

Introduction

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“Larp, the Universe and Everything” is an anthology of articles on the theory and practice of live role-playing. It is published in conjunction with Knutepunkt, the annual larp conference rotating between four of the Nordic countries, and named in the host language: “Knutepunkt” in Norway, “Knutpunkt” in Sweden, “Knudepunkt” in Denmark and “Solmukohta” in Finland. The meaning is the same in all languages: a nodal point, a place that connects places.

Since its inception in Oslo, 1997, Knutepunkt has fulfilled the promise of its name by bringing together disparate communities of role-players from across the Nordic countries and the world for an extended weekend of lectures, parties, workshops, play and performance in a spirit that is simultaneously festive and serious. There is no central organization behind Knutepunkt. Each event is organized by entirely autonomous groups, and continuity is maintained by the twin pillars of “network”

and “tradition”. Though helped by grants from public and private sponsors, Knutepunkt and its sub-projects (including the book) are still carried entirely by the hundreds of work-hours put in by volunteers from the larp and role-playing communities.

“Volunteers”, in this sense, does not mean “amateurs”. The people who meet at Knutepunkt work out of love of role-playing, but the quality of the things they produce, whether conventions or live role-playing games, is usually comparable or superior to the products of salaried professionals. Ours is a network of professional amateurs, and — as of 2009 — one that includes the occasional amateur professionals, who have converted their hobby into a source of income. This year is the thirteenth Knutepunkt, and the fourth to be held in Oslo. “Larp, the Universe and Everything” is the 8th Knutepunkt book. Those are some big shoes to fill. And, as usual, there are traditions to be upheld – or mutated – or reacted against.

Nordic and international

Whatever else it may be, Knutepunkt has always been decidedly Nordic. That we spoke and wrote in English at the first Knutepunkt was simply an afterthought, a necessary bridge between the Scandinavians and the Finns. One of the earliest discoveries made at Knutepunkt was that the Nordic larp cultures had a lot more in common with each other than they had with “LARP” (or “LRP”, or “GN”, or “Interactive Theatre”) in other countries.

The Nordic style, as most “schools” and art movements, is easy to recognize but hard to define. There’s the sense that a Nordic larp should be considered a work of art, to be taken seriously – even though participants will joke about it, about themselves, and possibly get drunk before, during and after. There’s talk of immersion, of being one with the character and forgetting everything else – but the immersionist dogma has always had its dissenters. There’s the ideal of the total illusion, the larp where costumes and scenography are perfect – and then there are experimental

larps where you're sitting around in just your underwear, but your character isn't. There's the dominance of rule-free, unstructured play that relies on the honor and improvisation of players rather than points, dice and referees – even though the distinction between the “meta-techniques” currently in vogue and “game mechanics” is mostly theoretical. There are “arthaus” larps set in every possible genre or milieu except fantasy, while the Nordic fantasy larps are often called “mainstream”. There's the belief in the creative power of larpwright *auteurs*, bordering on cults of personality – but also leaderless “collective larps” and “larphackers” who take it upon themselves to save a dysfunctional larp from its creators.

Possibly as a result of the Knutepunkt books' online availability in English, the publication has gathered attention from outside the Nordic countries. People eager to discuss larp and tabletop role-playing – from the perspective of the hobbyist, the artist or the professional – read and write for the books. We did not have a specific focus on international larp when soliciting and reviewing articles, but a global perspective has emerged nonetheless. **Agnese Dzervite** (p.9); **Schmit, Martins & Ferreira** (p.75); and **Tadeusz Cantwell** (p.43) bring us reports of how larp is done in Latvia, Brazil, Britain and France respectively, styles that will seem both familiar and alien to Nordic readers. On the other hand, two Nordic style larpers – **Andersen & Aarebrot** (p.55) – describe their experiences assisting larp organizing in Belarus. **Andrea Castellani's** (p.187) “Karstic Style” is no less Nordic in its approach and references than the “Turku School” or the “Stockholm Narrativists” – except for being based in Trieste, Italy. And one need only take a look at the child-sized boffer swords for sale in a typical Danish supermarket to see that far from all Nordic larps fit the stereotype of the Nordic style.

