly of a fish. For the pieces of the Pillar you had to trick a goblin, fight some dead folk, answer riddles and climb trees, swim in the lake and make songs, chase trolls and seduce old women.

On these many adventures the smarter among you realized that it was too late to save the world. The Bright Dome

of Heaven would fall and crush everything under it. But you could build a new World Pillar from the pieces and start a new age of the world. You together would decide what it's like, and decide to go there or die with the old world.

While the others talked of this, you made a personal realization. Your girlfriend is not just any strange woman, she's the daughter of your mother and father. Black Kullervo is supposed to protect his people from this, but even he can't defeat fate. Sleeping with your sister is against all the laws of the land and an offence to gods, but you still loved each other.

All the peoples together, even the Kuovinmaa oppressors, gathered together on the Holy Mountain. In a grand ritual you rebuilt the World Pillar, tied it up, and nailed the Bright Dome to it with a knife. All that was needed was a human sacrifice for the gate to the new world to open.

You and your sister-girlfriend offered yourselves. You couldn't live together and you couldn't live without each other, so it was better to die.

Most of the others entered the new world, some stayed behind to die with the two of you. You few watched on the Holy Mountain as the Bright Dome fell down and the world was no more.

TOWARDS A FANTASY OF THE PEOPLE

Täällä Kirjokannen alla (Here Under the Bright Dome of Heaven) was an attempt at recreating fantasy adventure, at bringing back the sense of wonder, and making a fantasy world unencumbered by Tolkien. It ended up creating a new genre, folk fantasy.

Most fantasy larps are derivative of the works of J. R. R.



The head slave of Pohjola returns from the tent village set up for the foreigners. Photo: Mike Pohjola

Tolkien or, even worse, derivative of works that are Tolkien derivatives. Of course, Tolkien drew heavily from Anglo-Saxon and Germanic myths, Shakespeare, the Bible, Wagner, and sometimes a little Finnish mythology, but mixed those influences to speak against the industrial revolution and for a world ruled by a benign aristocracy. Could we retell our own myths and say something relevant to our time?

Folk fantasy is based on local mythology, both ancient and contemporary. In this case it meant everything from *Kalevala*, the Finnish national epic, to political novels, iconic historical events, modern arthouse movies, and modern rock songs. Anything which had in some way dealt with what's quintessential about Finland and being Finnish.

I imagine Polish or Turkish folk fantasy would use similar tools but apply them to local mythology, current events, national stereotypes and contemporary pop culture. The idea is not only to enforce the stereotypes, but also to explore and deconstruct them. Ideologically, folk fantasy is not so much a conservative, nationalistic project but a way to reclaim national archetypes from the conservatives and use them for something new.

Folk fantasy has one very clear perk compared to the old fantasy that permeates larps nowadays. It's new and unexplored territory. I've played in dozens if not hundreds fantasy larps, tabletop games, computer games, and read an equal number of novels and comic books. For me, elves are not exotic anymore and wizards are not magical. They have become boring clichés.

The sense of wonder we experienced in our first larps is gone. Folk fantasy can bring it back.

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

Täällä Kirjokannen alla was a folk fantasy larp we ran in the August of 2011. Its genre was folk fantasy. Stylistically it was a combination of the old-fashioned forest adventure larps (where almost everyone has a latex sword, and the forest is full of magical treasures and monsters) with the modern methods and practices of the Nordic art larp scene.

The larp was played in the nearly untouched forests of Sipoonkorpi, half an hour from central Helsinki. The location had high hills, a lake and different kinds of forest, some nearly impenetrable. The only buildings were a barn, a sauna and a little house, complemented by many medieval tents. There were no roads, no electricity and no running water. Birds, blueberries, flowers, deer flies and moss-covered rocks colored the surroundings.

The structure of the larp was straight out of rituals and mythic journeys. To transcend from the off-game parking lot to the in-game forest, most players would have to walk through a gate and enter a liminal space where they would slowly become their characters. Some groups sang their signature songs while walking in the liminal space. After that

they would walk through another gate, be completely in-character, and enter the forest in the land of Pohjola. Soon after they would be confronted by the warrior of Pohjola demanding to know why they approached the Holy Mountain. For most players, this was their first event in the game.

After entering the world and meeting the others, the core of the game would begin: the quests for the pieces of the World Pillar. As the tradition for such small adventures is nearly dead in Finland, ideas for quests were asked for from larp organizers all around Europe.

Each piece had an individual quest, most of which were offered for grabs to "the seven most just", "the seven most thirsty", "the seven most quiet", and so on. Thus most quests would be undertaken by different combinations of characters, propelling interesting interactions and clashes of culture.

During this period, the realization that the world would end anyway slowly dawned on the characters. But they still had hope in creating a new age for the world, and choosing whether to go there or stay in the old world and die.

This led to the hour-long ritual climax of the game, mirroring the ritual-like nature of the game itself. The ritual was also based on old Finnish pagan rituals, spiced up with human sacrifice and individual choices for each character. On the Holy Mountain the sun was setting over the closed gate. Most players found this the best part in the game, or in some cases, any game they'd been to.

Surprisingly, at the end of the ritual when the gate to the new world was opened, there was a final battle with the dead attacking the wicked Mistress of Pohjola.

Soon after entering the new world, or dying with the old one, the game would end. The players would then walk ten minutes from the Holy Mountain to the house, where a short debriefing was held.

WHAT IS FINNISH FANTASY?

Much of the world of the larp was based on the Finnish national epic *The Kalevala*, but in modernized form: what if thousands of years had passed since the war between the good land of Kalevala and the evil land of Pohjola, depicted in the book? The isolated, matriarchal Pohjola would still exist, but Kalevala would be one of the many provinces of the Empire of Kuovinmaa that was reminiscent of Russian Empire, Swedish Empire and the Catholic Church, all entities that have once exerted their influence over Finland. The culture of Kuovinmaa was based on the idea of Fennic cultures of the Baltic coast developing a literate culture without any outside influences from Germanic, Slavic, Christian or other cultures.

Another important aspect was *sisu*, relentlessly hard-headed perseverance in the face of impossible odds. Sisu is a quality many Finns associate with themselves, and that is dealt with in numerous films, songs, poems and novels. A

typical example of *sisu* is a farmer who keeps working the worst patch of land possible, but refuses to give up even when more viable options for sustenance are available. Alcoholism and depression go hand in hand with *sisu*. These attributes were most strongly reflected in the province of Jukola, which consisted only of drunks, suicidal people, wretched marriages, and sons hating their fathers. They were almost proud of having the worst fields and the nastiest god, but still somehow surviving. Many fantasy larps go for high fantasy, high adventure, high society, so these guys had to be as low as possible. So low they're high. Their patron was a dark god of incest and suicide, Black Kullervo.

Other groups reflected other aspects of Finnish mythology and contemporary culture. The matriarchal and proud people of Pohjola and the unemotional Maidens of Gold almost straight from *the Kalevala*. The revolutionaries of Sampola reflected the reds in the Finnish Civil War in 1918 and the communists in the 1970s with their magical utopia. The *staalos* were a reflection of the dead, people who were treated almost as a race of their own still a hundred years ago, and that perhaps still hold a strange influence over the Finnish mindset. For a little variety, we also had a non-Finnish culture, the people from the Land of Fire, based on Slavic and Siberian myths. Russians have traditionally been seen as "the other" in Finland, and this group served that role. To top it all off, we had two or three groups of outcasts and wanderers where renegade members of the other groups formed unlike alliances.

The story had to be Finnish. It couldn't be destroying a magical item to save the world or defeating the rise of an evil empire to save the world. In Finnish stories the heroes make the magic items and exchange them for wives. When a neighboring empire is afoot, the first thing they do is invade Finland.

Since the hatching of the world, the forbidding land of Pohjola has been guarding the World Pillar, which holds in place the Bright Dome of Heavens ("Kirjokansi"). The Land of Pohjola has nearly fallen into ruin, forgotten the old ways, and left the World Pillar unguarded. The World Pillar has collapsed, and the Bright Dome of Heavens may fall down at any moment ending the world. But one last hope remains! Warriors, truth-speakers, priests and artisans from the surrounding realms have been called to help. Through dangerous adventures and magnificent feats they have to find the missing pieces of the World Pillar, reclaim them through whatever acts of foolish heroism are required, rebuild the pillar, and save the world.

Hatred of lords, *sisu*, foreigners, misery, sex robots, revolution, misery, dead people, giant penises and ancient poems. That is what Finnish fantasy is made of.

THE FUTURE OF FOLK FANTASY

Folk Fantasy can happen in your country, too. You don't have to follow this recipe, but it could be an interesting starting point to reviving your local fantasy larp tradition.

If the mythical past of your people had developed without outside influences from neighboring countries, religions and peoples, how might it look today? Would old pagan gods diverge into a huge pantheon, or combine into a single god or goddess? Could ideas such as democracy, totalitarianism, anarchism, socialism, capitalism, environmentalism, equality, homosexuality, or postmodernism find some root in that world? What would be taboo in that society?

Add to that elements of pop culture, history, national stereotype, current events and politics, literature and songs that are relevant for you in understanding your own national identity, if you have one. What makes them important? Can you base a group or a fantasy race on one of them?

What small local things could have a bigger relevance in an alternate world? For example, in the world of *Kirjokansi*, all big temples and churches had a sauna where you had to wash yourself before entering the ritual space.

If some part of your culture is already widely used as a fantasy archetype, you might want to remove that. Scandinavian/Germanic Odin and Celtic/English Merlin are clearly the roots of Gandalf and thereafter most grey-bearded wizards. So incorporating them into a Celtic or Germanic folk fantasy setting is not interesting, unless you can find some interesting twist for them.

To make the world less simple, try to include a group or a fantasy race that's the opposite of what you think your national stereotype is. If all Finnish fantasy people are quiet, depressed alcoholics with lots of *sisu*, make one group that consists of loud, happy, sober, spineless people. And try to see if they, too, say something interesting about your people.

Obviously Folk Fantasy is not limited to only dealing with national themes. It's an angle you can use to explore the possibilities of fantasy larp. Similarly you could replace the word "people" with "political party", "queer" or "music genre". What would a communist fantasy larp be like? What are the major gods/goddesses in a transsexual fantasy world? What would happen in hip hop fantasy?

Folk Fantasy is not meant as a protectionist, nationalist project. It is a counterblow against the monoculture that is fed us by movies, books, restaurants, politics and television. When all fantasy is similar, it's not fantastic anymore.

We need to reclaim fantasy before it's too late. You can start in your own larps. Join the Folk Fantasy movement! We have nothing to lose but our chainmails. But we have many, many worlds to win.

Fantasy larpers of the world, reclaim!

TÄÄLLÄ KIRJOKANNEN ALLA

(Here Under the Bright Dome of Heaven)

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kirjokansi.sange.fi

LUDOGRAPHY

Täällä Kirjokannen alla (2011): Mike Pohjola et al, Helsinki.
Engl. "Here Under the Bright Dome of Heaven"

CATEGORY: NEW FRONTIERS

RELIVING SARMATIA

NATIONAL HERITAGE REVIVED

IN THE POLISH LARP SCENE

WORDS MICHAŁ MOCHOCKI

Roleplaying games can be a powerful tool for shaping national identity. Here, I take a broad look at games set in the Polish-Lithuanian (a.k.a. Sarmatian) Commonwealth (1569-1795), the most important historical period in Polish culture.

The Sarmatian period is the setting of the popular Polish roleplaying game *Dzikie Pola* and the larps it has inspired. In the early 2000s, the players of these games developed a collective pretend play resembling an alternate reality game, in which their everyday lives overlapped with the assumed identities of Sarmatian noblemen.

In many cases, this "sarmatization" has produced a lasting effect, permanently imprinting on the player's real-life identity. A similar way of constructing identity (being Polish = being an heir to the Polish cultural heritage = being a descendant of the Sarmatians) is also found among people who have no contact with roleplaying or historical re-enactment. However, in the roleplaying community games have been the deciding factor in the construction of such an identity.

WHAT IS SARMATIA?

The name "Sarmatians" was originally given by ancient cartographers to a people living in the lands of today's Eastern Balkans and Southern Ukraine. Centuries later, in the Early Modern period, it was adopted by the *szlachta* (nobility) of the Kingdom of Poland, which eventually united (1569) with Lithuania¹ to form the Commonwealth of Two Nations. Inspired by the widely-read 16th century chronicles, the Polish, Lithuanian and Ruthenian noblemen considered themselves the descendants of the ancient Sarmatians, who had conquered the lands of Slavic nations and turned the indigenous population into serfs. Hence, the unofficial name *Sarmatian* was used interchangeably with *szlachcic* (noble-

1 The Kingdom of Poland had been in a personal union (one king, two separate states) with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania since 1385, and in 1569 they finally merged to form one state.

man), and *Sarmatia* with *Rzeczpospolita* (Commonwealth/Republic), not unlike Gallia in France or Albion in England.

Consequently, for today's Poles the term is associated with the legacy of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569-1795), a.k.a. the Commonwealth of Nobles. Non-Poles can find out more on *szlachta*, *sarmatism* and *Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth* on English Wikipedia, and try to get hold of translations of Henryk Sienkiewicz's *The Trilogy* or its film adaptations.

...with civil liberties (for nobles), strong parliament, religious tolerance, and free election of kings as its foundation, the Sarmatian state was a peculiar phenomenon in the Early Modern world, arguably more similar to 18 – 19th -century USA than to any country of its time. The number (8–12% of the population) and unquestioned dominance of the nobles, leaving very little power in the hands of cities, has no close counterpart anywhere. Given its uniqueness, longevity and complexity as a social, political and cultural system, the Sarmatian Commonwealth can be viewed in terms of distinctively national character (with the nobility of Lithuania adopting the Polish ways). To quote Krzysztof Koehler², Sarmatia was "the basic, and for many years the only formula of Polish national identity." By comparison, all other periods in Polish history have imported major sociocultural trends and political systems from abroad: Christianity, feudalism and chivalry in the Middle Ages, rationalism and democratization in Enlightenment, scientific positivism and the myth of progress in the 19th century, various -isms (modernism, fascism, communism) in the 20th, and finally, contemporary eurosocialism and postmodernism. It was only in the Sarmatian period that the Poles had their own truly national culture: developed by Polish citizens themselves, not found outside the Polish-Lithuanian state, and universally dominant on its entire territory.³

It seems that the legacy of Sarmatia could (should?) have been the essence of national heritage for subsequent generations of Poles. It was not, mainly because of a "black PR" campaign launched against Sarmatianism by the proponents of Enlightenment in late 18th century, when the Commonwealth was indeed in a terrible political, social, intellectual and moral decline. Unfortunately, the rightful critique of the shameful state of affairs in the 18th century was unjustly projected 200 years back, onto the entire history of the Sarmatian Commonwealth.

In the aftermath of the Partitions that erased the country from the map, the invaders (Austria, Russia, Prussia) gladly embraced the "Enlightened" caricature of stupid, violent,

greedy and drunk Sarmatians, thus justifying the collective conquest: the Poles were seen as incapable of managing their own state, so it was the duty of neighboring countries to take over the reins. In the short interwar (1918-1939) period of independence regained after 123 years of Partitions, Poland dismissed the *szlachta* legacy and formally erased all legal distinction between nobles and non-nobles (the March 1921 Constitution), opting for a modern egalitarian democracy with a strong socialist angle. In the communist era (People's Republic of Poland, 1945-1989), aristocratic traditions could not be promoted either, with politically correct historical legacies found mainly in folk cultures of various regions.

And when the fall of the Soviet regime in 1989 finally broke decades-long isolation from the capitalist West, Poland was flooded with Western-style goods, trends, fashion and traditions. In search for a new post-communist identity, going back to the bygone eras was not an option compared to shiny and glamorous Americanization. It was not until now, twenty years later, that Sarmatianism seems to be rediscovered. More than that, it seems to be gradually moving from the cultural margins to mainstream; a phenomenon I dubbed *the Sarmatian Cultural Turn*.

MODERN POLITICAL CONTEXT

There are some references to Sarmatian heritage in present-day political thought, but they are a very recent phenomenon. In mainstream politics, the left-wingers are "Forget the past, look into the future" EU-enthusiasts, and the pseudo-right-wing traditionalists prefer to base patriotic sentiments on the history of World War II and the interwar (1918-39) period, mostly on our resistance against the Nazis and the Bolsheviks. In terms of cultural heritage, the most celebrated period is Romanticism, developed at the time of the Partitions by artists living either in exile or under foreign occupation. Their anti-Russian, free-minded, rebellious and patriotic message was well understood by Poles under the Nazi and Soviet regimes (1939-1989), and has been treated as the essence of national culture to this day. Weird as it is, in school literature classes the strongly *international* Romanticism seems to be more *national* than strictly home-grown Sarmatianism.

Besides, all Poles who went to school before 1989 were taught history in the communist paradigm, with noblemen depicted as greedy parasites exploiting the working class, and Sarmatianism presented in line with the "Enlightened" stereotype. The schools are definitely among the culprits to blame for today's "bad press" for Sarmatianism among older generations, and this partially explains the unwillingness of politicians to reach for it.

Only in the last couple of years did the Sarmatian legacy enter political debate, and still, this initiative comes mostly from NGOs or academic political scientists, rarely from

² Poet, film director, opinion writer and literary critic.

³ This paragraph comes from my so far unpublished paper *The Sarmatian Cultural Turn in 21st-century Poland*. Coming soon in *(Re)visions of History in Language and Fiction*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

politicians. There is no continuity either in politics or cultural identity; the Sarmatian Cultural Turn occurring after 2000 is a revival of traditions that have long been sidelined. First and foremost, Sarmatia is embraced by social activists and political opinion writers who try to build Polish republicanism, some of them independent, some associated with NGOs like Iagiellonian Club, Republican Foundation and Aurea Libertas Institute. In their writings, the political thought and values of the Sarmatian Commonwealth can still be a reference point, or even a model to follow, for present-day reforms of the state.

A parallel concept has been developed by academic historians and political scientists with regard to the European Union, highlighting the EU-like composition of the multicultural, multinational, multireligious, multilingual, and half-unitary half-federal Commonwealth. This was the main topic of "Unia lubelska – Unia Europejska" conference held in 2009 on the anniversary of the 1569 Polish-Lithuanian union (at the very same castle in Lublin!), its proceedings published with the same title in 2010.

As for active politicians, reaching for Sarmatian themes is a rare thing but is becoming relatively more frequent. Quite recently, Radek Sikorski, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, made an extensive reference to the Commonwealth's history in his (in)famous Berlin speech on 28th November 2011⁴. In Poland, several MPs occasionally put on Sarmatian nobleman's dress, some are practicing re-enactors, some support or even organize Sarmatian-themed events. There is an association called Society of the Descendants of the Great Sejm, founded in 2006, uniting present-day politicians who can trace their bloodlines to members of the glorious 1788-1792 parliament. Marek Minakowski, a leading Polish genealogist, says that politicians "stopped being ashamed" of their aristocratic roots. Also, the press becomes increasingly interested in the noble background of contemporary political and financial elites.

But the largest milestone in the political comeback of Sarmatia is to be found with president Kaczyński, the one who died in a plane crash in April 2010. A few days before the catastrophe, he chose the theme music of his upcoming re-election campaign: it was the theme song of *Colonel Wołodyjowski*, the film adaptation of the last book of Sienkiewicz's *The Trilogy*. Also, president Kaczyński officially supported and acted as the patron of the first re-enactment of the Battle of Klushino in 1610, a great victory of 3 000 Poles over 20 000 Muscovites plus 3 000 Swedish allies. It was the first case of direct presidential support for any Sarmatian event in Poland, and the first case of Sarmatia used as an asset in a campaign for presidency. These events are not

⁴ The text can be found (in English) here: www.msz.gov.pl/files/docs/komunikaty/20111128BERLIN/radoslaw_sikorski_poland_and_the_future_of_the_eu.pdf

likely to be repeated with the current president Komorowski, his administration having completely ignored the 400th anniversary of the Russian Homage (29.10.1611), when the defeated Russian czar knelt before the Polish king.

SARMATIA ENTERS THE ROLEPLAYING COMMUNITY

Released in October 1997, *Dzikie Pola (Wild Plains)* was the first Polish historical roleplaying game, and also the first time Sarmatian themes were employed by our game industry⁵. At that time we merely had three Polish-made fantasy games and a few translations of Anglo-Saxon classics (*WERP, AD&D, Middle-Earth, Cyberpunk 2020, Call of Cthulhu, Vampire: the Masquerade* and *Werewolf: the Apocalypse*), all of them based on fantasy, science-fiction or horror motifs. *Dzikie Pola* was not devoid of supernatural elements either: the game world contained both educated magic arts (astrology, alchemy, chiromancy, etc.) and traditional folklore herbalism, healing rituals and witchcraft, as well as ghosts, devils and other monsters. But all these were based on credible historical knowledge of 16-18th century popular folk beliefs, and of magical arts as they were practiced, debated and recorded in period sources. And more importantly, all player characters were supposed to be mundane (though noble-born) humans without any magic powers.

With all supernatural stuff hidden in the background and inaccessible to player characters, game masters had a choice: they could treat magic and monsters as really existing in the game world, or assume that all this is mere superstition, self-deception and occasional fraud. Even if they chose the first option (favored by the game handbook), *Dzikie Pola* still put strong emphasis on historical accuracy. Lead designer Jacek Komuda held a degree in history, and the authors insisted that all officially published game material must first be approved by them. So it was not designed as a fantasy game loosely inspired by history, but a historically correct game in which fantastic elements were scarce and strictly based on period beliefs.

Dzikie Pola had a slow start, with relatively little support from its publisher, who owned the only commercial roleplaying magazine *Magia i Miecz (Sword and Sorcery)* in Poland those days. The breakthrough came in late 1999, when Artur Machlowski and Andrzej Rusztowicz founded the *Swawolna Kompanija* fan page at www.dzikiepola.com (later licensed by the publisher as the official *Dzikie Pola* website) and I was in charge of the *Dzikie Pola* section in the newly established *Portal* magazine. *Portal* soon joined forces with *Swawolna Kompanija*, and our costumed appearance at Eurocon 2000 in Tricity marks the beginning of the Sarmatian era in the Polish fandom.

⁵ Unless we take into account some board wargames re-enacting historical battles on hex maps with cardboard tokens.

From 2000 on, Sarmatian themes had a strong presence at game conventions in the form of lectures, debates, contests, and of course tabletop and larp sessions, with *Dzikie Pola* players easily spotted thanks to colourful quasi-period clothing. In 2004, the first edition of the VETO! collectible card game was released, directly influenced by Dzikie Pola. 2005 brought the second edition of *Dzikie Pola*, this time co-authored by myself. In 2007 the second edition of VETO! hit the streets, becoming a huge commercial success. And the years 2009-2011 brought more Sarmatian stuff made in Poland: board games *Proch i stal* and *Folwark*, computer games *Szlak Sobieskiego* and *Hetman koronny*, and a miniature wargame called *Ogniem i mieczem*. Also, Polish editions of the board game *God's Playground* by Martin Wallace, plus the computer games *Mount&Blade: With Fire and Sword* and *Reign: Conflict of Nations* can be seen as reliving Sarmatian themes, if you look at them from the Polish perspective (and they were strongly advertised as such!). But I shall focus on roleplaying here, and primarily on larp.

LARPS, LARPING, AND QUASI-LARPING

The typical *Dzikie Pola* larp was combined with a theme party, or rather a huge Baroque feast making use of the fact that "off-game indulgences that work well in games are good food, alcohol and destruction in general", to quote Juhana Pettersson⁶. This is why most larps and/or theme parties were organized in pubs or restaurants, preferably with real or stylized historical decor, but sometimes in as blatantly non-diegetic places as the basement of the school that hosted the game convention.

Non-historical props were not a problem, as our live events (unlike tabletop *Dzikie Pola*) did not emphasise historical accuracy; in fact, we would always invite friends from beyond the neo-Sarmatian community, even if they knew little about the period. Besides, while genuine historical knowledge is rare among the Poles, everyone has seen film adaptations of *The Trilogy* by the Nobel-prize-winner novelist Henryk Sienkiewicz, broadcast on national TV each year. Focused on the military and romantic adventures of the 17th century Commonwealth's nobles, and set against a broad and well researched image of the social and political realities of the period, *The Trilogy* provides enough "genre-derived interaction codes"⁷ to easily perform the roles of Sarmatians in larps. We would wholeheartedly subscribe to Parsler's policy: "We emphasised to our players . . . that history didn't need to be accurate, as we didn't want players to compete over who was most knowledgeable of history"⁸. It was also perfectly plausible to adopt the role of a foreign nobleman – or a na-

tive one who followed foreign customs – borrowing interaction codes from cloak-and-dagger narratives like *The Three Musketeers*. Occasionally, we would have a real foreigner, like Hogshead Publishing's James Wallis, guest of honor at the Dracool 2001 convention in Gliwice.

The event was clearly broken down into two parts: first a full-fledged larp with pre-written characters, conflicts, story arcs and game mechanics (e.g. paper-rock-scissors to resolve fencing duels), then a regular theme party where everyone dropped their larp-assigned goals and identities but still posed as Sarmatian nobles. On one hand, it is very easy to distinguish between the two parts: larps always had a "non-porous magic circle"⁹ with a clearly announced beginning and end. As for story content, larps could be limited to household and social issues, or venture into the military, political, and legal (courtroom dramas!) aspects of the period.

On the other hand, all early larps included the feast as the main social event in their fiction, so we cannot say the theme party began *after* the larp; in fact it was the same feast/party enjoyed first through the lens of the larp and then without it. When the larp was over, we would still be wearing the same costumes¹⁰, feasting at the same table, and using the same "interaction codes [...] certainly informed by every 15th-19th century period drama the players had seen, and every historical novel they had read", to quote Eirik Fatland¹¹. Manners of speech, drinking customs (like toasting), period songs, or jokes stereotyping peasants, townsfolk and foreigners remained the same. So despite the obvious and well realized¹² distinction between the larp and post-larp party, there was also a great deal of continuity between the two.

The matter gets more complicated if we look at what happens later. The larp and the theme party are both over, but people walking back to the convention stick to the same Sarmatian interaction codes, addressing one another with historical honorifics and maintaining the illusion they are Sarmatians, but referring to their real-world identities. Are they larping "in contexts that are not larp" in the way described by J. Tuomas Harviainen in "The Larping that is not larp"? No, in Harviainen's view they are not, because larping requires that "a character, not just a social role, is played". Neither is it what he calls "re-enactment roleplay", as the entire larp/party was never supposed to be a re-enactment event, with all the consequences including no need for historical

⁹ As defined by Harviainen in "The Larping that is not larp", published in 2011 in *Think larp*.

¹⁰ With rare exceptions, when someone had larped as a low-class character (e.g. a stereotypical Jewish innkeeper) and now changed clothes to appear as a noble.

¹¹ Fatland, 2006.

¹² You could hear comments like "the shittiest larp but the best party ever" afterwards.

⁶ In the article "The Age of Indulgence", published in the book *Playground Worlds*.

⁷ See Fatland, 2006.

⁸ See Parsler, 2008.

accuracy in costumes and props¹³. Besides, the people are no longer re-enacting the period but merging the Sarmatian pretence with their real lives.

What kind of activity is it, then? This may be explained as regular post-larp bleed, as the emotional states and thought processes initiated in the game need some time to wear off. But what if it becomes a habit that is carried on from one convention to another, even if there is no Sarmatian larp there? What if the habit lives on for months and "bleeds" not only into emails you send to other *Dzikie Pola* players, but also into the way you speak or toast while hanging around with friends who have nothing to do with the game? Lasting much longer than the lingering post-larp effects known as bleed, this is some other kind of pretend play. A kind of pretend play it certainly is: "pretending to be someone who thinks and feels in certain ways and pretending to be part of certain relationships to the physical and social pretend reality", as defined by Rognli in "We Are the Great Pretenders: Larp is Adult Pretend Play"¹⁴. And it is by all means a pervasive one, in the sense that it did "expand the traditional magic circle of gameplay in terms of space, time and social relations"¹⁵, combining larps, tabletop sessions, internet communication, socializing in- and outside the fandom, food habits, library research, rethinking your national history and politics etc. Just like in *Prosopopeia*, "the everyday life of a player was taken as it was, changing the ordinary life into game by adding the ghost", with Sarmatian identity replacing the ghost in our case. Now when I am trying to classify this phenomenon, I start to think that it all began as an alternate reality game, a year before the first well-known ARG (*The Beast*) came to exist.

...HEY, DID I ACCIDENTALLY INVENT ARG?

Opening a *Dzikie Pola* section in the *Portal* magazine in 2000, I was in desperate need for new writers. Roleplaying magazines paid poorly, or nothing at all, so I had to find a non-financial incentive for volunteers. This is why I came up with the idea of the Gliwice¹⁶ Confederation, a tongue-in-cheek imitation of grassroots political movements in the Sarmatian Commonwealth. Historically, confederations were temporary non-governmental organizations formed by citizens (noblemen) to tackle serious threats to the state or

13 A few larppers who were also involved in serious historical re-enactment brought their costumes and weapons, but they were perfectly aware of the non-re-enacting nature of larps and had no problem with co-larppers dressed in "zhupans" that looked more like sleeping gowns than the real thing.

14 Rognli, 2008.

15 Montola & Jonsson, 2006.

16 Gliwice is the home city of Portal Publishing. Confederations usually took their names from the town they were registered in.

society when the official authorities were failing. Depending on the situation at hand, confederations were royalist, e.g. founded to help the king against foreign invaders, or sworn to stop the king from infringing upon civil liberties or prerogatives of parliament, or founded to ensure public security when the king was dead and his successor not yet elected.

Mimicking the interregnum confederations, my call-to-arms issued in 2000 could be summarized as follows: "The poor Commonwealth has been without King much too long, taken over by commoners and traitors. Now is the time to restore the former Sarmatian glory, bringing back the elected King, Sejm (parliament), and local structures. All nobles skilled in sabre and pen should join the confederation and help save the Fatherland from misery and oblivion."

Essentially, the goal was to build a network of dedicated *Dzikie Pola* fans who would submit game-related texts and actively participate in our online- and conventions-based activities. In our pretend rhetoric, very patriotic and idealistic in the Sarmatian style, they (we) were genuine descendants of the Commonwealth's nobles, and our aim was to recreate the old socio-political system and national culture destroyed by wars and revolutions. As part of this "reactivation", people who wrote game materials, or organized local larps, or in any significant way contributed to the *Dzikie Pola* community were rewarded with titles/ranks reflecting the historical hierarchy of local offices and honors. Generating a significant boost in the size and productivity of our community, the Gliwice Confederation project was launched in April 2000 and reached its climax in February 2001 with a pretend royal election held at Krakon convention, where Jacek Komuda (the main author of *Dzikie Pola*) was appointed the new King of the Commonwealth. Having reached its desired goal at this point, the Confederation was officially disbanded, but the community it helped build lived on, still upholding the Sarmatian pretend play with "king", "state officials", "local administration", and "service to the homeland". When I said it was very much like an ARG, I considered these things:

1. It was based on the idea of "performing belief", as described by Jane McGonigal¹⁷. We pretended to believe that we are all true descendants of Sarmatian nobles and that our efforts in the recreation of old structures of power could make a difference in mainstream culture and politics.

2. It was pervasive, as it merged with everyday life both in terms of identity (as a Confederate you thought of yourself as heir to Sarmatian legacy) and actions (stylized language and worldview in online communication, various *Dzikie Pola* -oriented tasks like writing, organizing, game mastering, attempts at private re-enactment of cuisine, language, code of honor etc.).

3. It contacted the participants via multiple channels: website, email, telephone, printed magazine.

17 See McGonigal, 2003.

4. It made use of live events: larps, theme parties, convention meetings, and the royal election as the big final event.

5. It was orchestrated by a small team (5) of designers, and strongly reliant on contributions from the online and real-life community, ready to incorporate local events and human input into the project.

6. It was organized with financial, logistic and media support from commercial and non-commercial institutions (Portal Publishing, the *Swawolna Kompanija* website, and later the *Valkiria Network* web portal), the main aim being to promote the product (*Dzikie Pola*) and build positive image of the company (Portal Publishing).

7. Also, it inspired people to get involved in real-world volunteer work for a public cause. In this case, our cause was historical education, values education, and the preservation of national heritage.

8. It followed the TINAG principle. Although openly centered around a roleplaying game, the project's main idea was to get *really* involved in support for *Dzikie Pola* in order to *really* contribute to the promotion of Polish national heritage.

9. It activated the collective intelligence in a wiki-like effort to build a growing database of game materials (including real historical knowledge of the period, so it was also educational).

When I was debating this with my wife, who is a game researcher as well, she pointed to some reasons why the Gliwice Confederation was *not* like an ARG:

1. It did not have specific tasks given to players at various stages. (I wonder if we can find its equivalent in the ongoing task of active participation in and contribution to the *Dzikie Pola* community.)

2. It did not contain a pre-designed mystery that would be revealed by players through extensive research and data analysis. (I wonder if the extensive research of Sarmatian history and culture, necessary to become a quality contributor, could count as the equivalent.)

ARG or not?

SARMATIAN ROLEPLAYING WITHOUT THE CONFEDERATION

The neo-/pseudo-Sarmatian roleplaying community did not dissolve with the formal closure of the Confederation in February 2001. We had about 30 dedicated writers and designers, about 50 hardcore fandom activists, and several hundred people who participated in our events irregularly, so the ARG-like fun went on as if nothing changed. It was not until 2004, with the *Portal* magazine closing down in November 2003, that *Dzikie Pola* entered the phase of gradual decline. A sudden revival brought about by the release of the second edition in 2005 did not last long, as the publisher failed to support the game in any way, leaving it in the hands of the community organized around www.dzikiepola.com. As the main orchestrators (me included) were

getting increasingly occupied with professional careers, and there were no competent and dedicated leaders to replace us, *Dzikie Pola* began to drift toward oblivion. Today, *Dzikie Pola* can still be found at some game conventions in tabletop or larp form, but they are mostly organized by some of the few "old guard" guys who occasionally feel like going back to good old times. Talks have been running about the need for a third edition, but nothing is certain yet.

However, the Sarmatian fandom is still growing, it is just no longer focused on *Dzikie Pola* but on *VETO!* collectible card game. Interestingly, the *VETO!* community has adopted the pretend perspective "we are modern Sarmatians", encourages the use of period-style costumes at tournaments, holds Baroque theme parties after the major events, and – quite recently in 2011 – has come up with *VETO!* larps at game conventions. Such a larp uses *VETO!* cards to represent characters, but beside that it follows the old *Dzikie Pola* patterns. Which comes as no surprise, as a large portion of today's *VETO!* fandom are former *Dzikie Pola* players, including *VETO!* lead designers and publishers. Tomasz Wolski, the *VETO!* larp designer, has been involved in the creation of *Dzikie Pola* RPG all the way back since its first edition in 1997. Now he runs *VETO!*-based larps and urban games, and one of his newest ideas is the use of random *VETO!* cards as a quick roleplaying game scenario generator. So the story comes full circle: initially inspired by a roleplaying game, *VETO!* the collectible card game now provides an incentive for more roleplaying. Given all that, I prefer to think of the Sarmatian games fandom not as two separate communities but as one that has been branching and evolving.

Another branch of larping that stems from the *Dzikie Pola* movement but is not directly related to it are re-enactment larps, organized by some of *Dzikie Pola* players who got into serious historical recreations. Initially, historical roleplaying was looked down upon by re-enactors, and there was little (but still some!) overlap between the two communities. Nowadays, when a significant number of *Dzikie Pola* players have reached high status and authority as true re-enactors, these reservations have largely diminished, and we can come across larps created by and for Sarmatian Commonwealth re-enactors, for example at the annual event *Pola Chwały (Fields of Glory)* in Niepołomice.

Finally, there are educational Sarmatian larps, organized by teachers in history and literature, or designed by off-school educators – including historical re-enactors – as half historical, half civic education. I am currently conducting my own research project on the educational potential of larps in a school setting, and my natural choice of testing ground was history with larps set in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Its pilot study carried out last year, the main research starts now and will be discussed in a forthcoming paper.

PERMANENT SARMATIZATION: TRANSFORMATIVE POWER

Sarah Lynne Bowman writes in her book *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*: "the process of creating, enacting, and evolving a role-playing character appears to leave a lasting impression in the minds and hearts of players". Also, the Nordic larp scene, as I see it through the Knutepunkt books, has generally accepted the belief that roleplaying can change human personality in a deeper and more lasting sense than the short-term psychosomatic bleed after the game. Thomas Duus Henriksen claims that roleplaying's "facilitated experience might be able to set its mark, and produce a lasting development for the participant"¹⁸, which Mike Pohjola states metaphorically: "once we have immersed in the characters, we cannot get rid of them. Instead, we always have a Temporary Autonomous Identity with us, and that will set us free". Nathan Hook's is the most radical statement: "larp can be living myth with the same potential for personal transformation as mystery plays or religious rites". This assumption opens the possibility of intentional larp design, capitalizing on the fact (theory?) that "[p]layers could . . . learn new things or re-evaluate their values and manners through their experiences in larps"¹⁹. In line with this, Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros describe "[t]he way to use roleplay as a tool for personal growth"²⁰, Jofrid Regitzesdatter talks about "transformative potential within larps in regards to creating gender equality that reaches outside of larps"; and Eirik Fatland mentions that "players had reportedly walked off previous politically themed larps [...] with radically revised worldviews and political opinions"²¹.

Can any of this explain the permanent "sarmatization" of *Dzikie Pola* players? Not all of them, of course. Some got married and lost interest in the theme, some were never really into Sarmatianism and preferred the roles of foreign nobles, and some were just casual players without identity issues. But a significant number have embraced the Sarmatian cultural heritage as their own, including myself. I (we) do think that:

- Sarmatia is the core essence of Polish cultural heritage.
- The Sarmatian Commonwealth was the best socio-political system of its time.
- Elements of its political thought and values would be good for today's society.
- The Sarmatian legacy should be used for the international promotion of Poland.

Some of us have taken up Sarmatian re-enacting. Others have not, but incorporated elements of Sarmatian heritage into everyday life: traditional cuisine, home-brewed alcohol,

¹⁸ See Henriksen, 2003

¹⁹ See Lampo, 2011.

²⁰ See Montola & Stenros, 2011.

²¹ See Fatland, 2009.

historical or Sarmatian-themed music, games, linguistic patterns (proverbs, quotes, strictly Sarmatian honorifics), frequent references to period sources and Sarmatian literary fiction, and the persistent and pervasive belief that being a history-conscious Pole equals being a Sarmatian.

Is it the effect of years-long brainwashing through *Dzikie Pola*, like in Erwin Goffman's theory: "Once a person has performed the same roles many times, he internalizes them to form a personality, which is something rather stable at the core of the actor's self"²²?

I know Sarmatian re-enactors who have never played *Dzikie Pola* but still fit the above description. Were they brainwashed by intense and repeated performance of their re-enactment roles, then? I also know people who have not been involved in either roleplaying or re-enactment but do feel the same way about Sarmatianism, for example Jacek Kowalski, academic art historian, poet, singer and musician, author of several books and music albums on Sarmatian history and culture. He "became a Sarmatian" through the study of history and art history combined with a somewhat conservative family background. As mocked by Ryszard Legutko, philosopher, opinion writer and politician (currently a member of parliament), the trend in 21st century Poles to find ancestors in Sarmatian Commonwealth is parallel to 16th century nobles reaching for the name of the ancient Sarmatians²³. But the trend really exists, based either on sound historical research or on the romantic-patriotic myth absorbed from *The Trilogy* or other films and books. So maybe roleplaying or re-enactment has nothing to do with it? Maybe the "sarmatization factor" is simply the immersion in patriotic fiction (or in the deep knowledge of history) that makes you think of national identity – and you just need to discover that Sarmatian heritage is central to Polish culture? It seems so. But still, for me and for the *Dzikie Pola* players I know, the game was instrumental in this discovery. Neither history, nor *The Trilogy* had this eye-opening quality. We did come to love the history and historical fiction afterwards, but the immersive experience of roleplaying was essential: it put us in the shoes of 17th-century Sarmatians and encouraged us to think, speak and act like them. The liminal quality of this experience can best be understood through an anonymous comment on the *Dzikie Pola* roleplaying game in my online survey on Sarmatian games in 2010: "Thanks to it I turned my communist friend into a patriot. And I realized who I really am."

²² See Lukka, 2011.

²³ In his article *Sarmaci wczoraj i dziś* in the conservative *Polonia Christiana* magazine. Its March-April 2011 issue focused specifically on the significance of Sarmatian heritage.

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Troopers Hirvikallio (left), whose schizophrenia medication had run out three days before, and Wuori, the eco-activist.



CATEGORY: GOOD GAME BAD GAME

VALOKAARI

THE MAGNIFICENT FAILURE

WORDS J. TUOMAS HARVIAINEN, PHOTOS HENRI BLOCK



Soldiers from both main units, agreeing on patrol duties. Kaila's Executioners took most of those, of course, not trusting "the amateurs".

Valokaari (eng. Arclight) was a Finnish war larp, set in a near future where Finland had been holding back a Russian invasion for six years, and had already lost half of its land mass to the attackers. Three groups of soldiers would chance upon each other, at a small family's remote house. The authors – myself and Henri Block – wanted the game to be one of high tension, with everyone getting on each others' nerves. We failed completely. The players, however, loved the larp - because they made it something very different from what we intended.

In retrospect, it is easy to see where things went wrong: the background material said that some of the groups had been together right from the start of the war. So the players, meeting before the game to raise team spirit, had decided that their characters had to be veteran soldiers, used to the quirks and difficulties of the front. This meant that when playing, they aimed for maximal realism. As noted by Johanna Koljonen: "[*Valokaari*] was understood to be (and played as) a psychologically intense low-key portrayal of fear."¹

The characters who we expected to get on each others' nerves never did – because most of them spent all their time either patrolling, eating or sleeping. Some few were more social, but they had to keep an eye on both the civilian family as well as some Russian prisoners of war – all of whom were ordered to either stay silent or be shot. The sense of realism was palpable. The sense of interaction, in the manner in which we expected it, was not.

¹ Koljonen, 2003.

DESIGN STRUCTURE

The basic template was simple enough, being a war variant of the classic high-tension environment larp. Put together sufficiently dissonant people, under pressure, and they will start provoking reactions from each other. The dynamics were calculated to be a balance of annoyances: each negative trait would irritate at least two, preferably many more characters. Likewise, the chain of command was written so that the mediating, keep-things-functional kind of officer was of the highest rank, and had the largest group. He was almost directly based on Tom Hanks' character in *Saving Private Ryan*. Following him was the almost legendary leader of the "bad guy" unit, Staff Sergeant Kaila. Most of his soldiers (known as "Kaila's Executioners" amongst Finnish troops) were the kind of sociopaths who are wonderful in a war, but a horrible risk to everyone during peace. The rest were nationalistic idealists. The third group consisted of one political officer and some support soldiers, looked down on by all the others, yet in charge of some vital, secret information.

To mix things up, an hour and a half into the game we also introduced a lone officer, Haapoja (named after a famous Finnish murderer), who was second in rank amongst

all present. He wasn't actually an officer, but rather an extremely dangerous escaped convict. For the nasty characters, he (while still believed to be genuine) represented an opportunity for more efficient leadership. For the nicer guys, he was an enigma. Plot-wise, he surprisingly ended up being a supporting factor – when he tried killing the captain, the officers fought him together, thus forming a bond.