The stereotypical Nordic larp is played only once, at a secluded location. The pervasive larp breaks out of the seclusion to spill over into the outside world, while the repeatable larp is designed to be played in multiple instances by new groups of players. **Montola, Stenros & Waern** (p.197) provide us with the fruits of the EU-funded IPERG research project, in



■ “Speculative Larps” panel at Knudepunkt 2007

Photo
Britta Bergersen

the form of a *smörgåsbord* of readily applicable philosophies and strategies for the designers of pervasive larps. **J.Tuomas Harviainen** (p. 97) discusses the design of repeatable larps, based on ample hands-on experience, and recommends strategies for facing the design challenges of such larps. Both have plenty to offer for the designers of single-serving, reclusive larps.

Larp and role-playing

Names such as “larp” and “role-playing” become problematic when borders are crossed. Most Norwegians would assume that “role-playing” (*rollespill*) refers to tabletop, not larp (*larp*), while the Russian word which literally translates as “role-playing” usually refers to larp and not tabletop. Most cultures treat “Role-Playing Game” (RPG) as a synonym for either tabletop role-playing or computer games inspired by tabletop. But in Brazil, the term includes both of these, and also larp and adventure

books. While definitions and classification are sure to be discussed for years to come, we have for the most part followed the conventions of earlier books by letting “role-playing” refer to the actual activity of playing a role, “larp” (lowercase, as a noun) to events where role-playing involves the players’ whole (usually costumed) body and “tabletop” to role-playing where players might sit down while their characters walk around.

Depending on the host community, Knutepunkt has been labeled either as a “larp conference” or a “conference on role-playing with a strong emphasis on larp”. The Knutepunkt books have always covered a wider array of forms – not just other forms and contexts of role-playing (tabletop, freeform, educational) but also role-playing in relation to art, theatre, games, ritual, and performance. This year’s book is no exception. **William White** (p.173) analyses a tabletop session based on its transcripts, and draws some interesting conclusions about the nature of role-playing. **Florian Berger** (p.111) describes a combination of role-play with theatre.

- Contact improvisation workshop at Knudepunkt 2007.

Photo
Britta Bergersen



But the “role-playing” that Berger has turned into a performance is, in fact, tabletop. The actual act of role-playing has received less attention in the past than theory and design methods. **Morgan Jarl**, correcting this imbalance, brings more inspiration from the theatre to larp – in the form of a manifesto (p.23) and a how-to on character development (p.165).

Schmit, Martins & Ferreira (p.75) discuss the use of “RPGs” in education in Brazil, and use “RPG” as a broad umbrella covering anything from simple single-player games with no actual character improvisation to complex events with multiple role-playing groups assisted by specialized organizer roles. **Hyltoft and Holm** (p.27) adopt a related approach to educational role-playing, blending a learning game with a role-playing frame borrowed from “Harry Potter”. The authors clearly derive benefits from an eclectic approach to these different forms. And so, perhaps, might others.

Looking forwards, looking back

As Knutepunkt book readers in the past, we must admit that we have at times pulled our hair in exasperation at impenetrable prose and incestuous webs of reference. As editors, we’ve grown more humble. Though the Knutepunkt book is not a peer-reviewed academic journal, some of the articles in this book are written in the genre of the academic paper, with citations and reference lists. Neither we nor any of the authors have allowed the format to be an excuse for obscurantism. Academic writing, while it might require more of the reader, should ideally help us see the world more clearly for what it is.

The theme for the 2009 Knutepunkt is “what matters?” Our working title for this book was “fun”, a tentative answer. We envisioned something more akin to a glossy magazine or a coffee-table book; a collection of engaging articles, a fun read. Others must judge how well the final book matches our visions. But our hair is growing back.

When reading through the submissions on their own terms, three other themes emerge: one theme looks at the practice of live role-playing

from the perspective of the designer or practitioner. A second documents role-playing communities around the world. The third theme goes beyond role-playing, towards performance, education and all the other ways that role-playing intersects with the human life. As such, this is a book about *larp*, *the universe* of role-playing communities, and *everything* related. When these three themes could be comined into a Douglas Adams reference, the title became irresistable. And while the only author to seriously grapple with the f-word and its implications is **Katri Lassila** (p.255), it is mentioned frequently enough.

Old-timers have also been talking about making things fun again, and perhaps this book's vision is part of that trend. The second Knutepunkt book was called "As larp grows up". The editors of the last Knutepunkt Book, "Playground Worlds", suggested that perhaps it had. These days, one can detect a certain nostalgia, a desire to be less serious, more impulsive... less adult, perhaps. This is probably a function of growing up itself – as Knutepunkt has aged, so have its participants, and some tabletop RPG communities have seen a similar development, with a return to old-school fantasy games filled with dungeon crawls, kobolds and evil wizards.

But as Nordic larp communities have grown older and more nostalgic we are faced by the uncomfortable fact that many of our past achievements exist only as fading memories. **Eirik Fatland** (p.223) makes an attempt at preserving such a memory, Norwegian mammoth-larp AmerikA. **Juhana Pettersson** (p.131) writes about the why and how of documenting larps, while **Britta Bergersen** (p.145) – whose photography accompanies several of our articles – has made it her job to do just that. They are not the first to mention the need for documentation, and there is still plenty of work to be done in preserving the Nordic larp heritage. But we should also look forward and ensure that the larps of the future be better documented than those of the past.

Growing up, inevitably, means looking to the next generation – our successors in the role-playing movements. Our kids, even. Larp for children, whether to educate or entertain, has been a growing phenomenon. As old-time larpers and role-players have progressed in their careers, they've looked for ways of integrating their "hobby" (or lifestyle) with their work. Those who used to be maverick rebels, larpers with no concern for consequence or what would happen tomorrow, are now responsible adults telling the kids not to hit below the belt and instructing them in the values of co-operation. We can only hope that the kids we treat with such caution and respect will turn around, break all the rules we've taught them, and create their own worlds of beauty, horror and mystery.

A bilingual history of Latvian larp

Agnese “Axa” Dzervite

1

SCENE

DOCUMENTATION

Latvia is at its heart a bilingual country, having retained a large number of inhabitants of Russian descent after the reign of the Soviet Union. Every Latvian attending school before the 1990s learned and used Russian as a second language, while the following generations have mostly renounced its use in the public sphere.

This has had a profound effect on all aspects of Latvian culture and has resulted in the formation of two distinct groups of people – those that speak predominantly Russian and those that speak Latvian.

Nowhere can this segregation be seen more clearly than in role-playing, a hobby that is very much based on narrative and social interaction. Thus you can never speak of Latvian larping as a single phenomenon, but must rather address its two groups as separate pieces – the Latvian and the Russian.

The two groups have separate histories and often congregate as distinct communities.

At the very beginning, in the early 1990s, all information regarding role-playing came to Latvia from the East across the borders from Russia, where fantasy larps were gathering large numbers of Tolkien or Sapkowski¹ fans. Role-playing enthusiasts of Russian origin visiting their motherland came back with experiences from hard weapon fighting, high fantasy settings, historical simulations and tactical gamism.

¹ Author of the renowned “Witcher” saga.

Larping soon gained a small following in Latvia. The first game was hosted in 1997, leading to the formation of an official role-playing improvisational theatre. A club called “Dragon” came into existence during 1999, started by Russian-speaking role-players. Larps created by the club developed an emphasis on storytelling, detailed costume creation, hard weapon fighting mastery, social interaction, the use of diverse knowledge in history and life sciences, and strategic economic or war tactics in game design.

The first game hosted in Latvian was held in 2003 as a response to the Russian-speaking movement and was based on historical reenactments of ancient Latvian culture.