Game mechanics were very simple. Each character had three stats: Speed, Firearms and Melee. The six-tier Speed value determined initiative, if the target was not completely surprised. "Fastest" would act earlier than "Faster", and so forth, up until "Slowest" at the end. Being hurt would drop the initiative value. In order to support fluid play (and the guns supposedly being lasers, so that shots caused no sound or light), we went for a Rock-Paper-Scissors system. The combat attributes were listed by order of effect. For example, the Melee of the wounded Russian corporal, Vasili (who pretended to be Finnish, being fluent in the language) was "none-none-light", meaning that he'd cause a light wound, should he win the Rock-Paper-Scissors. In contrast, the blatantly fascist Finnish political officer and kick-boxer, lieutenant Haukka, had a rating of "light-heavy-dead". The players were expected to play out the damage, in a suitably fitting manner, and to add up levels accordingly, so that even a bunch of light wounds would eventually be lethal. The system worked very well indeed because many of the players had only played boffer fantasy or *Mind's Eye Theater Vampire* games before.

QUIRKS IN DESIGN AND PLAY

To distract players, we had a longer sign-up list than necessary. On it were also ten other players, all of whom were not able to attend, but agreed to pretend that they were. The presence of the names was intended to make the players expect new events, which were never to actually manifest. As the players were not interested in playing with meta-information, however, no one actually looked at the sheet that closely.

Some of the in-game discussions we expected never happened. For example, the blatantly racist character's player never realized that another character (stereotypically named, and played as one, in terms of dialect) was a gypsy. And he was mostly kept away from the POWs. The player admitted that in addition to that one slip, despite years of larp experience, he'd found himself unable to play a loud-mouthed racist. In general, however, discussions and debates were missed because everyone was just too busy.

One slight slip up was pointed out by the mother of the civilian family. We ran the game at a rented summer cottage, and I had been fixated on just securing the location. We had forgotten to stockpile appropriate food in the kitchen, and thus the mother had nothing beyond coffee to offer the sol-

diers. So on the fly, just before the game started, we ruled that another band of soldiers had passed the area a few days before, and taken most of the family's supplies with them. That detail worked its way into the narrative quite well, in the end, and provided nice discourse on war's consequences on the civilian population.

Other than that, the game site itself worked really well – an 18th century house of a ship pilot, with two attached smaller buildings next to it. The sole problem with them was that the off-game area also had to be put there, as it was impossible to place it outside the yard. The limit of the yard did not cause problems for the players. On the contrary, I had to force strongly immersed players to return from their patrol which was already deep inside the nearby paddock, a place owned by someone else and not a part of the game location. Tellingly, those players actually complained about the game-break damaging their immersion. They had happily crossed the game-area line (marked by nothing less than real barbed wire!) described during the initial briefing, as that seemed appropriate at the time.

One of the central elements of the game was set inside the house and mostly ignored by players immersing outside on patrol. According to the game fiction, the country had only one functioning radio channel, the commercial "Radio Free Finland". No one could explain why it worked.² Accordingly, the staff refused to have the government commandeer the studio, but had agreed to host political programs and military transmissions. The radio was actually recorded on 10 hours (the official running time of the larp) of tape, with the purpose of building up tension. It all started off with an ironic song about capitulation, and became more and more surreal as time went by. To make sure that the radio would stay on, we included both relevant programs and military information codes in between the songs.

The programs, too, started soft and then degenerated in style towards the game's end. Early on was a Christian evening prayer, where the speaker suggested the listeners imagine their own funeral and eventual decay. Later came the strongly advertised interview of the regional commander, exquisitely played by a person who could not attend the game. During the show, the interviewer started asking personal questions about the general's adultery, eventually driving him to commit suicide live on the air. (His lover was present amongst the character hearing the transmission.) After that the channel hastily switched to a Satanist evening prayer with another guest player. He was an actual Church of Satan priest, who we'd asked to record a speech that he himself would find over the top. Both parts were big successes. In addition to the interview, the transmission contained personal messages to a couple of other characters as well.

² *The answer, as this was a Post-Bjorneborgan larp, was of course that the radio station was run by demons.*

The narrative build-up of the game was, in the end, mostly dependent on the radio, given that the player interaction was only sporadic, and mostly limited to small chats between the civilians and whichever soldiers were inside the house. The military codes were the main source of tension. They were very simple. A place's name, followed by four digits. Known to just the radio soldier, the captain, and one trooper who kept it a secret, the second of the digits meant either victory, loss, bombardment or no-change. So bad news kept creeping in, and the sense of the enemy approaching was quite strong.

Finally, we got to the end twist: what only two characters (a former chauffeur to a general, and a Russian general amongst the POWs, pretending to be just a common soldier) knew was that there was a weapons research lab in Parkano, and they had an honest-to-god doomsday device, capable of wiping out all life on earth. So when the messages said that the Russians were approaching Parkano, they got really tense. At 8.5 hours into the supposedly 10 hour game, just after a radio hour of Japanese noise music turned, to everyone's relief, into a call-in show with a sleazy host, came a code saying Parkano had been bombed. A moment after the host announced that military command had requested a song, which would now be played: the Finnish national anthem. In the darkening evening, one by one all the people stood up inside the now-packed house, joining in the song while the transmission started breaking up. Then we killed all the electricity from the building, and a bit later announced the game was over, expecting everyone to be really disappointed. Surprisingly, they weren't, and the debriefing and post-game feedback discussions were some of the strangest I remember. Organizers were claiming failure, and players claiming success.

UNDERSTANDING WHAT WENT WRONG – AND RIGHT

We, the organizers, failed to pass along one simple suggestion: we did not explain the genre. Ever since then, I have made sure to include it and mold player expectations accordingly. Nor did we manage to attend the pre-game team meetings, which were organized by the players themselves, and which ended up setting the central mood of the larp. To get a taste of how we felt, envision you are running an *Ally McBeal* larp and then realize your players have chosen to play it like *Law & Order*. The subject matter of "law" remains, but emphasis is very different. The contrast in *Valokaari* was not actually that strong, but it felt so at the time. I believe that by including even one single line of text in the brief specifying the genre, things would have been different. "Would they have been better?"; however, is another question. I think not.

By accident, *Valokaari* became something far superior to what we had envisioned. Despite some slight problems, as mentioned above, the character material, setting, player interactions, and most of all, a feel of realism, made the larp much greater than a sum of its parts. Had the game run its intended course, it would have been just another piece rightfully overshadowed by the success of *Ground Zero* – a game we did not know about yet when when we started writing *Valokaari*. By failing, it became something more: an immersionist game par excellence, providing realism, strong emotions and a visceral sense of being there.

VALOKAARI

Written and organized by Henri Block
& J. Tuomas Harviainen

Loviisa, Finland, 26th August, 2000

Attendance fee: 5 FIM, ~1,80€ (initially 10 FIM, but we lowered it when we saw the actual costs. Most players gave us the whole 10 anyway, being so pleased with the game.)

Total budget: 25€

Number of players: 30

Duration: 8,5h

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Office day at Kiirastuli oy. From the museum installation.

CATEGORY: DOCUMENTATION

KIIRASTULI OY

A SATIRE ABOUT THE WELFARE SOCIETY,
RECESSION AND ART

WORDS & PHOTOS VILI NISSINEN



The poet William Blake with his motivational hat.

During my second year of studying visual art in art school, we had a course about communal art. During that course I realized how close communal art and larp are. In her doctoral thesis, Lea Kantonen defines communal art as art where the artist and the participants are working together and the borders between them are starting to blur. An artwork is something that rises from this cooperation, but the cooperation itself can be defined as art too. (Lea Kantonen: 2005, 49).

To me, that sounded like larp. One of the most important things in larp is its communal and social aspect. Working together, creating something new during, before and after the game.

Later, earning money and building frustration in a dreary office, I was inspired by the lyrics of the German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht. In the late 1920s, Brecht wrote one of his most notable works, *The Threepenny Opera*. In it, he revealed the secret of how our world works:

What keeps mankind alive?

The fact that millions are daily tortured,
stifled, punished, silenced and oppressed
Mankind can keep alive thanks to its brilliance
In keeping its humanity repressed
And for once you must try not to shirk the facts
Mankind is kept alive by bestial acts
(Brecht, 1928)

The game is about an infernal office environment where employees are exploited and humiliated in many different ways. Its name is *Kiirastuli OY (Purgatory Ltd)*. *Kiirastuli OY* and its sequel *Kiirastuli OY: Alennustila (Purgatory LTD: Abasement)*. They were a part of my thesis project, a communal artwork in which larp was a method.

The game was based on a simple idea: a bunch of dead real-life artists are living in Purgatory. Purgatory is an infernal company where every artist had to work in a depressing office. Artists could earn promotions and get a private office from Paradise, or get fired and end up in Hell. During the game the artists had to do different art-related tasks and in the end they voted on who was good enough to earn her place in Paradise. I wanted to satirize our welfare society and its urge to make us into animals fighting and competing for better jobs and other life opportunities.

For me, this project was more than just making a larp. I wanted to create something new with something I love very much. I wanted to create a larp in which communal and social creativity, work and experience would be the main focus. I wanted to share "the ultimate power" and responsibility of the game master with the participants and create a more communal experience. I also wanted to do a social art project and try larp as a method of making art, as well as create an artistically acceptable piece. Because the project was my thesis work, my school paid all the costs. We also got some food sponsors, so participants didn't have to pay anything.

COME AS YOU ARE

In the beginning, my biggest mission was to find participants for my project. Every participant had to create his own character based on a real life artist and make a video for the game where they revealed something new about their characters, for example a scene from the character's life. During the game, participants were asked to do art as their characters. I think that was quite a lot to ask from a larper, but I still found almost twenty people willing to jump into the project. It would have been great to get some new faces, but I ended up with only people I knew personally.

I was positively surprised by how excited my participants were to choose an artist and how interesting the artists they picked were: the actresses Jane Avril and Marlene Dietrich, poet William Blake, painters Mary Cassatt and Vincent van Gogh, musicians Kurt Cobain, Edith Piaf and Janis Joplin, writers HP Lovecraft and Oscar Wilde and the film director Leni Riefenstahl. A couple of the participants wanted to create new characters based on real artists. The Harlequin writer Ally Blake and the young misunderstood video artist Matthew Islander were created like this. One participant created a business consultant as a character and the organizer team played the evil management of *Kiirastuli OY*, the magicians Aleister Crowley and Anton LaVey.

I decided that my role as an artist was not to tell the participants what they can or cannot do. When one of my participants wanted a school shooter as a character, we had a long discussion about it. We discussed what the reasons behind school massacres are and how art can be a part of it. The participant decided that his character wanted to change the world and perpetrate a school massacre as his art work.

Other participants brought new aspects to the game through their characters as well, so the game wasn't just a depiction of a world ruled by evil corporations, but a humane and witty description of people. It also commented on the art world and the artist's place in it.

Making videos for the game was actually much easier than I expected. A third of my participants made their own videos and others needed my help only for the technical stuff. During the filming sessions I travelled across Finland visiting my participants and making videos with them. I think these meetings built trust in the project and me as an artist. Sometimes we spent whole weekends making videos and discussing the project. In some videos, the sets were very authentic. We had great shooting locations, like the stage of an old Victorian theater. Some of the videos worked very well and my critics said that they are like little pieces of art in themselves. I also created a couple of psychedelic videos for the game to foreshadow future events.

THE GAME

I decided to film the whole weekend of the game, because I had to prove to my professors and classmates that I had done my thesis piece. So when we finally arrived at the game location, we started to build a film set. There was one security camera and a sound recording system in every room. The school shooter character had a video camera and he filmed almost all the time during the game. There were four separate in-game spaces: paradise, a workspace, a conference room and the cafeteria. We tried to make all spaces as depressing as possible, working together with all the participants. We also made our food together, because I wanted a nice communal atmosphere at the location.

During the game, the characters had a normal working day with coffee and cigarette breaks. They were invited to a conference room to talk with the vice president of the company who presented the videos to them. They saw each other's videos and some of them saw video foreshadowing the arriving of the school shooter. The meaning of the videos was to modify the characters' opinions of each other and to affect the voting at the end of the game, where they voted on who should go to paradise.

For the characters, one of the game's most delicious moments was the visit of the business consultant. For an hour, all the characters sat around a table discussing how they could be more productive. They had to make stupid

paper hats that were supposed to motivate them. They had pink and purple cardboard, feathers and pony stickers. Then they had to present their hats and explain how they motivated them. After the hat session, the characters had to work with their inner child using finger puppets.

After the consultant came the art tasks. On the wall were large paper sheets and every character had to fill one sheet. Some of them drew, some wrote. The next task was to debate in small groups the meaning of art.

During the coffee breaks the characters get coffee and pastries, because the company motto was: "Morale From Pastry!".

The characters voted on who gets to paradise, and you got extra points from art tasks. But the final decision was with the management, and the management used dice. The randomly chosen winner was the school shooter, just arrived in Purgatory.

After the game, we made pizza together and debriefed outside at a hot water tub in the snowy winter night.

ROUND 2

During the diploma work exhibition I organized a sequel for the game. The venue was the museum Kunsthalle TR1. Normal people and the museum audience had a chance to take part in the game. All the game materials were ready from the first run and the idea was just to make a replay.

Unfortunately, the museum botched the marketing of the game, failing to inform people about its existence in any way. Because of this, we had only three participants. This was especially bad because the museum was excited about the game.

We ended up running the game with three players. They had a lot of coffee and pastries to consume. Museum visitors were encouraged to jump in, but this aspect didn't work as they preferred to watch as spectators.

The spring the museum version was played, recession and layoffs were very much in the news, so I made them a part of the game. This is why its name was *Alennustila*, or *Abasement* in English. The company had only three workers left, after all the productive workers were moved to other departments and all the drug addicts had been demoted to Hell.

The players did a workday at the office. They drew their personal visions about the company's problems with productiveness and created hats that would make them better workers. They motivated themselves by playing hide and seek in the museum. It was fun to use the museum space in a new way. Large installations and rooms for video works offered wonderful hiding places.

In the end, the department was closed and two workers were fired, while the last was transferred to another department. The company vice president got a huge bonus.

In both runs of the game, the players had the chance to

mutiny, but they didn't take it, settling to their fate. Maybe that's what happens in real life too.

THE EXHIBITION

For the diploma work exhibition, I built a large office installation from materials made for the game and during the game. From the filmed material, I edited videos for the exhibition and from the recorded material I edited a soundscape for my office space. A couple of days before the opening of the exhibition there was a school shooting threat in my school. Lucky it was just a sick joke, but it made me wonder if they might remove my installation from the exhibition, because of the school shooting aspect. They didn't.

There was a lot of material: text, drawings, video, photos, etc. Some visitors went through all the stuff, others just glanced at it. Things that people found offensive were lesbian kissing and roleplaying. Others liked the fact that the office environment reflected their own lives and the problems they faced.

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Kiirastuli OY: Alennustila (2011): Vili Nissinen, Tampere. Eng. "Purgatody Ltd. Abasement"

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KIIRASTULI OY

Credits: Vili Nissinen (main organiser), Mikael Kinanen (supportive organiser), Riikka Enne, Annu Ijäs, Samael Innanen, Jaso Jaakkola, Riku Kalapuro, Aliisa Ketonen, Jade Lehtinen, Mikko Ryytty, Jarno Sarhamaa, Carl Syrén and Hanna Vartiainen (co-writers, videos and other material).

Date: March 18-20, 2011 and April 30, 2011

Location: Old Farmhouse in Orivesi and Kunsthalle TR1 in Tampere, Finland.

Length: First game 6 hours and second 4 hours.

Players: In first game 11 and two game masters. In second three players and one game master.

Budget: 2900€.

Participation fee: Free.

CATEGORY: NEW FRONTIERS

PLAYING 'THUS SPOKE ZARATHUSTRA'

THE PLAYER AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN
ANIMAL AND OVERMAN

WORDS ARI-PEKKA LAPPI

Friedrich Nietzsche's masterpiece Thus Spoke Zarathustra is not only philosophy and poetry, it's also a game. Unfortunately, it hasn't been quite successful as a game. Otherwise, the known tradition of pervasive reality play would have been over a century longer.

Something went terribly wrong with the reception of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: even the most intelligent and open-minded readers failed to see Nietzsche's story of an over-aged child-prophet, Zarathustra, as a map toward the mind-set of a *playful form of being*. No. The army of scholars, those slaves of reasoning, took the text as a fine art painting, framed it and placed it next to the holy icons of Christ on their mighty wall of wisdom. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* was generally seen *only* as a philosophical analysis of morality, society, truth, religion and life in general. It has become a part of the very same canon of higher values it aggressively attacked.

I'm not arguing that Nietzsche intended to write a game. The concept of game was too narrow then and it is too narrow still. I'm saying that Nietzsche wrote a game without being fully aware of writing a game. If Nietzsche had said that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* was a game, he would have devalued it as philosophy and political commentary. Get rid of phrase "this is *only* a game" and replace it with "this is *also* a game". After that, seeing one's life also as a game – as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* seems to suggest – is not a big step at all.

Games like *Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum*, *Fat Man Down* and *Lovers' Match Making Agency* have slowly started to reveal the potential of play Nietzsche unintentionally saw over a century ago.

THE SYNOPSIS OF THE GAME

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* the player attempts to become an *overman* and tries to avoid collapse into the *last man*. In order to become an overman, the player must modify his morals and values so that they reflect his *highest hope*.

The actual play consists of short encounters. An encounter can be an argument between the player and his adversaries, teaching his disciples (yes, in this game you may have disciples) or just an internal monologue. Each encounter consists of one or more moves. A move means just a decision that is affected by the game in some way. E.g. you may choose to avoid doing something only because doing it would take you closer to becoming the last man.

Each encounter includes a *lens*, a lightweight fictive layer that changes the way the player sees the situation and acts in it. The change might be conscious as well as subconscious. There are three different kinds of lenses in this game.

First, the player may take one of the game's functional roles: *camel*, *lion* or *child*. By using a role he structuralizes the process of creating his own good and evil.

Second, the player may project an adversary over a situation. By doing so, he amplifies the situation: "This choice is important, but because my arch-enemy is a part of it, it is even more important".

Third, the player may add an additional motive to any decision, namely the attempts to become an overman and to avoiding a collapse into the last man. By this he may add significance to potentially insignificant decisions and amplify the important ones.

Even if the main objective of the game is to become an overman, becoming an overman is not *why* the player plays this game. The player can always overcome his self and approach the overman, no matter how close he is already. Therefore, he cannot ever achieve the ultimate goal. The true motive for play is to make the player's own life more worthy and interesting.

In order to play this game you need to understand some key concepts: camel, lion, child, highest hope, spirit of gravity, last man and *eternal recurrence*. I hope that the spiral-like structure of this text makes it easy to apprehend these concepts and start playing. Once I get to the concept of eternal recurrence you will find one more reason to prefer the spiral as a structure and aesthetic ideal of the text.

ON THE ORIGINAL TEXT

Nietzsche never explicitly explains the rules of the game. He just gives four extensive game examples. I try to extrapolate the rules and techniques behind the examples. I'm unable to discuss here all the moves and techniques Nietzsche suggests. Instead, I have chosen to introduce those that I find most important.

Each of Nietzsche's game examples lasts many years. In

my opinion, you cannot achieve an enjoyable *and* deep play experience only in a few weeks: the game is designed to last years and a few weeks is simply far too short a time. I suggest that for the first game few months is a good time period. If you don't get the idea of the game within few months, just let it be and forget it. If it works for you, don't stop playing until death forces you to.

ON THE THREE METAMORPHOSES

In each encounter the spirit of the player may go through three metamorphoses. In the best case, the spirit goes through all of them, but in many cases only one metamorphosis occurs. First, the spirit becomes a camel, then the camel a lion and finally the lion a child.

During the first metamorphosis – becoming a camel – the spirit learns the heaviness of life. He learns to suffer and carry the burden of duties and higher values. The camel is able and willing to say weakly 'yes' to everything.

The spirit becomes a lion because it "wants to hunt down its freedom and be master of its own desert". While the camel says "I can" or "I must", the lion says "I will". The lion is needed to create "freedom for oneself and also a sacred No to duty". Not every camel ever becomes a lion. Actually, most camels die as camels.

The lion is needed to take on new values, but it is not able to create them. That is what the third metamorphosis is for; the metamorphosis from a lion to a child. Nietzsche writes: "The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a wheel rolling out of itself, a first movement, a sacred yes-saying.

Yes, for the game of creation my brothers a yes-saying is required. The spirit wants *its* will, the one lost to the world now wins *its own* world."

Now, visualize: How does a primitive animal lurking in the dark become a camel when the sun rises? How does the camel transform into the lion at noon? And how does the lion finally become a child when the sun has almost set?

ON THE OVERMAN

Zarathustra – the player in Nietzsche's play examples – promises to teach us the overman. The overman is a person who plays his life and his world in order to make them more meaningful and aesthetic.

Zarathustra keeps on repeating that "Mankind is a rope fastened between animal and overman [...] What is great about human beings is that they are a bridge not a purpose: what is lovable about human beings is that they are a *crossing over* and a *going under*."

"A human is a bridge or rope between animal and overman" means simply that "our whole life is just a playground, not the goal of the game". The goal of the game is to become

a better human *eternally*. Obviously, a mortal man cannot ever fully achieve this goal. Yet, our life can be never-ending growth as a human being. That's the true goal – the overman is just a point of reference.

ON THE HIGHEST HOPE

The very first thing you need to do once you start playing this game is to choose your highest hope. If you have one, choose a better one. If you can't, don't play. In this game, you are supposed to create a *new* moral standard, and the choice is a part of the gameplay. If you start with an old highest hope, how can you expect to have a *new* morality and *new* idea of what is good?

Another way to say the same thing: what is your definition for 'my life as a hero'? No matter how your game unfolds, don't lose the hero inside yourself. This is something Nietzsche expresses stunningly well and clearly:

"You aspire to the free heights, your soul thirsts for the stars. But your wicked instincts also thirst for freedom.

Your wild dogs want to get free; they bark with joy in their cellar when your spirit contrives to liberate all prisons.

To me [Zarathustra] you are still a prisoner who plots his freedom. Alas, the soul of such prisoners grows clever, but also deceptive and rotten.

[...D]o not throw away your love and hope! [...] The noble person [=the player of this game] wants to create new things and new virtue. The good person wants the old things, and for old things to be preserved.

Oh, I knew noble people who lost their highest hope. [...] Then they lived churlishly in brief pleasures, scarcely casting their goals beyond the day. [...] Once they thought of becoming heroes: now they are libertines. To them the hero is grief and ghastliness. [...] I beseech you: do not throw away the hero in your soul. Hold holy your highest hope."

Yes, you are supposed to abandon the moral of the camel: the willingness to carry all the duties, obligations and restrictions that make your life burdensome and hard. Of course you need to have the morality of the camel in the beginning. You cannot get rid of something you don't have. You are not supposed to replace it by any set of values – or by nothing, but by a morality, sense of the just and a *taste of the values* that represent better your highest hope.

ZARATHUSTRA'S HIGHEST HOPE

For example, in the first part Zarathustra tells the rising sun his highest hope as follows:

"For ten years you have come up here to my cave [... I, my eagle and my snake] awaited you every morning, took your overflow from you and blessed you for it. Behold! I am weary of my wisdom[...] I want to bestow and distribute until the wise among human beings have once again enjoyed their

folly, and the poor once again their wealth.”

In the second part he returns to defend his teachings from the icy laugh of his enemies. In the third part, the hope of Zarathustra is spiritual growth: the idea that “from the deepest the highest must come to its height”. And finally, in the fourth part Zarathustra tries to save the higher man – the respected nihilists of the old values – from themselves.

ON THE SPIRIT OF GRAVITY

After you have chosen your highest hope choose the enemy or the challenge of play: the one to whom the camel says weakly ‘yes’ and against whom the lion poses its sacred No.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche gives many examples of adversaries and I won’t introduce them all here. The most significant ones are the spirit of gravity and the last man. The first one is a mostly external threat and the second one is a mostly internal one.

Because of the treacherous spirit of gravity, “[a]most from the cradle, grave words and values are imparted to us; ‘good’ and ‘evil’ this dowry calls itself. For its sake we are forgiven for being alive”. Because of this spirit, “we faithfully lug what is imparted to us on hard shoulder and over rough mountains! And if we sweat, then we are told: ‘Yes, life is a heavy burden!’”

The spirit of gravity has two components: firstly, the higher values devalue a person’s own earthly life. The world beyond will make this filthy human life less worthy and the value of chastity denigrates primitive lust. Second, the duties and obligations that follow from the higher values make life heavy and burdensome. In Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality*, the ‘Spirit of Gravity’ is replaced by resentment, bad consciousness and the ascetic ideal.

ON THE NON-MAGIC CIRCLE

The spirit of gravity seems to be a distorted mirror image of Johan Huizinga’s *magic circle*. The idea behind the magic circle is that the rules of the game (or conception of a game) form a social, temporal and spatial boundary that differentiates play and non-play.

The spirit of gravity represents normative, social, temporal and spatial frames of gloomy everyday life. It specifies social roles like man, woman and married couple. It also sets spatial constraints like workplace, school, bar and home, as well as temporal boundaries like free time versus work time. Each of these frames has its own rules that dictate our life.

Any of these frames can be a load that makes us sweat and mourn ‘life is just a burden.’ These frames also make our lives more meaningful and clearer. For some of my friends, the role of a married couple seems to be the core framework of their social life. For me, a certain work frame and the epic role of the philosopher are currently meaningful.

The spirit of gravity is, nevertheless, a poisonous gift. It *may* make me shine every now and then but it certainly makes me ill. Thus, I need to struggle so that my shine is brighter than the void of my sickness. For instance, the role of a married couple seemingly makes people accept behavior they would not accept otherwise. The frame of work has a tendency to make me a workaholic.

The spirit of gravity is not a thing; it is an attitude and a perspective related to something. Work as such doesn’t make anyone workaholic. The culprit is the frame the spirit of gravity places on one’s life in the name of ‘work’. The spirit of gravity is not work but *work as a burden and a sickness*. Neither is the spirit of gravity marriage but *marriage as a burden and sickness*. And so forth.

For Huizinga, games primarily specify a topography of consent in which the player can safely and ethically apply the rules. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, a game seems to be the topography of freedom and creativity that is *opposed to* the non-playful everyday life but not *separated from* it. The game facilitates conflict between playful and non-playful parts of everyday life. From this perspective, the magic circle seems to be a fallacy – and an entertaining piece of the absurdity of the bourgeois spirit.

ON THE LAST MAN

While the camel is the weak ‘yes’ for the spirit of gravity, the last man is weak ‘yes’ for nothing. The last man is temptation for nothing but small pleasures. For the last man, everything big and significant seems to be too laborious and burdensome. Thus he chooses not to want these things at all:

“A bit of poison once in a while; that makes for pleasant dreams. And much poison at the end, for a pleasant death. [...] One no longer becomes poor and rich: they are both too burdensome. [...] No shepherd and one herd! Each wants the same, each is the same, and whoever feels differently goes voluntarily into the insane asylum.”

The last man is at the same time a caricature of the bourgeois spirit and a cynical and nihilistic type of human being. He is a person whose life is heavy and fettered – at its best. Most of the time, it is nothing more than meaningless. The last man has no true ideals, and he thinks: “the world is fundamentally ill and sick, therefore it is definitely not a place for a joyful life”.

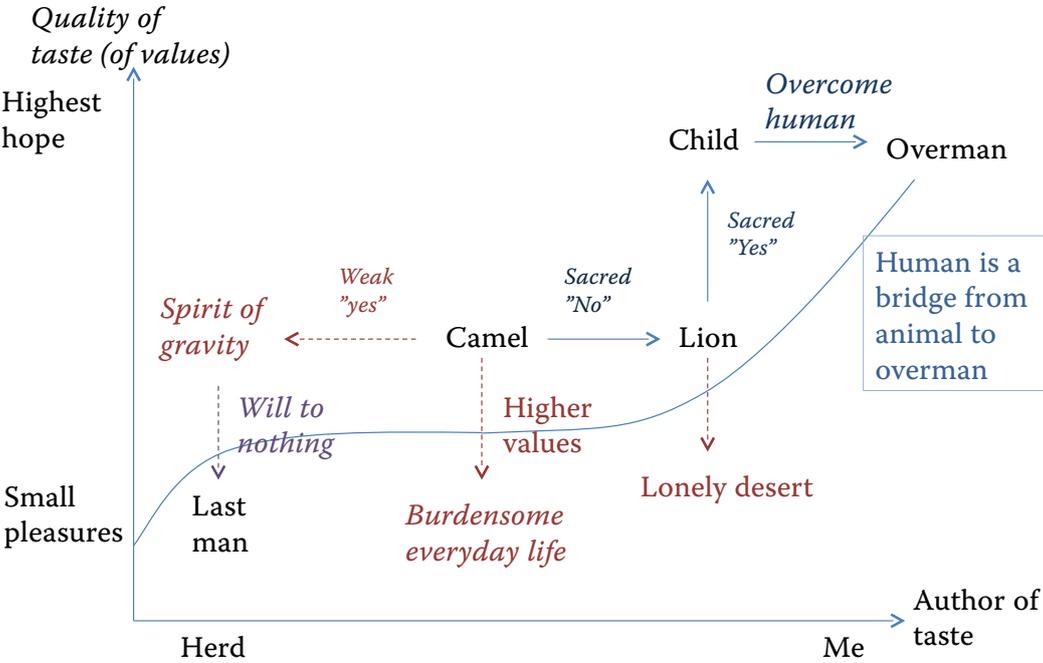
The last man doesn’t want to carry the burden a camel lugs willingly. Unfortunately, he is also unable to say ‘No’. He just wants to perish silently – a suicide would be too noisy.

ON THE TASTE OF VALUE

In my opinion, one of the most fascinating ideas in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is the idea of values as a certain kind of *taste*. You should have the taste of an *eagle* rather than a

snake. And your taste of values can always be nobler and higher. You just need to direct yourself toward your highest hope instead of the smallest pleasures of the last man.

The following diagram sums up the core framework of the game:



The camel is an ordinary person, who wants good and avoids evil. Unfortunately his conception of good and evil is not his own, but bestowed by the spirit of gravity.

A weak 'yes' to the spirit of gravity means blind obedience and affirmation of the non-magic circle of everyday life. Because the spirit of gravity has loaded the camel with higher values, its life is weary and burdensome. For Nietzsche, higher values are transcendental, non-earthly things like truth, God, justice, good and evil. However, your higher values can be something smaller like work, marriage, gender, nature, money, and so forth.

The lion's sacred No represents an attack against the spirit of gravity. The sacred Yes of a child is an alternative. A lion without an alternative finds himself in a lonely desert. The mighty 'No' without an alternative turns slowly into weak 'yes' to nothing. In the end, the lonely desert is an affirmation of nihilism and cynicism.

A human is a bridge from animal to overman. He's not a purpose: there is no intrinsic value in being human but there is in becoming a better human. We are better than animals only if we keep on becoming better as humans.

ON THE ETERNAL RECURRENCE

There is one more concept left until you are ready to start playing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: the eternal recurrence*. The game doesn't flow without it.

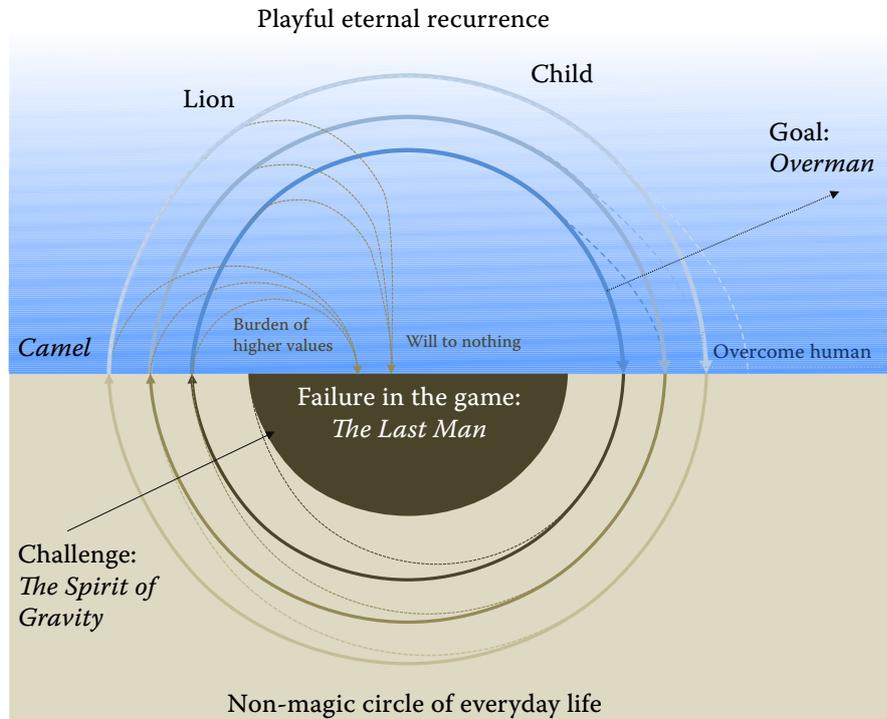
"[Zarathustra teaches] that all things recur eternally and ourselves along with them, and that we have already been here times eternal and all things along us. [...]"

I will return, with this sun, this earth, with this eagle, with this snake – *not* to a new life or a better life or a similar life:

I will return to this same and selfsame life, in what is greatest as well as in what is smallest, to once again teach the eternal recurrence of all things."

The player is going to become a camel over and over again, then a lion and finally a child. And then he *crosses over and goes under*, in order to become a camel again under the same sun and on the same earth. Perhaps he has overcome the human, but that is just temporary and never final.

The following diagram illustrates the flow of the game:



An encounter in the game always begins from the moment where the player realizes the weariness of everyday life. This can happen anytime and anywhere. Becoming a camel is seizing the automation of everydayness. By taking the role of the camel, the player is suddenly able to alienate the weariness of everyday life from himself. Something in the world around stands revealed as a poisonous gift, the spirit of gravity. If the player does nothing against this arch-enemy, it will eventually annihilate the player's joy of life.

The player always has an option to just accept the weary burden and return to the everyday life. He need not always become a lion after he has become a camel. After all, "a bit of poison once in a while; that makes for pleasant dreams". But by accepting the poison of the spirit of gravity, he is a bit closer to the last man. However, this was just one move – just one weak 'yes'. And again, even this kind of failure can be significant and *even enjoyable*, because it gives face to the

spirit of gravity: if you need to accept certain obligations and duties anyway, why would you *not* dramatize them a bit?

Alternatively, the player may choose to become a lion, and bawl out his sacred 'No'. This is the most dangerous moment of the game, because if the player fails to take the next step and become a child, he falls down to the rocky ground of cynicism and nihilism. That being the case, he may lose the hero inside him. After that failure he is trapped into the role of the last man. Becoming a nihilist instead of a child is never a choice but a plain failure.

If the player succeeds in entering the role of the child and creates an alternative, there is one more decision left: "Should I keep the newly found values or return to the old ones?" The player needs to reflect if the change makes his *taste of values* better or not. The only thing that sheds light over this decision is the highest hope somewhere on the horizon. If his taste of values evolves towards the highest hope,

he has overcome the human.

After this decision the player returns to the automation of everyday life, until the play recurs and suddenly the player is a camel once again.

EXAMPLE

Becoming a camel could follow from this observation:

"Once people *believed* in soothsayers and astrologers, and *therefore* they believed: 'Everything is fate: you should because you must!'

Then later people mistrusted all soothsayers and astrologers, and *therefore* they believed: 'Everything is freedom: you can, because you want to!'

The sacred 'No' of the lion could be against the fatalism as well as the obsession for individual's freedom. I want to stay far away from both of these idiotic ideas.

The sacred 'Yes' of child could be following conclusion:

"Yes, my brothers, so far we have merely deluded ourselves, but not known about the stars and the future, and *therefore* we have merely deluded ourselves, but not known about good and evil."

In this case the conclusion is a platonic aporia: it is better to admit that you don't know than to be deluded. Overcoming the human is a realization of this, and changing one's own ideals accordingly.

The spirit of gravity could be the liberal ideal that "Everything is freedom: you can because you want to?" This is a burden, because this kind of argument devalues freedom: it makes freedom just a stubborn fool.

LAST WORDS

I hope that this text did help the reader to understand how *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a game, so that you can start playing it. In the best case, the reader will realize that 'good' and 'evil' are not granted or otherwise fact-like as modern ethics often claim, nor are they truths from gods. They are *signifiers*, and they should be used to play a better, worthier and more memorable life.

For me *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is an attempt to create Religion 3.0. Religion 1.0 is an institution of myths and gods. It creates hope and gives a meaning to life but with the cost of weary fatalism and lack of control over the cosmos. Religion 2.0 is the sphere of technology and science. It has created control over cosmos and annihilated religious fatalism but at the cost of fundamentally free will and the intrinsic significance of the human being.

Religion 3.0 tries to have the controls gained by technology and science without losing the hope and meaning of life provided by Religion 1.0. I'm inspired by the idea that religion 3.0 could be a *game*. Perhaps my hazy and incomplete vision of Religion 3.0 inspires you. If not, don't get stuck in it but find your own inspiration to play this game.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This text can be seen as an operation in the *Anastus*-projekt ("Theft-project") facilitated by Pekko Koskinen for Reality Research Center. *Anastus* studies stealing as a potential form of art.

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CATEGORY: NEW FRONTIERS

THE LABYRINTH OF POSSIBILITIES

A REALITY GAME FOR FRIENDS AND FAMILY!

WORDS GABRIEL WIDING, TRANSLATED FROM SWEDISH BY THOM KIRALY

Play and storytelling have disappeared from our lives. Adventure has been demoted to being played out on computer screens and pages in books. Reality gaming offers a way to play the part of the adventurer or the explorer in order to rediscover reality and oneself. By coordinating a small reality game for your friends, you can create a story which will present them with enticing perspectives on everyday life.

Getting started can sometimes be a challenge, which is why we've assembled a model aimed at helping game coordinators come up with short stories for their friends. More often than not, the players will outnumber the coordinators, but this is not always the case. This article was written to give some pointers on how 1-3 coordinators could organize a reality game for 3-12 players.

WHO IS THE COORDINATOR?

The coordinator is the manipulator, the conspirator, the puppet master, the guide. As the coordinator, your job is to create the conditions for an entertaining and exciting game. The coordinator could be likened to the director of a stage play, the game master in a roleplaying game and the organizer of a larp. The task is creating a framework wherein the players can step forward and act on their own.

Coordinator role: The Flâneur. The flâneur aimlessly wanders through the city. Simply take walks in town, preferably at different times of day, without a destination in mind. Follow every impulse, answer every question. Could that door be opened? Where does that ladder go? Readily visit areas you've never been before. What stations along the subway or bus lines have you never visited? Surprise yourself by walking for twenty minutes in a particular direction, e.g. northwest, and see where you end up, but don't be afraid to make stops along the way. With your eyes peeled, you'll discover interesting places that could fit a scene in the story which is about to take form.

Coordinator role: The Spy. The spy operates by informing herself, searching through archives and files to find revealing information on her surroundings. Using the right map, an exciting yard or hill or roof may appear. Satellite images from the internet and maps in libraries can be of great use. But there are also archives available to the public (in Sweden, thankfully, all documents traveling through or produced at a governmental institution are public documents. This means one has the right to request and collect countless maps as well as the blueprints of any house).

ENTRY POINTS

It is the task of the coordinator to invite people to play. There are two strategies for this. The first might look like this:

- 1 - Invite your friends and family to play a reality game.
- 2 - Allow people to sign up for the game.
- 3 - Explain the game's rules (if any) and agreements.
- 4 - Start(ing) the game.

The other way of getting people into the game is staging an event, role or setting interesting enough for people to start investigating it on their own accord, without knowing it is a game. Games bleeding into reality without anyone noticing it are usually called seamless. The seam which has been used to join game and reality is an invisible one.

A game started using the sign-up method is easier to organize than its secret counterparts. Openness lends the game an air of security and participation. Secrets tend to breed caution and suspicion. Altering reality for someone not in on it is both hard and resource-intensive. Should you choose to use the obvious alternative, you can ask the players to simply "forget" that they're playing a game once it has started. Trust them to indulge in playing the game.

The first scene of the game is important in setting a mood and creating a shared sense of commitment between the players. For example:

- Someone has put a note in the school locker.
- Someone has left a paper on the xerox machine at work.
- The player signs up for a class.
- The player becomes a member of an organization.
- A secret is revealed.

Perhaps a game is best initialized through human interaction. A crackly telephone call or a dodgy character seeking some kind of contact.

WHO IS THE PLAYER?

Who are we really and why? Who do we want to be and who could we be? What happens when you put on the wrong clothes, speak in the wrong way, go to the wrong place? Different roles create different possibilities for action. The player is the adventurer, the friend, the explorer.

Your job, as the coordinator, is involving the player in an exciting story. You can use any means necessary to accomplish this, but the player must have a reason to play the game, otherwise things will move forward very slowly.

Reality gaming has been compared to roleplaying in the streets. To some extent, this is an accurate comparison, but in a reality game, player and role can be viewed as one and the same. A role is a way of thinking or a social position the player inhabits in order to be able to act in a certain way that benefits the story and the life of the player. The player may have to be prepared to take on new roles in order to progress through the game's story. Some parts of an identity are harder to alter than others. Gender, class and ethnic background are some of the most challenging parts to transcend, while occupation, interests and lifestyle are generally easier. Gender, class and ethnicity are deeply rooted in our bodies and social codes, hence the challenge. But everything is probably possible, neither bodies or social expressions are static and a lot revolves around symbols: a cross in a necklace, a bomber jacket, a hoodie, a suit.

NARRATIVES SUITABLE FOR REALITY GAMES

The stories of the reality game may very well follow the form of the game. Let the story show the players just how weak the walls of reality are, how we can break down all notions of what is and is not possible in order to find a fantastical

world on the other side. This insight or experience can be conveyed in many ways.

Fight the power. Construct a story revolving around the teachers requiring the students to spy on them, find information, and undermine their judicial and elevated position. Or why not make it a game of paranoia: someone is out to get the players! They must escape this unknown force, information must be exchanged, but the enemy must not get a hold of them or the info.

Myths. Create a myth for the players to investigate. Stage a local ghost story or myth or make up one on your own! Many people are ready to believe in fairy tales and beasts, but preferably in a modern form. Pictures of UFOs are sometimes accompanied by the words "I want to believe". Use that desire in your games!

Within literature and film studies, the concept of suspension of disbelief, describing how a spectator refrains from distrust, is often used to describe the same phenomenon. Films and books require the spectator to harbor a willingness to believe in the fiction. The reality gamer can possess the same willingness to believe, especially when instructed to do so.

Destructiveness. Avoid stories using self-destruction, violence and death as their basic elements, since our stories tend to turn into reality.

CREATING A GAME

Various environments, scenes and moods, which can be used to create a reality game, are presented below. Read and ponder what spaces there are in your area and what ways you could use them in within a story. Think of events and encounters which would be exciting to experience in these spaces. From there, it's only a matter of making sure it all actually takes place.

We recommend starting small. Short, tasteful scenes, simple events turning into magic due to the fact that the players have never experienced them before. An unexpected encounter in an elevator, the newly conquered sensation of climbing under a bridge, the smell of spray-paint after having drawn a magical symbol on a rarely visited side street. Go through events from your past that you found exciting or transformative and try to use them for inspiration.

Coordinating is hard. If you manage to tie a story together using three working scenes as a first experiment, you should be pleased. Granted, there are games which have carried on for years, myths and stories which never seem to come to an end. The experiences and memories gained by the players will never be lost.

Some combinations of scenes and locations or players and locations may at first glance seem impossible. Give them a try! The unexpected often produce interesting results. How could a ritual inside a mall or an interview carried out in a tree house be made to come to life?

AGREEMENTS

By creating various agreements and rules for the reality game, the chance to give shape to otherwise impossible stories is also created. This can also be used as a way of creating a sense of security for the player. One common agreement in reality games is that everyone pretends that what happens in the game is "for real" and that they, to some extent, pretend that what is happening "for real" matters in the game.

In killer games such as *Killer* or *Deathgame*, "killing" players in workplaces and schools is usually forbidden. In the mid 90's, weapon replicas were used in killer games. Following a number of incidents, the agreement was reached that it would be better if a gun was represented by a commonplace item like a banana, much like suggested in the original rules circulating as faded copies. Such agreements became important so coworkers and fellow students would not have to witness staged murders.

Rules and agreements can be formulated before play or emerge as part of the story.

THE CITY AS STAGE

Stories and fairy tales can be found in our dreams, in poems scribbled on hidden slips of paper. In whispers around the campfire in the summer night. Now, we must dare to bring these stories into the streets, let them come to life in the seething warrens of people and unexpected encounters. The city could be a labyrinth of possibilities, but it has grown into a wretched, repetitive pattern where everything seems unpredictable.

Free/open spaces. The spaces we call free lack clear agreements on what one may or may not do. Thus, the players are giving a larger space of action. Defining an event which fits the framework of the story is easy, because pretty much anything could happen.

Abandoned buildings. There's almost always at least one available nearby. Getting inside could present somewhat of a challenge, but once you're in, the possibilities are vast. Sometimes, electricity is available which means audio equipment can be used. Works great for discoveries, encounters, surrealism, creation. Watch out for alarms and holes in floors. Look for a way onto the roof and also for alternative ways to enter the building.

The Underworld. In most cities, there are plenty of underground tunnel systems and spaces: shelters as well as tunnels used for telecommunications, storm water, gas, district heating, etc. If you have any kind of opportunity, be sure to bring you players down into the underworld, it's an experience they'll never forget. Make sure they bring at least two flashlights with them. Suitable for discovery, ritual, exploration, gatherings.

Park. An excellent place for playing. During the day, it's green and soft and open, in the nighttime it is dark and easy to hide in. The park is dynamic, it can be both safe and frightening. In the fall, it turns yellow and red and poetic. Suitable for virtually any kind of scene or situation.

Square. The very symbol of "public space". This was, once upon a time, the space for public dialogue on political issues. In the square, attracting attention is easy. Everyone can see what everyone else is doing, which of course has its pros and cons. The square suits, among others, the action, gathering or surrealism.

The tree house. Tree houses easily get your imagination going. Playing on childhood emotions is easy. In a well-hidden tree house one can observe without being seen. There's also the more advanced "tree house" at camp sites, where one can organize a sleepover.

Roofs. Believe it or not, but every house has a roof. You don't often go there, but there they are. From these roofs, one can get a good view of the city, it could be appropriate to get such a view at the start of a game in order to get the lay of the land. Or, on the other hand, the game could end at such a spot to give the player the opportunity to look back at the journey she has made.

Seized spaces. These spaces have a clearly defined agreement on what is and is not allowed. This makes playing in them more difficult, and all the more exciting. These spaces create a drama as soon as the players are forced to break with any of the functions the space was initially intended to serve.

Mall. A challenge for every reality gamer is doing anything at all inside a shopping mall. These privatized mega halls offer a very limited space of action. According to the agreement, we are allowed to do two things: looking and shopping. Thus, any scene is a challenge of this space as it does not suit any scenes. Nonetheless, it deserves to be bombarded with play. Watch out for security guards.

School. What could potentially be an amazing platform for creativity, play and collaboration is today a reformatory institution where juveniles are kept to prevent them from coming up with any mischief. It's a sort of prison up until adulthood. School is a natural starting point for r-gaming.

Buses and trains. Means of transport are temporarily closed rooms that often have a low-key social character. It can be difficult to plan scenes during the journey, as players can easily end up going away from the scene.

Work. It easily becomes misleading to say anything in general about workplaces because they look so different. Workplaces are often difficult to infiltrate with play. The left behind rules of *Fight Club* is a great example of how limited resources can cause a good deal of confusion. As a teacher or youth recreation leader, you have tremendous opportunities. With more asocial jobs, such as subway ticket vendor

or programmer, this turns into more of a challenge. Reality games at work can produce results of great importance to your daily life. You can get a close-knit team to poke fun at the boss, allowing the game to highlight the constant conflict going on between employers and employees.

Cafe. Suitable to use in scenes which are based on speech and dialogue. If you ask nicely, the staff can play music that fits well into the scene.

Temporary spaces. In these spaces there are different agreements depending on when one finds oneself in them. They are social spaces rather than geographical ones. They arise for a short period and at that location, specific agreements on what to do and what not to do to are in effect. Examples include clubs, festivals, camps, flea markets, group therapy sessions. We recommend using temporary spaces as part of the story of the game because they, in their basic form, already involve the type of state of emergency that reality gaming often leads to and is nourished by.

Closed spaces. Closed spaces are, in many ways, similar to larp or temporary autonomous zones. With "closed space", we mean that all elements, all suggestions, which are experienced at this location are part of the game and its story. These spaces are not reached by consensus reality, except in the form of memories and habits. What is exciting about closed spaces is that the experience of playing the game can really be stepped up, what's sad is that reality is rarely changed as a result of what goes on inside these closed spaces.

ORGANIZATIONS

Every story needs a few parties who can return in different contexts and boost the drama in one way or another. One way of including such parties is to simply create new ones. These may include businesses, cults, government agencies or schools. Remember that an organization based abroad is harder to check the credibility of than one based in the country you're playing in. Of course, you only need to create the image of the organization, rather than the whole organization itself. The impression given by business cards, websites, logotypes and name tags go a long way.

SCENES AND EVENTS

The job of the coordinator is to put the player into interesting situations. The players should never have to force themselves to understand how exciting, dangerous, dangerous or amazing a scene is. They should feel it. A free fall and you're frightened, a hand in yours and you feel closeness, someone kneeling and you feel revered, ropes around your wrists and you feel captured.

Meeting. Put your players in contact with one or more people who could help them or who themselves need help with something. Make sure that the role or person they

meet is exciting and piques their interests. Perhaps the person wants to share knowledge or information? Perhaps the role needs help with something or the players need help from the role?

Interview. Perhaps your players must be subjected to an interview to join a secret organization? Or maybe a confused journalist calls to find out more about what the players are up to? The interview forces the players to express themselves about what they've experienced in the game. It can sometimes be important for the coordinator to gain some insight into what the players have been through, without having to interrupt the flow of the game.

Discovery. Searching which leads to something often revolves around a location, an object which is of great importance to the story, or a setting the players are able to experience and end up in thanks to the game. What magical places are there in your area? Having your players watch the sun rise over an old quarry or sneak into a hotel swimming pool during peak season can serve as titillating experiences and strong story elements. Discovery must be driven by the curiosity of the players. The coordinator's task then becomes to bring out that curiosity and present incentives to make the players follow their impulses.

Actions. An important part of r-gaming is the players showing courage: that they dare act and take place on the stage of reality. This can be done in many different ways. Take inspiration from political actions and street theater.

Interventions. The situationist movement used the term "intervention" to describe operations in the urban environment which turned a situation on its head. For some examples of such mischief, do an online search for "flash mobs".

Investigation. Scanning one's way through unfamiliar surroundings in the search for an unknown object or an important person. Take inspiration from detective novels.

Creation. Have your players engage in some form of creative process related to the story. Perhaps they must write a letter, build a radio transmitter or repaint a wall? Creativity brings the group together and lends confidence. It's important that whatever is created is also used in an upcoming scene or is directly relevant to the scene already taking place. Other, more commonplace examples could include cooking food or making a fire.

Journeys. A long walk or a bicycle ride, rowing across a lake to an island or getting in the car are all forms of transcendence. Journeys often mark a shift in a story. They can also function as build-up for a decisive scene.

Rituals. Rituals can be used for many different purposes; as a way of gathering power, as a way of transcending one's everyday identity, as a way of directing one's energy or attention toward something specific, as a way of obtaining new abilities, sharpening one's senses.

Infiltration. Give the players a reason to blend into a new environment and social context, a subculture for example, or any other closed group. If your friends are aesthetes, put them into a new context with technologists or vice versa. Outfitting oneself with a whole new style is not expensive if one does it at a second hand shop or at a flea market.

Surrealism. Establish a sense of unreality. This can be done in different ways. Take inspiration from surrealist art and David Lynch movies. If the players encounter an instructed role, this person could repeat the same line several times, using the same body language. That would create an unpleasant situation with a touch of déjà vu.

Confrontation. Scenes wherein a group of players are asked to answer for what they have, or have not, done, either by another player or by an instructed role. Perhaps someone wants to make them do the right thing in a situation? Maybe there are friends who are their enemies and enemies who are their friends!

Picnic. Coming together to share, e.g. food, is always a good thing. This could bring together players or groups of players. What is shared can of course be something other than food, such as music or stories.

Duel. Weaving creatively oriented conflicts and challenges into the game can be a lot of fun. Playful brawls can be staged using dancing such as capoeira or break dance or even balancing acts, music jams or songs.

DEBRIEFING

After a reality game, it's important to get the players talking to each other about what they have and have not done. If they know each other well enough, this will happen spontaneously. Otherwise, elements which encourage the players to talk about their experiences in a written form could be woven into the story itself. Perhaps the player receives a letter from a fictional character asking for an explanation of what has happened or you as the coordinator can simply ask for feedback after the end of the game. Another way of getting feedback is letting an already informed friend participate as a player and ask her, behind the scenes, how the game has been going.

The ending can be orchestrated in many ways. You can either put together an evidently epic finish, or you can let the story slowly fade away and thus let the game slowly sink into the everyday lives of the players. Perhaps that will make the game linger in the minds of the players for a bit longer.

This article has sought to identify and summarize some of the experiences we've had in connection with various reality games created by Interacting Arts, i.e. as *Scen 3* and *Maskspel*. This is neither the only nor the best way of producing reality games, but it is a starting point. Research and exploration of different methods will continue.

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CATEGORY: ART AND DESIGN

WE CREATED A MONSTER, PART I

WORDS JOHANNA MACDONALD, PHOTOS: PILAR ANDEYRO

Aarni Korpela as Icarus/Citizen of Pompeii sews butterflies to lengths of string, then hangs them over candle flames to make them "fly".

The Walkabout project is on the border of larp and performance.

"Madness is confusion of levels of fact... Madness is not seeing visions but confusing levels." – William S. Burroughs

This could be the story of how two theater artists, who come from a glorious and entrenched tradition based on showing and telling, and who still can't agree on most things in the universe from God to fiction to whether to serve dinner before or after the players get their glow-in-the-dark medallions, created and are pretty much stuck in a perpetual process of creating a number of larp-inspired pieces in the hope of traversing the great gap between the plebeians – sorry, audience – and the gods – wait, that should be artists.

That, at least, sums up the prejudices and clichés associated with *Walkabout*, by myself and Aarni Korpela.

We're both attempting to explain *Walkabout* in this book, each from our own point of view, and without reading the other's work. Part of the reason for this is to convince the world that we are not, in fact, joined at the corpus callosum. Another reason to write about *Walkabout* at all is so that we don't have to explain it so much to people, while simultaneously getting more people interested enough to ask us to explain it to them. But then again, the two of us live in a space of contradiction and simultaneity, and that is where *Walkabout* resides.

And since I have the (dubiously deserved) reputation of being our duo's Structure and Form Nazi, let's start with some quantum physics.

HILBERT SPACE

When Aarni and I were in the play *Alice ad infinitum*, his character Black Max Tegmark explained one level of multiple universe theory with a six-sided die. He rolled the die and got a one, but explained that, according to Quantum Theory, the possibility of rolling any number could be expressed as a wave function. The moment the number one

appears, this wave function collapses into what's called our classical reality. So far, so good. However, theorists then postulated that all six outcomes of the die could in fact each represent a classical reality that is superimposed on the others – six parallel universes. In theory, every possible classical reality exists in an unimaginably, unreasonably large space called Hilbert space. In *Alice*, Aarni (dressed as a character we had dropped from the show) described it as an infinitely long dressing room where an infinite number of actors were dressing up in every possible character in order to go onstage for all other possible performances of *Alice ad infinitum*.

The reason I mention that show is so that you begin to have some kind of background of the kind of work that got us into larp in the first place. Teatteri Naamio ja Höyhen, our home base in Helsinki, is an experimental theater, where the vast majority of the work is devised — meaning it's written through improvisation by the entire working group. Much of the work is based in contemporary dance or in post-dramatic theater, a term coined by Hans-Thies Lehmann. It doesn't necessarily mean that there is no drama, but in a post-dramatic production the hierarchy of text and story is challenged. Lighting, movement, text, sound, design, color — all of these can be used as tools for theater; if you want to, the acting can serve the lighting, instead of the other way around as is traditional.

WHOOOOO ARE YOUUUU?

Alice ad infinitum, directed by Eero-Tapio Vuori, is a primary influence on us because in it all identity is subject to loss, variation, or mash-up. In *Alice* the actor and the character are equal partners with the lighting and the sound. We began with the idea that there is a line of separation between the character and the actor. We then decided that it's not really as clear-cut as a line (any actor or larper can tell you this); it's more like a blurry zone between them, as they

often influence each other. We decided to play deliberately in this zone as much as possible, and examine it, always searching for the exact moment of cross-over.

One exercise we used (and that Aarni and I have shamelessly stolen for *Walkabout*) was to speak in front of a mirror. At the beginning, the performer stands in front of the mirror with her own clothes. As Vuori would ask questions, the performer started to change clothing and makeup from actor to character, looking in the mirror the entire time, speaking to the director and describing the character in the third person. Somewhere along the way the gestures and voice would start to match the clothing, and the character would speak in the first person. After the character had been around for a while, it began the same transformation back to the actor.

In the show the dressing room and the off-stage areas were visible to the audience, some of them only via mirrors. Vuori would take a character you'd lovingly created and give it to another actor. He even gave my *lunch* to Alice once, which is particularly weird because *I played Alice*. By the mid-rehearsal period, the upshot of all this mind-wiggling identity wonkery was that I was genuinely able to have the following unforgettable conversation in a rehearsal:

Vuori: Where are you now?

Me (Alice): [starts to answer, then stops, confusion setting in] ...

Vuori: ?

Me (Alice): [with great uncertainty] Are you asking... me the performer, or me as Alice the character, or me as Alice the field of behaviour?

Vuori: [pause] That's good.

Most larp (and theater) people I've spoken to will see that complete confusion of "fiction" and "reality" as pathology, as inexperience or bad larping or acting. Of course, I remember that conversation so clearly because it did mess with my head, but I welcomed it. It is a core value, maybe the only one in *Walkabout*, that identity is fluid; that there is no fiction and there is no reality, and that you, the player, have the power to change the way you are in the world, any world. You are not trapped here. It's rather like my experience as an expat: only by living in a second country is it really possible to see your home country. Only a fish out of water knows what water is. The goal with *Walkabout* is an empowering one: to see our usual reality and behavior clearly by means of playing in a parallel one, and after that to be able to choose what kind of reality we wish to create for ourselves.

Fiction is not a dirty word, but escapism is. I'm not interested in escaping into any kind of fictional reality unless it's going to have an effect on my usual one — and the larps I've played such as *Kapo* and *Just a Little Lovin'* fulfil that to the letter.

WHY GO TOWARDS LARP

Larp is a better artistic tool for this than theater in many ways, one of which is fairly obvious: we have a different kind of understanding of a thing we have actually done rather than just seen. Another aspect is what Marjukka Lampo addresses in her essay "Larp, Theater and Performance" when she refers to larp as performatic behaviour. It brings to mind the notion that in larp, the entity you call yourself zings constantly around that blurry zone between player and character (both of whom can be said to perform and behave).

Over a three-day larp, let's say, there are moments where you are so engaged that you don't perceive what you are doing as play at all. Other times it feels like work to present the character to other players, or another player says something that momentarily shocks you into that feeling of unease between fiction and real (often expressed as "that totally took me out of the game"), and then there are times where one feels quite aware of it being play, but it's going so well that the experience of perceiving it as play is still enjoyable. Add to this the fact that any other player seeing you will usually not have any idea which one of these you are experiencing, and even if you feel off-game, you can appear in-game. All of this, by the way, happens to actors onstage as often as it does to players in larp.

It is, however, one thing to watch someone do this (as the audience did in *Alice*), and another thing entirely to enact it and live it yourself. It is not just the content of a *Walkabout* piece that should affect players; the experience of being unsure of who, where or what you are and what your role is in relation to others — in other words, what many players see as one sign of a crappy larp — is equally valuable. The challenge of being able to make this uncomfortable uncertainty a positive force while not alienating and discouraging your players is, I hope most larpwrights will concede, a real bugger.

Larp also has its drawbacks in this area: the creator has much, much less control over the participant's experience, over the total aesthetic impression, and over the message. I am nearly embarrassed to say how tightly Aarni and I have kept hold of the reigns in most of our projects, stifling the creativity available from our players and collaborators in the interests of directing the piece in a given direction. Well, we were artists before we were players. We have had to learn how to trust other people with our ideas. I'm starting to discover that very good pre-larp communication, expectation management, and follow-up are the best tools for this, and not so much what you do during the piece. I have learned that instead of trying to take your players on a journey of discovery where they don't know what's going to happen — like you do in movies and drama — you can often get a much better experience when the players know exactly what's going to happen, and are then free to make it happen in the most spectacular way.



In the performance section of Tower Room, Juha Sääsäski as Daedalus/The Surgeon Who Married A Suicide Bomber removes his own appendix, which contains a firework that he ignites.

In practice, *Walkabout* is a multifaceted and difficult project, and I am ashamed to say it usually looks and sounds better in documentation and description than it actually is when running it. But Aarni and I do at least have in common that we are both stubborn, and will keep attempting to fail better.

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CATEGORY: ART AND DESIGN

WE CREATED A MONSTER, PART II

WORDS AARNI KORPELA



Johanna MacDonald in The Dump Site, Hermiitti. With a dim light in her eyes, an mp3 player and sound-blocking ear protectors, the Dump was where participants went to get rid of any unneeded information. The Dump smiles, nods, and responds as though it can hear, but can actually hear and see nothing. Photo: Aarni Korpela

Between game and theater.

One morning in the fall of 2008 I was suffering from what I have come to call post-production anxiety. We had just finished a run of performances at the theater Teatteri Naamio ja Höyhen in Helsinki. An intense creative process had ended and I was still energized, but there wasn't yet another project on the horizon I could channel my energy into. In this creative and slightly desperate state my mind starts frantically rearranging to find something to employ itself with, and so it happened that that morning I had two insights.

First I realized that if no-one had a project I wanted to work in, I could start one myself. It was a novel idea to create theater myself and not look to someone with more authority on what theater was. It was partially because (although I felt vaguely guilty about it) it was the experimental and unorthodox that I liked in theater, not the tradition itself. I preferred the by-products to the actual product, the performance.

Lately I had become aware of the Nordic larp scene and what I felt about larp mirrored what I felt about theater: I gravitated towards it, but for the "wrong" reasons. I realized that what I was actually looking for couldn't be found in either, but both approached it from different sides. I hadn't heard of anyone working in that area. Why not go there and create it myself, if only to see what it could be and find out if someone had gone there before?

BETWEEN

That very morning we had a theater board meeting. I presented my idea, probably giving the impression that I had thought of it a little longer than two hours. It was promptly accepted: I was to direct a project that would research the area between game and theater. What's more, another board member, actor and performance art and theory student Johanna MacDonald recognized in it something she had also been gravitating towards, and she was on board.

So what had for two hours been my project was now our project. And that's why you're reading these two separate accounts of the *Walkabout* project, now in its fourth year – it has very much been defined by our differences. The project could probably not be presented accurately in any other way. But we write our separate accounts also as an example of creative co-operation, simply presenting without comment these two different, maybe conflicting, maybe complementary (we agreed to write independently, and so at the time of writing this, I don't know) perspectives.

To me, what is most telling about the difference in our points of view is that when asked to describe what we do I tend to say we work *somewhere between* game and performing arts, while Johanna would say we *combine* them. This is a difference in our personalities as well. Whatever method I learn, I always feel a need to question it, break it, steal what's worth stealing and leave the rest. Johanna on the other hand quickly and thoroughly learns the whole method, its tradition and theory, and then uses it as a whole, making it a part of her toolbox of methods to choose from. Her toolbox is full of well-maintained tools, mine is full of broken pieces and random junk and tools reconstructed from them. I often imagine them looking like the gynecological instrument in David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers*...

Our creative processes and their products mirror these differences. Johanna's tend to be more structured, theoretically motivated and constructed from distinct elements with distinct methods with insight into their traditions. Mine tend to use structures and ideas from outside art (such as a date, a retreat, a match-making agency) and be extensions of my everyday life experiences with no clear line in between, and concentrate around finding new and different ways to interact for different purposes and communicating things not shared in everyday life. You will also notice that in this article I intentionally avoid identifying our projects with a

specific field of art, using vague (and a little clumsy, I admit) terms like "project" or "piece" instead of "game", "larp", "performance", "installation" etc.

We also clash in many other ways – to name only a few examples: while Johanna is interested in exploring the hierarchies present in all societies, I tend to want to play on an artificially leveled playing field to concentrate on other things, where Johanna goes for the provocative and challenging I gravitate towards the therapeutic, gentle and humorous. I want to concentrate only on interaction based on physical presence and am mistrustful of even text, she is fascinated by text and not opposed to virtual interaction. In spite of all of this we have some central goals that we share, and that have stayed remarkably constant through the years.

In this article my emphasis is on those goals and the methods we have used to achieve them. I will only describe the projects as examples. So far there have been four major ones – *Walkabout* (called *Walkabout I* now for clarity), *Tower Room*, *Hermiitti* and *The Lovers' Matchmaking Agency*.

THROUGH A LENS

Our first goal was to create art pieces where the participants could use the full capacity of their physical presence to interact with the piece, lived-in art. What we set out to design could best be described as temporary worlds or societies. Unlike in larp, while the worlds may be fictional, their inhabitants are not. Our goal is that the changes in behavior and identity, sometimes creating something like a character, are caused by adapting to the situation and simply cause the participants' identities to include their new behavior and point of view.

We also didn't want this temporary world to replace the participants' experienced reality, but lay another layer of reality on top of it. The name I came up with for the project reflects this duality. A walkabout, as you might know, is a native Australian initiation rite from which you come back transformed, and it is, as you might also know, only a walk in the bushes that Westerners have made mystical. What we do has both layers and can be seen as either, depending on your point of view.

This interest in layered and liminal identities comes from our experience as performers. We want to share the experience of the character and performer's co-existence and interplay that has usually been kept behind the curtains as an unimportant by-product that does not concern the audience.

To reach these goals we have, through trial and error, designed some methods that we have found useful and that have become a part of the *Walkabout* toolbox.

Projects such as ours often require different levels of participation. Because we want them to be accessible, each project has participants comparable to theater spectators:

they buy a ticket and show up without preparation and are only responsible for their own experience. In addition to them there are one or more groups of participants who have more responsibility for the overall experience. For example in *The Lovers' Matchmaking Agency* a group of participants were trained through a workshop to work as matchmakers for the other participants, in *Hermiitti* an anonymous secret society helped in designing the piece, and in *Walkabout I* we had "performer players" creating visual and performance elements, enforcing the dramaturgical structure, gradually guiding the "participant players" into the layer of fiction, and playing their own separate but intertwined game.

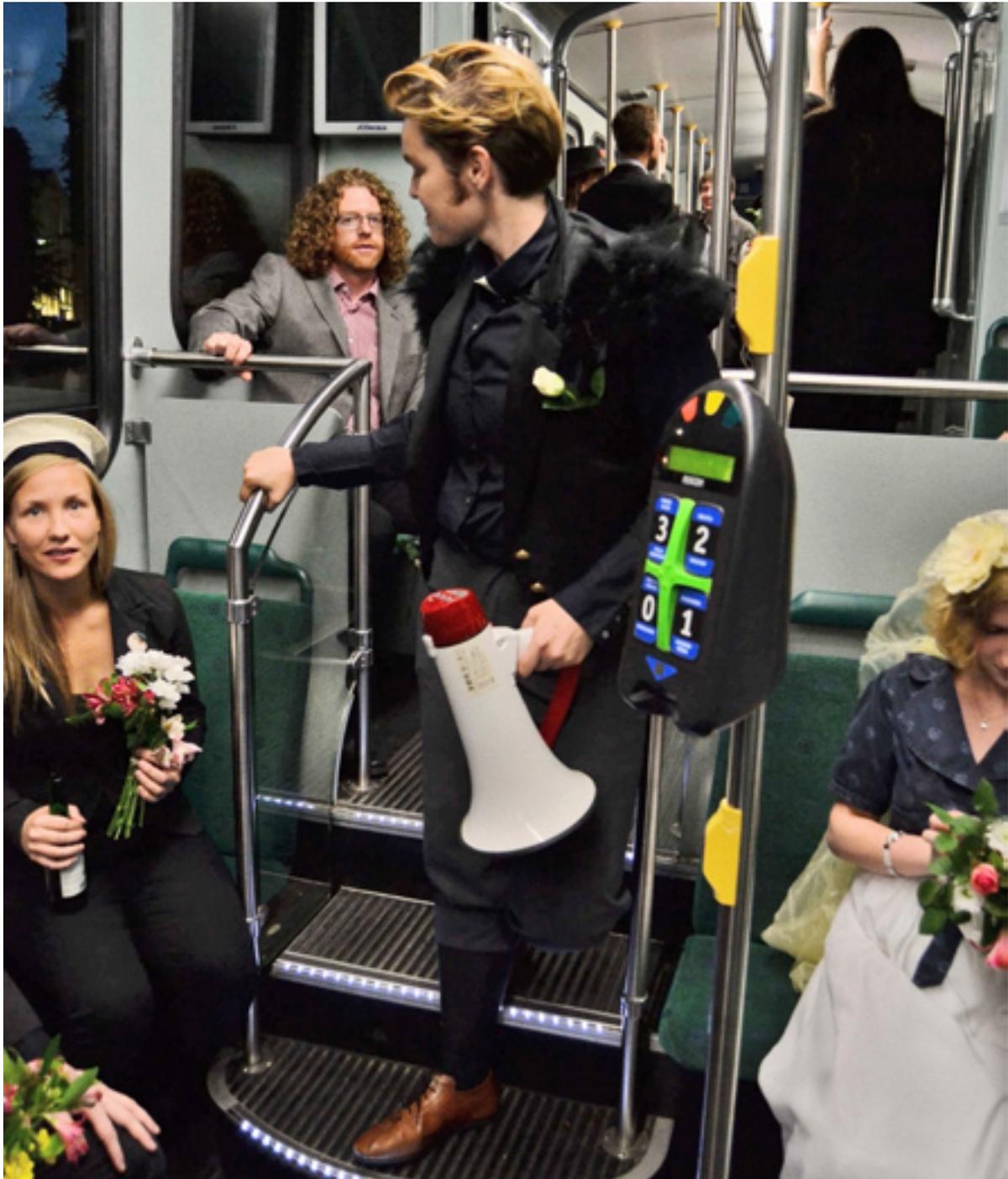
In *Walkabout I* we wanted the performer characters to be a set of archetypes, embodiments of different views of the world. It occurred to me to try tarot cards as a tool, specifically the grand arcana, an impulse that had unforeseen consequences. We quickly realized that the cards were perfect for our purposes. They were a set of points of view (22) that through centuries of development had almost every facet of human life represented and perfectly balanced each other, together forming a whole. They are perceived as a little silly, fun to play with but not to be taken too seriously, while simultaneously having an air of mystery and tradition.

In fact we have the cards to blame for the entire *Walkabout* project. Hours after the last run of *Walkabout I*, then intended as a stand-alone project, I and Johanna were digesting, recuperating (and drinking) and jokingly suggested we'd make a separate project based on each of the 22 cards in the major arcana. I'm not quite sure we will still be going through the deck twenty years from now, but it has been what we have been doing ever since.

While we were experimenting with the tarot cards, it was Pekko Koskinen who first introduced us to the concept of a lens in a game. We saw the potential in it for our purposes and from then on we have used it as a user interface of kinds for the participants. The idea of the lens resonates with how I see the world: an endless repertory of suggestions that enhance some stimuli and hide others, so that depending on the frame of mind the world can appear as almost anything. The tarot cards offered themselves as natural lenses. In *Walkabout I* each player had (or received) the lens of a card, while *The Lovers' Matchmaking Agency* was entirely experienced through the Lovers' lens by all involved.

BEING BORING

To create the lived-in experience, we wanted to give the participants a chance to settle in. We are both believers in boredom. As people stop frantically looking for stimuli and creating action, when there's nothing to do just then, people settle down and simply live in the circumstances they find



Johanna MacDonald as the Reverend from the Church of the Sacred Pelvis with players on the way to the Big Fat Fake Mass Wedding. Photo: Anu Leponiemi

themselves in, becoming a part of the world they inhabit. To give space for this we usually design the descent into the piece's world to be slow and gradual.

In *Walkabout I*, the participants would essentially be guided through stages that led them to adopt a new point of view, which would in turn affect their view of themselves and their actions. Where a larp starts with assuming a character, *Walkabout I* was the process leading up to the appearance of the character and ending there. This was achieved by gradually exposing the participants to the idea of lenses.

First they would meet a performer simply being his/her everyday self, giving them a task that would give them their first lens, something of a palate-cleanser: the Fool, the person entering a new world without expectations. The next performer themselves had a card lens on and explained their lenses and gave the participant a task that would help them see the world through it.

Next they got cards of their own and gathered to attend a party with their new lenses on for the rest of the game and meeting new performers whose lenses were so strong they were their only personality. They were encouraged through a game to fully use their lens, and in the morning they were initialized as new cards and sent to finish the game on their own without the performers they no longer needed.

In *Hermiitti* the entire process, including the building and rehearsing, was designed to create an atmosphere of tranquility and self-reflection. Not doing was considered an important part of the creative process, and stress and doing something one didn't want to were forbidden in the working group. The participants were asked to spend the day before *Hermiitti* in rest and solitude as much as possible in preparation for the retreat-like environment and state of mind. All the interaction was designed to enhance a state of turning inwards rather than towards people: it was cyclical, very simple and as stripped of stimuli as possibly while still enticing. No interaction was prompted.

With the process of gradual change we came upon the importance of naming. When there are no character roles, the roles given and required are social. We found that the simple act of naming the participants frames their experience to a surprising extent. In each project the naming (initiates, players, sub-programs, Lovers etc.) or assignment of social roles has been a crucial element. In some cases the roles are instructions for how to identify oneself in relation to the piece itself or playing with these roles of spectator, player etc.: *Tower Room* was separated into four distinct parts (installation, performance, game, ritual), and in each the participants were assigned a new role in relation to the piece.

"TOOLS"/"TOOLBOX"

We have used many methods to facilitate the experience of entering an alternate reality. Often we alter the participants' physical reality. Especially darkness as an environment has been used to refocus people's experiences as it alters the sense of space and self, interaction and sense of being a part of a group, the mood and the pace, and draws attention to the senses: *Hermiitti* and a part of *Tower Room* happened entirely in the dark. Sometimes we have used other forms of physical restriction and means of focusing attention on sensual experiences. The worlds of the pieces also tend to often have a very strong visual identity and ritualistic elements.

As ways to engage the participants in co-creation we have especially used tasks (*Hermiitti* had tasks written in glowing paint around the space to set the mood and stimulate questions) and Fluxus scores (the dates that *The Lovers' Matchmaking Agency* consisted of had Fluxus scores picked by participants from a date menu), tokens (in *Tower Room* marbles were used as currency) and storytelling games (in *Tower Room* there was a game to fabricate the best story of why Icarus needed to be sacrificed to the Minotaur leading to the sacrifice; in *The Dark*, a small research project, the people closed in the Labyrinth together needed to decide what the Minotaur was and how to deal with it to get out, and in *Hermiitti* the participants dreamed the answer to *Hermiitti's* questions together by each describing whatever they imagined experiencing in a stream of consciousness and these narratives intertwining and interacting).

As many of our methods have remained rather constant or kept reappearing one could claim there is a *Walkabout* method of doing things. However, listing the similarities in our projects is partially misleading. This is no manifesto, and there are no rules. We are always on the lookout for something to steal, and constantly pulled apart by finding out new ways in which our visions and personalities differ. There are 18 cards still to go – who knows what *Walkabout* will be like if it survives all of them?

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THE GAMES

For those interested there is more information on the
games discussed in this article at our web page:

happeningfish.walkabout.com



CATEGORY: GOOD GAME BAD GAME

THE ONLY THING WE FORGOT

WORDS & PHOTOS JUHANA PETTERSSON

Mike standing in the entrance to the underworld.

En kadu mitään (I Regret Nothing) had it all: an art festival sponsor, its very own radio station and an underground ice hockey stadium. The only thing we forgot to plan for was the game.

This is an article about a failed game, but I'll start by going through all the cool stuff we had. *En kadu mitään* was designed by myself, Mike Pohjola and Eirik Fatland. We were pretty excited: with such great designers as ourselves, what could go wrong?

Mike came up with the original idea for the game. There was an urban art festival in Turku, and we'd make a city game there, in the poor suburb of Varissuo. (Varissuo means "the Crow Swamp", but actually it was just dilapidated high rises). Mike's vision involved having different groups of players who could only communicate by asking non-players and bystanders to deliver messages. The groups would be forbidden to meet in person.

Eirik and I didn't really engage with this idea. Instead, we came up with a logo for the game which would be featured on posters, wifebeaters and stickers. We also shared a love of the videogame *Grim Fandango*, and made a "Radio De La Muerte", an actual radio station you could tune into with an ordinary radio during the game. The station broadcast programming from the land of the dead, including a marathon of *Sweet Dreams* covers and religious sermons I had lifted from Finnish fundamentalist websites.

We had small transmitters for the radio, plugged into MP3 players which had the entire contents of the radio show as a single file. We asked the proprietor of a local pizza place if she could host a radio station, and left the transmitter with her. She was quite beautiful and we were all taken with her.

NO FICTION

On the morning of the game, it occurred to us that while we did have all kinds of cool things, we didn't have a single written character or any idea what the story or setting of the game might be. A quick brainstorming produced a story, and Eirik would workshop the characters with the players.

Unfortunately, our story was crazy. There were two groups, madmen and angels. The angels were looking for God, and the nutcases for the Superego. Everything was based on the division into high and low, Apollonian and Dionysian, Superego and Id, God and Man, Sane and Insane, God and Angel, Angel and Man, City and Cave, and so forth.

For no real reason except aesthetics, all the characters were called Pablo, Flavio, Isabel or Maria. I remember Mike coming up with the madmen and the angels, I just wanted to call everyone Pablo, and Eirik was left in the unfortunate position of having to implement all these ideas in his workshop.

In perhaps the greatest game design innovation of my entire roleplaying career, I played the Sheet Monster, the guardian of the underworld. Our mechanics said that you were paralyzed if you were covered with a bedsheet, but

another player could pull the sheet off you and even use it to paralyze enemies. I lurked in the darkness as the players entered the huge underground parking space that held the grand finale of our game. As they approached, I attacked, throwing black bedsheets left and right.

After the initial confusion, the players started working together and soon I was out of sheets. As I made my escape, Cerberos was defeated.

I'm not sure how this fit in with the angels or the madmen, except on a lofty conceptual level.

CONCEPTUAL

It's hard to remember now why we felt it would be possible to make a larp in this way, with too many game design ideas and no setting. The players were confused but not too disappointed, for which I blame the sheer volume of stuff we had in the game.

We did a scouting trip to the location before we did the game and Mike noticed a bunch of huge air exhaust pipes on the ground. We asked the guide the art festival had provided for us what the vents were, and he didn't know but promised to find out. Later, he told us that there was an underground ice hockey stadium, and the vents provided it with breathable air.

Since it was summer, we asked if we could use the stadium. After talking to the janitor, we were told that the ice hockey rink itself was off limits, but the large and empty parking cavern was fair game, and we got it for free.

Walking down the driveway into the depths of the earth was impressive. At the end of their long walk, the players found God and Superego playing cards. I hope the magnificence of the cavern masked the fact that this was but the last confusing touch in an already confusing game.

I had a strong temptation to title this article: "I Regret I Regret Nothing". But the truth is, I don't regret our game. I only wish we had spent as much time writing it as we did planning all the special effects, and I regret that I didn't believe in Mike's original concept for the game. It turns out his idea of having different groups communicate only through non-player messengers worked, even if some of the players were mistaken for drug dealers.

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◀ *A cabaret with famous artists opened every night in the White town. Photo: Tatiana Rodionova, play.*

CATEGORY: NEW FRONTIERS

SONGS AND LARP

HOW SINGING IN LARP CAN UNCOVER NEW HORIZONS

WORDS ALEXEY FEDOSEEV & DARIA KURGUZOVA

We are used to seeing rituals, dances and visual effects in our larps. Game masters like such elements incorporated into the diegesis due to deep cultural background, interactivity, rich visual ambiance and so on. But singing songs (folk, historical, choral or solo) is a real godsend as a larp technology as well as a provider of game ideas and meaning.

Songs play a major role in human life and culture. We often use songs in larps. Usually songs are just a bright diegetic element, for example when a minstrel in a medieval larp plays a song or the sailors sing in a pirate game. Songs enrich the diegesis, create atmosphere and allow characters to experience a sense of community and belonging.

Aesthetics are not the only reason to use songs in larp. They can also have value as game mechanics. A simple example could be singing as a mechanic for magic. In Tolkien's Middle Earth the elven ability to heal can be performed through song. In a case like this, singing serves the function of a magic ritual.

Songs have unique features that grant special opportunities when using them as larp techniques. This is not only about the psychological difference between audible and visual human perception, but also about the deeper differences related to cultural context.

AESTHETICS THROUGH SONG: LAGAAN

The larp *Lagaan* was played near Moscow in 2008. The game was inspired by Bollywood movies and stories about India at the time of British colonial dominion. Dance and song were at the heart of this easy and cheerful game. The characters – native Indians – had to sing and dance almost constantly¹. The larp was 3 full days, with slightly less than 200 participants.

"I'm feeling so *** therefore I want to sing and dance" – this phrase became the slogan for the game (replace *** with any feeling you want – "happy", "blue", "weird", etc). The game masters wanted to create a style of behavior for the Indian characters, so they instituted a simple rule: "If you want to say something to another character, you should do this through dance and song!" The idea worked out wonderfully. When one character starts to sing and dance, others get caught up in it and soon the whole situation is a dramatic celebration.

1 Check out the wonderful post-game music video – www.youtube.com/watch?v=JS2SOQC5vII



Anusha (right) dances with her sister celebrating the suitor's gift. Photo: Ksenia Kozlovskaya, play

Here's a story from the game. A young and beautiful girl called Anusha had a beloved suitor – Sarang. Sarang wasn't rich, but he loved Anusha very much. A suitor was to present a new sari to the bride before wedding. Sarang borrowed a lot of money and bought the most beautiful and expensive sari he could find. When he came to Anusha and presented the gift, no one stood aside – everyone danced and sang in support of the young pair. Players invented the songs on the run, but this didn't prevent the scene (and the whole game) from being lively and cheerful.

MECHANICS AND STORY THROUGH SONG: DURMSTRANG

The larp *Durmstrang: the Bad Tale* took place in the Moscow region in the winter of 2011. This larp became a great example of using solo and choral singing for magical interactions between characters. The songs also had a major role in the main storyline of the larp.

This game was based on the fantasy world of J.K. Rowling's books. Durmstrang is the name of a distant magic school in snowbound Bulgaria. The characters were students, teachers and magic creatures. This was a 3-day larp with about 100 participants.

In Russia we have a lot of rules and mechanics created for magic interactions in the fantasy world of Harry Potter. There are several larps every year based on the books of J. K. Rowling and a huge community of "potter larpers". But the game masters of *Durmstrang: the Bad Tale* wanted to differentiate the east-European magic of Durmstrang from the "classic" magic of the game world. The game masters created mechanics in the tradition of invocation through song. The functionality of the magic songs was wide, but using them was limited by the difficulty of performance. The player had to learn the words and the melody of the song and the performance should be good enough (the condition is subjective but restrictive), and moreover, the character had to make an "invocation string". The player had to keep silent and tie a knot every 10 minutes for an hour or more for the most powerful spells.

The game masters selected 11 East-European folk songs: traditional Russian, Ukrainian, Serbian as well as modern folk imitations. The magic effect of these assigned songs was well-known and written in the game rules. At the same time any player could propose his "own" song in the same cultural tradition as long as the magic effect was discussed with the game masters before game.

There's a well-known but difficult song called *Dorozhenka* (*The Road*). The lyrics go: "There's more than one road in a field. But you cannot walk or pass along the road." The magic effect of the song allowed the singer to hide form pursuit, making her invisible to anyone trying to follow.

During the game the school was captured by an evil vam-

pire clan. Only two characters were able to sing this song and had the invocation strings of appropriate length. The two girls could get out from the room controlled by vampires and move through the school without problems – always singing. They coordinated the divided resistance groups and helped the school to be liberated from the aggressors.

The example demonstrates how such a mechanic makes it possible to communicate the invisibility effect to other players, but also to build appropriate East-European atmosphere. The example also illustrates the merits of using traditional folk songs: the players had an easier time with them because they knew them from another context. What the songs mean to different players on an off-game level depends on their linguistic and national backgrounds.

There's one more interesting aspect in *Durmstrang*. Singing was not only a game mechanic, but also something used as an invocation in the main storyline of the game. One of the *Durmstrang* stories was based on the Serbian fairy-tale about the black mill and Krabat, the miller's apprentice, who wanted to get rid of the cursed apprenticeship². There was no Krabat in *Durmstrang* but the story was very similar: the miller-warlock found 12 apprentices and desired with their help to control the Durmstrang school and become the new chancellor. In the original fairytale the girl, beloved of the main character, had to find her sweetheart among the boys turned into ravens to destroy the dark magic. In the larp, the twelve characters remained men but the girl had to find her love by voice – the boys sang the song *Viun nad vodoi* (*Bindweed over the water*) chorally and she listened blindfolded. The boys didn't use the invocation strings so from the mechanical point of view it wasn't a magical interaction.

This song is traditional and well-known for many Russians. The song has the following plot: a boy is waiting at the house of his beloved; servants bring a chest with gold and goods, beautiful horses, and other things, but the boy refuses the gifts singing "it's not mine"; he sings "it's mine, promised by God" only when his bride appears. According to the magic rules the song *Viun nad vodoi* itself was a powerful spell for charming other characters, but if it wasn't true love, one of the people involved would die in the future.

So, the girl recognized her beloved from among the twelve boys and the miller's test was passed. We can see how the singing of this song employs the cultural East-European background of this song as well as its diegetic mythology. Using this song outside the context of real love could cause misfortune, but using it sincerely gives a chance to defeat the evil and insidious miller. The idea of singing magic adapted the song, originally for weddings, to the game situation.

² This folk story was rewritten by Otfried Preussler in *The Curse of the Darkling Mill*.

AMBIANCE THROUGH SONG: THE SECOND AGE

In the summer of 2010 the most important larp in the central region of Russia was *The Second Age: the Time of Legends*, based on the works of J.R.R. Tolkien. The game was devoted to the second age of the history of Arda, to the Middle Earth and Numenor, to the destiny of elves and men. It was a big and complex game with more than 800 participants and 5 full days of larping.