During this time, a new line of players appeared with a younger generation of gamers that looked more to the West. This group of role-players was inspired by D&D, Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings, as well as by computer games such as Diablo or Fallout. They wanted to break free from the oppressive rules and precautions needed for any hard weapon fighting action larp, and create games with boffered weapons where any player might step in to fight without great fear of getting injured. Led by a game master known as Kamazs², numerous games were created based on a choice of location that enabled greater immersion into the game-world to gain maximum reality and fun by using gamist elements such as quick level-up systems and simple fighting rules. For example, an abandoned military town was used for a post-apocalyptic larp, and a remote island in the middle of a lake for a tension-filled social larp.

² Actual name : Martins Ceplis.

Latvia is a very small nation and can boast no more than about 300 role-players having ever participated in a larp. Thus, a game master wishing to create an event that gathers over 100 players has to look to both larping groups. In recent years, Latvian larps have become more integrated, bringing together both Latvian and Russian speaking role-players.

Language, however, is always an issue; hence bi-lingual larps have become more or less a norm. Sometimes English is preferred as a second language, since either side is more acquainted with this foreign language than the one used by their countrymen. With a choice of two widely know languages such as Russian and English being incorporated into a game, it is no wonder that at times larpers from neighboring countries of Estonia and Lithuania also join Latvian venues. Now, even foreigners from Western and Northern Europe have started appearing at Latvian larps.

Game mechanics, Latvian style

Larps in Latvia are predominantly based on worlds designed by individual or small groups of game masters who find pleasure in writing detailed world descriptions including geographical, historical and cultural backgrounds.

To make the games seem more real, and to facilitate simulation for the players, rule systems tend to include social constructions or interactions, world economics, religions, magical, alchemical and fighting systems. These often differ from game to game or from group to group, and are not very different from tabletop RPG or action computer game systems with level-up, class and hit point systems modified for the individual project. Russian larpers have a preference for more complex rules and often virtual³ aspects as part of the game system, while Latvians have expressed a simpler approach by a 'what you see is what you will get' style of play⁴.

Most Latvian and Russian larps tend to be not so much based on enactment of pre-written roles and scenarios, but true improvisation based on stricter or looser storylines. Within each such story there are always

³ Such aspects as economy, medicine or magic tend to be role-played virtually, while real life actions are substituted by using smaller physical gestures or pronouncing words whose effect is imagined and accepted as real. For example, a coal miner does not go out and dig up coal, but receives a note every hour stating how much coal he has gathered in the mines.

⁴ In such cases, if a coal miner is required to mine coal, there will be a location in which he has to physically dig up coal from the ground and hand it in to the game masters in exchange for in-game money.

missions or “quests” that potential players can receive or find during the process of the game. Game masters create a number of ‘world’ level quests relating to particular groups or stories incorporated into the game-world. The designers always strive to create multi-leveled and multi-faceted scenarios allowing for player initiative and development of all in-game events.

Numerous players enjoy the act of creating their personal characters, trying to place themselves or an imagined persona into the reality proposed by the game master. Writing the background story and picking out character traits for your alter ego is a bit like a pre-game ritual for some, while others really are in it just for the action, and may simply bring along a themed costume which leads to the generation of a character once they arrive at the game site. Large games tend to include key character roles from which players can choose or which are distributed beforehand by the game masters. These are still only described as general guidelines pertaining to history and status, while the players enacting them are obliged to interpret and develop their character within the gaming world without guidance from the game masters.

The real side of Latvian larp

Once the game masters have created the basic game world, they attempt to raise hype around their project by word of mouth, the Internet or at the few small existing gatherings of larpers, role-players and fantasy or sci-fi fans. LatCon, hosted every year in May, is always a place where game masters can meet with potential players and see what the competitors are planning on hosting in the near future.

To gain greater awareness and encourage players depressed by the economic recession to come to their games, Latvian game masters enjoy creating small trailer movies which are often a whole event of their own.