Songs didn't define the game, but the elven locations were characterized by music and singing. In the Russian larp tradition (from the beginning of the 1990's), singing is the most significant feature of playing an elf. During the last 20 years, a lot of songs have been composed in the Russian larp community. Elf players like to perform the songs in a graceful and heartfelt manner and often they do this really well.

According to the game rules every elf character who dies (elves are immortal so the only way to die was to be killed) had to leave her home location and go to Mandos – the game area for dead characters. In Russia there is a long tradition of playing the character after death. But before this all the friends and relatives were to say farewell to the dead hero and perform a burial ceremony. The ceremony included the performing of a specific song – the lament using the elven language Sindarin. The lament's text was taken from Tolkien's *The Elves' Lament for Gandalf*. The words were changed depending on the name of the deceased and other details.

Surely non-elf characters often wish to hear and delight in elven singing. There's one related story from *The Second Age*. One of the strongest elven kingdoms – Eregion – welcomed the ambassadors of friendly men from Numenor, including the Queen of Dunedain herself. Unfortunately, it was a sad time – many elves had died recently in a battle with orcs – and a burial ceremony was being prepared. The men had to listen to the lament instead of cheerful and festive songs. A lot of elves participated in the ritual since the tragedy had concerned them all. The men didn't require a translation because while the language might be unknown, the situation spoke for itself.

The atmosphere of farewell was increased because the song was filled with deep anguish. The most significant emotion during the performance of the lament was connected to the background: some time ago the dead elves had stood there and sung the lament together, but now they would not sing with the others until the End of Days. This sense of irreversible loss was felt by everyone and especially by the singers themselves.

This example demonstrates that song has ritual or illustrative functionality in the Russian larp tradition. If a song such as the lament is used properly it could amplify the atmosphere (especially if sung chorally) and underline the cultural and language differences in the game.

CULTURAL IMMERSION THROUGH SONG: SONGS OF THE WESTERN SLAVS

Another and more meaningful example of the cultural and national differences can be demonstrated by the larp *Songs of the Western Slavs*³. This game covered the life and tales of the Slavic nations: the characters were the country folk of three villages somewhere in the Carpathians. There were common peasants, shepherds and blacksmiths, young and old, priests and witches... The larp took 3 spring days in 2010, in a forest in the region of Tver, and included more than 130 players.

Songs of the Western Slavs was based on the singing tradition of South and East Europe. The three villages had different ethnic backgrounds: there were Ukrainian, Serbo-Croatian and Vlach-Moldavian villages. Three common songs were chosen for every village. The songs were connected with the appropriate cultural tradition of the nations and illustrated the differences in the styles of play in the different villages: comedy for the Ukrainian village, tragedy for the Vlachian village and tragicomedy for the Serbo-Croatian.

During the pre-game workshops the songs were taught separately for every village. The game masters used any opportunity to sing together with the players. Later in the larp the choral singing practice helped the villagers to come together in joy or danger.

Knowing at least three songs helped the players to overcome shyness and join in the choral performance even if the words of the song weren't clear. Singing accompanied most of the characters' activities from everyday life to heroic acts. The singing illustrated the diegetic events and also maintained the cultural context for every villager.

Every character also had her own song. The song was chosen in a pre-game discussion with the game masters and referred to the character's deeper motives and mythology. All the songs were traditional or modern folk imitations. The game masters did their best to have the songs of the individual character's conform with the overall style of play in each village. Moreover, every personal song was closely related to the character's story and background.

Personal songs were used as a part of the game mechanics. The personal song (being performed by somebody) had power over the character – he'd reveal his feelings and thoughts to the other characters.

The game masters included special singing supporting characters in the larp. They helped to create the appropriate mood and atmosphere as well as perform personal songs for the selected characters. "Lirniks" (from Ukrainian "lirnik" – a traveling bard accompanying himself with the lyre) con-

³ In fact, the eastern and southern Slavic nations were covered by the larp, but the name *Songs of the Western Slavs* refers to a Pushkin poem well-known in Russia.

stantly traveled among the villages and sang the songs in random order. So a real folk atmosphere was there, because there is no folk culture without songs. But the lirniki also helped to implement the fate of many characters – if a character listened to his personal song, he became a good person for some time afterwards and revealed his thoughts and sins to the people around him without any malice. In one case the villagers found the personal song of a suspicious and evil man, and sang the song together with the lirniki. This provoked the man to own up and confess his sins before the whole community.

It happens often that we hear a song after a larp is over and think: "Wow, that's about me!" Personal songs from *Songs of the Western Slavs* became the mightiest means for this because they affected both the characters and the players! The game masters consciously made this happen when they chose the personal songs for different players. For example, one of the old men from the Serbian village had as a personal song *Nema raja*. The song is about a man's love for his native land, and this was in fact the meaning of the old man's life. You can say to the player "you love your country very much" or you can express this with a song before the game.

A SONG MEANS MORE THAN A LARP

The larp *Songs of the Western Slavs* started a discussion in Russia about songs and their use in larps. The main distinguishing feature of folk songs was determined to be their cultural context. Every available song, and especially a folk song, exists independently of any larp. It's not just a part of the cultural context of the player, but the culture itself. Because of this, every folk song is greater than any larp.

A song is not just a multi-tool in the game master's hands. It's a keyhole, and we can see something big and beautiful through it. We can immerse ourselves in a living cultural history.

Because of this players and game masters should not profane the songs they use, but learn to sing them well, chorally and individually. For the same reason, game masters should exercise responsibility when they choose the repertoires for their games.

POST GAME REFLECTION THROUGH SONG: THERE WAS THE CIVIL WAR

The larp *There was the Civil War* took place in the Moscow region in 2008. This larp was characterized by the use of songs not only in-game (to bind the diegesis with the cultural context of the players), but after the game (for the players' reflection and discussions).

There was the Civil War was devoted to the Civil War in Russia in 1919. The game events cover the war between the Red Army and the White Guard at a small, fictional sector of the front somewhere in the territory of modern

Ukraine. It wasn't a historical reconstruction, but rather a reconstruction of the mind. The game was mostly about the fighting, gathering intelligence and creating diversions, but there was a place for civilian life on both sides of the front. This involved a conflict of lifestyles – the old and the revolutionary. The game lasted for 3 days and had more than 300 participants.

The Russian Civil War (1918-20) is still a debatable and contested theme in Russia. We all have grown up in a Russian culture that combines Soviet education and pre-revolutionary traditions: movies about Red Army soldiers, Cossack songs, works of literature and theater from the both sides of the front. The songs from the period of the Civil War and the modern songs about that time can be used as a powerful depiction of that time. Every song clearly shows an attitude to the historical situation and gives a position concerning the conflict.

One evening in the game, soldiers from the Red town sat at the fire and had a heart-to-heart talk. One of them started singing *The Internationale*, and all of them joined the song. Then they sang *Belaya Armia*, *Cherny Baron*, *Tam vdali za rekoi*, then other Red songs. Afterwards, more neutral songs: *Vashe Blagorodie*, *Cherny Voron*. But when the Cossack song *Oi to ne vecher* and other songs from the enemy side of the front began to sound, one soldier thought: "Why are my comrades singing the White songs? Maybe they are traitors?" Thankfully, that evening passed without betrayals and executions. But the story could have been different if an official of Cheka had listened in.

This example demonstrates how the cultural context of the players met the diegesis in an alive and spontaneous way. Indeed, why did the Red soldiers spontaneously start to sing the songs of their enemies? Probably because the songs were known to the players and were taken from the same culture? Or because the characters – the people from the beginning of the 20th century and the culture of that historical Russia – didn't understand why they should not sing a sincere and beautiful song even if it's from the other side. We think that such moments – the moments uniting the character's and player's feelings – make larp really impressive. In this case the moment occurred due to the songs belonging to the common cultural context for all players.

The game was primarily about war, so there wasn't much time to sing. But right after the end of the game the players burst out! Improvised gatherings appeared in both towns. People sang all their favorite songs, disregarding the side. Only at that moment the link appeared between our vision of the history, what we remember about the Civil War and the events from the larp that just ended. The songs helped us to understand the purpose of the game. The knowledge from the movies, the books, the school textbooks, the songs from the cradle returned to life. It was the real sense of living history.

We think that singing right after the end of the game is the most important source of after-game reflection. For many reasons: the players can adopt the cultural context containing the songs, try to correlate the texts of the songs with the events from the game, join with the other players in emotional and aesthetic meaning, and belong to the something big and significant.

CONCLUSIONS

Here's a summary of what singing can do in a larp:

- **Game mechanics.** Song is a good mechanism for complex interactions, e.g. rituals or magic. Using song, you always know when the invocation starts and finishes, how it was interrupted, etc. It also gives a good opportunity for joint performance or effect.

- **Storyline.** Song can be a way to construct a game story. Character's actions and motives could be interconnected with song. Character's background or the game events could be passed using songs without losing the diegesis. Sometimes song can help to build the main storyline of the game and involve many players.

- **Atmosphere.** Singing, especially choral, creates a wonderfully alive atmosphere and ambiance. This is very important in games where folk and traditional culture have a great part. In this case songs will be as important as historical costume, manner of speaking, etc.

- **Self-identification.** Often singing allows a group of characters to find some common ideas, culture, values, etc. At the same time songs can easily divide characters to take incompatible sides.

- **Cultural context.** Song is a good and powerful way to immerse players and characters in a cultural context. The songs can be learned and performed during preparations for the larp or after the end – they'll help players to understand the context. Some cultural context (e.g. folk culture) actually requires songs.

- **The minimum creative threshold.** A roleplaying game is a co-creative work. Song can be an appropriate tool for this. When players sing together they actually do such joint creative work. It's like a small game inside the big one. Song is the minimal creative threshold the game masters could set for the players.

The traditions of singing in larps go to the beginning of larp in the 1990's. It was the time of games based on J.R.R. Tolkien's books. But the time has changed. The new era began, and therefore the new games appeared – a bit more materialistic. It was only several years ago, starting from 2008-09, that songs started to become more and more significant in Russian larps. We hope that this trend becomes stronger and spreads abroad.

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Portovenere. Eternals at their struggle.

CATEGORY: DOCUMENTATION

PATHOS

DREAMS OF A FUTURE PAST

WORDS LORENZO TRENTI, PHOTOS UNKNOWN

Its name was Pathos. It started all over Italy in 1997 and it was a pervasive larp and an ARG (Alternate Reality Game) when such words didn't even exist yet.

Hundreds of players took part in *Pathos* and it definitely left a trace still visible in the Italian larp community. Two of the minds behind *Pathos* were Luca Giuliano (teaching professor of semiotics at Rome University La Sapienza) and Piermaria Maraziti (gaming author and internet provider, now selling games): we've asked them – and a few players, too – some details to better understand the game.

HOW IT STARTED

The full name of the game was *Pathos: è solo un gioco (Pathos: it's only a game)*. It was a very provocative name: the roleplaying game hobby had a bad reputation in Italy because a lawyer in search of easy fame publicly accused roleplaying games to be the cause of the suicide of a boy and said that those games were dangerous, because you couldn't tell truth from fantasy. In March 1997 a network of Italian researchers was formed¹ and it published a brochure to give the press correct information about roleplaying games.

Pathos played on the brink of reality and fiction, just as the fearmongering lawyer had accused roleplaying games of doing.

Luca Giuliano says that: "To me, *Pathos* really started on November 1st, 1997, when we organized the very first larp during the gaming festival *Lucca Comics&Games*. It was a press conference held by Lapis Ex Coelis Ltd, which was part of the official program of the expo: Beniamino Sidoti, head director of the gaming festival and also a character in the *Pathos* fiction was there. Suddenly, Dr Esar (my character, the avatar of Destruction) called the Awakened from the audience to reach him. I still remember the shock on the face of the people who were there, knowing nothing of what was happening and finding themselves in an unexpected situation."

The game broadly used the convention of separating R1 (Reality-1), the real world where we live in, and R3 (Reality-3), the gaming world. So a thing could happen in R1 and have its counterpart in R3.

Piermaria Maraziti recalls that: "One of the most attractive points in the game was its pervasive nature. Players were immersed in the game 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Each news item you read in the newspapers or watched on tv might be used in the game (obviously, the stranger the news, the stronger the chance for it to be embodied into the gaming fiction). Also, there was no such thing as political correctness: with all due respect to painful and bad news, they were happening both in R1 and in R3, so strange murders in Vatican city, church cupolas breaking down due to an earthquake, astronomical events, even a train seen departing from a station with a full load of stones, they all would become an element in the game."

¹ *gdr2.org*

Pathos triggered a huge effort on the part of the players in creating fake materials as contributions to the game. Several websites were spontaneously put up, giving "real" information (at least, real in R3) about an archaeology professor, a mysterious organization, a recruitment agency for strange jobs and so on.

Maraziti says that: "You could receive e-mails or phone calls or even visits by players in person, sometimes even players you didn't know, at any time (in some cases even in the night); there were at least a couple of people 'kidnapped' in a realistic fashion (by friends and/or in a gaming convention, reassuring the outsiders it was just a game). The best part was the larps: there the 1:1 scale was absolutely total, apart from the need for special effects when something 'magic' happened."

The game evolved on this aspect: in later larps a yellow pin was used to suggest that the player was in R3, playing his character. Even the mailing lists for the game were separated: one in R1 for technical discussions and rules negotiations, and another one in R3 and in character. In the latter, the characters themselves were actually sending e-mails. Which was a nice paradox, just years before a novel like *American Gods* from Neil Gaiman, because you had reborn deities typing on a pc keyboard.

PATHOS MYTHOLOGY

The setting was heavily influenced by the Sandman comic books created by Neil Gaiman and published by Vertigo. In the *Pathos* universe there were seven Eternals which were incarnations of emotions and human passions ("*pathos*" literally means "passion" in ancient Greek). They were Destruction, Psyche, Discordia, Destiny, Desire, Enigma and Dream. Each was portrayed by a different game master. In the fiction, the Eternals were awakening in the human world to bring passions back to the people. Each of them had a very distinct inner mythology: for example, Psyche was the sum and the conflict of Reason and Madness, and this schizophrenic dichotomy informed every follower of that particular deity.

Maraziti says that: "In the beginning of 1998 I received a call from a friend. We had experimented a lot in roleplaying games in the years before: from decision-making parlor larps to murder parties and so on. He asked if I was interested in a new game inspired by Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, something very narratively intensive, part larp, with a very high amount of playing done on the internet, primarily by email. I was immediately attracted by that idea and got enlisted. Because of my experience in larps and my role with an internet service provider (which could help the project providing free services such as mailing lists and websites), I got one of the

top roles, the Eternal Discordia. The friend who called me was Luck, one of three aspects of Destiny (the other two being Necessity and Death). Later on, due to the extreme success of my work as Discordia, which (sadly) leaked into real life, that same friend said it wasn't a good idea to have me as Discordia, and that was one of the most controversial compliments made to me and *Pathos* itself."

Pathos had a very evocative mythology and theology. Every Eternal had an Harmony of seven Notes, which were something like demigods, historical figures, reincarnations or sub-archetypes. Every Note was a link from an Eternal to another one; so Socrates was Reason of Enigma (because of its maieutic philosophy), while Cassandra was Discord of Destiny. There were seven "pure" Notes, like Prometheus who was Reason of Reason (and/or Madness of Madness). Every Note was played by a single player (actually, not every one of the 49 slots was always occupied by someone), and every Note could have an indefinite number of Alterations after them. The musical names had a distinct "music of the spheres" bouquet and contributed to the esoteric feeling of the setting. Also, the pyramid structure and the recurring theme of the number seven was very close to that of an occult conspiracy. Umberto Eco's *Focault's Pendulum* and its discovering of the mysteries behind official history immediately spring to mind.

According to Giuliano: "We shouldn't forget that *Pathos* created – and did it very well, too – an esoteric setting which was business as usual for a fan minority, but went mainstream only years later with the acclaimed *Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown."

In this setting a lot of things existed together: Nazi bases in Antarctica and satanic rituals, ancient gods and advanced technology, the Holy Grail and rebel artificial intelligences. The first "quest" of the game, the one that started it all in 1997, was an enigma about finding the lapis ex coelis (i.e. "the stone from heaven", in Latin), which was hidden in a fragment of the Cimabue fresco destroyed by the (real) earthquake of Assisi. The first press conference launched a challenge, in form of the cryptographic "Cimabue Code": by solving it, one could reach the stone and gain its powers. It was later discovered that the challenge was part of a program for bringing together the Awakened at the time of the passage of the Hale-Bopp comet.

THE ACTUAL GAME

Giuliano says that: "*Pathos* had at the same time a maximum of 140-150 players. Someone got in and then went away very soon. Of those 150, at least half of them were very active and were there in the final larp in Lucca, October 2000. 40-50 players were the hard core of the game; they are still around in the gaming scene"

The game was pervasive, meaning that everyone was per-

manently in-game. A gaming manual was written, detailing the fact that one should try to separate R1 and R3, so to avoid – for example – sending an alarming message to the email address of someone's real workplace, or pretend to be a real doctor or police officer in a public place.

Every player could participate as much as he wanted to. One could just read emails and never take part in a larp, or could autonomously organize a meeting of Alterations to plot against other Harmonies or the Notes as a system. There were "official" larps, usually in coincidence with the biggest gaming events in Italy (Lucca and Modena), where there was a referee-directed plot concerning the retrieving of some artifact, or the spreading of a virus, or the coming of the Men in Black who were trying to destroy the *Pathos* mystic. But a lot of other things happened, like spontaneous meetings (usually in the form of a larp-dinner) or email "quests" to fill the game between larp sessions and tell stories of what couldn't be represented in a larp.

According to Maraziti: "Things were happening on a 1:1 scale with real time flux, apart from quests played by e-mail/chat. For example, when a group reached villages in inner Somalia or an old Nazi base in Antarctica, a game master stated that those people were 'away' in the needed time frame."

"One of the newest characteristics of this game was the choral game mastering. Game masters were extremely powerful entities in the setting, so they judged players actions but they were also playing, even if on a higher level; Notes judged actions by Alterations while playing themselves. But almost all was agreed upon."

"Some accidents did happen and the system reverted lightly to a more classic one, but that was impossible to avoid when the number of people playing became more than 100, in a highly competitive setting. However, at the beginning and on local scale, the method worked well."

To avoid breaking the suspension of disbelief of a shared and living setting with inconsistencies, the game masters created the concept of "narrative provinces", with a ruler for each of them. So, let's say that you want to create an email quest for some players and send them to discover the remnants of Atlantis: you ask in the R1 mailing list, you're told that it's the Eternal Discordia which rules over Atlantis, and then you proceed in private mail with him to learn what you can and what you can't put in your quest.

There was another aspect of the game which wasn't planned in advance and that, in the end, was very popular: the Teophanies. They were just short stories written by the players and published on the web, but they contributed to the whole aspect of making sense of a shared narration. They usually were stories about past lives of the characters, or summarized versions of some quest, or inner monologues and so on. They were very popular and created, piece by piece, a whole saga made of different points of view.

PATHOS: A TOPICAL WAVE?

Andrea Castellani makes the argument that larp is a "topical wave"². Its not just a unified, monolithic narrative, but a flow of different rivers of meaning one can experience in many ways. *Pathos* was, more than other larps, a topical wave in this sense: a lot of things happened in different parts of the game, and probably no one – not even the Eternals – could really grasp the big picture.

The game was experienced as a wave, but what about contributing to the game's design and setting? Was the design process top to bottom or the other way around?

According to Giuliano: "This is a tough question, because it has many answers. Generally speaking, in storytelling the decision making is never from the bottom. But in *Pathos* there were several decisional levels, determined by the hierarchy of the characters in fiction. Obviously the Eternals' storytelling was guided by the Eternals themselves, and this was the decision-making level of higher grade. This was what we called 'mainstream'. Then there were the narrative seeds produced by Notes and Alterations. Usually they were managed by the Harmonies and sometimes the single Eternal could rule them because of a private purpose. But it was typical that, if there was a good storyteller at the bottom of the hierarchy, he naturally took control of that aspect of narration."

Maraziti continues that: "The foundation of the setting was chosen on a top level, among with some cornerstones. Then everything happened on its own level: Eternals had the power to move some strong cornerstones, Notes could do the same but with minor cornerstones, while the Alterations had a weaker influence. But an Alteration could be a very influential character in the gaming world and have the power to change it more than others. This hierarchy was inherent to the setting of the game – an Eternal could do broader things in the *Pathos* world than one of its Notes – so I think we can still speak of a successful experiment in shared storytelling."

Giuliano says that: "Probably the strongest arguments about storytelling, where we had the deeper negotiations and conflicts, were on the Eternals mailing list. My style has always been to launch ideas or provocations, then see if someone collected them and then follow those ideas until they become true. Certainly the experience of a chaotic narration like that, which became tidy and well-ordered like an auto-organized biologic lifeform, was rousing. This happened for the first three years of *Pathos*, from 1997 to February 2000. Then the complexity of the system had a strong crisis. The information began to be too much to be managed in a decentralized way, and at some point the net tore apart. It's difficult for a single author to keep together just one fictional world. Go figure what happens when you have more

2 Castellani 2011, Castellani 2012.

than fifty authors. Still nowadays, it strikes me that we lasted so long and were able to write a saga of hundreds of pages and stories that can stand on their own. The literary quality of the short stories was discontinuous (this wasn't the purpose of the game) but something very good was there."

AFTERMATH AND LEGACY

Pathos 1 ended at the end of October, 2000 in Lucca with the final ritual. Soon after, a lot of players asked to continue the experience, keeping part of the setting and the characters. According to Giuliano: "After *Pathos* some email games were organized. Honestly, I don't know a lot about them. *Pathos 2* was certainly as demanding as the original one."

Maraziti says that: "*Pathos 4* was the end of the experience. It was an ultimate departure of the Eternals from this world. Some speculation has been made about the form of a *Pathos 5*, maybe a tabletop version, but it still has to be made. Of course, the setting could be easily translated, but not the gaming structure, which can work only if it has a high number of participants."

A lot of time has passed from the original *Pathos* and its success probably shouldn't be measured by the number of sequels (like a good movie franchise) but from memories and feelings that you can still speak of. After all, if an experience is remembered, it was probably a strong experience. Here are comments from veterans of the game:

(anonymous): "I really liked the sense of community and cooperation in creating something together, even if with difficulty. And of course I remember moments of pure fun – like when the players unveiled very complex plots which actually never existed. It was a fascinating way to confirm the wonderful skill of the homo ludens to invent, create and elaborate. One thing I didn't like were disputes, all the daily pettiness that was vented in the game"

Mirko Gagliano: "I treated a god as he deserved and got myself sent down an elevator shaft. I died but with a certainty: I'd do it again. I've never felt so good in my life. I regret not having done (nor said or thought) anything for a friend in need. R1 and R3 did mix together in this. I still cry, sometimes.

"We underestimate what we do. We sincerely think that we can circumscribe our experiences in definite categories: fun, research, job, love... but it's all just an artifice. Every moment, every thought, every action belongs to an ensemble that, in the end, defines us, determines our existence, lets us recognize ourself. This happens on any level. *Pathos* lifted a veil: can you really discern different levels of reality? Is there really a hierarchy for them? How much of the world that we call "real" is immune from the contamination from other universes? We believe in gods, fairies, mermaids, horoscopes and politicians, and we let our actions and thoughts be conditioned by truths that share very little with reality.

We called them, very humbly, narrations. What are we doing just now?"

Francesco Beltramini: "I really liked the discussions on game and storytelling during the meetings for the organizers. The level was very high and at the same time there was a nice atmosphere of sharing and community. One thing I remember was a player telling Luca she was seeing us, the referees, as putative fathers, and she expected much more from us on a personal side. I feared this undue investment. All in all, *Pathos* left me a strong mark. It taught me how to stay in a virtual community and what are its mechanics. I've never played online again, but this lesson was very useful in other mailing lists and later in social networks."

Andrea Morgando: "I don't know why, but every time I think back to *Pathos* a subtle angst starts crawling down my spine. I find myself both dreaming with open eyes and frowning at the same time. *Pathos* was disconcerting: very immersive for a life experience, too immersive for a game. It jarred strings in my personality – very deep for a social experiment, too deep for a cooperative writing experiment! I didn't like realizing that the game sometimes became a morbid shelter from reality. I liked finishing a short story coming from an email quest: *Pathos* let me exercise the art of writing and effective storytelling. It also taught me to distrust games that toy with real expectations and insecurities on players' part. Half of the friends I invited to my wedding ceremony were from *Pathos*."

For a game that was meant to bring passions back to people, it seems to have been quite successful – again mixing R1 and R3. Emotions in the game became emotions *from* the game.

Giuliano says that: "I believe that one of the strengths of the game was the creation of a gaming community. We put together a playing frame where people could be players at the beginning, then find a common passion and finally become, sometimes, true friends. This strength also created problems, as always happens in social contexts.

"*Pathos* was an avant-garde game using all that the web of those years could offer, long before online roleplaying games took their modern shapes. Today a game like *Pathos* would use tablets, smartphones, Facebook and so on."

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Players listening to the pre-larp briefing outside the warehouse.

CATEGORY: DOCUMENTATION

SHADOWRUN

WORDS THOMAS B., PHOTOS LE FOUR FANTASTIQUE & MAUD JENNI

Not all larp designs start with a chosen theme, a political message, a theory to test or a kick-ass site. Shadowrun started with guns.

More precisely, *Shadowrun* started with infra-red (IR) toy guns. We, the members of Le Four Fantastique, a quartet of Switzerland-based larpers, had experienced the fun of shooting at each other safely in the dark like most people who attend the local laser tag commercial arena. But we realized the full potential of these toys during science-fiction larps organized by other local French and Swiss larp groups.

IR guns work like standard television remote controls: the absence of projectiles means that, unlike with paintball or airsoft equipment, the risk to hurt the players or damage the game site is virtually non-existent. And unlike Nerf guns, another favorite in the larp arsenal, long range enables sniping, and there is no need to pick up the foam dart ammo at the end of the game. Ideally, this low impact makes both players and site owners a bit more comfortable with participating in or hosting such games.

On the flip side, sites cannot be tight indoor spaces with white walls (i.e. most apartments) as IR beams bounce everywhere and aiming becomes moot. Furthermore, IR guns are designed for short games and not the long events that larps usually are. Thus, their electronics usually make them either go to sleep mode or drain the batteries. This has a direct impact on larp design: firefights need to be constrained to a limited duration and there can be no surprise "Han shot first" gunplay unless the gear of both parties is turned on.

The latest generation of consumer-grade gear at the time *Shadowrun* was written was the LazerTag Team Ops line, sold by Hasbro, Inc. Apart from superior range to most other brands, it featured "on gun" IR targets, meaning there's no need to incorporate receivers in the costumes. It also featured advanced built-in programming features, allowing basically the same type of individual scoring as in a commercial laser tag arena, plus built-in games and various hacks that could be used in larps. As the toys were never properly distributed in Switzerland, about 20 of them had to be acquired through the patient use of eBay and American larper friends.

GUNS, PROSTITUTES AND ELVES

The location of the game was called Skatepark HS36, a refurbished warehouse in a former manufacturing neighborhood of Lausanne, Switzerland. Located in an urban valley, the skatepark is surrounded by elevated metro tracks on one side, recycling containers on the other, and several other warehouses, some still in industrial use, others converted into office buildings and art spaces. At night, the area features both live concerts and the city's main hub for street prostitution. This combination of guns, a warehouse and a shady neighborhood suggested a mafia-related larp, and Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* came to mind.

The large metal and wooden structures used by skaters both outside and inside the two-storied warehouse might have provided a great backdrop for a *Mad Max* larp, but the organizer consensus was *Shadowrun*. Created in 1989 by FASA Corporation, this tabletop roleplaying game features the unlikely mix of standard fantasy elements (elves, orcs, magicians) appearing in a standard cyberpunk setting. The dystopian world features the usual omnipotent multinational firms and human augmentation through cybernetic implants, but a corporation's CEO can be a dragon. Player characters are hired guns called Shadowrunners, and conduct illegal missions for employers who want to remain unseen.

Most members of Le Four Fantastique had not played the game for at least a decade, but could still remember the book's first edition cover, an elf with a mullet hacking a computer terminal while his wizard and gun-toting friends protected him from enemy fire. It became quite clear that this scene needed to happen: we had the guns, all we needed were the Matrix terminals and the elves with 80s hairdos.

BACK TO THE OLD SCHOOL

To be true to the genre, we soon realized would have to stray from the intricate, murder mystery -style plots we were used to writing. As a good chunk of the game would actually be spent in action scenes, we abandoned our usual writing method of "the rule of 3", where each character has at least three character traits, three things to hide, three direct connections to other characters and three objectives for the game. This

minimalist approach enabled the fast-paced action of a *Shadowrun* mission. To prevent this from being just laser tag with costumes, we also wanted each character to have a unique point of view, her own backstory and aspirations.

The *Shadowrun* tabletop roleplaying game has a very detailed character creation system that is not larp-friendly, so to keep things light, it was ignored. The game setting had evolved a lot between 1989 and 2008, and we knew that due to elements like wired reflexes and enormous dragons, pulling off a 360° illusion was not going to be feasible. Therefore, our goal was to evoke key elements and themes, tropes of *Shadowrun* tabletop games, rather than a full simulation. For example, there would be no visual spells, but rather invisible effects like mind control.

We did use some of the background material, especially the more recent European setting published in French by Black Book Editions. The larp was set in 2068 Lausanne, the French speaking part of Switzerland having all but seceded from its German-speaking neighbors. Each organizer wrote four characters, forming teams of shadowrunners that reflected their favorite aspects of the game setting. The Swiss team was called Heimat Immer Verliebt, a group playing on current Swiss-German stereotypes. Uranium Communist Zombies were anti-corporation activists, Baron SA were voodoo-inspired guns for hire and Raeghsa Tiserulus a group of Celtic elf nobles and their ork nanny.

To balance the groups from a gamist point of view, guns were aligned with set character types: each team had a rifle with foam and IR rocket launcher for their heavy fighter, a more complex gun with a heads-up lock-on display for their techie (who could also heal and pick electronic locks) and light handguns were given to each hacker (who had access to the game's computer matrix) and wizard (who could use the gun's built-in shield and had a unique spell). The simplification helped people to grasp their roles quickly but it did make the teams feel like dungeon crawling parties.

SATURDAY NIGHT FIREFIGHT

We shot a teaser/trailer to set the mood with an electro hip-hop soundtrack, give rough costume suggestions, present in-game corporate logos, prominently feature the guns and give a quick tour of the closest thing there is to a cyberpunk neighborhood in Lausanne.

The larp followed the standard *Shadowrun* tabletop adventure structure, starting with a meeting with the employer's representative, usually called Mr. Johnson. But as the game was short, it had to start with action, so the first mission was actually to penetrate the warehouse where Mr. Johnson was located, using guns provided by the mysterious sponsor.

To preserve the surprise of the inner layout of the skatepark, players received the characters early but were only given the game location at the last moment. The pre-

game briefing took place outside of the warehouse. As night fell, players went through a safety briefing and learned how to use the guns. Each group was given a walkie-talkie and a flashlight and was escorted to their starting positions in the neighborhood. The organizers gave the "game on" signal by radio and took on the roles of the supporting guard characters and Mr. Johnson, or rather Ms. Johnson.

Each team went their own way, the celtic noble elves charging down a grassy slope shouting an ancient (and historically accurate) Breton battle cry, others waiting and seeing, or walking around the block. Since this happened in public space, it may have been bad game security, but an actual warehouse assault was just too good to pass up. Later, players said that it would have been good to have more stuff located outside.

During the opening scene, with a fellow organizer shot down under the sodium streetlights, we suddenly realized that we had to document this.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION!

Once inside the dark warehouse, fluorescent tape pointed to the skatepark bowl. When all players managed to get in, the doors were closed for the night and bright lights turned on. Following a tabletop *Shadowrun* tradition, the characters had been betrayed: the four teams had been selected to compete with each other in what was actually an elaborate job interview. They would be tested on various aspects of their future work but only the best team would actually get it. Each "test" was a mini-game, giving us a diegetic justification for why the guns could only be used for limited time.

Ms. Johnson had rented the local hacker headquarters and the warehouse's artificial intelligence (AI) was setting guns to stun, unlocking them only as needed. The test started with a simple Easter egg hunt, looking for hidden LED fingerlights. Others tests involved protecting an area from the other teams, forming alliances or covering for teammates performing a complicated task, just like in the famous 1989 book cover.

Pre-recorded messages from the AI and ambient music were played through the warehouse's PA system, mellow at first and faster (mainly 1990s hip-hop and big beat electronica) during fights. These action moments were when the organizers' vision came to life: seeing a guy cast a spell by yelling Marxist incantations in a skating bowl, surrounded by allies and enemies shooting each other, with a song by Busta Rhymes blaring in the background. Players running down slopes, gun in hand, blue leds stuck to their faces, these moments really made the tabletop game's illustrations come to life.

In between the tests, guns were turned off and more regular roleplaying would resume, players could work on their characters' personal goals, and find out more about their secretive employer.



Diegetic briefing: Ms. Johnson reveals to the Shadowrunners that they have been tricked into a hands-on job interview.

WHAT IS THE MATRIX?

Clues were scattered all around the place, both as paper printouts and in a computer system. Obviously, the Matrix had to be one of those geometric 3D environments seen in movies like *Tron* or *Johnny Mnemonic*. The original intent was to use *Dystopia*, a cyberpunk mod for the video game *Half-Life*, but the lack of mapping skills in the organizing team forced us to use EduSim, a simple 3D environment that was not very gamer friendly, with no real "game" per se, just an exploration in a limited timeframe, with easily deleted elements.

Textures were re-used from *Dystopia* and diegetic corporate logos, text messages and short movie clips shot by the organizers were inserted in the Matrix to reveal hints about the plot. Hackers achieving direct communication with the warehouse's AI were invited to enter the "total Matrix", a physical room representing this deeper level of virtual reality. It had garbage bags on the windows, the darkness only broken by a strobe light. Eerie music from the movie *Akira* was looping, and a supporting character dressed in an Asian-inspired outfit with a blank mask met the players entering the room.

HIGH TECH/LOW LIFE

Technology betrayed us more than once during the game. The laptops running the Matrix were excruciatingly slow at times. A backup solution was planned, with some clues hidden in a standard Windows environment, and this proved a godsend when some players started to lose patience. Another shortcoming was the inability to dim the lights in most of the warehouse: they were either bright white, thus diminishing the mood, or too dark, which was not acceptable considering the height of open skating fixtures and absence of head protection. The strong neon lightbulbs interfered with the IR receivers of the guns, especially with the advanced programming features. The result was a last minute "go down when your gun reaches zero hit points, only techies can turn it back on" mechanism, without the detailed individual scoring that Ms. Johnson was supposed to use to select the best Shadowrunners.

Another bitterweet aspect to the game was more human. In retrospect, *Shadowrun*, like all Four Fantastique larps, was highly post-Bjorneborgian. Contrary to how it was often perceived, it was an experience, not a competition or a theatrical show. Our equivalent of the demon in every game

is the presence of a temple or altar regardless of the setting. This time, it was with incense, flowers and a Ganesha statue. The one aspect where we unfortunately erred from the Manifesto was the correct selection of players. Among the 40% of complete unknowns, some were promising newbies, but some did not really involve themselves in the game. This was a pity considering how few players there were in total. We learned our lesson and while we still invite newbies to our games, we've reduced their proportion of all players to make sure they are well briefed and, if needed, helped by more experienced players.

DON'T BELIEVE THE HYPE

The game ended with a final plot twist and a free-for-all fight, leading to an as-yet-unwritten sequel featuring the actual job that needed to be done. Afterwards, everyone proceeded to the debriefing on couches, with healthy snacks of artificially-colored sports drinks and ramen noodles. Players were very positive, overall. The game helped to highlight how irrelevant the local split between murder mysteries and classical outdoors fantasy larp could be.

Shadowrun did feature a small number of players, and it was short, but the extent of physical action was on par with more classical ork-bashing games, helping people to broaden their definitions of what larp could be. Online reception was overwhelmingly positive. We even got encouraging feedback from both a US author and from European publishers of the tabletop game. The most interesting feedback, through private emails or social networks, came from American gamers. Their questions mostly focused on how a particular aspect of the rules system had been implemented, and many were surprised that we preferred to preserve "what you see is what you get" over a faithful reproduction, and that we never even considered a long-running campaign with character progression experience point systems.

They also consistently commented that games with such production values were not available where they lived. It is a paradoxical situation, because *Shadowrun* is an American game and our core technology, the LazerTag guns, had to be imported from the U.S.

SHADOWRUN (2008)

Designed and organized by Le Four Fantastique (Natalia A-V., Thomas B., Samuel M., Lucien V.)

Duration: 4h

Number of players: 16 + 4 organizers/NPC

Budget: 960 Swiss Francs

Participation fee: 60 Swiss Francs.

Video:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5SwkPKYHT0,

www.youtube.com/watch?v=4HEarcvdqSE

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Shadowrun (2008): Le Four Fantastique, Lausanne.

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CATEGORY: DOCUMENTATION

GIVE ME YOUR HANDS,
I WILL BE YOUR EYES

STEEDS

WORDS & PHOTOS AARON VANEK

A Steed talks to the Rider via hand signal.

What happens when you decouple sight from the other senses?

The Rider has sight, but the Steed has the rest.

If I have a "usual" method of designing larps, *Steed*s is the outlier to that system. Normally I come up with a purpose, genre, or setting for a larp and design the mechanics and rules to fit that particular idea. With *Steed*s, the mechanics and system came before the world or characters. It took three runs before I knew what fictional reality fit with the logistical hook of the larp.

The idea for *Steed*s came to me on a flight to Phoenix in January 2010. I rarely have free time for daydreaming, and the concept hit me so quickly it seemed like my subconscious was begging for the opportunity to pitch the idea to my conscious self. The seed sprouted at takeoff, and by the time I landed, *Steed*s had flowered.

I am fascinated by larp's ability to utilize all five senses, a rare strength most other art forms lack. With *Steed*s, I wanted to see what would happen when one of those senses was delegated to another person.

CONCEPT

*Steed*s features four teams of two players. One member of the two-person team is designated the "Rider" and the other the "Steed". The Rider and the Steed are in different rooms. The Rider sits before a laptop computer and watches a live video feed from the Steed. Steeds operate in the play area after donning an elaborate rig: a laptop computer in a homemade mesh backpack wired to a webcam mounted on a helmet, which also holds a blindfold in place over the Steed's eyes. A pair of headphones jacked into the laptop allows the Steed to hear the Rider.

The Steed's laptop and the Rider's laptop are wirelessly connected and share a simple AV chat. Our team found that Apple Macs with the iChat program worked best over the computer's built-in Airport connection. This elaborate technological configuration allows the Rider to see for the blind

Steed as well as talk to her. Audio is one-way, from Rider to Steed. Steeds cannot talk back to their Riders, but I created six simple hand signals for the teams. A Steed would raise a clenched fist up so the webcam could see it; this meant "No."

SCENARIO

The technical hurdles for *Steed*s were considerable and took the majority of design time. Although I knew how Steeds and Riders would function, I had only a few vague ideas for what they would be doing and even fewer ideas as to why.

I felt I had to explain why Steeds were blind and why they were being sent into an environment despite their lack of visual ability. My muse directed me towards a futuristic world where the Steeds were vat-grown creatures produced for a specific purpose. In this case, large corporations were overeager to execute a salvage-rescue mission on a distant planetary scientific outpost. I thought of the Steeds as early precursors to the replicants from the movie *Blade Runner*: artificial humanoids that could withstand the harsh climate and unknown conditions of the outpost. Due to the timely nature of the salvage, all Steeds were released without their visual senses.

Each Rider worked for a different corporation that had semi-similar goals for the mission: some wanted to sabotage the other Steeds before plumbing the secrets of the outpost. The Riders, therefore, were working against each other, yet they were all stationed in the same room.

The Steeds were introduced into an unfamiliar area. We took steps to make sure the players did not see inside the area before the larp. Together with their Riders, they were to figure out a few simple puzzles to restore power, ascertain what happened to the scientists, and retrieve any data that could be useful.



A Steed learns to communicate with his Rider.

In short, the challenges were "bring objects A & B to area 1, which will reveal object C which will help you in area 2." Some puzzles involved smell or hearing. For example, to turn the lights on in the research station, fresh biofuel had to be poured into the fuel tanks. The fuel was in one room, the tanks in another. Rider data said that biofuel is a red liquid, but if it smells like peppermint, it has spoiled. A table in the outpost held six clear bottles containing colored water: three red, three green. Of the three red, two also contained peppermint extract. To find the good fuel, the Rider would need the Steed to open and smell the three bottles of red liquid — with the Rider verbally directing the blind Steed to the red ones — and identify which one did *not* smell of peppermint. That bottle was to be taken to the fuel tanks and poured inside; we had a funnel nearby for convenience.

Steed carried a flashlight, a foam dart gun for combat, and two marked spray bottles of water that had to be used in a specific order to heal. These were carried inside a small pack that hung on the harness with the laptop computer.



Ready for combat! Aiming was done remotely by the Rider.

HOW IT PLAYED OUT

After briefing all players with a general explanation of the scenario, each player chose to be either a Rider or a Steed, and then randomly paired with their counterparts. Some teams knew each other (a husband and wife, or two friends), but that was acceptable. The Steeds were taken outside and started to don the "rig" as we called it, while Riders sat before their terminals and reviewed mission rules and their individual corporate goals.

Once a team of two were ready, we left them to begin training with each other outside of the area designated as the research station. For some, this was already a highlight of the event: learning how to communicate when only one side can talk. The Steeds would explore their packs and learn how to use their Nerf guns and healing items.

Once all teams were ready, two organizers went to the Rider room, and two stayed with the Steeds. We communicated with each other via walkie talkies.

We covered the webcam with a hat so the Riders could not see and led the Steeds into the outpost area. When all were in place, we lifted the caps off so the cameras could work and let the teams go.

The Rider room was very loud and active, as they were constantly trying to stream voice information to their Steeds. At least two Riders were constantly talking for the whole larp. A few Riders would coddle their Steeds, being very kind and almost obsequious. Some Riders would talk to their Steeds like pets, saying "You're a very good Steed, good job," or constantly asking if their Steed was OK. These kindly Riders and Steeds performed better than the others in their runs, though whether that had to do with the attitude of the Rider towards the Steed or the players themselves is unknown.

Inversely, the Steeds were very quiet. They focused intently on their other senses, particularly hearing and touch. One Steed moved in a graceful tai-chi manner of balance and openness.

Time and space were distorted for both Riders and Steeds. The Steeds were in the environment roughly an hour; one Steed thought it was only fifteen or twenty minutes. After the run, we led the Riders to the Steed area, and vice versa. All the Riders were convinced that the play area was far larger than what was really there. The webcams, the speed of the signal — which had a lag, see "Issues", below — and the walking pace of the Steeds warped the actual scale of things. The fact that many areas were unlit contributed to this spatial distortion.

All Steeds moved slowly, a perpetual adagio ballet.

I was surprised that many tropes of first person shooter video games were realized: Riders directed their Steeds to grab everything that wasn't taped down. One Rider directed her Steed to carry far beyond his pack's capacity, so he lugged spare mechanical parts in his arms, wires dangling, for many minutes. Also, when one Steed was injured, which merely involved sitting in one place for five minutes with the webcam covered by a hat, another rider directed his Steed to "spawn camp" and wait until the hat was removed, indicating revival (the Steeds couldn't be killed, that's why they were there). As soon as I plucked the hat off the injured Steed, the other one shot him again with the dart gun, sending him back to unconsciousness. Two Steeds bumped into each other, but one started stealing ammunition from the other's pack. Steeds would also take each other's guns. One tried to pour water into another Steed's backpack, on the computer, but we quickly stopped that. Another conflict occurred when a Rider properly directed his Steed to snatch a foam dart out of another Steed's gun right before she fired it.

Steeds could talk to each other normally, and they knew others were in the room, but in all three runs, any Steed that tried to communicate to the other Steeds was ignored. In fact, when one Steed asked "Can you hear me? Is there another Steed here?" the others backed away and reached for their weapons. No two Steeds cooperated in any of the three runs. Some thought of rebelling against their Riders,

but none did. There was nothing in the game that forced a Steed to obey, just like horses are not compelled to follow their riders. This may have been due to background info, detailed in "Issues".

Some of the Steeds and Riders began to add more words to their vocabulary. One Rider told her Steed that they were looking for something that smelled like peppermint, and asked her Steed to come up with a hand signal to that — which she did, crossing her index fingers into an X. The Rider didn't tell the Steed what peppermint represented, however. Post-game commentary from one Steed lamented that he didn't get the chance to develop his vocabulary beyond the six words I introduced.

Very few of the puzzle challenges were solved before the time ran out. In the first two runs, the lights never came on because the fuel tanks weren't refilled. One room accessed via a dark tunnel was only explored by one Steed. Items were taken by different Steeds, but they never communicated their findings with one another — nor, I assume, their Riders — and so were unable to solve the second-level challenges.

ISSUES

The players on the first two runs at Wyrd Con II, the Southern California interactive theater convention, expressed enjoyment or almost-enjoyment. Intrigued by the concept, there were some problems with execution that they felt could be solved via more playtesting. Their biggest issue was the play area's darkness, which hindered their ability to get much done, like powering the lights.

The third playtest, for IndieCade (a festival of independently made games, many online or video), was a subpar feature: it took too long to get ready and to do anything. For the third run, two teams used new technical systems, including one Rider who came in using Skype from a different city, and another Steed mounted with an Android smartphone, which caused a lag of more than ten seconds from what was shown on screen. One team in the third run consisted of a Nordic larper and a fan of Nordic larps. This team performed the best and had the most enjoyable time. The video gamers were miserable.

Some comments from players at Wyrd Con:

"The darkness was a big hindrance. Not knowing your partner or having time to talk about it ahead of time was a hindrance."

"I would love to replay this game with a full team of LE [Live Effects larp group in SoCal] folk. I think that even with the darkness it would be possible to beat if we had a SMARTER TEAM."

"Would very very much like to play again with a pre-coordinated team and a pre-coordinated plan. I understand the experimental nature of *Steeds*, but I have some suggestions. Mid-game environment alterations would be

interesting, especially for Rider/Steed teams that did not make headway on the initial puzzles. My thought was if gravity were increased [the organizers] could make the Steeds wear weighted aprons/backpacks mid-game. I'm not a video-game person so I did not see the appeal of making it more like a first-person shooter. I understand how cool it is in concept, but that added nothing to my experience."

From the third run at IndieCade:

"Cool game, it was fun. Yes, there were technical issues but that is to be expected with something like this. Without sound, it was hard to know what was a game object and what a non-game object (or person or activity). All I had to go on was a tiny screen. I think game objects should be marked somehow. Maybe use something like glow tape around game objects? I spent some time trying to get through a door. I have no idea if I could go through that door in-game. For all I know that might lead out to the street. It might be interesting to have [an organizer] on conference call with the Steed and Rider at times to provide [supporting character] information / interaction. It's kind of a hard game. Maybe a few small easy goals to kick it off?"

"I was SO excited to play this game as I was briefed about it, and as I was suited up to be a Steed.

Then, I was met with a broken and boring gameplay experience because the internet connection was so delayed that my Rider saw everything I did on a fifteen second delay.

While I see the experience really being amazing when all the glitches, technical problems, and video latency are removed, what I played felt more like an hour-long loading screen with intermittent bursts of seconds-long gameplay (when my Rider was actually occasionally able to see what was in front of me long enough to get me to pick up a bottle, or walk to a table, etc).

In addition, this was an hour-long loading screen that I could not look away from because I was blindfolded inside this larp. It was almost like the diametric opposite of the 'Ludovico Technique' used on Alex in *Clockwork Orange*. Instead of being forced to see violent images I didn't want to see, I was forced to blindly stand inside a game, wishing I could play it, while I WAS playing it."

FUTURE RUNS OF STEEDS

The technical system needs to work, and work well: the Riders need to be able to see, with enough light, and with minimal lag and without losing the signal/connection. This is possible with minor adjustments, as the first two runs had minimal lag, but the cheap webcams weren't able to get enough exposure in the low light.

Besides that, the missing heart of *Steeds* is the content: this is a great system, but what is the story and message behind it? For video game players expecting a first person shooter larp, *Steeds* should merely be an arena combat of

blindfold tag, tracking number of kills in a certain amount of time. Bigger weapons, healing, or other items could be dropped into the play space, but characterization and plot would be minimal at best.

For a larp run, the *Steeds* system can be used in different scenarios, such as: a spy thriller where the Steeds, acting as agents, can see, but the Riders have additional information the Steeds do not, such as what a double agent is wearing or looks like. Ideally, I hope to have a run using *Steeds* for a romantic Cyrano de Bergerac -style larp, where two Riders are courting one another through their Steeds. They, the Riders, cannot speak or touch one another except through their Steeds, who might have other attractions.

I am also fascinated by the idea of Riders being able to participate in a larp via Skype or other chat programs from locations far removed from the Steed play space, as well as instances where Steed and Rider don't meet: in a few runs, I included a mirror, so the Rider could see what his Steed looked like, or even what gender she or he was. Unfortunately, no Steed found the mirror because it was too dark, and the items that could have lightened the area were being hoarded by greedy Rider-Steeds.

Finally, I am interested in exploring the nature of obedience: why should a Steed obey her Rider? What command would she disobey? Would Steeds join one another to rebel against their masters? More experimentation is needed.

LUDOGRAPHY

Steeds (2011): Aaron Vanek, Costa Mesa.

CATEGORY: GOOD GAME BAD GAME

MISTAKES I'VE MADE

WORDS CLAUS RAASTED

- Sorry, you can't use the location after all.

- But it's Wednesday and the game is on Friday!

At Knudepunkt 2011 in Copenhagen, a Danish larp enthusiast by the name of Rasmus Høgdall held a lecture called "All the mistakes I've made". Actually it wasn't a single lecture, but several, and it wasn't Rasmus who ended up talking about mistakes, but other people. I want to use this opportunity to share some of my mistakes as well.

MISTAKE #1: WRITTEN CONTRACTS VS. FREE HELP

Maybe the boat rental guy realizes that you'll be holding a Klu Klux Klan ritual on his 1920s boat and doubles the rent price at the last minute. Or maybe the bus you're going to use for the road trip larp becomes unavailable because your uncle divorces your aunt. Whatever the reason, location difficulties often leave the organizer up shit creek with only a latex sword as a paddle.

"Get a written contract, noob!" is the prevailing wisdom on how to avoid this. But this brings its own set of problems. Because while I might let a friend looking for a place to hold a 1950s murder mystery borrow my apartment, I sure as hell won't sign a written contract to that effect. And while

it's usually possible to get help from the strangest of people, getting them to commit to that help in writing isn't always something that can be accomplished.

While getting a written contract from your rich uncle is difficult, it's just plain stupidity not to get one from a youth culture organization. And it's even dumber not to call them and ask why there's a delay when they don't do the things they've promised to do. Even though you're not paying them a cent.

Here's what you definitely want to avoid. If someone has let you use their location for free and they supply you with a written contract, the least you can do is actually read the damn thing. Because then you might (unlike me) discover things like "The location can only be used 8:00 - 22:00" and ask if that can be worked around. Or, of course, you could do what we did and discover that fact Friday night when the "janitor" casually says: "By the way, you can't stay the night even though the woman you made the deal with said you could... it's in the contract". Finding sleeping quarters for 50 players in half an hour is hard. As I found out.

MISTAKE #2: COMPROMISING ON VISION VS. CANCELLING

The high and the mighty (or at least the moderately successful) in the larp community will be quick to tell you that when you're doing any kind of volunteer project, you need to keep true to your vision or you'll lose your motivation and become frustrated. This makes perfect sense, of course.

Often, though, you'll need to compromise somewhere in order to realize your ambitions. Maybe because of participant wishes. Maybe because of the opinions of helpers. Maybe because of budget concerns. But when should you just pull the plug and call it quits? The moment something has to be changed? When you've lost all sight of the original?

I'll tell you when not to shut it down. In the middle of the thing. It's the best way to get the worst of both worlds. Just don't do it. Please. I beg you. For your own sake. When we cancelled a larp halfway through and called the participants who were supposed to come in the day after and play it (it was a dungeon crawl), some of them went so haywire that they not only wanted their money back, but wanted extra money to make up for their troubles. They didn't get it, but if I'd been a less experienced organizer, that cancellation could have been the end of my organizing days.

MISTAKE #3: BLEEDING YOUR HEART OUT VS. SACRIFICING A MINION

Usually, when doing a larp (or any other kind of project) the thing in shortest supply is good decision-making. It's relatively easy to find someone who can cook food efficiently, write texts that are readable or turn scrap and bent nails into a 2614 spaceship. What's hard to find is someone who can make good decisions and keep a cool head when the poop starts hitting the windmill. And surprisingly enough, if this decision-making creature then deprives itself of sleep, food and earthly comforts, those decisions don't get any better.

So should you always say: "I'm the main organizer. You sleep on the floor, Guy-Who-Does-The-Make-Up-For-

Third-Orc-Unit, since I'm more important to this project than you are?" No, of course not. But if you know that tomorrow will be filled with decisions, decisions and yet more decisions, then maybe – from an overall standpoint – you need your sleep more than Orc-Make-Up-Guy, who mostly just needs to paint them green and yell "NEXT!"

What I did? Got into an argument about who sleeps on the floor that stretched for hours and left everybody mad at each other without anyone getting any sleep.

But most of all, don't end up sitting up all night the day before a larp getting everything finished if it means you get no sleep at all. And if you decide to take a 80 € taxi from the game location to your home to work five hours on making sure everything is perfect and printed and ready to go, then don't forget the printouts when you stagger out into another taxi and take the same 80 € back. Because if you've sacrificed all your sleep and 5% of your budget on something in the 11th hour, make goddamn sure you actually bring it with you!

We didn't.

MISTAKE #4: LANDING SMACK IN THE MIDDLE OF TWO EXTREMES

If you end up in a situation where you have two options, choose one. Or if you're unable to choose, try to find a third option. Don't just count on other people being idiots. And yes, this means that when your co-organizer comes up to you and says: "Claus, we need to cancel our pirate larp! We don't have a working kitchen, the ship combat thing will never work and we just lost a fourth of our players!" it's not a good idea to respond with "I have a plan. We'll just buy every group a huge bottle of rum and hope they get drunk and don't notice that everything sucks."

It didn't work out as I planned. We should have bought way more rum.

CATEGORY: NEW FRONTIERS

THE ROGUE WAVE

WORDS ANDREA CASTELLANI

Larp has often been considered as a limited medium for being intrinsically incapable of building a story with all the features of traditional narrative. For this reason it has experienced a series of attempted reforms that, trying to correct this alleged defect, distorted our medium, making it similar to theater or to tabletop roleplaying. But in today's world this apparent weakness of larp can instead become its strength.

Larp is such a simple and intuitive form of expression that its characteristics can be easily recognized in a number of phenomena patchily spread throughout human history; among the media most similar to arthaus larp are perhaps the *happenings* created by the pioneer of performance art Allan Kaprow in the 60's, which are linked to arthaus larp by a likely cultural continuity. But from a historical standpoint, larp as a whole derives mainly from tabletop roleplaying, the first form of roleplaying games to assert itself at an international level, since the publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* by Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax in 1974.

After the release in 1991 of *Amber Diceless Roleplaying Game* by Erick Wujcik and *Vampire: The Masquerade* by Mark Rein•Hagen, the world of tabletop roleplaying experienced a phase in which the ideal of *story* reigned supreme, although in a sense these games have typically been stories told under the aegis of the game master. This limitation has been surpassed in the late 90s in new design movements

such as those centered around the Forge discussion forum (www.indie-rpgs.com) and the Story Games forum (www.story-games.com). These later movements have proposed games where the story is created collectively without a central authority.

The matter has been quite different in the varied galaxy of larp, especially if we look more closely at the world of arthaus larp.

ON A PIN'S HEAD

One of the first documented examples of arthaus larp is *Knappnålshuvudet* (in English *A Pin's Head*), organized in Kviberg, Sweden in 1999 by Daniel Krauklis, Martin Ericsson, Susanne Gräslund and others, and well described in Gräslund's paper *Building Dramatics*, from which the following quotes are taken:

"Knappnålshuvudet, that I was one of the main organizers for, took place in our world in our time and there we

used themes such as crushed dreams, drug dependence, religious and moral dilemmas – universal issues that we all are affected by.”

Introducing the event the author immediately presents two of the main characteristics that distinguish arthaus larp from the strictly playful forms of the medium: no more fantasy settings as in most of the roleplaying tradition, but the real world; no longer pure escapism, but themes with genuine literary dignity.

“At *Knappnålshuvudet* we also used a kind of three level system, but slightly different.¹ The first level consisted not of a main story because we chose to have none. Instead we had a common framework, a place and a neutral course of action that went on independently of what happened. At the second level were a couple of groups, but most characters didn’t really belong to a group or at least not only one group. We had what we called quartets or short stories (Swedish: noveller) that consisted of about four people, one angel and its human wards. The wards had something in common, but not necessarily a very obvious connection. We always thought of the dramatics as a collection of short stories. There wasn’t one main thread, but about fifteen in parallel, winding in and out of each other, sometimes crossing and intertwining. On the third level were the single characters that were all stories in themselves. They were usually very closely coupled to the short stories and therefore these could be placed somewhere between the second and the third level.”

The designers of *Knappnålshuvudet* refuse to follow the tradition prescribing that in a larp there must be a so-called *plot*, meaning a main storyline that serves as the backbone of the event and is developed in a way predetermined by the authors, regardless of the choices that the characters will make during the larp. In its place as the backbone of the event, shared by all participants, the authors simply establish the location where the event takes place, the situation in which the characters are (the so-called *gameworld*) and a series of pre-established background events, useful to provide a shared atmosphere for the larp, but not in themselves the larp’s storyline.

The plot is not created, either, at the level of individual groups of people with backgrounds or relations in common (another *topos* of traditional larp), but of these *quartets* or *short stories*, which do not necessarily feature, as might be expected, characters with pre-existing explicit relationships between them (family, colleagues, friends, etc.), but characters sharing a *thematic consonance* instead. That is, each of these characters is actually a story in itself, a story which, in the development of the event, comes into contact with other

1 The author is comparing Knappnålshuvudet with the “three level system of dramatics” described in one of the very first books of larp theory, Saga mot verklighet, by Henrik Summanen and Tomas Walch.

stories that share its themes. The focus thus is no longer the “plot” of traditional narrative, but the thematic consonance, which harmonizes on a certain number of themes a large number of stories, crossed and intertwined in a way so thick and inextricable that they cannot be analyzed individually.

“However, one mustn’t forget that one of the greatest tasks for a larpwright is to communicate the vision of the game to the participants so that everyone is striving towards the same goal. The textbase must therefore focus both on delivering the vision and giving improvisation material.”

Here a landmark of some larp traditions is removed: written materials delivered to the players are not an *in posse* plot, split into individual contributions and distributed in an orderly manner between the various characters, which is then “put together” during the event. The written text has instead the task of giving a common vision to the participants (so that the larp is consistent in terms of the overall theme and of the atmosphere) and providing them the basic narrative material on which to build, each of them, their own personal history, not through a rational, calculated creation, but directly experiencing the events while they happen, as in real life.

“Now that we have created the dramatic web, the groundwork, it is time to spice it up with dramatic tools to stimulate the game. There is really no limit to what you can use; objects, letters, phone calls, scenography, in-game music etc. Realistic things have been used a lot and few larpers have anything against it, but surrealistic features, such as background music and video clips on the walls, have always been met with a lot of scepticism in the strivings towards a greater realism. However, I think that for non-historical plays in particular, there is much to be gained here. Using sound and music is a very good way to create an atmosphere, and to help the players keep up the illusion. At *Knappnålshuvudet* we created the womb, the gate between heaven and earth, where the angels could communicate with God via sound and vision.”

Some larpers disliked the lights and sounds of *Knappnålshuvudet* for a reason that makes sense, at least from their point of view: introducing non-diegetic elements, that is elements belonging to the narrative but not the physical gameworld (such as the soundtrack in movies, which is listened to by the audience but not heard by the characters), challenges one of the totems of many larpwrights, namely that of total realism. But if the goal is no longer trying to maintain the flow of a storyline, but instead creating a thematic consonance between many individual stories connected with each other, the use of this kind of “special effect”, which acts directly on the participants’ emotions without passing through the filter of the characters and, more generally, of the fiction, is certainly useful and perhaps even essential.

To conclude this brief glimpse on *Knappnålshuvudet*, Gräslund reminds us that the richness of a larp experience is indeed in the individual stories, but also in how they combine and intertwine:

"If you focus on the single characters and make up interesting stories for all of them you will create a solid ground for your play. You will have to take care to make up a character gallery that fits well together, and draw maps of connections to make sure that no one will be an outsider compared to the others."

LITTLE PIECES OF STORY

Now that we have an idea of how a larp like this works, we can compare larp with other, more traditional media. We know that in classical cinema, theater and TV fiction there is a strong sense of the author from the narrative point of view: the director, following a written text prepared by the screenwriter or playwright, sets out what must happen in the narrative, and the actors perform according to their instructions, of course providing their artistic contribution but fitting perfectly and indisputably in the storyline designed by the authors. This approach produces a linear text which can be enjoyed in only one way, impossible to modify by the users: the viewers can interpret what they see in a personal way, but cannot change the narrative proper, which exists in its own right, regardless of the individual viewer.

Even a highly interactive medium like the most narrative-oriented forms of tabletop roleplaying work, at least from this point of view, just like cinema and theater. Regardless of whether the story is firmly in the hands of the game master or is the result of the active contributions of all participants, the text that is created is still unique and linear, since it is experienced simultaneously by all participants in linear order, like a novel or, better yet, a sort of radio play. To express this concept, Raffaele Manzo speaks of *diachronic* roleplaying.

Despite being a medium in which the audience does not exist, larp allows the individual participant of the event to create their own personal narrative, which exists only as intertwined with the many other narratives that the other participants are having at that time. This creates an apparent chaos in which storylines overlap, merge, separate and mix continuously, and no participant is aware of the whole piece of art, because they cannot be everywhere at the same time and simultaneously participate in what happens in two different rooms or hundreds of metres away: this is what Manzo calls *synchronic* roleplaying.

Therefore, in the most self-aware and elaborate forms of larp, what is created is a non-structure resulting from the simultaneous interaction of a myriad of micro-contributions received by each participant in his own specific way, often completely different from each other. This is why those wanting to provide a narrative experience in a larp cannot focus (as it would be normal in other media) on the beauty of the

narrative arc, on the pace of the events, or on the adherence to (or refusal of) Campbell's monomyth: these efforts are contrary to the very nature of larp as a medium, since larp takes the participants to a situation more similar to real life than to literature. A narrative arc can develop only by forcing the events, the pace is that of life rather than the scene-based pace of cinema or theater, and so on.

There have been attempts to "reform" larp so as to eliminate its chaotic aspects and enable it to create a traditional narrative: an eminent example is Eirik Fatland's *fateplay*, which creates a proper plot by introducing a series of forced events in the course of the larp. Some include the Swedish *jeepform* movement among these experiments, though historically jeepform is a very successful attempt to enrich tabletop roleplaying through modes of expression taken from larp. Markus Montola speaks more generally of *integrative* and *dissipative* methods in conducting a roleplaying event: integrative are those methods which aim to order a traditional narrative, while dissipative are those which aim for the typical larp chaos.

But attempts to transform larp into a traditional medium are laborious, as Fatland himself admits in his essay on fateplay. To fully exploit the potential of larp one must instead use methods that insert into the event a certain thematic consonance or assonance, perhaps the only element of traditional narratology which can be transposed in larp, but that in larp becomes far more powerful than it can be in any other narrative form. In fact, not only in a larp may there be a huge number of different themes (potentially a different theme, or more than one, for each of the participants), but these themes can be tied together and entwined with each other, gaining in complexity and depth, in a way impossible in other media. When living the game in the first person, with one's own body and senses, what happens to the character amplifies the emotional charge brought by the larp's themes and events, even in some cases making it difficult to sustain.

Thus, a designer aware of the limits and potentials of the larp medium would avoid trying to develop a coherent story, focusing instead on maintaining the participants' feeling of participating in a very particular form of narrative having its own essence, independent from the individual micro-contributions. That is, if this effort is successful the event would develop emergent properties of a narrative nature that would cause it to be regarded instinctively by the participants as a proper, somehow coherent narrative, despite the absence of the structures of a traditional story.

In conclusion, it is possible to view and analyze a large part of arthaus larp as a non-traditional narrative form, not so much based on the consistency of information (which is chaotic), but on thematic and associative coherence: a narrative form that I want to define as a "topical wave", a concept defined for journalism by Anthony Moor.

TOPICAL WAVE

Moor theorizes an imminent (and perhaps already happening) paradigm shift in the world of journalism, a direct consequence of the advent of the so-called Web 2.0. It is a shift which leads from the traditional concept of "story" to a new concept which Moor calls the "topical wave".

Traditional journalism has always tried to turn news into stories, by using narrative structures and elements to recount events. A bank robbery is news, but it is not yet a story: it becomes a story only after a journalist has created characters, a plot, a dramatic arc and all the other elements, taken forcefully from the narrative sphere, that make an article attractive to the public. In the English-speaking world, newspaper articles are downright called "stories" – there is also a distinction between "news stories", recounting a specific event which has just happened, and "feature stories", analyzing and tracing a situation beyond the strict present. In the 60s and 70s Tom Wolfe and Truman Capote's *New Journalism* movement developed the narrative aspects of journalism to such a point that newspaper articles became indistinguishable from proper literary works: this is the tradition from which also Roberto Saviano's "non-fiction novel" *Gomorra* comes.

Clearly, narrative forms attract the public, which is more willing to read a piece of news or an enquiry if it is presented in a literary form. But, according to Moor, Web 2.0 has changed the taste of the public and will change it even more in the near future: more and more people do not follow politics, economics, crime, or sports in newspapers anymore, following them online instead, through continuous news feeds, Twitter and Facebook. These services provide a personal point of view, often filtered through direct experience of a given event.

Apparently we like to listen to well-constructed stories, but we like even more to follow the finals through the tweets of a friend who is watching the match at the stadium, to hear about protests in Rome from the Facebook statuses of a Roman friend who participated in them, and so on. According to Moor, this constant flow of information, personal but not filtered and unstructured, finds a peculiar organization of its own in thematic "waves": day after day, tweet after tweet, the "wave" about riots in North Africa takes shape, then another "wave" about Berlusconi's legal problems, another about betting scandals in football, and so on.

Each of us makes up their own completely unique and individual narrative within each of these waves, a narrative created by harmonizing a mass of chaotic and often contradictory information, nevertheless perceived as a coherent whole. A proper story, but light years away from the categories of traditional narratology: this is the "topical wave" Moor speaks about.

If Moor's analysis is correct, we are heading towards a

future where the public will get more and more used to a "topical wave" narrative, and will be less and less attuned to the traditional concept of narrative (article, plot, story...), not just in journalism but also in other forms of communication. Consequently a participatory and highly complex medium like larp will become increasingly attractive for the general public, as in a larp it is impossible to recognize a traditional narrative, but it is easy to recognize an emergent "topical wave" narrative.

Unlike larp, classic tabletop roleplaying games follow the old model of the "story", just like a traditional text: while a participant speaks the others listen. Exchanges can be hectic, but generally all players will remain aware of everything that's happening in the game. Although secrets are sometimes used in tabletop roleplaying, the vast bulk of the experience is shared simultaneously among all participants. All participants stay in the same location, within hearing distance from each other. This means that in tabletop roleplaying it is possible to create an orderly story out of the game experience, the same story shared by all participants.

Thus, the distinction between larp and tabletop moves from the traditional dichotomy between action and description to a dichotomy between a topical wave and a story – which, instead of framing jeepform and similar activities as larp, frames them as tabletop roleplaying.

In fact, if an organizer wants to give their participants a "topical wave" experience, their issues and priorities would be radically different (probably focused on trying to maintain a thematic consonance) from those of an organizer wanting to give their participants a story experience, which requires that the usual mainstay of traditional narrative is met: the dramatic arc, the pace, the succession of events, and so on.

OTHER WAVES

The notion of "topical wave" can tell us much about larp, helping authors and participants to use this medium in the most appropriate and effective way. But if we think about it, even the so-called "extended narrative ecosystems" work roughly as "topical waves": think for example of the most popular television series, around which endless forums, wikis and fan fictions are built, proper corollary-universes that bombard fans with a continuous flow of details, often at odds with each other, which become to all intents and purposes part of the narrative. The same goes for massive multiplayer games such as *World of Warcraft*.

Designing waves instead of stories is an essential part of developing the native language of larp design, a language specifically suited for the unique demands of creating divergent, spontaneous and surprising larp experiences.

I will not tell you a story then, but you are welcome to ride the wave.

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CATEGORY: ART AND DESIGN

IT'S ABOUT TIME

WORDS ELEANOR SAIITA

Just a Little Lovin', played for the first time in July, 2011 in Norway, explored the New York gay scene of the early 80's, and the impact the coming of AIDS had on people's lives. The game was played across three consecutive 4th of July parties. While one hesitates to use a phrase like "life-changing" lightly, I feel comfortable saying that Just a Little Lovin' will be, if not a tectonic shift then at least a marked inflection point for many players. The deployment of time in the game had a significant part in the emotional impact.

Just a Little Lovin' was designed as a mostly "high resolution", realistically represented game, but not exclusively so. A number of metatechniques were used throughout the game, to various ends. Although possibly not conceived of as such explicitly, the way time was deployed in the game ended up being absolutely core to the game experience. Almost any other single technique could have been replaced or significantly altered leaving the fundamental impact intact, but a significantly different use of time would have completely re-defined the game.

Lacking a time machine, there are only so many ways to interact with time as a player or designer. To work with time as a larp designer is to work with the mapping between events in the game and events as experienced by the player. To the extent that one can speak of the "natural" timing of

events in the context of a more or less realistic narrative, we can consider that our reference measure of time.

We can picture the events of a game like knots tied in a piece of string. Each event consumes so much string, and is spaced so far apart. Being larp, there are at least as many strings as players, and even for one player or character, many events may be happening at once; likewise the edges of events are rarely so well defined. Still, the metaphor is useful.

When we think about creating play, either as a game designer or as co-creating players, we build this string. We think about how many knots there are, how they're tied, and how they're spaced — plot and pacing, in other words. Looking at the string as a string, instead of as a series of events, rhythm takes the place of pacing, and repetitive elements are highlighted. This "whole narrative" view of events,

and rhythm and repetition specifically as features of it, will be useful as a tool as we dig deeper.

Critically, the strings perceived by the player and the character need not be the same. Broadly speaking, there are three distortions that can be introduced to the mapping between character and player experiences of time — compression, expansion, and periodicization, each of which changes the player perception of events. At the simplest level, distortions of the timeline are a matter of emphasis. We devote the most of our limited time in-game to those events that matter the most. This is a simplification, however, and there are many other interesting effects in play.

EXPANSION

Expansion during an emotional scene builds tension, but only up to a point. In *Just a Little Lovin'*, at the end of breakfast the morning after each night's party, a lottery was held. All the players had the opportunity to put in one or more tickets for their characters, and then the Tower (every character had a tarot card), supervised by two undertakers, drew names from a top hat. As the names were called, characters stood and were eventually led away. The first morning, eleven names were called, and we, the remaining players, didn't quite understand the process. Those called by fate were lead away, and, unbeknownst to us, a second lottery was held, closed in the black box space, and that lottery determined who actually died. We stood outside, waiting, held transfixed by Death's slow southern drawl. The wait was heart-wrenching.

That second lottery took a long, long time. Eventually, the wait was boring. No one talked, all-suspended in metatechnique dreamtime. We had no choice but to slow down and sit with our emotions. To get to know the contours of our grief, our fear.

On the second and third mornings, the lottery moved more quickly and we mostly knew what to expect, but there was still time then, motionless, standing in the sun with our hearts. Sufficient expansion of the time experienced by the player at the right moment gives room for the lyrical, allows entirely other affects to rise.

COMPRESSION

Compression is more common than expansion. Even the curation we do when we decide which few days of a character's life we're interested in can be seen as compressing the rest of that life away to perhaps some few sentences in a character history, to an hour during workshops at most. Even long-running campaigns (reasonably) ignore most of their characters' lives. The games we play, no matter how immersive, how true to life, are almost always hyper-real, more eventful than any un-engineered time period. As larp designers, we don't want our players to be bored. We don't want a game

to end early, for lack of material. As players, we manufacture drama, fill in the white space.

Sometimes, this is necessary and good co-creation and sometimes it's excessive embroidery, not leaving room for emotional depth and reflection. The difference is often a matter of taste.

Frequently, we don't recognize what we're doing as compression — it's simply an eventful evening.

Compression isn't always just about fitting more in, though. In addition to the fear of death, *Just a Little Lovin'* was a game about desire. While specifically marked as not just a gay game, much of the sex and sociality in-game was gay, and specifically gay, not queer — in the period, narratives of bisexuality or androgyny would be (and were in the game) met generally with derision at best. Sex was played with a variety of techniques, negotiated between each couple or group. Scenes ranged from the entirely symbolic to the somewhat realistically simulated, while still leaving room for a ludic circle to pass between what was happening and anything that could be called player sex.

It was stated ahead of time that desire in play wasn't expected to only be character desire, that bleed into or from player emotion was entirely acceptable, within limits. While challenging for some players (but not, as far as I am aware, in a way which resulted in players being pushed beyond their own limits), overall this seems to have worked well; certainly it contributed a lot to the emotional impact of the game.

In part because of this bleed, managing desire and managing sex scenes seems to have involved a lot of compression for most players. For instance, a sex act that might have taken ten minutes in the real world might be played through in a minute or two; an orgy that would last most of an evening might be 45 minutes or an hour.

While the previously mentioned interest in fitting in as much plot as possible was clearly at play (no slow, languorous love-making when you're a playboy with six other people and a command performance at the drag show to fit in), compression here also allowed players to limit the degree to which their own desires were exposed, acting as a second safety net.

The lottery periods acted in some ways as a form of temporal compression, fitting one facet of the actions of a year into an hour or so of real time. That said, the framing of these events within the metatechnique made them feel more like a separate continuum, largely unmoored from normal experience.

Each act, each year, in *Just a Little Lovin'* had its own emergent feel, along with more explicitly declared and shaped themes. Sampling just one day from each year definitely encouraged plot compression and time compression, even with a heavily used black box and much off-game coordination of intervening events — there was just a lot of living to get through.

PERIODICITY

The intervals in play were absolutely critical to telling the story. The tragedy of AIDS, sudden as it was in some ways, didn't happen overnight, and the story needed years of character time to develop an appropriate weight of tragedy. The final theme of the game was friendship, and the gaps were as equally critical for giving definition to friendship as to tragedy.

Theorists of tradition speak of "pastness" as the property that leads us to take relatively arbitrary social constructs and rules seriously. Pastness isn't just the age of a tradition, as something can be old but irrelevant; it's closer to the extent of lived experience. Not just age, but age accounting for activity across time. Additionally, tradition requires presence, the accessibility of a past pattern to contemporary life, and what is called *traditio*, or the property of having been passed down person to person. Without both of these, a tradition is not alive. In larp, both presence and *traditio* are easily embedded within a fiction. Likewise, we may elect to imbue elements of our fiction a priori with pastness as part and parcel of the creation of characters who take those elements seriously within a created tradition. In doing so, we allude to the presences of some prior interval of nonlinear time, but in the interest of convenience, we often elide its performance.

The core of larp, what gives it much of its emotional punch, its flexibility, and its (sometime) subtlety and veracity of affect, is embodied performance. When we make explicit the pastness of our fiction, playing it bodily, we engage a deeper emotional register and make that pastness firmer. Without explicit enactment, we have only the textual, not physical, notion of the reality of tradition.

Repetition is as important as embodiment for pastness. Even in the second act, having once before enacted all the little pieces of the evening in *Just a Little Lovin'* made that act much more real, both in the current iteration and in my memory of the previous iteration. Repetition combined with explicit enactment is very effective at building pastness, and the fact of repetition is consecrated in many areas of human behavior; the genesis of rites. We often think of repetition as a negative, a trigger for boredom, but pastness can't accumulate without it.

Repetition which happens as part of a linear temporal sequence carries relatively less weight, however, than when temporal gaps (in the fictive timeline) separate those repetitions. While not providing any more of an embodied trigger, separation permits the player to construct further repetition internally, provides room for the accretion of fictive pastness, and also gives an avenue for long-term change. As in this game, many narratives must play out over years for sufficient change to happen for either the characters or setting.

We can call repetition with gaps periodicity, a specific pattern in the manipulation of time that evokes the rhythms

of everyday life, allows them to build, and then highlights how those rhythms change or break down. Rhythm implies memory, the visceral recall of earlier instances but also the heightened awareness of the distinction between occurrences, the shifts.

The relationship between Max and Steven in *Just a Little Lovin'*, was a great example of how periodicity can work. In the first act, the two characters barely interacted; in the second, they hooked up. Their players decided that, over the course of the intervening year, they'd begun a serious relationship. The combination of the enacted past, the repetition of life pattern, and jumping ahead in time meant that in the third year, their relationship had a visceral emotional depth to a degree which proved difficult to dispel after the game.

For in-depth games where character pasts are defined before the body of the game begins, one can either write out a character or play out the details in workshops. Workshops require more organization and bias the game toward a certain kind of emergence which may be difficult for tightly plotted fictions. While the pastness developed in-game in *Just a Little Lovin'* worked very well, a number of players reported difficulty performing elements of their written backgrounds. Sometimes, this was because there was just too much material to remember, but it was also because they had no enacted anchor for the material. For tightly plotted games, thorough use of black-box scenes during workshops may be a happy medium. That said, reports from the character development process in the game *Totem*, where all relationships were played out in sketch form, not pre-planned, suggest a preference for organic development.

The issue of available workshop time raises another note on time in *Just a Little Lovin'*, especially interesting to a relative outsider to the medium (despite some experience with tabletop and reenactment, *Just a Little Lovin'* was my first Scandinavian larp). The degree to which players were co-creators was delightful and surprising, and one of the ways this was most obvious was in management of the rhythm of play. Time off-game between acts was very short, and players worked hard to fit everything they needed to do in. Similarly, the timing of pre-planned events was adjusted between acts, trying to ensure everyone could make it to what they needed to do. What on the first act felt like bumpy, uneven time, unusually full of portentous events but still with gaps, time for boredom — natural perhaps — became a smoothly run machine. This made for a good game in many respects, but between on- and off-game tight scheduling, the overall impression was of a Taylorism of affect, the collective body of the players tuning themselves into eurythmia.

One final form of manipulation of time was present in part in *Just a Little Lovin'*, and to a much greater degree in the game *Delirium*, namely nonlinearity, cutting out sections of the string and rearranging them. In *Just a Little*

Lovin', this happened only in the black box, as people played out the causes or consequences of actions. Time in the main narrative thread was always inviolate. Changes in the black box were invoked under the explicit control of the player, limited in scope, and with some exceptions, always causality preserving for the main narrative.

In *Delirium*, none of these were true. Time was under the control of the game organizers, who intercut past and future, without necessarily making it clear to the players, let alone the characters, which was which. In effect, this added a third viewpoint, sandwiching character time between player time and "real" time in the fiction, radically warped to the point of being almost divorced from both. Needless to say, this is a temporal frame only suitable for some fictions.

EVENT CITIES

I'd like to switch metaphors at this point, having exhausted the understanding of time as knots on a string at one level, and talk about the spaces we play in as temporal objects. Although the ludic circle within which we play is an embodying artifact in its own right, it must be situated within real space(s). Bernard Tschumi, in *Event City* and *Architecture and Disjunction*, discusses physical spaces, whether buildings, entire cities, or merely some marked place, as spaces of movement and events having a beginning, when they are first marked as a space, a following temporal narrative, as the space happens, and eventually an end, as the space is un-marked. Trivially, one experiences this entire trajectory every time one has a picnic in a park, creating a temporarily delimited space that, for all that it's only a blanket and circle of friends, feels like an almost bounded, indoor room to the people inside it. This is socially defined, performed, event-space. Tschumi argues that all spaces are like this, regardless of how much concrete or steel may be used in the social performance. As we socially perform spaces, an understanding of those spaces as having a deep history, a before and an after, may be productive. From *Architecture and Disjunction*:

"Bodies not only move in space but generate spaces produced by and through their movements. Movements — of dance, sport, war — are the intrusion of events into architectural spaces."

"...architecture is inhabited: sequences of events, use, activities, incidents are always superimposed on those fixed spatial sequences. These are the programmatic sequences that suggest secret maps and impossible fictions, rambling collections of events all strung along a collection of spaces, frame after frame, room after room, episode after episode."

We overlay an additional event space every time we play, whether entirely figuratively (as in many jeep games), or more literally, in either a dressed pre-existing environment (like *Just a Little Lovin'*, which used a set of cabins near Vestby as a set), or even more obviously in a completely

created environment, like the set of the game *Kapo*. Spaces are always bound to what is enacted in them, and Tschumi examines various degrees of binding, an avenue which I will elide for space but which may be fruitful for the theory-inclined. This notion of the temporally performed space is clearly demonstrated, almost multiply so, in *Delirium*, with its transient, physically reconfigured but fictively static environment, a space literally becoming a simulacrum. Just as altering the structure and pastness of relationships in games provides for much deeper meanings, we can alter the performed structure and pastness of spaces.

Explicitly performing and reworking our relationships with the built environment points toward new frontiers which are architecturally interesting, if nothing else — shades of the work of architect Cedric Price, rebuilt into a temporally complex augmented reality game, made even more charged by the current (as of this writing) occupation movement, temporary autonomous zones writing themselves permanent in cities around the world by performing those spaces differently.

ATEMPORALITY

That the occupations around the world will almost certainly (for better or worse) mean something different as they become history brings us to our last time-construct. Atemporality, coined by William Gibson in a talk at BookExpo America in 2010 and expanded on by Bruce Sterling at transmediale 10, is the collapse of meaning in previously historically-marked aesthetics — and, for that matter, ethics. The now-current meaning of the occupations will be equally accessible when this is read as the contemporary meaning is; likewise the fashions of the 40s, or indeed the 80s, are equally as available today as contemporary fashion is. In pre-atemporal times, seeing someone walking down the street in 40s fashion would bring to mind someone playing a historical role, would explicitly load that temporal frame. Now, we no longer load that frame; we see a contemporary person wearing contemporary clothes which are referencing one equivalent aesthetic scheme.

While walking to the train to *Just a Little Lovin'*, I noticed a bunch of people dressed oddly — a little more color than I'd expect to see in NYC, for instance, but still within bounds where they wouldn't get much more than a second look; I didn't read the clothes then as being 80s-specific at all. It turned out that these were other players, some already dressed in costume. Just after the game, again waiting for a train with other players, I noticed two people off in the distance and almost called out to them that the train was coming, as from within an 80s-era aesthetic viewpoint, their clothes were very strongly period-marked. Of course, they weren't players at all.

Finding evocative near-modern clothing is always some-

what difficult, especially when trying to avoid things which will be read as ironic within our modern, hipster-saturated fashion milieu. That said the mass appropriation of fashion from all periods, network-culture driven instant recall, makes reading temporal contexts much harder. The key in this case was reading back into a culture which was much less sophisticated in its use of image, was relatively naive to visual quotation, appropriation, and mash-up. When the two people I saw after the game got closer, it was just this fluid use of image that made them obviously not players.

While atemporality for image is both useful and complicating, it will be interesting to see how atemporality alters our understanding of the traditions, rituals, and fictions we create. If we can use our more fluid understanding of time to imbue an easy pastness and we become used to an assumption of all historical traditions having some degree of presence, we may find our worlds increasingly easy to invoke thanks to a more nuanced understanding of the temporal effects and affects at our disposal.

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LETTING THE STORIES GO

WORDS EMMA WIESLANDER

Political larps, or larps that aim to change something in the players, in larp scenes or in society have been discussed in various ways. Some discuss the topic of making norms visible and experimenting with the breaking, changing and construction of new norms. Another subject is how much of an effect a larp can achieve. In this article, I offer some tools and thoughts to create both generate an increased awareness in design processes and make games that have a lasting effect.

The idea of Positive Power Drama is celebrating its tenth anniversary and is more relevant than ever. In *Beyond Role and Play*, where it was introduced, I started the article by stating: "What we perceive as possible will forever influence what we are willing to try". Since then a lot of things have become perceivable.

This article elaborates on this idea, and the concept of drama that can change the world and do good, at least on an individual level. I expand on ideas like the inter-subjective collective as a mechanic that can redeem the story as easily as it can lead it to the seemingly unavoidable Aristotelian corner of despair.

WHO'S WHO?

First, I'd like to introduce some concepts I find useful. To keep it simple, I suggest using words that also are used in psychology, behavioral science, religious studies and other relevant fields of academia.

Here, a "role" is a word used to describe function. In this sense, "the role you play" doesn't mean what character you play, but rather what actions you are expected to perform. For example, the character Mr T in *Just a Little Lovin'* was the host of the party and as such his role was to welcome the other characters to his summer house. In an average larp some players will have roles of this kind simultaneously as players and characters. Typical examples are characters with

kitchen functions such as the character of Peggy, owner of Peggy's Diner, who did catering for the game of the same name.

Roles are typically organized by "identity". A role becomes an identity when it's internalized and is experienced as part of "who you are"; even when you are not performing the actual function. An example can be that the caretaking of a child is a role but a parent is someone who has internalized the role and might perform as a parent in situations that have nothing to do with the child. The person might make choices; use special words or body language or clothing associated with the identity of a parent. These images that the person relates to are generally not self-invented but part of a cultural norm, often described as the social construction of the society.

A perspective from religious psychology I find particularly useful in game and character design is that of the relationship between identities and "personal myth". Myth in this context doesn't mean that it's anecdotal or a lie, but rather that it's the story a person tells about herself to herself or to others. It's not just a historical description. These myths are often useful in organizing identity, rationalizing choices (even bad ones) and circumstances, and thus inspiring us by spelling out what to believe in or strive to be. Or as Kenneth Rees puts it (referring back to Feinstein and Krippner):

"...personal myths explain one's world to oneself, guide

personal development, provide social direction and address spiritual longings. They organise one's sense of reality and guide one's actions. Such a concept can therefore also include emotive as well as purely rational factors that inform how people negotiate their way through the post-modern web of life."

I believe that one of the key factors in what is called "bleed" (the player inherits experiences, feelings and sometime hang-ups from a character) is that the game events sometimes tie in to our personal myth, "the story" that we tell our self, in a way that fuels the story. This, of course, goes both for positive and negative emotions. The brain, it seems, is rather changeable. During our life, paths carved are made deeper or rendered obsolete, and what we expect to feel is rather instrumental in how we experience actual situations.