As the hobby is still in its infancy, with no industry to cater to it and participants with very little money to spend, games generally have a non-existent budget and are financed by the organizers themselves, out of

their own pockets. No outside sponsors or beneficiaries have been linked to larping so far, since the hobby tends to be regarded by the general public as childish and escapist, at best mildly entertaining when reported on a few occasions by the media. Delivering live action role-playing games to willing players is up to the couple of dozen people willing to spend time and money to organize larps, write world descriptions, referee games and enact non-player characters.

Still, larp survives, and each year at least three to five relatively large events take place outdoors over several days, usually gathering some 50 to over 100 players; in addition, some smaller one-day-span games take place indoors or outdoors for 30 or less participants.

Over the decade that larp has existed in Latvia, there have been games of fantasy and sci-fi, set in cities real or imagined, gathering from just ten to even three hundred people to search for treasures, go to war or open the gates to Hell. There is no visible development or change so far. Some themes come and others go, some rules are added and others removed – still the whole point is to get people together, dress up in costumes, take on roles and explore the realms of our fantasies.

It is always about gathering to have fun. Believe us when we tell you that we know how to have it and where to look for it.

33 ways to have fun at a Latvian larp

Agnese “Axa” Dzervite

2

SCENE

PLAY

We have compiled just for you a list of tried and tested methods of role-playing fun to be had at a Latvian larp.

If you follow just a few of them you will learn to rev up your game play, create a unique character, spice up your equipment and slaughter your enemy while bringing a smile to their face.

Each and every one of the 33 points have been gathered by Latvian larpers through trial and error out of more than 10 games encompassing historic, fantasy and post nuclear genres. Do not just take our word for it, but listen to the experiences of all the numerous satisfied Latvian larpers that have been there and done it first hand.

Go on, give it a shot. What do you stand to lose, apart from your money and time?

1. First of all, if you have no clue what Latvia even is – stop right here! Go into www.google.com and type in “LATVIA”. I think you know what needs to be done next...
2. This is the most important piece of advice you will receive – Get your butt off the couch and get down here!

It's easy, just go online – book a flight on www.ryanair.com or a bus ride on www.eurolines.com. Once you step off your plane or bus the real fun will begin.

I. Game play

3. Arrive at the game, put on your costume and go exploring. Don't stop wandering through woods, fields, swamps and ravines until your feet fall off or you pass out from exhaustion.
4. Take a shot of Red Bull or any other highly caffeinated drink, then start picking up quests anywhere you go. Don't stop until you've reached the maximum level for your character and can wipe out anyone you lay eyes on.
5. Ask the game masters for an epic quest and get really cryptic instructions to go find heck knows what, heck knows where and heck knows how. Spend the rest of the day trying to figure out the riddle and getting lost.
6. Enjoy the pleasure of a treasure hunt for an historic artifact which the game masters simply forgot to bury or happened to misplace.
7. Don't be afraid to get wet – a little dip might pay off if there happens to be a sunken treasure at the bottom of the lake.



KSH

8. Put on your gas mask and step into a radioactive building to scavenge through apartments filled with abandoned furniture, clothing and other forgotten commodities. Any electronic or rare items will fetch you a nice price in the black market. Just make sure no mutants or druggies are hiding behind closed doors.
9. To gain fame, women and free drinks – learn to play a musical instrument well and make sure to take it along with you to the game.
10. Want to make a scandal in a public place? It's easy! Just grab anyone that's walking by and start massaging their shoulders and back. People might stare and point, the guards might grab you and throw you in jail, but at least you got a good shag out of it.¹
11. Do the game masters seem to be ignoring you? Does all the action seem to be somewhere else? There is an easy solution – lie down on the ground and simply watch the grass grow. This is the key to any larp based on Latvian historic re-enactment, and is a proven method to get a team's morale up.
12. Does it seem like the game is boring and nothing much is happening with your character? Don't fret! Just commit suicide and spend the next couple of hours doing some very satisfying community work² – chopping wood, stirring pots and carrying water. Not only will you get the appreciation of run-down game masters, but you will also trim your waistline and burn some extra calories.