Unfortunately for those who'd like to make a case that playing a murderer will make you more prone to actually commit murders, it's not that simple.

We seem to have to "want" the bleed to happen. One way of explaining this is to look at how we choose to relate to bleed: how we incorporate it into our story about ourselves. It appears that if we make our experience as a murderer mean something else, even to get a kick out of experiencing forbidden things in a safe and sound environment, the effect is rather the opposite of reinforcing the behavior assumed in the game.

The lesson learned from games such as *Mellan himmel och hav*, *Just a Little Lovin'* and *Delirium* is that the process of debriefing is especially important for the integration of game experiences and the player's personal myth. This is to a great extent an organized form of helping the player make sense of it all. In many intense games it might also be a good idea to organize this as an on-going process that begins before the game and is a vital function of an off-game area.

To conclude, I believe that a successful way of thinking about characters, especially in games designed to affect the players, shouldn't be only concerned with the role of the character, or the roles, historical or particular to the game, the character is supposed to have internalized. I believe that the myth, having a narrative for the experience, can be a key element. Such a description can be only one paragraph but will inevitably communicate the *essence* (including beliefs, relations and incentives) of the character in a way that can hopefully become relevant to the player too.

An example of such unusually short descriptions would be the characters in *Joakim*. One of the characters, Ulrika, consists of the line (in my translation) "The one who became an acclaimed director instead [of being an actor]".

REPETITION WITHOUT THINKING

In games we can experiment with different positions in a broader sense. Not only different roles, but concepts such

as class, age or what kind of beings we are. We can embrace different beliefs, expand our catalogues of myths available for subscription and of course discover how the process of internalization works. This enables us to construct and deconstruct identities, make us more aware of the norms surrounding us, and make a critical approach to life easier. Unfortunately, in my opinion, most larps don't take this holistically aware approach on character creation. As Jofrid Regitzedatter and others have noted, it seems we can easily imagine worlds that contain dragons while the personal myth – the story – we offer our characters is, more often than not, limited to constructs of our contemporary society and culture.

Of course, not all larps are about deep character interpretations. I propose that this approach, or at least awareness, might nevertheless be useful. However practical stereotypes are in explaining a person quickly, these images can make it more difficult for the players to experience the fiction.

A stereotype is typically bound to a specific context and a mutual understanding of that context. Many genres have invented stereotypes that only make sense in the context of the fiction. However, this only works if the stereotypes truly go beyond being mere reflections of class and gender drawn from the organizers' contemporary context. Such constructs, uncritically taken into the fictional reality, makes the game less fun by limiting its possibilities and leads to rather daft reifications of existing stereotypes in the gamer subgroups.

This can be illustrated by the idea that women (players) should not have fighting characters in fantasy games because the genre is essentially constructed from historical medieval times where women did not fight. Regardless of whether that is a true description of the historical context it should be clear that all elements in a fictional setting such as fantasy need to be constructed within a common agreement of what is true. As genders, class and other social constructs are not forces of nature they are as much subject to that agreement as elements like dragons, elves or artificial intelligence.

By helping players to tell other stories, by enabling other agreements, I believe we can make games better, regardless of genre or gaming style. I believe we can achieve this simply by making more positions and stories available to more players, or in the case where a game designer wants a specific story to be told, by using myths and roles in a strategic fashion, aware of social norms. The first step is to make yourself aware. A good starting place is to observe with awareness. Simply ask yourself (and try to be honest) what the groups, stereotypes and roles given to the players do for the fiction and for their experience.

Markus Montola might have been the first to explicitly write about the obvious fact that no two people will have the same larp. Larps are stories that are subjectively produced and just like a picture might look different from different

viewpoints, so does larp. The practical result is that producing story and characters in a larp has to be a collaboration of different people with their respective subjective interpretations of the story. I'd like to call this an intersubjective collective creation process.

By viewing it as such I believe that we gain insight into the importance of not assuming that everyone involved has the same frame of reference, which makes it obvious why the use of uncritical cultural stereotypes is inefficient.

WHAT'S THE STORY HERE?

Describing stories, how they are composed and told has been an art form in itself at least since classical times. Since most larps are stories in some way a lot of the practical and philosophical work from other story media is applicable. Still, most of the really useful stuff is written specifically for larp.

Since even the monsters are the leading characters in their own stories, there is never just one story, unlike in other media. It has been argued that there are really only seven stories in the world. In game design this is interesting in terms of plots:

Overcoming the monster – defeating threatening force, like in Hollywood movies such as *Star Wars* and *Jaws*.

The Quest – a group sets off in search of something and (usually) finds it, *Lord of the Rings* and *Moby Dick*.

"Comedy" – not necessarily a funny plot. Some kind of misunderstanding or ignorance keeps the parties apart, but is resolved towards the end bringing them back together. *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *War and Peace* or *Much Ado About Nothing*.

"Tragedy" – someone is tempted in some way (vanity, greed, etc.) and becomes increasingly desperate or trapped by their actions until the climax where they usually die. Unless it's a Hollywood movie, in which case they escape to a happy ending. *Devil's Advocate*, *Hamlet* or *Requiem for a Dream*.

Rebirth – the hero is captured or oppressed and seems to be in a state of living death until it seems all is lost. Then is miraculously freed. *Snow White*, *A Christmas Carol* and *A Doll's House*.

Rags to Riches – the riches can be literal or metaphoric. *Cinderella*, *Pygmalion* and *Sound of Music*.

Voyage and Return – the hero journeys away from home to somewhere different and finally comes back having experienced something and maybe changed for the better. *Wizard of Oz*, *Gulliver's Travels* and *Alice in Wonderland*.

Of course, these stories make for some fine personal myths too. Most games that are intended to have an impact on players use themes like the Voyage or Rebirth. This can also be one of the incentives for players to attend games such as *Kapo*, *Europa* or *Futuredrome*. Some larp theorists have described this story as the Aristotelian story curve, where there has to be a pivotal turning point, a catharsis. This is, of

course, only one possible arc. Experiences from larps such as *Mellan himmel och hav*, where this arc was not part of the design, show that for many of the players the myth of the catharsis-experience is such a big incentive to participate and is so ingrained into the concept of drama larp that the players were actively (albeit not consciously) creating it even if it wasn't a part of the original design.

WHY QUARREL?

Eirik Fatland argued in his article "Incentives as tools of larp dramaturgy" that conflict seems to be the base of almost all incentives. Nevertheless, he quotes Ursula LeGuin who proposes other alternatives. She argues that the conflation of story and conflict is a reflection of a culture that inflates aggression and competition at the (conscious) expense of other behaviours such as relating, finding, losing, bearing, discovering, parting and changing. Fatland concludes that although most players testify that it is the non-competitive elements that form their most memorable experiences, very few larps have been played and designed with this in mind.

Fatland gives us tools for working with incentive webs that can also enable less linear or even recursive story plotting (although he does perhaps not advocate it). He does ask if the typical use of relations in character instructions really are intended to produce a less conflict-focused drama. He suggests that relations, when used to encourage events, often imply conflict.

"A relationship of mutual love is not always an incentive, it may encourage some role-playing between the two lovers but no specific courses of action. Love becomes an incentive when the parents of the young lover refuse to acknowledge their relationship, and once again we speak of conflict"

In a sense, this is a question of semantics, but I agree with LeGuin's view that this is a clear example of the bipolar, black and white, competition driven worldview that permeates the western contemporary culture and its expressions. Since 2005 more larps have explored gender, emotive larping and using "story" in a less reductionist way. Still, I believe that Fatland's assessment that very few larps have any awareness of using other stories than those based on conflict is still accurate.

I believe that choice of what stories we tell is highly important, not only on an individual level, but also on a political level. The idea of the (god given) authority that cannot be wrong makes insurgence more difficult; it's likely to fail and is also wrong. The idea of measuring (and talking about) how "productive" a day-care unit or a hospital is in financial terms, rather than talking about more concrete values, such as health, well being, creativity and so on, defines the use we can have of them and creates a hierarchy of values where money is the highest value. The story of Success holds the possibility of losing ones inherent human value through be-

coming *The One Who Failed*. As Barbara Ehrenreich proved in her work of investigative journalism, it's the real opium that makes people subject to intolerable work conditions in the U.S. today. The naming of such abstract phenomena as financial wealth as "concrete" just because we can use mathematical formulas to measure it while social factors are often deemed to be vague or elusive when they are in fact so simple that the smallest infant can explain to you its state of well being.

I believe that larp as a media has the possibility to elude reductionist and simplistic stories. I believe that it's inherent in the media itself. Because of its intersubjective nature and participatory structure, larp never has only one story. It is never that simple. Regardless of the definition of larps as narrative or not, they do tell participants something, both about their possible positions in structures such as society, and about themselves as people. Even in the simplest game, the thing that will make it memorable will most likely be how well the larp ties in to the player's basic needs, be it *To Belong*, *Sexual Satisfaction* or *Simplicity*.

A seemingly negative experience, or an experience set in an uncomfortable environment, can still tie in to these needs and make us feel more confident, safe or strong because we experienced it. This depends on the player's personal mythification of the event. Feelings, negative and positive, are derived from needs and there are no negative needs.

I consider all stories to be political as they teach or tell us something. Stories that we fail to relate to are hardly stories at all. I resent the notion that only the stories that expose the hidden or advocate change should be considered political, as if the conservative or the prohibiting were something neutral or less ideological. It's a lazy, but still political standpoint to passively retell stories of a culture that in itself strives to limit the possibilities of storytelling. While I write this, the Occupy Wall Street movement is spreading, and one of its maxims is a quote attributed to Desmond Tutu: "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor".

Although political principles might motivate me and explain why I should write this article, it is not my foremost reason to offer it. I also believe that multitude is an end in itself. I feel that the limiting structures and the retelling of only some of the possible stories out there is fruitless and counterproductive.

I propose a more explorative approach to game design. Ask yourself what stories are made impossible by conforming to a storytelling tradition from other, monostoried media, or even to the convention of larps played today. As players we can question the unspoken politics, but also explore other arcs than *Rebirth* and *Catharsis*. In 2002, when the first steps of formulating *Positive Power Drama* were taken, this was not so clear. Since then, many great larps have been

played and I strongly believe that we, as a collective, have enabled the perceiving of a much wider set of stories than we had ten years ago.

GO EXPLORE!

Positive power drama is not just a neutral tool; it's also a call for action. Larping has every possibility to be a positive force in the world, be it as a tool for deeper learning and understanding, for exploring ways of genuine co-creation and by undermining the divisive way of thinking in terms of us and them. It achieves this through getting rid of an unnecessary audience and involving people as participants.

Although all these things are empowering in themselves that doesn't mean that larp, larp-making or partaking in larp are empowering experiences per se.

To make it truly empowering, we need to look at the stories we tell on a deeper level. Language is magic. It's one of the most efficient ways of shaping the world through shaping the way we think. Positive in this case does not mean that I believe we should think positively about everything or that I subscribe to the New Age notion that we choose our life. The civilian victim of war does not choose to die, nor do the poor choose the situation they are born to.

I aim to go deeper than that. Why are there people who starve? We have plenty of food in the world. Why is there still gender inequality, racism and other dividing systems of hierarchy? Why don't all people receive medicine and care based on their needs? The declaration of human rights which states that these are in fact rights has been a consensus for a very long time now. In order to change these structures I believe we need to tell stories that make the declaration possible. Both to empower people to take action, to show possible ways to change and to have fun doing it so the journey is an end in itself.

To break the dividing dogma that enables the kind of greed and perceived self-interest that is an underlying factor in many of the situations that threaten the realization of human rights, we can look to what myths there are that can justify such action. To use the definitions of psychologist and eco-activist Miriam Simos, they are:

The Apocalypse – This is a story about time. It tells us that time is a thing and not a set of relationships, that history is a story with a beginning, middle and end, and that the end will be climactic. It's the idea of revolution. It shapes the way we think of death and enables states that make laws against murder to still manufacture weapons and go to war. It creates the notion of extreme circumstance that justifies non-justifiable means. It appears in our daily life as deadlines and crises followed by crashing, exhausted. It's hard to think, plan and build for long-term change when expecting impending doom.

The Good Guys/Girls Against the Bad Guys/Girls – This story is about value, and therefore also about passing judgement. This is the basis for all dualism: all qualities can be broken down into pairs of opposites – one good, idealized, one bad, devalued. In the split world spirit battles with flesh, culture with nature, the sacred with profane, light with dark, men with women and then some women (virgins) with other (whores). The devalued becomes an object to be controlled and contained, not a part of the same whole.

The Great Man Receives the Truth and Gives it to a Chosen Few – This is a story about knowledge. Knowledge is something that can be given. First to a great man (usually through some form of ordeal) and then to the elect worthy. It's also a story of authority, legitimizing hierarchy and the notion of exclusive truth, a notion that has destroyed more movements than the secret polices have.

Making it/The Fall – This is a story about success and failure, be it the fall from Eden or the American Dream. This story keeps us busy trying to "make it", to push into the circles of the elect, looking for personal salvation instead of challenging the consciousness that devalues what we already are. It breeds not only isolation but also devalues us as human beings with innate worth. We become the sum of our achievements, contacts and resources. Even worse, we can position our self on an imaginary scale where those with "less" are also responsible for their failure as otherwise we couldn't take credit for our success.

These are the stories of "power over". By becoming aware of these themes we can free our thoughts from their power over us and create fiction (and ways of thinking) that emerge from other values.

Close your eyes and imagine what is the most sacred to you.

"Ask yourself: what do I care about so strongly that I can't bear to see it compromised or destroyed. When you know the answer consider for a moment what the world would be like if our social, political and economic systems all cherished what is most sacred to you. In what ways do they already? In what ways would they need to change? What would change in your daily life? In your community? In the world around you?"

NOW MAKE A LARP!

Whatever it is you hold sacred, be it the living earth, the joy and laughter in your children's eyes or the love and companionship with your loved ones, I'm sure that there's a story there that is exciting, engaging and full of dramatic incentive. Form a group of people all doing the same thing and think about it. Create a vision. Put that in a genre that you are comfortable with, be it close-to-home jeepform, high fantasy or dark political sci-fi. Decide the whats and invite others to explore the hows. Is this a one evening event or a

huge campaign? Is it a five-player thing or *the* event of the year?

Explore the stories that are about and within the plethora of stories that don't fit into a dualistic mind-set. Explore the power-from-within. That which is more than a feeling, more than a flash of individual insight, our knowledge of the impact we have on others. Act, and draw wisdom from the resistance and negative sanctions that you will encounter, the structures of authority, of norms. In a community we have the power to heal each other and to help, a power that goes beyond the individual self.

We discover our worth as we help each other to heal the crisis and damages inflicted by this culture. Within a community we can identify the set structures and play ourselves to freedom, to counter the constricting stories of estrangement. To do so we need stories of singing and dancing in front of the jailers, refusing to take part in the aggression and the counter-aggression. We need stories of the groups that have differences but complement each other, rather than compete. We need places to practise methods of non-violence. What space would be better defined for this purpose than the media of larp?

The challenge of Positive Power Drama remains. What we choose to perceive can inspire us to expand gaming as well as reality. Now all we have to do is make it happen.

LETTING IT GO WHERE YOU WANT IT TO

Becoming aware of personal myth, on both a player and a character level enables a more strategic design of both characters and bleed. It is possible to open new doors behind which a vast range of mostly unexplored stories and choices await both players and potential games. By using larp as a tool for empowerment we can even construct games that function as a countermovement to a depowering society and oppressing, economizing structures. This can be achieved through strategic work in three areas:

1. Choosing the themes and stories to tell and retell, preferably exploring new ones that don't feed constricting and splitting societal paradigms.

2. Exploring methods for storytelling, organizing, debriefing and working in collaborative processes that empower everyone involved in an emotive, collective and subjective process.

3. Creating characters that are defined from the perspective of personal myth and creating incentives for action through relation-formed beliefs. Working from there to then describe possible identities and roles.

By using any of these I believe that most organizers (regardless of theme or genre) can "change the world", at least on an individual level. By using all of them we can make magic happen.

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TEARS AND DEFEAT

META-LEVELS AMONG FAERIES

WORDS NATHAN HOOK, PHOTO NICKLAS SILWERULV

The tragedies of playing with hollow men.



Off-game, I stood on a small almost-island, on the third of five days of the Swedish Tolkien-style epic fantasy village larp *Weave of Fate*. It was my second year at the long-running campaign, but I was unsure how viable it was to go every year. Against the backdrop of lake, forest and sky was a beautiful figure in shining white, with sufficient Oxbridge education to speak quasi-Shakespearian English. We had talked pre-game but never met in-game before.

I HAVE A QUESTION

In-game, I was playing a grey-haired old faun/satyr (a physically embodied faerie, in contrast to the truly immortal faerie spirits) named Silenius (based on Greek half-animal mentors) getting ready to play host to the humans and elves coming to attend our faerie revelries. Newly arrived was the Faerie Queen (a being somewhere between Proud Titania and Galadriel-with-the-Ring), his spiritual mother and literal Goddess.

Gingerly the faun approached her with the words "I have a question". The queen acknowledged me.

"Each year I notice more grey hairs", the faun said, his fingers in his loose flowing hair. That statement was true at every level, in-game and off-game.

The Queen replied with the smile of a predator. "You are afraid. You fear death, as the mortals do." She spoke of how much she enjoyed the taste of his fear.

He struggled out the words as his throat closed up. "I know I could leave this world for Faerie and not age, but if I stay here until this body wears out, what will happen to me?"

◀ *The author as the satyr Silenius.*

Already somehow standing lower than the Queen despite my natural height, my character fell to his double-jointed knees. Floods of tears rolled from his eyes and he sobbed like small child at his mother's feet.

She commented to the imposingly horned faerie spirit Hunt standing nearby: "He could leave this world, but he will not." The faun affirmed softly: "I love this world".

Off-game, what made the feeling so powerful was the real sense of limited lifespan. It is not viable to keep making the long trip to the same foreign larp campaign every year. At that point in the event I was already thinking I may not be back the following year. My time in that world and the enjoyment I had being that character really was limited in every sense.

The Queen spoke in answer to his crying: "I enjoy your emotions, but not that sound you make." She continued by answering his question, revealing his spiritual nature, his fate after death and the choice he made before birth.

MOVING ON

The scene moved on and the day passed. Prior to the start of the event the faeries had been briefed that the Queen would likely appoint one of them to represent her when she is absent (which is most of the time) and she invited gifts. In addition the Queen had announced that as she was a Goddess she desired mortal worship like her siblings in the commonly accepted pantheon of Gods normally received, and commanded the faeries to arrange this.

Off-game, our response to this contest over the days of play leading up to this had brought our different play styles into a new light. The faerie spirits were played by Swedish narrativists who had reacted to situations by trying to make dramatic scenes. Speaking more generally, during the event some faerie players felt the need to go off-game when no mortals were around to plan out scenes – faeries that literally wink out of existence when no mortals are around to observe them.

Coming from a simulationist tradition I had gone around the huge site during the previous days, and had schemed, plotted, bargained and proactively initiated events fully in-game so that I had something of consequence to present to the Queen.

In-game the other faeries variously presented items of no significance or effort to acquire – 'that tree', or 'this necklace'. My faun presented to the queen a large group of mortals he had plotted with whose prayers she had already heard, and their promise to raise a church in her honour. In addition he spoke of the faerie-blooded human child he had sired on a priestess the year before at the faerie revelry (at the previous event) that would become her prophet.

This context brought home to me the full realisation of how different our play styles were. However I also realized

it was not just an off-game difference in play style but also an in-game difference, something the Queen had brought to my mind when she answered the question earlier. The faerie spirits lacked the mortal spark of creation. As the Queen had affirmed earlier that day, the faun had both a faerie spirit and a human soul meshed together. He existed in a perpetual liminal state between faerie and mortal natures, so he had the creative spark they lacked.

The contest was concluded as the sun set. The Queen chose the most impressive looking faerie spirit there, Hunt, to be her voice, then immediately apologized to the faun, then rebuked Hunt for his many mistakes and threatened to rip his horns off (again). My character sank depressed at having unexpectedly lost. The faerie Dream tried to cheer him with the promise that all his mortal descendants would dream of him after he was gone, a mental image that drew a few further tears.

The day drew to a close with the Queen wishing us goodbye. The moment was tingled with sorrow at lost opportunities, of other things that could have been done that day.

WHY, OH WHY?

Immediately after the event one of the organizers explained what had happened. He had decided the result and instructed the Queen's player. In his own words "you had wiped the floor with Hunt" but he felt they needed a Swedish player whose character could be present at the smaller events in the campaign during the year to fulfil that status role. The organizer apologized to me for it three times over the following off-game day and said how angry he would be in my place. Ironically the player of Hunt had already decided he was retiring his character from play during that event but not told the organizers. Not only had the internal consistency been broken and a great mass of plot threads derailed, but the off-game reason was invalid.

As I understood better when I talked with the players later, some of them wanted to play cool scenes and not deal with the logical cause-and-effect of their actions. Their characters have 'hollow man syndrome', presenting an impressive image but with no solid character or personality underneath. In the Faerie Queen's case, the organizer had overridden the player and hollowed out the character.

Faeries and narrativists have no soul.

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CATEGORY: ART AND DESIGN

WHAT IS GOOD PLAYING?

WORDS NIINA NISKANEN

There's been a lot of talk about how to make a good game, but what about good roleplaying from the player's perspective?

Larping has been a dear hobby of mine since the late 90s, and I guess that makes me somewhat experienced. However, I consider myself a mediocre player at best. Among other things, I've accepted an unsuitable character, neglected debrief and feedback, and failed in supporting my co-players due to chemistry problems or laziness. When the circumstances are right I might excel myself, but must I passively wait for the circumstances to happen? Could I somehow create them myself? In this article I ponder some elements of good playing in larps.

Good playing can't be defined without first defining a good game. My rough simplified generalization is that a good game is a powerful experience created in cooperation by all participants. Interimmersion plays an important role. The range of different games is vast. In the other extremity there might be a 50-player hop-in-hop-out party game without preparation situated on a cruise ship, and on the other end a carefully directed, visionary work of art for five players in a dungeon involving complex multimedia, budget of thousands and a professional production crew. Different games work in different ways but the elements of good playing are universal. When the game is on, everybody strives for the common goal by common means. Thus cooperation is a key factor in my definition.

THREE PERSPECTIVES OF GOOD PLAYING

I see good playing from three different perspectives: my own, the co-players' and the game organizer's point of view. Certain elements are included in all three, but some are strictly dependent on the viewpoint. It is wise to be aware of all perspectives: the view is much more diverse. Good playing is not necessarily restricted only to actions during the actual game but extends also to pre- and post-game practices.

My own playing is strongly influenced by the feedback I've received in previous games. The more positive comments I get, the more secure and skillful I feel as a player. I also follow the basic conventions: pay the fee, study the given material, create the look. During the game I react, think, feel and experience the way I feel is best. Afterwards, my perspective of my own playing is again evolving as I get feedback.

When I evaluate the playing of my co-player some common elements catch my attention. Is she willing to discuss and plan the game ahead? Is her character credible and in line with the background material? Does she follow the rules? Does she support my own playing and the immersion? Is she a skillful actor? Are we in friendly and constructive terms before and after the game?

The third perspective is that of the organizer. It is notable that a player and an organizer might see good playing very

differently. The organizer's point of view is usually wider. As an organizer my main interest is to find good players for my game. Is a player known to cancel at the last moment? Is she experienced? Does she follow the game practices? Can she offer a great venue or a special skill I could harness for the good of the game? Is she familiar with the genre conventions of the game? Does she ask questions in advance and give feedback afterwards? These kinds of issues are not for players to worry about and they must be considered beforehand, usually during casting.

During the game the organizer's point of view is secondary: she has done her work and the stage now belongs to the players. She cannot be an active operator in playing but more like someone putting together a puzzle. Therefore I find the player perspective most relevant.

I claim that not all players are equally good. A successful performance requires various skills. I can develop them only if I'm aware of them and their mechanisms. Next, I sketch four elements of good playing based on my own experience.

A LOOK IN THE MIRROR

When spotting an interesting game, I'm often faced with a sign-up form of some sort. The word "sign-up" is actually misleading: the enrolment rituals resemble those of a job interview. I find this justifiable. Signing up is a chance and a duty to recognize my expectations and the reality. Thus, I first consider if the game is suitable for me. Is there a game workshop but I'm too busy? Maybe all my friends are going but I dislike the genre. Can't afford the accessories? Have potential engagements on the date?

Next I try to separate my desire to play something and my ability to do so. As a naive person I'm bad at conspiring but a good victim. I lack authority, therefore it's no use making me a leader. I need close relationships for my character to act with. Knowing my strengths and weaknesses is the first element of good playing.

COMMUNICATION

After recognizing my attributes as a player, I must communicate them to the organizers. It is good to explain how I'm usually typecast, but also offer some new, interesting choices. It is wise to recognize even the problematic parts of one's playing.

When invited to a small wandering larp called *Suden heimo*, I was very excited. Among other things, the game was about fate, spiritual rituals and primitive culture situated in a landscape of forest, lakes, full moon and misty sunrise. I gave the organizer the information he asked for, but for some reason I did not declare one of my major restrictions: playing a pregnant character. The surprise was unpleasant as I found out that my character was indeed pregnant. I could blame only myself. At first it seemed that

there's no way I can enjoy the game, but then, inspired by my pondering on good playing, I decided to try switching my view. I kept my repulsion to myself and tried to bring the element to the game somehow without leaving my comfort zone. The game was unforgettable, and the shadow cast by an unpleasant feature was fortunately minor. Nevertheless, this was a healthy reminder for me of the importance of communication, the second basic element of good playing.

FEEDBACK AS COMMUNICATION

A game always makes an impact on its players: small or big, positive or negative, briefly or for a long time. I feel very ashamed when thinking of those games I've participated in and never given a debrief nor feedback. The game is a two-way project and the player is the key to the development of games and playing. Thus it is fundamental that players give feedback both to each other and to the organizers. Good feedback creates good atmosphere. In the long run it makes confident and spontaneous players. Likewise not receiving any feedback leaves a hollow and insecure feeling. It is the same vacuum where the game organizer sometimes stands in: after giving something to the game no one seems to notice. This diminishes the importance of the game experience.

After the Jane Austen era larp *Tahto ja velvollisuus* I was told that my performance had created a good atmosphere and that I was considered a trustworthy player. These comments made me childishly happy. I'll probably be savoring those sentences for years to come: as a player I've received very little feedback for my own playing. These words sharpen my image of myself as a player. In the same way I can be the mirror for my co-players and the game organizers. We work together.

Giving positive feedback is fairly simple compared to criticism. I don't remember giving almost any critical feedback to a co-player and I've received very little. Noting flaws in the organizers' work is easier. The idea of players criticizing each other makes me a bit uneasy: playing is exposing oneself, and that can cause vulnerability. I remember being very irritated when a fellow player told me what a foolish choice she thought I made in the fantasy larp *Ketunhäntä kainalossa*. Her way of giving feedback seemed graceless to me. However, if playing is seen as a skill and a part of creating the game, could it be possible to find a way to discuss failures and flaws constructively? Without any feedback it is very hard to see how one's own playing looks like, and it's very challenging to develop it.

THE CROWDED LIMELIGHT

Playing is balancing between the shade and the limelight, mine and yours, personal and common. Succeeding in this is the third element of good playing. To be able to make choices during the game the player has to be aware of a meta-level

el: a good player follows the rules of cooperation and leaves room for others. Understanding this factor can be seen as a basic skill of playing. Thus, good playing isn't free roaming nor based only on what I feel best but conducted by social conventions of playing. Immersion is the most refined form of cooperation.

In an adventure larp called *Albión* I was given the role of a refugee princess coming to claim back her throne. She had a talent for singing so beautifully that hearing it made others forget their quarrels. I prepared myself for the possibility of using this talent, as having such big shoes to fill made me nervous. During the game came a fight that I could prevent, and decided to act, to sing, grab the moment once and for all. The scene was an important one in my game, and I was eagerly waiting for some comments since it was seen and heard by many others. However, I received one single comment that left me even more uncertain. I felt very uncomfortable: could it be that by taking hold of the scene I overrode the fighting players' chance for a great moment of their own? Maybe they had waited for it as eagerly as I waited for mine, but as conscientious players they stood back for me. I felt too ashamed to bring this up with anyone (thus failing communication, too). Since then I've been haunted by the consciousness that as a player I am partly responsible for my co-players' experience and the whole interimmersion.

The question is: when can I step forward and when must I stand aside? When a good game sweeps along it is difficult to think of metalevels. Still I feel obliged to consider co-players' characters and be flexible for the good of others. But where to draw the line? How far must I go? At a certain point the awareness of the metalevel becomes a burden. I think the answer lies somewhere in cooperation, and also in trust in the organizers ability to construct the game. One useful solution might be the so called "rule of the greater drama": I must choose the action that will produce more drama and thus better game. The other, I believe, is experience and feedback.

KEEPING UP THE ACT

Whether in the shade or in the spotlight, in a game I am on the stage and a member of a team. Even though the game is good and the player well prepared, the atmosphere of good playing is not necessarily there. In the fantasy larp *Araquestro* my character's husband was played by a guy with whom I had no chemistry. The situation for me as a player was very awkward - and probably for the poor co-player as well. My character's attitude towards her husband became chilly, and I tried to concentrate on other storylines. The way I see it, a good player would have at least tried to create the immersion for her co-player, albeit superficially. It was unfair to break his immersion and make it hard for him to follow

his character. For years, I've stubbornly claimed that I do not have to be a good actor to be a good player. Actually, this is not true. When emphasizing ends, acting begins. My duty for my co-players is to keep the immersion standing even if my inner game has not succeeded.

I recently spoke to a player who during a short period of time moved to a foreign country and lost a relative. Nevertheless, she participated fully in the game - at least that's how it seemed, and it was enough to create the illusion. This left me thinking how strong obligations can we require for co-players and the game. The organizer can not define this: it is for the player to do. By attending a game the player is engaged as a part of it and given both rights and duties. A good player knows her limits and is also willing to yield for the good of the game - to different directions.

REACHING HIGHER

A workshop on modeling violence, exercises on improvisation, acquiring a dancing technique useful in larps. These are ideas or even fulfilled plans I've thought in order to become a better player. I include development as the fourth element of good playing. Developing one's skills is however not necessarily crucial for a good game. Some games are easy to participate in without special abilities or particular interest in the complexities of larping, and they can still offer an impressive, or at least entertaining, experience. Nevertheless, knowing the huge and wide potential of people makes an ambitious player and organizer to envision the perfect immersion and thus the perfect game.

For my part, I try to take step at a time on my path for becoming a good player.

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Toporiada 2011. The finals, the session run by Tomek "Smok" Wolski.

CATEGORY: NEW FRONTIERS

THE EVALUATION OF ELUSIVENESS

WORDS ALEKSANDRA MOCHOCKA, PHOTOS PAWEŁ SCIBOREK

The Golden Axes is a competition for both Best Player and Best Game Master, held annually in Poland. The competition reflects the state of Polish roleplaying and presents a special challenge in how to evaluate something as ephemeral as the quality of roleplaying.

Tabletop roleplaying was introduced to Poland around 1989, with the opening of the borders after the fall of Communism. In Poland, characteristically, the most influential game at that time was *Warhammer Fantasy Role-Play*; *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* were virtually unknown – but their “clone” *Kryształy Czasu* was popular.

The history of roleplaying in Poland can be divided roughly into four main stages. The first stage started in 1993 with the publication of the instalments (in *Magia i Miecz* magazine) of *Kryształy Czasu*. Dense with gamist-simulationist mechanics, it utilised a fantasy setting; if ever played at present, it is probably out of humorous nostalgia. Other games popular at that time were (all translated into Polish in 1994) *Warhammer Fantasy Role-Play*, *Cyberpunk 2020*, and *Zew Cthulhu* (*Call of Cthulhu*). They are still widely played in Poland (with the slight exception of *Cyberpunk 2020*). This stage was characterised by the limited choice of game systems and mostly gamist-simulationist approach to roleplaying, changing slowly as *Call of Cthulhu* gained on popularity.

The second stage started around 1996, when *Vampire: the Masquerade* was translated as *Wampir: Maskarada*. First of all, it became a hit, contributing to the increase in the general number of roleplayers. *Werewolf: the Apocalypse* was published in 1997, and *Mag: Wstąpienie* (*Mag: the Ascension*) in 1999, followed by *Wampir: Mroczne Wiek* (*Vampire: the Dark Ages*) in 2000. (*The World of Darkness*, Old as well as New, is still fairly popular here.)

Other translated games were published successfully, such as *Legenda Pięciu Kręgów* (*Legend of the Five Rings*, 2000), *Deadlands* (*Martwe Ziemi*, 2001), or less successfully, such as *Shadowrun* (1997), *Gasnące Słońca* (*Fading Suns*, 2001) and *Earthdawn*. A series of the so-called New Wave experimental games were published, including *De Profundis*. Some attempts at creating an original Polish game were made; out of those, a game world emulating the 17th century Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (with optional undertones of magic and the supernatural) called *Dzikie Pola*, published in 1997 and re-written thoroughly in 2005, has been popular ever since. This stage was characterised by the domination of the *World of Darkness* games, followed by a preference for a narrativist approach and some deeper critical reflection, as well as by setting up various experiments, formal and stylistic.

The third stage was marked by the collapse of the professional print magazines. For a time, it appeared that roleplaying as such is on the decline. On the other hand, the most successful Polish roleplaying game ever, post-apocalyptic *Neuroshima*, was published in 2003, and *Monastyr*, a dark fantasy game set in a cloak-and-dagger world, in 2004. The

new *World of Darkness* rulebooks were translated into Polish and the better access to the internet made it possible to reach all sorts of indie games.

The fourth stage is what is happening right now. *Savage Worlds* has been published recently, as are the new editions of many cult games (for example, *Call of Cthulhu* and *Warhammer*). A steampunk fantasy game, *Wolsung*, was released in 2009, as well as *Klanarchia*, a dark post-apocalyptic fetish fantasy game. The internet is buzzing with roleplaying discussion groups and fanzines, and the biggest convention with roleplaying roots, Pyrkon in Poznań, hosted 3660 people in 2011.

Generally speaking, it seems that the average Polish player has numerous choices available, and will not hesitate to use them, but there is no sense of uniformity that was prevalent especially at the second stage, and tabletop roleplaying appears to be giving way to larping: hence my half-joking term, post-roleplaying. The most valued roleplaying style seems to be narrativist/simulationist, but there are many newcomers to the scene, who start with a gamist approach and find other options as they develop as roleplayers.

THE DEBATE

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Polish roleplayers could consult the how-to guides published professionally in either *Magia i Miecz*, or *Portal* magazine, or in a handful of other ephemeral magazines (Mochocki 2007). *Magia i Miecz* was published from 1993 to 2002, with 103 issues altogether; the bi-monthly *Portal* was launched in 1999, and closed in 2003 after the publication of the 17th issue. Both magazines contained innumerable pieces of advice on roleplaying and game mastering, and set the tone for the entire roleplaying scene. Towards the mid 2000s the debate on roleplaying moved to the internet, with sites such as Valkiria Network, Gildia, or Poltergeist being the preferred source of inspiration and reference.

As to the scholarly publications devoted to tabletop roleplaying, there are still but a few published (with many more written as unpublished dissertations or diploma papers), most of them articles scattered across various journals, or put out under the auspices of the Games Research Association of Poland in the *Kulturotwórcza funkcja gier*, *Homo Communicativus*, and *Homo Ludens* series. Jerzy “Jurzy” Szeja’s doctoral dissertation, published as *Gry fabularne – nowe zjawisko kultury współczesnej* in 2004 (*Roleplaying games – a New Phenomenon of Contemporary Culture*), was a milestone.

The biggest Polish roleplaying competition is the “Master of Masters Cup for the Best Game Master”, organized since 1998. It is an itinerant, annual national event, organized by

the representatives of various clubs and associations, with no stable governing body. Two game masters compete in the finals, each with a scenario of their own choice, and the members of the jury join the parties. In the Master of Masters Cup (Puchar Mistrza Mistrzów, or PMM) the game masters are graded with points: 1 to 6 – where 1 means an epic fail, and 6 is granted for special merits – which is the equivalent of Polish school grades system.

TOPORIADA

The Golden Axes Competition has been organized annually since 2006 by the Topory Association, a roleplaying and science fiction/fantasy club located in Rawa Mazowiecka in central Poland.

From 2005 to 2007, the Topory organised three mini conventions, limited mostly to the members of the association and their friends. In 2008, however, they decided to go public and advertised their event on a national scale. The idea was to organize a roleplaying convention with a lot of roleplaying, as opposite to the typical Polish event, focused on theory and socialising, yet usually lacking in actual games.

Usually, all the organizers in a Polish convention do is provide some venues and a board on which game masters can advertise their sessions. The number of sessions is commonly quite limited and it could be difficult to take part in a tabletop game, even if one wants to. Socializing and larping – not tabletop roleplaying – are the most popular activities at a typical roleplaying convention.

Roleplaying conventions where people don't roleplay is the tendency the Topory Association wanted to reverse. The Toporiada convention falls into the category of roleplaying/larp event. Unlike most similar conventions, it is organized in a scout camp in the middle of a forest rather than a school building or a conference centre. The roleplaying game sessions are included in the official (organizer-controlled) programme, with detailed previews published in the programme leaflet. The number of sessions is adjusted to the number of participants in such a way that virtually everybody can play. The organizers encourage every participant to take part in a game session. Consequently, while socializing is one of Toporiada's hallmarks, the events are "roleplaying carnivals", festive in mood.

Apart from delegating their local game masters to run sessions, the organizers invite skilled game masters of national repute. The sessions, from 13 to 20 in number, begin at dusk and are held in spacious military tents by the candlelight. If need be, electricity is provided to support laptops and loudspeakers. All the sessions start at exactly the same hour, and no other activities are planned for the time. Personally, I find the hectic rush just before the sessions start – as people run there and back again to fetch the necessary equipment or to find the proper tent, and then the

sudden silence over the entire camp when the sessions begin – thrilling and captivating. Purposely or not, the organisers succeeded in creating a liminoidal experience that helps the roleplayers immerse into play.

THE GOLDEN AXES: THE RULES

The competition concerns tabletop roleplaying games; no specific system or game mechanics are recommended. Scenarios can be original and amateur, or commercial/professional, and can be re-played, even with the same party. Experienced players may compete in one of the two basic categories: the Best Player and the Best Game Master.

There are three special sessions and an additional category for novices (the Best Inexperienced Player). Roleplaying and game mastering is evaluated by a jury for two subsequent days, during the sessions that are in the official programme. Unless a person states clearly that he or she does not want to be evaluated, everybody playing in the scheduled sessions takes part in the competition. If a game master does not want to be evaluated, she still has to tolerate the jury watching the players perform.

The jury visit the players discreetly for shorter or longer spells of time, changing places from a session to session as long as the participants play. The set of criteria is rather general and there are no points or grades assigned to performance.

According to the official regulations, in the case of game mastering the jury should take into account:

- How the story is being told (the presentation of the game world, the impersonation of the supporting characters, the coherence between those elements, and the general impression a session makes);
- How the game has been prepared (to what extent the game master knows the system and the game world; how he or she utilizes the scenario; whether he utilizes any props);
- Flexibility (creativity, reactions to the players' decisions, and control over the players);
- Atmosphere (the mood created during the session; the level of the players' engagement; the players' emotional responses and their general attitude).

In the case of roleplaying (in both "ordinary" and "beginners" categories), the jury should take into account:

- The character's creation and the roleplayer's performance (originality, presentation, immersion);
- The coherence between the character's actions and decisions and the character's personality and temperament as specified on the character's sheet;
- The player's creativity and his or her influence on the plot;
- Fair play, that is, the player's respect for other players and their decisions, as well as the general lack of unruliness (letting the game masters do their jobs).

MY BABY

Aleksandra Mochocka (AM): Why did you want to organize a competition like that? What was your goal?

Hubert "Jankos" Jankowski (HJ): Initially, I thought of the competition as a tool to improve the quality of sessions played at Toporiada. At the same time, I wanted as many new game masters to come to our convention as possible. Our aim was to create an event centered around roleplaying. We assumed that if the game masters had to compete, they would prepare and run their sessions better. The competition would provide an incentive to come and game master at Toporiada, so more game masters would visit the convention. I must say that we were right in assuming both things; especially the first one, as many game masters who had made themselves known as representing a rather careless attitude towards game mastering reached their heights of perfection when they ran sessions at the Golden Axes Competitions.

Other than that, we wanted to create and promote a new competition. The convention was meant to be the "Polish convention with the most roleplaying" and such a competition was an absolute must. We wanted it to be one of the strong points of the event, something that would distinguish Toporiada from other conventions and appeal to the people who were really focused on roleplaying. In other words, the competition was intended to be a part of our brand, something specific to Toporiada, a trademark that everybody would recognise.

AM: How did the Topory community respond to your idea?

HJ: Actually, the idea was approached with scepticism by most people involved in organizing our mini conventions. Most importantly, they said that our event is too small, and recognized only locally, so there was no point in starting a nation-wide competition. Many people criticised the core idea of such a competition; they were against the evaluation of roleplaying in general, firstly, because it cannot be done objectively, and secondly, because any competition would imply rivalry, and rivalry would kill the very essence of roleplaying, that is, fun. Technical and logistical problems (such as selecting the jury) were also an issue.

AM: What's the theoretical background to the Golden Axes Competition?

HJ: I can't talk about any theoretical background in the initial stages, the first three competitions, unless you count the roleplaying magazines or internet zines I read: a lot of *Magia i Miecz*, especially the famous almanacs published there, *Gwiazdny Pirat*, *Valkiria*, or *Poltergeist*. I was also acquainted with Jerzy Szeja's doctoral dissertation, and that gave me a couple of ideas on what good game mastering and good roleplaying should look like.

None of those sources gave me any direct tips on how to organize a competition, but I had found some points of

reference as to the quality of roleplaying in general. Those findings were valuable, even more so as we were a tight and detached community. I was apprehensive our local view on good and bad roleplaying would turn out to be totally different from the assumptions of the rest of Polish fandom. We started to analyze the structure and criteria of our competition only in 2008, simply because the convention had grown big enough to become a nation-wide competition.

AM: Did you have any practical models to emulate? Since you must have known about PMM, what was your attitude to it?

HJ: At first, we knew almost nothing about PMM. All we knew was that PMM was the most important and, as we thought, the only Polish roleplaying competition. That was all. In 2008 I took part in the PMM as a player, which gave me an insider's view. Also, in 2009 I was a juror in a less known competition called "Złote kości" (the Golden Dice) at the Grojkon convention. The Golden Axes Competition is both a "best player" and a "best game master" competition, so I decided to take part in the "Gramy" (We play) Best Roleplayer Competition at the Fanfest convention.

AM: Was the Golden Axes Competition meant to be similar?

HJ: It depends on what aspect of the competition we are talking about. There are two aspects of PMM that have influenced us. First, following the example of PMM, we introduced stages (preliminaries and the main competition) in 2010. What is more, in the main competition the jurors are divided into those who watch all sessions and those who draw lots for sessions they roleplay in, as members of the party. This system allows for more objective evaluation and reduces the risk that while visiting different parties, the committee may stumble across an unfortunate spell of rotten play.

On the other hand, we wanted to avoid what we considered to be the biggest weakness of the PMM: at every stage of this competition, anybody (including total novices) could play in the parties controlled by the competing game masters; the players are selected and appointed randomly to specific parties. This can ruin even the best laid plans of the best game masters, especially in the case of more ambitious and demanding systems, such as *Monastyr* or *Legend of the Five Rings*.

One can say, of course, that a good game master is able to find a way out of every situation, including running the sessions for poor players who roleplay in a way that would hinder rather than help her. But this is not what we mean. We want the sessions at our competition to become masterpieces; we want game masters to become creators of art. And our point of view is that this is possible only with a party of competent and experienced players.

Consequently, in the finals of the Golden Axes Competi-

tion there are four game masters, and each gets a party consisting of three players selected in the draw out of the pool of the best players we have distinguished in the preliminaries, plus one random juror.

Another difference is that unlike PMM or "Złote kości", we do not want to impose on the game masters any motif or topic for the scenario at any stage of our Golden Axes, nothing they have to prepare during the competition. We assume that this is the best *game master* and best *player* completion, and not the best roleplaying *scenario*. To our mind, it is irrelevant if the game master is able to create a good scenario on her own; this is not the point.

AM: The competition has been changed a couple of times. What changes do you find most significant?

HJ: The biggest changes were introduced in 2009: the preliminaries and the finals, jurors roleplaying in the finals, and the best players from the preliminaries randomly appointed to the final competition parties. Other crucial changes had been made the year before, as in 2008 we introduced the category of the best beginner player (the person has the right to play in the finals). Generally speaking, the sessions for beginners were a very important improvement.

AM: Now, after six years of the competition, can you say that your initial objectives have been reached?

HJ: Yes, definitely. The quality of sessions in 2011 was the best since the beginning of the convention. I can see how roleplaying at Toporiada has been improving. The competition is fairly well recognized in the Polish fandom and has included renowned game masters (authors, game designers, and those who participated in the finals or won PMM) such as Inkwizytor, Wojtek Rzadek, Tomasz Wolski, Neishin, Nurgling, Michał Mochocki, Marcin Baryłka, Jacek Komuda¹ and Artut.

AM: What is the most difficult or troublesome aspect of the competition?

HJ: As the number of sessions still increases, the biggest problem is to find enough competent jurors. Next year we are going to ask more people from associations and clubs unrelated to the Topory Association to be our jurors. Up to now, half of the jurors are the Topory members.

Another problem is the question of objectivity, or the lack of it. Some people will accuse us of being biased against or in favour of specific participants. I think this is a side effect no competition can avoid.

Another problem is the premises: the tents in the middle of a dimly lit forest. It may be atmospheric, but is difficult to evaluate the sessions in such conditions.

AM: What are the criteria you use when selecting a jury?

HJ: Usually, half of the jurors belong to the Topory As-

1 J. Komuda is a best-selling fantasy/historical fiction writer, and the designer of both editions of Dzikie Pola.

sociation. The other half is selected out of the clubs that collaborate with us (Armia Goblinów, Bractwo Feniksa, Dzikie Bez). We look for veteran game masters, who have experience with as many different systems as possible, and with the finals in mind, ones who are skilled roleplayers. Each year there were some people who study roleplaying games or science fiction/fantasy, like Ania Winnicka or you.

THE GOLDEN AXES: 2011

In 2011, I was asked to be a juror in the Golden Axes Competition, along with five other people, four of them belonging to the Topory Association and one to Armia Goblinów. I was the only juror who had not carried out such duties before. Since the guidelines for evaluating the game masters and players were rather vague, I had to use my own judgement. After the discussions we had in the process of selecting the winners it turned out that, perhaps due to my literature studies background, I focused on the language the participants used much more than my colleagues did. I praised the use of elaborated code for the descriptions of the world and the actions of the characters (the players' characters as well as supporting characters) and stylization (e.g. archaization) for both the description and the dialogue.

On the other hand, as I am fond of keeping the roleplaying strictly inside the tertiary framework – in terms of Fine's separable discursive frames that can be recognized during a game session – I also praised those game masters and players who would stick with the diegetic reality, limiting the excursions to the secondary framework (game terminology, utterances exchanged to discuss game mechanics) to absolute minimum; consequently, I criticized all those players who would allow for any discourse belonging to the primary framework (though, I must say, such instances were exceptionally rare).

Out of the factors enumerated in the official rules, what I found especially important on the part of the game masters was the ability to control the players and adjust the game mastering to their skills and comprehension, and on the part of the players, the ability to impersonate the character described on their character sheets.

In 2011 the convention was held in July and lasted three days, starting on Thursday 28th. Before the games started, I was afraid of the ideological side of the competition: Would I be able to be objective? How to evaluate totally different gaming styles? What should I do with a system I did not know? Soon it dawned on me that it was the material aspect of the Golden Axes that was the most troublesome. As mentioned before, the sessions took place in military tents; they were placed away from the central fireplace and the camp bungalows. I had my torchlight, but as it was getting dark, it was more and more difficult to manoeuvre among the trees, bushes, and tent lines. The story has it that during one of



Toporiada 2011. No game master, no fun. One of the competing game masters dropped out of the Golden Axes.

the previous competitions a juror fell into a ditch and broke her arm.

On Thursday there were 20 sessions altogether and it was absolutely impossible for me to check up on all of them sufficiently. I felt a tad frustrated, but first and foremost exhilarated and exhausted. The forest and the tents were great as the backdrop for the sessions, but from a juror's perspective it was a huge hindrance. All in all, I was able to listen to approximately 10 to 30 minutes of each session, visiting each tent (and I had to visit nearly 20 of them) at least twice at various intervals. Objectively or not, I decided not to spend too much time on the sessions that made a less than positive impression on me when I had visited them first.

Obviously, I was not the only visiting juror, and when we compared our notes during the briefings, our conclusions were surprisingly similar.

Friday night was different at first, as I was appointed to roleplay under one of the game masters who had won the

preliminaries. Along with the best Thursday players, four of us joined the parties to be evaluated in the finals. In 2011 the finals included sessions of *Warhammer*, *Neuroshima*, *Dzikie Pola*, and a *Cyberpunk 2020*-like original system; I joined the *Neuroshima* party. Unfortunately, although the session went very well, our game master was so sleep deprived and tired that he literally dropped out in the middle of the scenario.

All the final contestants (game masters as well as players) gave very impressive performances and it was difficult to single out the winner. Some jurors opted for a game master who had run a dynamic and energetic *Warhammer* session that allowed for sheer fun and heaps of laughter, and some for one who run a more nostalgic, slower session of *Dzikie Pola* that made it possible to immerse into the game world better. After a heated debate, the *Dzikie Pola* gamemaster Szymon "Neishin" Szweda won.

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Ringboy Mateo and ring girl Nana are ready for action. Photo: Nino Hynninen

CATEGORY: DOCUMENTATION

¡LUCHA LIBRE!

WORDS JENNI SAHRAMAA

From masked superwrestlers to a cocaine piñata, Lucha Libre salutes the crazy culture of Mexican show wrestling.

¡Lucha Libre! Kovaa menoa Meksikossa was a popular culture -inspired larp about poverty, indian rights, guerillas, drug lords and especially Mexican wrestling. It was played in August 2011 in Pusula, Finland. The basic storyline was about a wrestling promotion company, Lucha Libre! Promotions, arriving to a small Mexican village for the last event of their tour. The village, El Pulpito, was a neutral no man's land between the interest areas of a local drug lord and a guerrilla group called TACO.

The characters were wrestlers and wrestling company workers, the drug lord and his henchmen, freedom fighters, local and federal policemen and -women, backpackers in trouble, local wrestling fans and village girls looking for their chance in life.

INSPIRATION

Lucha Libre was set in a Mexico where sombreros are big and donkeys grumpy, señoritas are washing big American cars in mini-shorts, and every masked wrestler is a hero of the people. The game was popular culture inspired in quite the same way as many of the larps organized by the Greywolves (a Finnish larp group) have been historical. Instead of being based on historical sources, the game grew

out of comic books, movies, wrestling shows and fanzines. The setting was in the real world of 2011, but the genre was cinematic realism.

Humoristic elements were an inherent and natural part of the game world and the game was not a parody. The main sources of inspiration were the *Love & Rockets* comics by the Hernandez brothers and some Robert Rodriguez movies. Some typical characters of these works, such as female mechanics, leftist activists and low-life small-scale drug dealers, were also seen in the game.

PROMOTION WORK

The game took its style from the colorful and slightly absurd world of lucha libre, Mexican professional wrestling. Pre-game communication was based mostly on fictional in-game information. The website was built to resemble a Mexican wrestling promotion website and off-game information about the game was kept to a minimum.

This didn't work too well as a marketing strategy as potential players were not familiar with the world of lucha libre beforehand, and didn't immediately understand why they should be excited about masked wrestlers. Apparently the concept of the game itself wasn't communicated clear-



La Mujerta and Eskeletor putting Double Clothes Line in action. Photo: Suvi Korhonen

ly enough since some people believed that all the players would have to wrestle during the game. Some fine tuning of the promotional material was needed before the casting was completed.

Once the players were gathered, the policy of pre-game communication worked better. The world of wrestling was communicated to the players through the updates of the Facebook page of Lucha Libre! Promotions. Small stories from the in-game world were published on the game website, written as news or advertising teasers for the upcoming event. The website also contained introductions, including a short bio, a photo of the mask, the signature moves and the theme song of the wrestlers, the luchadores and luchadoras, who were to fight in the event. The players were also given a short "lucha libre for dummies" -guide.

APPEARANCE IS EVERYTHING

The promotional material was very visual. This has been the style of many Greywolves games such as *Antikristuksen yö* (*The Night of the Antichrist*) and *Hopeavirta* (*Silver Stream*), and the graphic designer behind all these projects

is Hannamari Vahtikari. The idea of the pregame photos was to create an idea of the style of the game – to tell more in a picture than you could with many words. Unlike the earlier, historical projects the promotion photos were not a main source of dress and propping information since most of the people in the photos were either wrestlers or girls in their bikinis. Although these were also seen in the game, most players had translated the concept of "a good old times Mexico" to mean slightly 1980s style clothing with a tex mex twist. This looked absolutely fabulous.

The in-game setting for the game was the lone cottage of an old indian wrestling coach living on the outskirts of El Pulpito. Off-game, a cottage was rented from a local winter sports club in Pusula. The place was chosen for its worn look and a location remote enough to be free of extra spectators. It also had a big sandy parking area to build the constructions needed for the wrestling event, especially the ring. The ring was made of wood and rented tatami mats with posts the color of the Mexican flag and orange roping. It was the single most challenging part of the organizing work. It had to be safe and elastic enough for wrestlers to be thrown to



Getting ready for the new ring girl contest. Photo: Nino Hynninen

the mat, and it still had to look good. The organizing team is pretty experienced in building different kinds of stuff for their games, but success in building this totally new kind of structure was still a pleasant surprise.

The players were asked before the game if they could bring in their American cars, SUVs and motorcycles, and the rest of the propping around the ring was done with these. Because the already agreed-upon rental donkey got the flu and couldn't make it to the game, the best single prop for the game turned out to be sunshine. The day of the game was the last hot day of the summer which also helped us to win the gamble of organizing this kind of event outdoors. Mexico in Finland was sunny, dusty and damn hot.

Tex mex culture has luckily provided us with a lot of easy ready-made finger food, and this was shamelessly exploited in the game. Teresa's salsa & taco joint sold the spectators burritos and low-alcoholic lime drinks for a five eurocents a portion. Selling the food in-game fit the idea of a sports event / village party, and being able to order custom made burritos helped to deal with allergies. Alcohol in the game was real and probably did its part in creating the festive feel-

ing. Still the amounts of alcohol consumed stayed pretty low, and the wrestlers had their share of stronger drinks after their time in the ring. The only problem the drinks caused was the amount of bottles and cans to be cleaned from the place after the game.

WRESTLING WITH A FEELING

Lucha Libre was about wrestling, so a wrestling show there had to be. The concept of having a practiced show was already tried in *Gloriana*, a Victorian era Lovecraftian theater larp, where the game started with a short musical. For *Lucha Libre*, about ten organizers and players trained their show-fighting skills and practiced their match choreographies for six months. The referees and the presenter of the show also took part in the training. Matches were preset, but this wasn't common knowledge in the in-game world, so some gambling could also be organized in the game.

Practice like this needed a lot of commitment from the wrestler players. Building up a show-fight live event, where the audience could be anywhere around the ring, wasn't an easy task. It needed to look real enough, it was to be as

spectacular as possible, but it also needed to be safe for all participants. Most of the wrestler players had some previous background in some kind of combat training, but all learned many new tricks during the training period. Some invaluable help was given by a coach who had previously wrestled in the Finnish pro wrestling promotion, but otherwise all the choreographies were designed by the wrestlers themselves, and refined by others in the rehearsals. Training was not only about the moves, throws and blows, but also about the story of the luchadors and the narrative designed by the promotion company. The wrestler players were not only playing their characters in the game, but also their characters were playing masked warriors with a storyline of their own.

Trying pro wrestling like this was a new experience for everyone involved. Wrestling in front of an audience required courage, but also strong teamwork and trust between the two or more people fighting. In the heat of the event, some moves were done a bit faster and harder than in the practice. This was anticipated and understood by all the wrestlers, and safety plans were made beforehand for emergencies. Luckily no one was hurt in any serious way. The physicality of it all was still overwhelming: besides all the bruises from the training, you also needed to be very close to your opponent in sometimes quite awkward positions. A wrestler was also pretty naked in front of the audience, with all the faults of his or her body, to be gazed upon and cheered or booed at. For me at least, this was a pretty broadening experience.

THE SHOW MUST GO ON

The idea of setting up a show for a larp is to give the characters something to do, watch and talk about in common. From the part of the spectators, some roleplaying is required – the show might not be the most spectacular ever seen, but if they act like it was, the common experience might become something huge. In *Neonhämärä 4*, the most popular troll metal band of the in-game world gave a gig to their fans. Though the musicians were in real life complete amateurs, and some even learned to play for the game, the participation of the audience made the gig great. This lesson was remembered when briefing for *Lucha Libre*: the players practiced cheering everything the game masters said or did. Most players were also told who their character's favorite wrestler was, and who they hated.

Building the atmosphere of a big sports event worked out pretty well in the game, even though there were only some 50 spectators present. If the game setting would not have been so far away in the forest, some extra spectators without characters and with only a small fee could have been taken in. This worked out quite well in *Gloriana*, which was played in a theater in the middle of Helsinki but wasn't even attempted with *Lucha Libre*. In retrospective, more spectators could have helped the audience to keep up

cheering and living with the events of the ring. Still many did their best to the point of losing their voices from cheering so much.

Music played a big part in creating the game's atmosphere. Many of the wrestlers' theme songs were big hits of the 80s and so well known to the audience. Outside the matches, DJ Vieja Escuela played Mexican hip hop and towards the evening, more and more Latino hits.

WHITE FLOUR IN THE PIÑATA

Before and after the two parts of the wrestling show, there were also plots in the game. Many were small scale interpersonal plots with violent and missing fathers, secret love, infidelity and professional rivalry between mechanics. Most of the bigger plots involving more characters were linked to the drug lord, TACO-guerrillas, wrestling promotion or all of these. Some plots were designed to get more velocity through predesigned events. A group of TACO fighters started their game by finding a dead body of their old comrade, and the whereabouts of a lost package of drugs came into everybody's knowledge when the piñata was hit with a stick and white flour flew all over.

One of the unforeseen events created by the acts of players was a very intense scene where the head of the promotion company, a known macho and ladykiller, organized a tryout for all the girls wanting to try their luck as ring girls. Carrying a signboard high above your head in a bikini and high heels, or washing a car with everybody watching surely wasn't every player's cup of tea. One player commented after the game that this experience had woken feminist feelings in her, making her very happy of the fact that she didn't need to do something like that in the real world.

A Mexican village is easily imagined to be a pretty chauvinistic place, and the show business is often all about how much of your tits you are ready to show. Still, the women in *Lucha Libre* were not just somebody's daughters, girlfriends or crazy old aunts. Besides strong and active female characters, there were also a couple of female players playing male characters and one cross-dressing male character. The possibility for women to be important and active participants in the plots was commented positively afterwards. This of course gives a slightly sad impression of Finnish larp culture in general, but is maybe more understandable in the context of historical games the Greywolves are known for. It has proven to be difficult to find enough interesting and important things to do for all the female characters in games with a strongly patriarchal setting. Cross-gender casting of the players is one possible solution to this problem, and it has been used with some characters in many Finnish historical games lately.

Some characters in the game suffered of the same problems as many a larp does. Not everybody can be an ultra-

cool freedom fighter with a complicated relationship to an old wrestler – somebody usually ends up playing the third Pancho from the left. In *Lucha Libre*, character design and writing was a somewhat second priority when much of the organizers' time was taken by making the whole event possible. It was hoped that the amount of hassle and dazzle in and around the ring would make up for the lacks in psychological depth and complicated plots for some characters. It is always depressing to see or hear some people being bored during the game, but in my experience, you can never give the perfect experience to everyone.

IS THIS THE END?

When the wrestlers had left the ring, it was taken over by dancers ready to shake their butts for the rest of the evening. This acted as an ending of the game for many of the players, who came slowly out of the character when dancing. Because of this, the pre-planned ending had to be changed to a less complicated one, and still players thought that the game ended when the music ended. This situation was not foreseen by the organizers, and created some confusion. In all the hurry, planned sound effects also had to be done with the DJ set. This confused players, who didn't know how to react to the weird sounds and didn't know whether the game had already ended or not.

After the game there was normal buzzing around with people talking with their contacts, picking up their things and somebody already warming up the sauna. A short thank you speech was given by the organizers, but no common debriefing situation was organized due to the mixed feelings it has created in the past. This was criticized afterwards by a player who felt like being totally left out of many of the main events of game. This led to some conversations about what should and what should not happen immediately after the game, and it possibly leads to some experimentation with the possibilities of debriefing in the future.

Talk of sequels is normal in the emotional heat after a successful game. This time, the most enthusiastic were the wrestler players. *Lucha Libre* gave them the chance to be a star for a moment, maybe even a superhero, what with the mask and spandex, and it was totally worth all the training. It just might be that, in some form or another, the world of lucha libre has to be visited again.

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¡Lucha libre! Kovaa menoa Meksikossa (2011): Jenni Sahramaa et al, Pusula.

¡LUCHA LIBRE! KOVAA MENOA MEKSIKOSSA

Designed and organized by Jenni Sahramaa (main organizer), Konsta Nikkanen, Jukka Pajarinen, Anna Merikallio, Riina Kantola, Maiju Reiman (writers), Tomi Gröndahl, Joonas Sahramaa (background work), Susanna Huhtanen, Petra Rossi, Julius Väliäho, Mikko Heimola, Jukka Seppänen, Nguyen Viet Jung, Maria von Hertzen (wrestlers), Hannamari Vahtikari (graphics) and Emilia Hjelm (webmaster).

Played in 27.8.2011 in Pusula, Finland.

Duration: about 7 hours.

Number of players: about 60

Budget: 1 300€ (participation fee 20€)

More information: rubiini.org/luchalibre



Barbiturate shots and guards' batons didn't deter more violent patients from fighting. They would end up locked in solitary basement rooms.

CATEGORY: DOCUMENTATION

TAHTOTILA

RUNNING THE GAUNTLET OF MADNESS

WORDS SUVI KORHONEN & TUUKKA VIRTAPERKO, PHOTOS SUVI KORHONEN

It's a rare gift as a larper to be scared out of my skin. Especially if it's a week before the next game, reading my character's update. Tahtotila (State of Will) was a game which succeeded in creating a continuing state of creeping insanity and paralyzing fear.

According to the game masters of *Tahtotila*, the game series was not intended to be horror as much as drama and thriller. They were creating a mystery around the house and the island's morbid history, which were unraveling slowly throughout the game series.

After two previous larps also set in mental institutions, *My Mad, Mad Carousel* and *Nukkekotit 34 (Dollhouse 34)*, gamemaster duo Nora Niva and Hanna Viitanen had an idea for a possible series. The first *Tahtotila* game, *Anima*, was a pilot. It proved successful, and the players were told only afterwards that it would be the start of a campaign.

LIBERAL AMOUNTS OF TRANQUILIZER

In the first game, it was the summer of 1957, when half of the house of the C. Wright hospital collapsed. Some months later seasons became inconsistent with the calendar and eventually the ferry to the mainland stopped coming. The world seemed to forget about the inhabitants of the remote island of Lundy in the Bristol Channel.

The C. Wright private mental institution had less than 25 beds and patients, which proved to be far too many to handle for one psychiatrist and one psychologist, three nurses and three guards.

The few violent bullies kept both other patients and the staff on their toes. They were all known murderers: two female convicts relocated to treatment in C. Wright and an old head nurse of the institution. Anybody could be a target for their rage, but they especially loved to freak out the quiet girl with a handful of severe phobias. A sharp cry across the yard, and the guards and nurses were running again, ready to inject liberal amounts of tranquilizer to hostile patients, who didn't get the hint from being hit with a baton.

Patients were mostly harmless, unless provoked. They had formed loose cliques and the game had a high school like social structure. The hierarchy was rather dynamic: some got kicked out from their circle of friends or whole groups would disintegrate after a social climber found better company. Most characters were entangled in the web of romantic interests and got their share of the crying game. Premarital sex and homosexuality were taboos in the 50's, as was love between patients and staff.

A list of short descriptions of all the characters and groups was published before the game. In sign up, players had a say about who they could or couldn't play. They got pre-made characters, who they made their own in the first game. Game masters reserved two characters for themselves. They took part in the game series as full-fledged characters more than as classic non-player characters, setting example of how organizers can be players in their own game.

In updates, game masters excelled in imitating each character in dialogues. When the mass of text became enormous, assistant game master Mikko Behm coded an online tool, *LarpCraft*, for publishing character updates. With it, the game masters can choose who sees each diary entry, cutting on time spent cutting and pasting text in Word.

The main reason why *Tahtotila* was so perfect is simple: it fulfilled the ideal of every character being the main character of the larp for its player. The game masters listened to input from their players with a keen ear. Players got to influence all storylines and social dynamics, which encouraged them to write over 10 pages long debriefs for games. While the game masters planted plot hooks already at the beginning of the campaign, they managed to keep even the most experienced gamers in the dark about the metaplot until the end.

THERAPEUTIC TREE WASHING

Daily hospital routines kept repeating and creating the feeling of being institutionalized. You were constantly waiting for the next meal time, next therapy session or bed time.

During the campaign, the split between the sane and the insane was blurred. It was there, with the insane being characterized by an inability to fulfill obligations unless they really wanted to. Some originally strong and relatively normal patients and staff members started losing their hold over sanity, while others gained more control over themselves.

Patients had therapy sessions with staff, which were recorded. Group therapy activities like discussing your nightmares, walking in line in pairs or washing tree trunks in teams were introduced to foster social skills. For the players, they were stages for verbal conflicts between characters.

Psychiatric drugs were administered thrice a day according to the patients' management plan. Medication was propped with pills and patients invented cunning ways to spit them after the nurse had left, stash the pills and use them to poison their roommates later on.

Looking at a dissociative patient from across the yard, you could tell which personality was present from her posture and voice. Some patients had an earphone on so they could hear auditory hallucinations, personally recorded for them, from an mp3-player. All patients had plausible personal histories, from which their pathological problems emerged. The game masters have had done some studies in psychology and didn't use mental diseases as substitute personalities.

It was hinted that the place had a sinister history. After the first game it was not yet clear how central the supernatural horror elements were going to be. Living the everyday activities and drama of the asylum seemed enough for

a complete game.

Eventually all characters knew that about half of the population of Lundy had joined a secret society called the Family, introduced by a ghost girl. Joining the cult and taking the role of a tarot deck's major arcana made person immortal, but also unable to leave the island.

Immortality as a rite bearer, as Family members were called, was not a miracle solution to all your problems. It became awkward to those who had attained it, as they lost their free will in exchange. Their tarot card began affecting their faith instead. You could still die and feel all the pain, but you would always come back, and the fears would not go away.

Take for example Sebastian, a late addition to the island. The suave ex-diplomat wore a straight jacket and a mask at all times. Even though he was a mortal, as a cannibalistic child rapist he was now seen as the top predator. Until he was found in his bed, lobotomized with a knife through his eye. The placid Sebastian got along better with others, but couldn't top his rival suitors for the beauty of the island.

VOICE OF THE HOUSE

The C. Wright hospital felt more like a prison in which brutal outbreaks had become the norm. The atmosphere was tense with all the fights and occasional assassination attempts. Not to mention the presence of an unknown supernatural evil that seemed to emanate from the basement.

And so the House started speaking. Or it would make sounds: first a low booming growl, then babies crying and the whole house crumbling around you. Finally it hummed a soothing song with a woman's voice. It would echo sentences from people who had lived on the island before. What was it trying to tell?

It was rumoured that the psychiatrist was talking to the House and making human sacrifices in the basement. The voices were controlled by assistant game masters who were listening and watching the game via hidden web cams. Game masters replied to islanders willing to trade their soul to fulfill a wish, not realising they were bartering with the biblical Lightbringer himself. The audio effects and Lucifer's voice in the basement were even scarier than the sounds upstairs and sent daring trespassers running.

The third game was generally agreed to be the mentally most exhausting for the players, when an escaped psychopath returned and permanently killed two staff members. Conditions were made worse by the mind-freezing winter weather and sleep deprivation. The House would make its eerie sounds during the night. Game masters noted that some players showed signs of post-traumatic stress and the sound effects were silenced for the night in the later games.

To help players unwind from severe emotional turmoil, there was a collective debrief session after each game, even with *Tahtotila* being an ongoing chronicle. Game masters

also encouraged players to pour themselves, not just their characters, in their debriefs and to talk to them between the games, online or in real life. They also had a weekend gathering for players after the campaign ended.

THE SACRIFICE TO LIGHTBRINGER

When the asylum was about to run out of food, two immortal staff members began butchering each other in secret and serving their own flesh as food under the lie that they had managed to hunt a seal. Some laughed at the detective, a paranoid conspiracy theorist, when he postulated it reveals who's good or bad if one has cheese over ham on his sandwich. But he eventually turned out to have gathered a lot of useful information with his aides, including memos of the things the House has said.

Weird strangers appeared in last games. These supporting characters passed knowledge of a ritual which would break the cycle that caused the island to be a magical trap, thus ending the reign of the House. The events on the Lundy island would happen in cycles. Previously the orphanage and tuberculosis hospital were stages for repeated tragic occurrences of madness, torture and murder. A Christian sect of lepers had brought holy suffering on the island and created the Family, as they believed this way the rest of the world would be saved from pandemia.

Self-sacrifice, in general, turned out to be an important theme in the final moments of *Tahtotila*. Approximately half of the population of Lundy would have to sacrifice themselves out of their free will in order to rescue the rest. They would receive no afterlife or reincarnation, and one of them would be tortured by Satan.

Social roles such as patient, psychiatrist and nurse were mostly discarded when everyone gathered to discuss the ritual in a dinner hall assembly. The game masters pulled the strings a bit to create the final moment of truth: everyone saw a vision of all souls stuck on the island, living in limbo.

Undisclosed passion raged just beneath the surface when more openly emotional people were weeping and wailing. They first tried to convince their loved ones to stay and then accepting the finality of their resolution said farewell. In the moment of reckoning you could see clearly: the other patients were not monsters or demons, as players might have assumed. They were simply fellow humans, twisted and tormented by their lives, which succumbed them into madness. Worst enemies saw eye to eye for the first time and shook hands in peace, before following through the ritual and slitting their own throats.

THE TAHTOTILA CAMPAIGN

Character profiles and updates: 1735 pages

Longest debrief from a player for a game: 56 pages

Audio effect clips: 300 files, total playtime 77 mins

From idea to game: 1,5 years

Character writing before first game: 5 months

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YOUR CHARACTER IS NOT YOUR OWN

WORDS GUSTAV NILSSON

I wish to broaden the concept of "the character" by pointing out a few problems with the individualistic viewpoint. I present a brief contextual viewpoint, and based on that, practical methods for creating and playing a contextual character.

This article is a solution, but what's the problem? A common experience in larp is the discrepancy between the character that you planned and the one who comes into play. "Am I doing it wrong?" one might ask, "Am I a bad larper?" My answer is yes, you are doing it wrong. But you are not a bad larper.

There are different ways of tackling this problem. You might spend even more time planning the character for the next game. "If I know more about the character I will play it better." The result of these efforts is sadly often the opposite. A more thorough idea of the character often widens the gap between the planned character and the character that comes into play.

Another approach to dealing with the problem is "on the fly" -characters. This is mainly used in mini-larps due to lack of time, or possibly in larger larps due to lack of planning. This approach reduces the gap between the planned character and the character in use, since there is not much planned that might differ from what comes into play. So, less planning might not be such a bad idea. The downside of this

approach is that the characters tend to be not as nuanced as one might have hoped. This is generally not a problem in minilarps since there would not be time to play out the character's whole repertoire anyways. But in longer larps an "on-the-fly" -character may seem shallow and dull.

ME ALONE

What if the problem is not in your character or how you plan it? Rather the problem is that you approach it as *your* character and that *you* should be the one to plan how everything works.

If the notion of the character as an individual entity is wrong, then the approach of each person planning their own characters is faulty. So let's take a look at this notion.

Whether we look at individuals, groups or societies it is clear that our actions are influenced by the people around us. We might *experience* ourselves as individuals, there's no denying that. But that does not mean that our own motives are what influence our actions the most. Lessons learned

from sociology, social psychology and numerous theories of psychotherapy all point in the same direction: we need other people and a shared history to be the individuals we are. It can all be summarized in the terms of contextual behaviorism: we are our context.

This is actually less complicated than it might sound. Basically, it means that first, the actions you choose are influenced by how others have responded when you have acted in a similar way before, and secondly, traits that are described as qualities of an individual are often in fact descriptions of interactions between one or more persons. Let's take a look at these points each in order:

First. Most of our actions are in fact reactions. For example, we seldom wave and say hello when walking down the street if we don't meet someone we know. We need a reason for taking action. The same goes for more dramatic concepts. Let's take a look at two examples. **First, consider the character John**, a middle aged policeman with low self-esteem and problems opening up to people around him. This concept has a lot of potential for nuanced play when someone tries to get close and he tries to let the person in but at the last moment withdraws and becomes passive-aggressive. But it also has the potential of becoming a flat character with just less to play with, i.e. a policeman who just doesn't talk about emotions. The difference here between awesome and dull is not the actual player, but the co-players. In order to play out John's emotional problems, the player needs someone to try to get close. Without it, John is just a policeman.

Second. When we talk about individual traits we are often referring to interactions between several people. Take the character Sarah, for an example. The player wants her to be a good leader who can be both friendly and commanding of her subordinates. This too has the potential of giving the player a lot of good and dynamic play. However, it can also fail. No matter how much Sarah leads it all comes down to one thing: do the subordinates follow? So, we can't just plan for Sarah to be a good and humorous leader without involving the other players. If they don't want to play good subordinates and laugh at Sarah's jokes, she can't be a good leader.

Leadership is an obvious example, but the same goes for

most social traits, such as being funny, clever, attractive or awkward. What the player does is important, but equally important is how the surrounding players receive her actions and how they respond.

The bottom line is that the individual is not enough. In real life we are influenced by the people in our surroundings. Taking this into consideration in larp will be helpful in order to play the characters that we want. It sounds easy enough, but how is it to be done? Actually, it is often being done implicitly. Workshops and pre game mini-larps have the effect of creating something between the characters and building a group dynamic. But it can be taken one step further. Let's take a look at a few techniques that were tried out in the mini-larp *The I in you*. These techniques naturally involve several persons. They are intended to help not only the player of the character in question, but also to help the other players know how to treat the character.

CO-CREATION

This one is probably quite common, but it deserves to be mentioned. It is simply to involve your closest co-players when developing the character concept. It is a way to get them to start thinking about the character and it makes it easier to find a fit with the other characters.

THE SHOWER OF STIMULI

Our actions are not only influenced by other people in the present, but by how we have been treated in the past. To simulate this mass of personal experience we can use the shower of stimuli. The idea is to let the player experience the input from others that has shaped the character in a intense way. The steps are as follow:

- 1 - Decide the main themes or personality traits of the character. This can be done either by the player or preferably in collaboration with the closest fellow players.

- 2 - Take a few moments to think about what kind of experience might shape this kind of character. It is easiest to work with comments of different kinds, but using other kinds of input is naturally possible. Feel free to experiment with physical touch, for example.

3 - The player then stands up, preferably with the eyes closed, and the other players standing around in a circle. They then shoot the comments in a stream, giving the player the experience of fast-forwarding through the character's personal history. One can do this chronologically, starting with early interactions with parents and kindergarten friends, and then progressing to the character's present age. Or, one can do it more haphazardly. This enables the player to explore the experience of being treated this way and the reactions this awakens. At the same time, it is good practice for the other players to experiment with how to treat Sarah so that she becomes the character she is supposed to be.

Example: When planning the character Sarah, the group sits around a table talking about her. They (1) agree that she is to be a good leader who can both decisive and friendly with her subordinates. They then (2) figure that she is a person who people turn to when they don't know what to do. She must also have been encouraged to tell jokes and to be informal with people she works with. After this, (3) everyone stands up in a circle with Sarah's player in the middle. They take turns with comments they have figured out. It might sound like this:

- I don't know what to do. What do you think, Sarah?
- [in the voice of a parent] People don't always know what is best for them. They need someone to guide them. Don't you ever forget it!
- Come on, tell us the story of when you got the whole patrol drunk before the parade.
- Ok, you heard what Sarah said. Let's get to work!
- Yes, sir!

RELATIONSHIP CYCLES

We influence other people, and they in turn influence us. A pattern of interaction evolves. Taking this into consideration when planning a group can be very fruitful. It gives dynamic play and provides something to fall back on when one is unsure about what to play on. The steps are as follows:

1 - Decide how you would like to describe the relationship. Is it warm and supportive, entangled and "stuck", built around common interests, or something entirely different?

2 - Discuss how this relationship came to happen. In other words, what are the basic steps in your dance? This usually takes a while and should be given the time it needs. It is well worth it!

3 - Think if anyone has a specific part to play, or if there are different stages in the cycle. It's a good idea to think about different situations that might trigger the cycle.

Example: The players for John and Sarah agree (1) that their main theme is mutual romantic interest that will never be revealed. They also want to play on jealousy with a hint of passive aggressiveness, especially on John's account. They figure that (2) they are usually "having a good time and being

good friends" and something happens and they "act as if they don't care". This leads to both feeling rejected and reacting with sour comments. This goes on until one "needs the help of the other", either for work or in his or her spare time. They then return to their normal state of "having a good time and being good friends", until something else triggers the cycle. The triggers (3) can be anything that reminds them of their own feelings for each other. Maybe they become even closer as friends and want more, but don't dare to reveal their true emotions. This one suits John well. There could also be a third party involved. Sarah might notice (or think she does) that the pretty secretary is interested in John, and feel jealous.

INPUT REQUESTS

Since we need other players' input during the game to be able to react the way the character does it is best to ask for it. Let the other players know how you want your character to be treated. A structured way of doing this is as an ABC of behavioral analysis.

1 - Decide the behavior (B) that you want your own character to have.

2 - Now, backtrack a moment and figure out what situation might lead to your character behaving that way. In other words, how do you want the character to be treated in order to react the way you want it to? This is called the antecedent (A).

3 - When the character has reacted (B), how is this behavior received by others? What kind of consequences (C) do you want your character to have from others?

Example: John's player wants to make sure that he gets to play awkwardness a lot. To be specific he wants to (B) try to tell people what he feels about them and then choke on his words and withdraw. To be able to play out this he needs his fellow players to (A) ask John what he thinks of them, possibly over a glass after work. They could show a skewed self image that John could correct, if only he dared to speak his mind. John's player also wants John to feel bad afterwards. So he suggests that when John chokes (C) people might seem hurt or judgmental. They might hint that they interpret John's silence as a confirmation of their skewed self images. In the game it might look like this: (A) Sarah tells John how she sometimes feel so unattractive. (B) John wants to tell her how beautiful he finds her but chokes. He blushes and looks away. (C) Sarah feels hurt and mumbles that maybe John should take a look in the mirror himself.

OUTPUT ONLY

This is a combination of *Co-creation* and *Input requests*. The point here is to shift focus from your own character to the surrounding characters. The idea here is that if everyone tries to give good input to everyone else, it will be very easy for each player to play the way they want. The steps are as follows:

1 - Together, develop the character concepts and decide who is to play what character.

2 - Make input requests of all the main themes for each character.

3 - Gather all the input requests from the other characters (the A's and C's) and rewrite the "instructions" so that they fit the way your character would do it. You now have a lot of stuff to do – output – in order to help others react the way they want. And everyone else has a similar list of things to do to help you.

4 - Toss away your character description and only use the list of output to different characters. Start the game!

Example: A group of players are going to play a police patrol gather to (1) create their characters. They create an emotionally withdrawn man and an outgoing leadership type, and also a lazy free-rider guy. They name the characters John, Sarah and Paul. (2) They figure that John needs openings for emotional talk in order to be awkward. Sarah needs people to look to her for guidance and leadership in order to tell people what to do in a friendly way. Paul, on the other hand, needs people to ask him to do stuff in order to say that he will do it later, but not right now. Each player then (3) gathers the input requests and rewrite them in a way that fits their own character's style. Sarah's player might write: John – ask what he thinks of her, then be hurt of how he rejects you, compensate by being extra professional. Paul – give him orders to stake out the suspects, then be angry with him when it seems as if he has been sleeping. This is all Sarah's player has to focus on. She (4) doesn't need to focus on being "an outgoing leadership-type", because everyone else has decided that they are going to ask her what they should do, ask for personal guidance, laugh at her jokes, etc. Sarah's player will then be in a position where it is natural to act as a good and friendly leader.

It should be pointed out that these techniques are not meant to be used in a rigid way. They are not to be read as scripts during play, nor are they the measure that decides what is good or bad play. Rather, they are tools for breaking out of the box of the individual character. They are meant as a way to communicate to fellow players how they can help you to reach the full potential of your character. In other words, these are tools to facilitate playing *with* other players, rather than *against* them. No man is an island.



CATEGORY: GOOD GAME BAD GAME

THE BLESSING OF LINEAGE

MULTIGENERATIONAL CHARACTERS IN TABLETOP ROLEPLAYING GAMES

WORDS & PHOTOS LAURI LUKKA

Why play a character when you can play an entire lineage?

For the past few years, our roleplaying group has enjoyed *The Great Pendragon Campaign*, set in King Arthur's Britain. Unlike many other games, it covers a rather long time span, about one hundred years during which the legend of Arthur gradually unfolds. Each year usually lasts from one to five sessions, during which the highlights of the year are played. The years have a distinct flow to them. During the winters the player characters – knights – rest, socialise and build their estates; summers are dedicated to the realm, adventure and war.

LEGO FIGHT

Game statistics that reflect character personality, the focus on drama, dedicated internet forums and fights modelled with Lego blocks are but some of the reasons why I love this campaign. However, it's the multigenerational roleplaying that really makes the game stand out. It means that the players take on the characters of a certain lineage and participate in the whole lifespan of their characters: they are born, knighted, wed, bed and will most likely face their demise bravely on the battlefield. As the years flow by, the sons inherit from their fathers or the focus changes to a more distant relative. Even when the characters change, the mul-

◀ *The knights prepare for a charge in the battle of Rochestford, 515 A.D.*

tigenerational viewpoint gives the player a feeling of continuity: death is a natural part of life for knights and does not mean the end of the game.

The multigenerational roleplaying in *Pendragon* is a sum of many factors. First, the game master gives the multigenerational framework to the players. Second, the medieval game world supports multigenerational characters with its lengthy time span, patriarchal lineage and primogeniture. Third, the rather light game mechanics give enough flexibility to build and develop characters from birth to grave. However, while these are required factors that also support multigenerational roleplaying, they are not sufficient by themselves. Finally, the players are given the choice of how they want to take advantage of the tools they are given. In *Pendragon*, our group has made the family a kind of a game within the game. It encourages social interaction and creates parallel, additional storylines and context to the main plotline of Arthur's legend.

CONTROL

The players have control over many things in our campaign. The game master encourages the players to come up with plot hooks and dramatic relationships, and even to lead some adventures of their own. This gives the players ample opportunities to adjust the focus of their family. One family has developed their mansion and social status; one focused on the pagan and mystical aspects, one concentrated on the relationships within the family. In this way the players not only shape their characters but also their family and the game as a whole. This has resulted in families having story arcs of their own, just like the characters do. For instance, one family has had but one key character who has during the course of two decades become one of the most famous knights in Britain and a member of the Round Table, building good reputation and fortune for his whole family and especially for his sons. Meanwhile, another family has had three key characters and has slowly crumbled from an influential position due to its internal conflicts, misfortunes and hardships.

The long time span also means that the characters will face the consequences of their past deeds. For example, a rape twenty years ago had unexpected consequences. The perpetrator had already died when the bastard son born of this vile act emerged to seek revenge for his mother. The perpetrator's nephew stood up to defend the honor of his family only to die in the resulting duel. At that moment, the bastard supporting character became a new player character that already had a rich history linking the old and new characters together.

In *Pendragon* the long time span has built true genera-

tional experiences. The first characters faced many hardships: there was no leader in Britain, only rivals who clashed in endless wars. A ruler after ruler rose to power only to fall from it. The next generation saw the sudden ascension of the great king, Arthur, and the ensuing unification of the Cymri. This upheaval has shaped the view of the world for the whole generation, meaning that the older characters have perspective that the newer characters lack.

However, integrating multigenerational roleplaying to a campaign requires a long time both in-game and off-game. Changing characters or playing more than one character during a session has also proved challenging. Too tight a commitment to a certain lineage might feel restraining to some players. The players are required to commit to their characters, campaign and the story, but also accept changes and characters leaving the game. While demanding, these factors challenge the players in a way unrivalled by single character or generation campaigns.

I have found new depth in my characters by focusing on the family as a system more than the sum of its parts. Multigenerationality has given me a unique opportunity to see how personality is shaped partly by the genes, partly by the environment. In the future it would be academically intriguing to link family therapeutic models, inherited traumas and personality development to multigenerational roleplaying. Even if far more time consuming, I feel that multigenerational roleplaying gives a fresh perspective when compared to the more common view where the focus lies primarily on intrapersonal development and characteristics. Playing multiple characters of the same family gives characters rich context, shapes the family ties and creates exciting drama. I feel that my characters in this campaign have depth that remains unchallenged by other campaigns.

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BEYOND THE GAME MASTER

THE RISE OF PEER EMPOWERED TABLETOP ROLEPLAY

WORDS EMILY CARE BOSS, IVAN VAGHI & JASON MORNINGSTAR

The game master is one of the basic elements of traditional tabletop roleplay. Lately, this standard has been challenged by a proliferation of games that change or remove this role.

Since the inception of roleplaying games as a medium of recreational narrative, a standard characteristic of the activity has been the presence of a game master, or GM. Born as a Dungeon Master with the successful and influential publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974, this role has been adopted into the majority of published tabletop roleplaying games as well as larp. Unlike card and board games which have a uniform set of rules and procedures used and applying to all players alike, roleplaying games have been characterized by the presence of a single player with a strikingly different set of powers and responsibilities than the others.

Recent design trends challenge the idea that having a game master is necessary.

The game master holds a role more akin to a sports referee, or a game-world engine as it is represented in a video game. The role can be broken down into specific tasks (Boss 2006). In a workshop on games without game masters, Ben Robbins enumerates these tasks as: "social enforcement, rules enforcement, antagonism, making the world, playing the world, surprise, story/plot, and [determining] who gets to talk."¹

¹ Robbins, 2011.

Until the late 1990s, few games² were structured in any way that changed the nature of the game master. Since Ian Millington's *Ergo* in 1999, a wealth of games have been created that deconstruct or obviate this role.

LEXICON

Lexicon, published by Neel Krishnaswami in 2003, is an early innovation in play without a game master. It sets aside assumptions often made in roleplaying games. In *Lexicon*, there is no first-person narration of events, nor conflict or negotiation of effectiveness or events. There is no game master providing all the many necessary values that traditionally game masters bring to play. Instead the players create together a *Lexicon* or cross-referenced encyclopedia of works within, or elements from, a fictional world.

Players create entries in a *Lexicon* referring to texts, ideas

² Notable exceptions are: *Bullwinkle and Rocky Role Playing Party Game* (1988), *Matrix Engle* (1988), *Sherlock Holmes, Consulting Detective* (1981) – ostensibly a board game, but more of a storytelling game with competitive and cooperative modes and no game master.

or concepts from a shared fictional world. Created in narrative form only (though they could be supplemented by multimedia additions), participants play by writing entries to the *Lexicon* in coordinated *turns*. Entries are ordered alphabetically, with the first set of entries referring to concepts beginning with 'A', then 'B', or the appropriate characters for the participants' native language character set.

Each entry makes references to other entries. The fiction a player creates intertwines with another's, rather than spinning back around on their own work. Players are barred from citing their own work, so that the phantom entries they create must be fleshed out by other players.

The players assume a persona within the game world as well. Since the game eliminates standard emotionally investing activities like speaking in character with dialogue and choosing actions for characters, this is balanced by having players assume a voice that places them in the shoes of a character within the world. This role of the academic even allows the designer to have his cake and eat it too: players are given a role, but one that doesn't make them fall fully into simply "being in the world". The role each player takes is that of an observer, and perhaps a partisan, but with respect to ideas and recording of the world. The scope of the player's perspective is therefore broadened.

BREAKING THE ICE

Breaking the Ice, a 2005 game by Emily Care Boss, is a sharply focused game that revolves around romance – or the lack thereof. Across a series of three dates, you'll find out if your characters have a future together or if they will part ways. It's a two-players game, with each participant assuming the role of half the potential love match.

The setup provides a reliable conceptual framework for play. Everybody understands what is going to happen in the fiction, regardless of how the setting is colored. Love is in the air, the rituals of courtship are alive with possibility, and the various outcomes are well understood.

Breaking the Ice shines a light on a particularly interest-

ing corner of roleplaying game design that is little explored. If a "traditional" group consists of four or five members, games explicitly designed for two players are a rarity.

Rather than completely without a game master, it may be more accurate to describe *Breaking the Ice* as a game that distributes authority evenly – but asynchronously – across a pair of player roles. In play there is always an *active player* (framing a scene for her character, usually related to a romantic overture) and a *guide player* (offering suggestions and awarding dice as currency). These roles are clearly defined and, between them, encompass all the authority necessary to play.

Like in many games without a game master, preparation for play in *Breaking the Ice* is carefully structured and critical to the success of the session. Beyond the general boundaries of a story about three dates and their ultimate outcome, players are tasked with collaborating on a *word web* for each character. A player chooses his character's favorite color, and a linked web of associations grows from this until there are a dozen words (six from each player) that form the basis for that character's in-game traits. Thus both players have a strong hand in defining each character.

POLARIS

Polaris, a 2005 game by Ben Lehman, has a strong setting reinforced on many levels via play structure and ritual. *Polaris* tells the tale of the last days of a dying people at the top of the world, protected by their noble knights, tragically destined to a forgotten death, or to a fall and damnation. The players take over the roles of the Knights of the Order of the Stars, defending the last four remnants of the people against the demonic Mistaken in a new alien world governed by strange seasons and an unrelenting sun that blots the sky.

The design of *Polaris* is based on player-level rituals that continuously reinforce this specific theme: the character sheet is a shared artifact that resembles a sky map and contains four "Cosmos"; every scene opens with a ritual sen-

tence affirming the mood of the setting; and the rules build up the story towards the final tragedy.

Whenever it is a player's turn, she can frame a scene – based on either her Heart or her Mistaken. The structure of the game keeps all players constantly involved (there are 3 game master-like roles and 1 protagonist-like role at any time) in a freely played-out narration of the scene, although each player retains ultimate narrative authority on those characters that fall within his Cosmos. Narration is presented in the past tense and in third person, evoking a long- forgotten time and its people.

The free competitive play will quickly find the players at odds. Conflict gets played out between the Heart and the Mistaken using ritual phrases to negotiate an outcome and almost always requiring a price to be paid.

ARCHIPELAGO II

Matthijs Holter introduces *Archipelago II* (2007) by saying, "I wrote this game trying to capture the feeling of Ursula K. LeGuin's *Earthsea* books", which it can certainly do. Time can pass; characters can grow and change; fates can intervene across decades and continents. It does epic pretty well, by design. The game's killer app is that it does not-so-epic equally well, because the bones *Archipelago II* is built on form a beautifully utilitarian story engine that does not need a game master.

In many ways *Archipelago II* presents a familiar model – **each player portrays a single character, play typically occurs in rotating scenes in which one player assumes more authority and roleplaying happens, and there is a formal procedure for resolving conflicts through uncertainty.** Instead of dwelling on these pieces of the design, let's look at the bits that are more unique. There are basically three little components that drive *Archipelago II*. As a game without a game master, the interplay of these is obviously crucial – they form the game's procedural framework.

The first is Destiny. Before each session of play you choose a Destiny point for your character. This is something you explicitly want to see occur during the session, and you are choosing from among suggestions authored by your friends at the table. Authoring and selecting Destiny points provides a very clear roadmap for every session of play.

The second are the ritual phrases. These are formal ways of guiding scenes. In play you can – and should – interject to bring these to bear often. Practically speaking this takes a little getting used to, but it makes the game much better when the phrases are in full effect. The phrases are "Try a Different Way", which communicates your dissatisfaction with a choice another player has made, "Describe That In More Detail" and "That Might Not Be Quite So Easy", which prompts everyone to engage in the conflict resolution system.

Finally, *Archipelago II*'s Fate cards and element owner-

ship deserve mention as a solution to a familiar issue of play without a game master. During setting creation, the group identifies the key elements of the setting (in playing a post-apocalyptic game, you might choose *technology* as one, for example). These are then parceled out to the players – you may end up "owning" technology, and whenever there is a question about technology in the game, the table turns to you to answer it.

SHOCK: SOCIAL SCIENCE FICTION (V1.2)

Shock: Social Science Fiction is a game by Joshua A.C. Newman (2007) that aims to recreate the classic what-if stories of the works of Bruce Sterling, Kim Stanley Robinson, Ursula K. LeGuin, and Philip K. Dick. These are stories focused on the human consequences of technology, rather than on technology itself. *Shock* is a game of rotating character spotlight, intended to be played in a single session if focusing on 3-4 protagonists.

The game starts with an exercise in world building, where players label a Grid with one or more technological or social Shocks and several societal Issues that are affected. Players claim ownership on individual Shocks and Issues, and become the ultimate narrative authority on these topics. Players create simple facts for each Issue they control, effectively defining the fictional rules of the world.

Each player can then place their protagonist at the crossing point of a Shock and an Issue that they do not control, creating a story around those specific topics. A player defines a Terminus for her protagonist: a story goal that tells other players what the character's gravitational center should be. This expresses the player's vision, which is not necessarily what the protagonist would want. The protagonist is also assigned Links to people and ideals that give meaning to his (or, as it would be put in *Shock* "hir") life.

Finally, the person to the left of the protagonist's player must define her Antagonist. The antagonist can be a person or an organization actively at odd with the protagonist's goals. The game proceeds clockwise in turns, with each player framing a scene centered on his protagonist. Protagonists are not required to meet and stories often develop in parallel around some common themes. Scene framing is not aggressive, as every scene starts with the protagonist in a static situation, being the Antagonist's duty to upset this balance towards and around the protagonist's Terminus.

GEIGER COUNTER (BETA)

Jonathan Walton's game *Geiger Counter* (released in 2008 in beta) is designed to emulate slasher horror movies, where most characters are mown down by an unknown enemy while bickering between themselves and solving their own issues, before making a final grand stand against the horror. *Geiger Counter* is one of the most well known free games

with distributed narrative authority and the author is currently working on a pre-release gamma version.

The purpose in *Geiger Counter* is not to survive, but to provide a cinematic experience within the same timeframe needed to watch a long movie.

The game opens with the *pre-production*: the players collaboratively determine the main theme and mood of the movie, give it a poignant title and draw a map representing the main locations of the story. This phase is crucial since it provides a common frame of references for developing a coherent fiction without any overarching narrative authority. In this phase, the nature of the Menace is defined only in general terms, and it will be unveiled by players over time.

Each player defines his one main character in very general terms with two free traits and a goal. The goal has to create adversity for another character. A character starts with 2 dice representing her ability to stand against others and the Menace. Secondary and minor characters do not have a mechanical representation and can be sacrificed at the whim of the players.

The Menace starts without dice, but it gains 1 die every time it makes an appearance. It starts by cutting down minor characters, increasing in power and becoming bolder until it has enough dice to threaten the main characters. The Menace power peaks at 8 dice, providing a reliable pacing mechanism for the narrative.

After one of the players has run a movie Trailer that foreshadows the Menace, the story cuts to the first Scene. Players take turns as Directors of a scene. A Director is in many ways like a traditional game master, setting the scene and characters, playing the Menace and secondary characters, giving a sense of purpose to the scene and moving it towards conflict. Other players can be called to interpret secondary characters and can be explicitly asked to contribute ideas by the Director. Scenes should last only a few minutes and introduce a single conflict. Character sheets provide guidelines and ideas for scene framing, acting as scaffolding for less experienced players.

FIASCO

Fiasco by Jason Morningstar (2009) takes a well beloved subgenre of film as its subject, the caper-film-gone-wrong, to create a game where players guide each other's characters down a shared road to perdition. Using an accessible story thread, provocative prep materials and simple mechanics the game creates an even playing field that allows players to co-craft the story, start to finish, with no single game master keeping it on the rails.

Inspired by films like *Blood Simple* and *The Big Lebowski* by the Coen Brothers, *Fiasco* is a paean to ambitious losers and fuck-ups. This archetypal field of stories provides an overarching framework for the game and functions as an

organizing principle. It calls upon the players' mutual understanding of the genre to inform the events, establishes a tone that can be replicated by the participants, and creates a sense of ominous fate for the characters. That fate drives the characters onward.

This fated downward spiral gives players permission to accept negative outcomes for their characters. This is reinforced by mechanics that require players to determine which scenes go well and which go poorly by awarding dark or light dice at the close of a scene, or by allowing the other players to do so. This does away with the single, external authority who sticks it to the characters. Everyone has the opportunity to devastate their own, and in time do the same for the others.

KAGEMATSU

At first blush *Kagematsu* (2009) resembles a game master led game. Kagematsu's player has a distinct role, unlike that of all the others. She sets the scenes for the other players, provides the foil against which other players must react, and helps to put pressure on the other characters. In most games, this role would be identified as the game master. However, *Kagematsu* balances the protagonist character, called Kagematsu, against the others who need his help. Like a wheel with a hub at the center, *Kagematsu* uses the tension between the characters and the threat they face, as well as gender reversals between player and character, to drive the story forward.

Based on an idea by S. Renee Knipe and developed and published by Danielle Lewon, *Kagematsu* takes place in medieval Japan. A travelling samurai enters a village under threat, meets women who live there, and eventually is asked by one to defend the town. Kagematsu, a male samurai warrior, is in many senses the main character. He is powerful, a force to be reckoned with, and is looked at to change the world for himself and others. However, instead of taking action, Kagematsu is acted on by the women until a tipping point is reached. When one woman successfully asks the samurai to confront the Shadow, the endgame begins and Kagematsu acts.

So the story alternates on who takes the assertive role: village women players, then Kagematsu. In an intentional reversal, Kagematsu must be played by a woman (if at all possible). Therefore men, by definition of the rules, must play the roles of women acting on behalf of the village, but in a supplicative role, not the active role that Kagematsu's player takes against the Threat.

How else do they distribute the creative tasks? The players create the village together, as well as the threat facing it. Over time, the threat will grow in strength, narrated by any player rolling a third six on a die, which triggers its appearance. The world and antagonism are built collaboratively by the group.

GAME POEMS

"A roleplaying poem," says Norwegian game designer and poet Tomas HV Mørkrid, "is a very short game, where the idea is to investigate a mood or scene or something else of limited scope."³ Prolific game-poem writer Marc Majcher says in his book *Twenty Game Poems* that "First and foremost, a game poem is just there to be taken in and experienced with a ... group of friends for a few moments, and then those moments are over – and hopefully, something small and wonderful will happen in the process."

Roleplaying poems rarely last more than fifteen minutes, and they rarely focus on more than a single impression, tone, or choice. While they greatly benefit from an experienced facilitator, they rarely include formal distributions of authority – there simply isn't any time. And this is telling. In a format ruthlessly pared down to the most diaphanous essentials, the precious bits that are preserved do not include complex authority structures.

Chris Bennett's game poem *The Believers* (2008) is an exercise in introspection and wonder. Players assume the role of UFO contactees and collectively establish the nature and tenor of our otherworldly visitors. The experience ends with a choice – will you join the space brothers and leave Earth forever, or will you stay? It is a surprisingly emotional experience, entirely predicated on the combination of collaborative creative contribution and a simple but life-changing decision.

Tomas HV Mørkrid's *Stoke-Birmingham 0-0* takes the exploration of mood to beautiful extremes. Players portray Norwegian fans of the Stoke City Football Club, dull people sitting in a dull pub enduring a dull game in a dull country far from home.

In a way roleplaying poems capture and hold the moments we strive for in roleplaying generally – intense moments of immersion, the catharsis of a profound choice made or obligation discharged – stripped of everything extraneous.

MICROSCOPE

Microscope by Ben Robbins (2011) takes a step into collaborative realms that allows it to realize a dream goal of roleplaying games. In the 1990s a game called *Aria* took as its aim enabling a playgroup to create not just a campaign, but a world together. *Aria* follows through on making it possible to do all of these things, but making it simple, speedy or easy – those are beyond the scope of the game. However, *Microscope* carries through on all of these goals and more.

There is no game master. Each player will play multiple characters over time. The world is not defined at the start. Events in play can happen in any chronological order. The game takes world creation and makes it the matter of play.

During play, the players establish what happens in long

3 Mørkrid, 2007.

time periods, called *eras*, specific actions or incidents within the eras, called *events*, and describe or play out specific *scenes* that occur during a given event. Players begin with the "Big Picture", a timeline that will be fleshed out through play (e.g. "An ancient empire rises and falls", "Cavemen at the dawn of time found the first civilization"). A palette of elements that players want included or prohibited is created. For example, players might affirm the presence of airships and hereditary nobility, but ban the inclusion of zombies or magic, all based on the players' preferences. Once these are chosen, initial and final eras are created at the start of play, between which all else will occur. They are assigned dark (or negative) and light (positive) tones, implying an arc of hope or downfall.

In *Microscope*, players are all on equal footing and have access equally to procedures, as is in many other games without a game master. A turn-based game, *Microscope* gives the position of *lens* to each player in turn. The lens takes the lead for a round of play creating a *focus* that each other player will build upon and elaborate during her turn. As each person creates her element, the others must let them do so undisturbed by suggestions. This ensures that strong voices will not overwhelm the more timid, as well as moving play forward without wrangling over each addition.

Scenes, the element of play most like other roleplaying games, have a very different function in *Microscope*. Each scene begins with a *question* that when answered will shed light upon the event in which the scene occurs. Questions are answered through play, it is the stated goal of all players to play toward resolving them, and once answered, the scene ends.

COMMONALITIES

There are many commonalities that distinguish these games from traditional roleplaying games. All games reviewed here share at least a few of the following:

Simplicity. More accessible handling time makes elegant, simple rules more attractive.

Prescriptive procedures. Knowing who can speak and when, who can suggest, or when players can negotiate. Procedures are designed to offer a structure where there is no game master, distribute spotlight, support players lacking creativity. Player position around the table is often used to assign roles within game procedures.

Fictional positioning. Often expressed through a total lack of traditional stats. Characters can start mechanically identical and differentiate due to what is described as occurring in the fiction.

Stats are not physics. Character-level resources often represent the chance to influence events, usually due to alignment with the genre or story or pacing, rather than by simulating some kind of world physics.

Immersion isn't mandatory. Or in some cases, even desired. A wider focus on the developing narrative is employed instead.

Formal transparency. Many games rely on some degree of open communication and expectation-setting, often in procedurally explicit ways.

Shared ephemera. Shared relationship maps describing process and procedures become more important than character sheets.

Prescribed story arcs. These games have an ending: they often focus on single sessions or a limited number of sessions (*Polaris* and *Archipelago II* are the exception)

Collaboratively competitive. Play is often competitive on the character level, but rarely on the player level.

Redundantly reinforced focus. Games recognize that the tone of the game can drift and spend time to reinforce both the tone, the genre and the focus of the game. This is done through, by initial world building, relationship maps, game procedures and ritual.

Roll to be surprised. Players do not roll to win, but they rather roll to be surprised and get more input.

You play to know your character. What will your character choose? You play to find out. You put him in difficult situations to know what he will do. Gone is the time of long convoluted backstories.

Free play. Shared narrative power until decision points.

Metagaming. Metagame is not a bad word and it is actually often encouraged. *Polaris*, for example explicitly encourages players to talk about the story and where to take it, between scenes.

Autorailroading. Players are often rail-roading their own characters more or less explicitly (there is an often communal decision about where to go).

CONCLUSIONS

These games highlight the many responsibilities of a game master by redistributing tasks and changing the focus of play. To make this possible in these peer-empowered games, *structure*, *transparency*, and *simplicity* are used to transfer the roles from one to many. Especially with respect to antagonism, these examples show ways to have the group fulfill the tasks of a game master.

Structure in these games is procedural and fictional. Prescribed procedures take the place of the social and rules monitor the game master once had to be. Now all players turn to the rules and the strong structure to provide guidance. This allows rules enforcement in all the games to be self-policed. Some games, such as *Universalis*, provide mechanics for players to use on the social level. Standard stories or themes are used in games like *Fiasco*, *Breaking the Ice* and *Geiger Counter* to keep the story on track.

Transparency requires that all players have equal access

and awareness of the rules, as well as of what is being created fictionally by the other participants. Making the world is commonly shared and becomes the whole focus in *Microscope*. Surprise, story/plot and who gets to talk vary across the games: many, like *Breaking the Ice*, *Polaris*, *Shock*;, *Fiasco* and *Kagematsu* use turn structure to regulate who talks and when, how the story moves forward and how the players surprise one another while collaborating closely.

Simplicity is a hallmark of the rules, From the studied lack of stats and skills, to letting go of complicated pass/fail mechanics in *Fiasco*, and *Microscope*, to the elegant narrative structures of the game poems and *Lexicon*. Since all players need to engage the rules, making them simple enhances the ability of all to do so.

The final obstacle, antagonism, perhaps the gold standard of being a game master, has many approaches in these games. Turn taking provides a structure for rotating antagonism in some, such as *Shock* and *Polaris*. *Breaking the Ice*, *Geiger Counter*, *Fiasco* and *Kagematsu* embody threat faced by characters in specific mechanics that are brought into play by various participants throughout play. Other games sidestep the issue of antagonism all together: *Archipelago II* by providing direction and surprise, and *Lexicon* by removing the element of action from the fiction.

The breadth of answers to these issues shows the many ways that designers and players have found to move beyond the paradigm of the roleplaying game master. Begun in innovation, with games like *Ergo* and *Lexicon*, these peer-empowered games continue to push boundaries as do *Microscope* and the roleplaying poems. In the living narrative tradition that is roleplaying, the answers that are found in these games help keep opening new vistas for what roleplaying games can accomplish.

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◀ *A Bedouin smith conspires with a local goblin at Saturday's Baronial feast.*

CATEGORY: NEW FRONTIERS

WE HOLD THESE RULES TO BE SELF-EVIDENT

LARP AS METAPHOR FOR AMERICAN IDENTITY

WORDS LIZZIE STARK, PHOTOS KYLE OBER, COURTESY OF JAMES C. KIMBALL

Dungeons & Dragons is the American Dream.

Wherever I traveled on the American larp scene during the three years I researched my narrative nonfiction book *Leaving Mundania*, I saw the same thing: larps based on rules that didn't differ greatly from traditional tabletop games. For a while, I labored under the delusion that I had actually discovered many types of larp. After all, there were vampire larps, meta-larps, zombie larps, Cthulhu larps, and more. They resolved conflict through different mechanics: boffer swords, cards and dice. Some games lasted years while others only ran a few hours. But taken as a whole, they were variations on the same rules-heavy theme.

Nearly every game I encountered featured character cards laden with skills and stats organized according to baroque rules stipulating character class, race, and affiliations. Sure, those headings varied from game to game, and the game worlds differed, but every game I encountered had heavy numerical underpinnings. Privately I dubbed the games I'd witnessed "genre larp". Like genre literature, they aimed primarily at escapism and epic adventure. When I asked around about an arty scene, my sources basically told me to go to the annual Nordic larp conference Knutepunkt,

since our local scene is comparatively nascent.

This dearth of art larp puzzled me. After all, *Dungeons & Dragons*, the precursor to larp in many places, came out of the US. We've had a long time to take that concept and riff off it. What caused our inertia? I theorized that Americans didn't have an incentive to alter a type of game we created to suit our local culture because it already suited our culture. In other words, *Dungeons & Dragons*, and the larps it influenced, are as American as pop music, reality television, and industrial farming.

In this article, I will argue that elaborate rules systems enforce the fundamental American value of equality of opportunity, and that such numerical systems, which imply the necessity of "leveling up", recapitulate the American rags-to-riches myth. Similarly, the inexorable path from noob to level 50 mage of awesome in traditional boffer larp echoes the ideal immigrant's path toward the American dream of riches and upward mobility; both the immigrant and the noob enter the shores of a brave new world with little in the way of assets, but through hard work or roleplay, gain power and influence. In this way, a traditional boffer game represents



New Jersey forest serves as the backdrop for Knight Realms. Here, a Celt rests between modules.

the perfection of the American dream, an idealized vision of the archetypal immigrant's journey in which no one is left behind and everyone inexorably rises in stature.

Boffer larp does more than reflect American values; national values structure the game. I will also examine how the American culture of lawsuits gives at least one American larp group the financial incentive to operate as a business, an organizational decision that has deep, in-game ramifications.

A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD: AMERICAN LARP, RULES AND EQUALITY

The US is a gigantic and mind-bogglingly diverse country without a unified larp scene, though thanks to the magic of the internet, this is changing. Although I've got my suspicions about US larp – a number of franchise games span the nation – I can't possibly speak for the larp culture of the whole country. I did my research on the East Coast between New York and Boston (but primarily in New Jersey), where I attended local gaming conventions and larps, including *Knight Realms*, a medieval fantasy boffer game that has run continuously since 1997.

Knight Realms is one of at least eight campaign boffer larps I am aware of – though there are probably many more

– in the tri-state area of New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. For purposes of comparison, the population of the tri-state area exceeds by 1.5 times the combined population of Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. By square mileage, the region is more than four times smaller than the Nordic countries. Most of the local boffer larps are medieval fantasy games, though in the last year *Dystopia Rising* made a big splash by introducing a new genre – sardonic zombie apocalypse – and several other groups are preparing to release games with a variety of genre settings.

Like most area boffer campaigns, *Knight Realms* meets one weekend per month, typically at a rented Boy Scout or Girl Scout campground. However, the owner of *Knight Realms*, James C. Kimball, recently purchased more than 140 acres (56.5 hectares) of land at a former campground for the game, cementing *Knight Realms'* place as, perhaps, the preeminent boffer campaign in the area. Other boffer campaigns rent this site during off-weekends. *Knight Realms* regularly draws one hundred to two hundred players each month, primarily from the tri-state, though some drive from as far as Virginia, Massachusetts, Indiana, and Canada. Players pay \$45 to \$55 per weekend, depending on how fast they want to advance their characters. James runs the game for

profit and relies on a large staff of volunteers – around fifty – to put on the game each month.

Like its brethren, *Knight Realms* has a lot of rules. Its website contains one hundred sixty-six web pages of rules, some pages quite short, and others quite long. Players may choose from twenty-four races and thirty-four classes of character, each one with a special skill list.

By some measures, these rules might be considered excessive. In her essay "Rules of Engagement" from *Beyond Role and Play*, Emma Wieslander wrote, "typically, 'rules' are all about portraying physical situations that one doesn't want the player to experience and vice versa." She focuses on violence and lust as two peaks in human emotion made safer through game mechanics. At *Knight Realms*, rules cover far more eventualities than situations that make players psychologically uncomfortable or physically unsafe. There are skills allowing players to charm other people, to disguise themselves, to pick locks and pockets, to gain bursts of speed, to climb, to hide, to read and write, to translate, and many, many more. These rules aren't necessary for safety, nor do they compensate for the limitations of the real world the way that a mechanic for magic spells does. However, they do play into American notions of equality.

"Equality" is a slippery word with multiple meanings. It's possible to talk about equality of perception, outcome, or opportunity. Here, I'm mostly talking about equality of opportunity, which a cornerstone of the American Dream. The inherent worth of all humans is central to American identity; it's enshrined in the Declaration of Independence – "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" – though of course now we recognize that 51 percent of "men" are women. The US Constitution lives up to the promise of this belief, in the first ten amendments, collectively known as the Bill of Rights, which protect citizens' lives from federal interference, and through the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, which says that state laws must protect all people equally.¹ Since all people have equal worth, the law is not supposed to discriminate by preferring one group of humans to another. The law's equal treatment of citizens, this supposed lack of structural boundaries to success is supposed to give every citizen the much-vaunted equal playing field. If we're all beginning at the same starting point, then we succeed or fail by virtue of how much effort we put in.

At *Knight Realms*, the voluminous rules enforce equality among players by neutralizing natural player talents, thereby ensuring that everyone enters the game on equal footing, both mentally and physically. I'm a writer with a couple of

1 Several other amendments pertain to equality. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery, while the 15th and 19th Amendments further assure us that for the purposes of voting, both non-white and non-male people count as human.

graduate degrees in writing, but until my character learns the skills "literacy" and "advanced literacy" I'm no different from a 14-year-old eighth grader entering the game. Literacy, as an in-game mechanic, strips me of my educational advantage. Similar logic applies to physical ability. Consider the "flee" skill, which allows a player to call a hold – a temporary pause in game play – and take twenty steps in any direction away from danger. It doesn't matter if a former track star is chasing a guy with asthma, if the latter calls the flee skill, escape is possible. The rules step in to make up for the asthmatic's physical shortcomings.

Knight Realms neutralizes economic differences among players at least partially through game policies, which may be considered a set of meta rules. On Saturdays, the game holds a bazaar at the inn, called "Market Faire", during which players sell items such as food, costuming, and props. Many transactions take place during the game for in-game money; if I'm hungry I can nab a cup of cider for a few silver. But a wealthy player could use the Faire to convert out-of-game cash into in-game gold. For this reason, the game's policy is that items costing more than \$10 cannot be sold for in-game money. If I want to sell latex weapons at Market Faire I can, but they must go for "baronial notes" – greenbacks – instead of gold.

Of course, it's impossible to enforce equality completely, in real life or in game. If I am not a sneaky person, it will be hard to play a thief at *Knight Realms*, no matter how many "hide in shadows" skills I have. Similarly, wealthier players may be able to purchase nicer costumes, which sometimes yield in-game benefits. Superior-looking armor is capable of holding more defense points, for example. Still, if one lives in a country where "anyone can grow up to be president" – or so the rhetoric goes – it makes sense that in a fantastical game, everyone, no matter how weak, tone-deaf, or lumbering, ought to have equal opportunity to play a knight, bard, or thief.

THE IMMIGRANT WITH A THOUSAND FACES

America loves rags-to-riches stories, and the hero's journey of the immigrant. The Emma Lazarus poem emblazoned on the Statue of Liberty says, "give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." The rhetoric, at least, is that America will take the huddled masses, assimilate them, and give them a shot at the American dream of moving ever-upward in socio-economic status, if they work hard. In particular, we celebrate people who hack the system in one generation. There's Supreme Court Justice Sonya Sotomayor, born to a day-laboring immigrant father with only a third-grade education; Oprah Winfrey – born to unmarried teenage parents; and Jay-Z who sings "I was raised in the projects," but eventually ends up a hundred-millionaire with a hit quoting noneother than the rags-to-riches musical *Annie*.

Larps that feature leveling up, as *Knight Realms* does, recapitulate this sacred American myth. When we enter the game, we leave everything behind – our names, our everyday worries, our community relationships, and our very conception of self – in favor of taking on a new identity and new position within the game world. If the rules strip players of their natural abilities, then new characters – the huddling masses immigrating to a new, fantastical world – enter the game virtually naked, without many health points, skills, or protections. Over time, players who make the real-life investment of time (event attendance) and money (costuming and admission fees) gain influence in game, their road to power conveniently quantified by level.

Achieving the American dream isn't easy in real life. It requires hard work, ingenuity, old-fashioned gumption, and no small amount of luck – how many people are still living in the projects for every Jay-Z or Sonya Sotomayor? However, at *Knight Realms*, power, wealth and influence inevitably accrue to players who simply show up; leveling up is the perfected, democratized version of the American Dream in which everyone is exceptional enough to "make it."

At *Knight Realms*, levels take the form of build. Build points are the raw stuff of character creation, and may be invested into bolstering stats or learning new skills. For every ten build points a character invests, she earns one level. Characters primarily earn build through event attendance. In order to ameliorate level inflation, the amount of build received is scaled to the number of events attended. A character receives 4 build per event for the first three events, for example, but only one point of build for every event attended after the tenth. In addition, players can purchase up to one point of additional build for \$10 at each event.

As characters proceed through the game, they gain status through leveling up, accruing gold from selling wares or killing monsters, and holding in-game political positions. In-game noble titles such as knight and lord are not inherited, they are earned. Characters must prove themselves through in-game channels – by positioning themselves politically and practicing good roleplay – and through out-of-game channels, by demonstrating trustworthiness by doing service for the game and showing up regularly.

In many cases, this status bleeds over into starring roles in game plots. The Baron, for example, plays an important role in the life of the town and is in high demand as a fighter of monsters, corraller of troops, and maker of decisions

Players also acquire in-game benefits through the out-of-game mechanic of service points. Staff members award service points to players who contribute to the *Knight Realms* community. Players earn points by donating needed items, such as toilet paper or dish soap or costuming and weapons for supporting characters; by performing duties (cooking, cleaning up after Saturday's all-camp feast, repairing camp

property, or organizing gear for supporting characters); by entertaining other players, either by serving an extra shift as a supporting character over the four-hour shift mandated for all players, or by organizing or running a plot; and by serving as a staff member. Service points may be traded in for potions, magic items, short-term skills, and limited amounts of build. Roleplay marshals, one of several categories of specialized *Knight Realms* game masters,² work to demonstrate good roleplay and to gently bring anyone going off-game back into the medieval era. They also dole out roleplay points for good acting; collect ten cards and earn a point of build.

Inevitably, any *Knight Realms* character will level up and become more prominent in town, achieving the larp version of the American Dream, but players who work harder – by contributing to the community and earning service points – or play harder – by staying in character as much as possible and earning roleplay points – will achieve this dream faster. What could be more American than that?

LITIGIOUSNESS, FOR-PROFIT LARP, AND WORLD-ENDING PLOTS

Knight Realms' vast quantity of rules reflects the American values of equality and hard work, but it is another American tendency – litigiousness – that structures the game. The States have the opposite of the Nordic freedom to roam; we've got attractive nuisance tort law, which says, roughly, that if my kid drowns in your backyard pool, or stubs a toe on that awesome sandcastle you made on the beach, I can sue you. Someone has to pay for my pain and suffering, and for my kid's trip to the doctor.

Cultural litigiousness influences the amount of touching allowed during larps; physical contact between strangers is often explicitly or implicitly prohibited. Regulated boffer combat, shaking hands, touching strangers on the shoulder to cast a spell, and kissing ladies hands are typically the exceptions. Among friends, roughhousing, hugs, back massages, and in some cases, the larp "cuddle puddle" – players lying in a pile before the inn fire – are permissible.

I asked several local game masters why touching is usually disallowed at games. The most common refrains were a) to protect young women who might not feel comfortable asserting physical boundaries from creeps and b) to indemnify organizers from he-said she-said situations and possible lawsuits, especially since children below the age of consent – which ranges from 16 to 18 in most US states – are present at many larps.

2 Knight Realms also has monster marshals responsible for staffing logistics in shifts and sending out random monsters; rules marshals, who settle rules debates; kitchen marshals, who keep the kitchen stocked and organized; and storytellers, who vet the main weekend plots that other players want to run and run several threads of plot on their own.

Organizing a larp in the US costs money. In addition to acquiring props, costumes, and scenery, groups must rent a site, or as in *Knight Realms'* case, pay a mortgage. Due to cultural litigiousness, boffer games generally take out liability insurance of the sort that a recreational hockey team might have. Players sign waivers asserting that they know running through the woods at night can cause broken ankles. Thanks to the cost of space and insurance, and perhaps influenced by the country's corporate culture, *Knight Realms* takes the form of a business.

This fiscal interest plays into the CEO-style organization of *Knight Realms*. James C. Kimball, the creator who owns and operates the game, assumes the financial risk of the business and the land deal. For this reason, he has final say on any matter, though he wields this power judiciously. James has a clear financial incentive to run a tight ship. The nature of *Knight Realms* as a for-profit business implies that players are customers to be entertained, and that relation shapes game play by way of the death system. Players make an enormous investment in their characters through the cost of event attendance, costuming, and props. When a character dies permanently, that player, that customer loses the investment. So *Knight Realms* has a forgiving death system, which allows characters to be "brought back through the focus" – reanimated – no more than five times, with a partial loss of skills and stats. Similarly, players who retire old characters get a benefit when starting a new character: a percentage of the build invested in the old character (the percentage varies depending on the number of deaths taken) may be invested into a new start. Seasoned players who retire a character and create a new one never need to start off at level 1; it's the in-game/off-game version of inheritance, the game's way of inducing players to stay loyal.

The game's financial stakes limit the types of plots played at *Knight Realms*. Each weekend, many different plots run, ranging from sweeping adventures involving the whole town to intrigue aimed at a certain races/classes/levels/lands/alignments. Players pitch plot ideas to a storytelling team, who vets and workshops them, and offers logistical support from writing monster cards to creating treasure. Although "we have to do X or the world will end!" plots are a staple of high-fantasy literature, *Knight Realms* forbids them, because players must always have the chance to succeed or fail. If players fail at an end-of-the-world plot, well, *Knight Realms* has written itself out of existence, and that's not in the business model. Plots tend to be discrete, more like the self-contained episodes of *Star Trek: Next Generation* than the overarching drama of say, *Mad Men*.

SO WHAT? (OR: THE CONCLUSION)

Knight Realms is a product and exemplar of American culture. The States' cultural litigiousness creates a finan-

cial environment that encourages campaign games such as *Knight Realms* to run as businesses, a move which impacts the types of stories played. And *Knight Realms*, through its elaborate rules system, strips away players' natural abilities to make them enter the game equally, and ensures that characters will live the American Dream, gaining in-game power and influence over time.

These are doubtless not the only ways that American culture circumscribes individual larps. *Alliance LARP*, a franchise boffer campaign, for example, doesn't allow religious beliefs in game, according to its website, because, "we do not wish to offend anyone's beliefs", a phrase that appeals both to the immense diversity of the US and the cultural value of religious freedom. Similarly, at *Knight Realms*, pre-scripted racial prejudices against, for example, Dark Elves, seldom get played because they produce liberal-minded anxiety about discrimination.

Sometimes, these national values harm either the immersive quality of the larp or the reality of the game world. Numerous rules with highly visible mechanics take players out of the diegesis, for example. On a practical level, racism and religion exist in the real world and to deny them in-game robs organizers and players of the chance to explore the subtleties of these sometimes uncomfortable topics in what ought to be a safe space – a fictional world. On the other hand, the surfeit of rules creates an environment in which each player's character options are limitless and everyone starts on equal footing.

If US larpers wish to further develop their own avant garde scene perhaps they should examine the way cultural values operate in their own games, with an eye to manipulating the tensions that are already present.

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ELIN NILSEN is an Oslo based larper and larp designer/organizer, and works as a project manager in an open software IT company. She started the Trondheim branch of the Larp Factory in 2010, and is now active in the Oslo original. She has made several larps in the collectively developed fantasy setting of Veiskille, like *Perm på Hølet* (untranslatable, about soldiers on leave) with Ingrid Storror, and the traditional big summer larp *Legender (Legends)* with a group of others. Lately she has focused on relational dramas written together with Trine Lise Lindahl (*Screwing the Crew*, *Par i terter (A Pair of Tarts)*) and now, with Anna Westerling as a third partner-in-crime *Summer Lovin'*. Elin has been involved in making the last two Knutepunkts in Norway, and will be central in the 2013 committee.

GUSTAV NILSSON is a Swedish soon to be psychologist and aspiring author. He has a long history of tabletop games. His interest in larp is mainly as a player, preferably in games with a lot of metatechniques.

NIINA NISKANEN is a player and a game organizer living in Helsinki, Finland. Her special interests are street larps, ambitious scenes and magical realism, on which she has written her master's thesis in Finnish literature.

VILI NISSINEN is a Finnish game and performance artist. Mostly he work with participatory projects combining larping, contemporary theater and participatory performances. His larps include *Kiirastuli OY (Purgatory LTD)*, *Vihan itkuvirsi (Requiem for Hatred)*, with Mikael Kinanen) and *Vili Nissinen Talk Show* (with Saara Honkanen).

JUHANA PETTERSSON is a Finnish journalist, game designer and tv producer. His larps include *Luminescence* (with Mike Pohjola), *Muovikuppi (The Plastic Cup)* and *Portaikko (The Staircase)*, with Katri Lassila). He has written a book about roleplaying games (*Roolipelimanifesti*, 2005) and a tabletop roleplaying game about penguins (*Ikuisuuden laakso*, 2009). With Tobias Wrigstad and Kristoffer Apollo, he edited a collection of Danish roleplaying scenarios translated into Finnish (*Unelma Keltaisesta kuninkaasta*, 2011). He was the editor-in-chief of the roleplaying magazine *Roolipelaaaja* from 2007 to 2009 and has been the producer of the videogame tv show *Tilt* since 2009. www.juhanapettersson.com

MIKE POHJOLA is a professional author, writing books, plays, films, columns, essays and interactive media. He occasionally teaches creative writing or interaction design at universities, and speaks on transmedia and interaction in international media conferences. He has a BA in Screenwriting at the Aalto University of Art and Design. He has also published three tabletop roleplaying games, and ran dozens of larps at art festivals and museums, as well as forests and conventions. He is also an entrepreneur and an activist. www.mikepohjola.com

CLAUS RAASTED is a professional roleplayer and calls himself the world's leading expert on children's larps. So far no-one has challenged that claim in earnest. He's also the editor-in-chief of the Danish national roleplaying magazine *ROLLE|SPIL*, the guy who makes sure *Playground* magazine gets out to the (select) masses and he's written seven books on larp so far. In his spare time he's the chairman of the largest larp organization in Denmark, The Roleplaying Factory.

JOHANNA RAEKALLIO (born 1980) is a Helsinki-based artist oriented to participatory, site specific and video work. Raekallio has a Master of Fine Arts degree and her works have been presented in galleries, art galleries and museums as well as in urban and nature environment. Of participatory projects she has over five years of experience, the latest with asylum seekers. Raekallio developed the larp *Dublin2* with the artists JP Kaljonen ja Haidi Motola 2011. There was an experimental document movie shot during the game. With JP Kaljonen she continues to develop the *Dublin2* concept and there will be a second game in Stockholm 2012, made as a Nordic collaboration.

ELEANOR SAITTA is a hacker, designer, artist, and writer. She makes a living and a vocation of understanding how complex systems operate and redesigning them to work, or at least fail, better. Among other things, Eleanor is a co-founder of the Trike project (octotrike.org) and the Constitutional Analysis Support Team (const.is). She lives mostly in airports and occasionally in New York and London. She can be found at dymaxion.org and on Twitter as [@dymaxion](https://twitter.com/dymaxion).

JENNI SAHRAMAA is a museum worker living in Vantaa, Finland. She is a long-term larp organizer and player with the Finnish historical re-enactment and larp society Greywolves. She has been part of the organizing team of more than twenty larps since the end of the 1990's, most of them with a historical setting. She has written a previous article describing the war and religion -themed historical larp *Antikristuksen yö* and the Greywolves-style games for the *Nordic Larp* book.

LIZZIE STARK is the author of *Leaving Mundania*, a narrative nonfiction account of larp aimed at a mainstream audience and due out from Chicago Review Press in May 2012. Her journalism has appeared on *The Today Show* website and in *The Daily Beast*. For fun, she edits the online literary journal *Fringe* and blogs about larp and more at LizzieStark.com.

LORENZO TRENTI (Castelfranco Emilia, 1977) works in communication and journalism. He's the co-founder of the "Flying Circus" gaming manifesto (www.flyingcircus.it), has collected narrative anthologies (among them *Frittology*, with Chiara Bertazzoni; the book was disguised as a fake self-help manual). He has published *Aperitivo con delitto*, a gaming manual for murder mystery parties, and collected four larps by Italian authors in the anthology *Dopocena da brivido*. He has organized larps, conventions and roleplaying tournaments since 1999, and he is one of the contributors to Larp Symposium (the Italian version of Solmukohta).

IVAN VAGHI is a digital media entrepreneur and researcher in wiki technologies. He lives between Milan, London and Valencia where he started a number of digital agencies. He was awarded a PhD for his work on distributed collaborative environments at the Mixed Reality Lab at Nottingham University. His only contribution to roleplaying games before this paper is a big catalogue of game masterless games available on the *Doubleninja Blog* that he writes together with Julie Zhu.

AARON VANEK has been larping for nearly 25 years. He wrote and published a free essay on the art of larp entitled "Cooler Than You Think: Understanding Live Action Role Playing" that was a required text for a University of Washington class examining a larp called *Heroes and Monsters*. Further larp essays and blueprints have appeared in the Knudepunkt 2011 books *Do Larp* and *Talk Larp* as well as the first WyrdCon academic program *Journeys to Another World*. He worked with Mike Young on a larpwriter challenge runner-up, *The Road Not Taken*, that was partially censored in Minsk, Belarus. He is a founding member of Live Game Labs (www.livegamelabs.com) and Executive Director of Seekers Unlimited (www.seekersunlimited.com), a non-profit company that brings larp to education (501c3 status pending).

TUUKKA VIRTAPERKO is a Finnish independent comic artist. His absurd and politically incorret strip comics (*Omenapuu 1 & 2*) have gained him a small cult of fans. Virtaperko is less known for his oil and ink paintings. The first *Tahtotila* game was his first larp experience.

GABRIEL WIDING is a cultural theorist and game designer bringing art, play and gaming together. He's the co-author of the book *Deltagarkultur (Participatory Arts, in translation)* and a member of the Stockholm collective Interacting Arts, based in Stockholm. He develops methods for participation and roleplaying, for example through collaborative writing and reality games. His last scenario was *Avatarvaro* (2011, with Ebba Petrén and Tova Gerge) performed at Turteatern, where the audience was turned into avatars controlled by a voice audible through headphones.