II. Character play

13. Come to the game incognito – wear a bag over your head and pretend to be deaf, dumb and blind.

¹ Sexual intercourse in Latvian larps is enacted by the act of massage.

² In Latvian larps it is a standard that once a Player Character dies in the game world, they have a chance to be reborn or enter the game once again with a new character, but have to spend some *time-out*. The *time-out* action can be specified by Game Masters making players act as Non-Player Characters for a while, helping out around the Game Master camp or in the community kitchen.



- Players working out in the kitchen, "Dusk of Uvaisa" 2006
- (opposite page) A scavenger, filming of "SUX2" trailer 2009

Photo
courtesy of the author



- A virgin sacrifice waiting to be eaten by the Devil, “Ancient Latvian game: Blood feud” 2005
- A peasant hard at work on a rice field, “The Shogun’s Way” 2006
- An old man with no ambitions but to travel the world, “Wolfsong 2” 2007

Photo
courtesy of the author

14. Be the only virgin character all through the game in order to enjoy multiple deaths by being sacrificed to appease the Devil’s wishes.
15. Start the game as a lowly peasant, but end it as the Emperor’s personal advisor by working hard, hoarding your harvest and bribing the whole court.
16. Happiness can be found in any pointless character. Try spending a game as an old man with 1 hit point, with no ambitions in life, just wandering around enjoying the scenery and you will see how ‘Zen’ life will be.
17. Come to the game with your friend and become inseparable joining yourselves at the hip with leather straps to play Siamese twins – twice as many arms and heads will get you ahead a lot faster!
18. If you’re a young man who finds himself low on cash and enjoys meeting new people, why not have a friendly nurse at the local hospital make you some C cup implants? Your friends will suddenly find you more appealing and start buying you drinks.
19. Here is a tip for those of you that are devoted masochists, trying role-playing a vampire and willingly go to visit the dwarfs. These lovely bearded people are true sadists when it comes to vampires – they will pull out your teeth and make you drink milk.
20. Can’t decide what character to play? Too many appealing choices? Do you happen to have a multiple personality disorder? No problem! There is a place just right for you; the non-player character team led by the game masters is exactly where you need to be. Be as many characters as you can be, see as much as there is to see, meet everyone who is anyone – that is the beauty of the NPC.

III. Equipment

21. If you happen to arrive at the game without any weapons or armor, don't panic! You can always turn around and flee as soon as you see another player and spend the rest of the game running.
22. Making a fun and practical outfit for your Latvian larp is simple. All you have to do is steal your grandma's old worn out curtains; hopefully they're not still hanging on the windows. Cut out a hole in one of them to slip over your head and use the other one to wrap around your waist – voila! Now you have yourself a smashing costume that is both appealing and practical. Similar results can be achieved with well-used potato sacks, though not likely to turn any heads.
23. Invent a new line of fashion for all the Undead – sew a dead crow's head and wings to the back of your kimono and you'll be the talk of the town.
24. Gain the respect of your brethren and scare the pants off your enemy by wearing a very appealing pelvic guard in the form of a bovine skull.
25. To become the scariest villain of all times there is only one piece of equipment you **MUST HAVE** – a basket over your head.
26. Any ordinary household item can become a deadly weapon in the right hands. Just boffer a showerhead that's still attached to the pipe and you have a strike area of 2 meters in diameter.
27. Practice target throwing tennis balls, because you never know when they might become deadly shuriken in your hands.



- An undead sorceress inventing a new fashion, "Wolfsong 2" 2007
- A bovine skull used as a groin guard, "Wolfsong" 2006

Photo
courtesy of the author

IV Antagonism

28. When facing an enemy army twice the size of yours, just pull down your pants to reveal your lovely butt cheeks and make lewd gestures with your boffer sword in the face of danger.
29. An easy way to take down your opponent is to be an early bird – get up with the sun just creeping over the horizon and go to the enemy’s camp and collect any weapons left unattended. Once they wake up they will be left helpless as babes.
30. While the game masters are asleep, meet up with your rival clan for a small drink and in your mutual moment of stupor propose genocide on a third clan. Put your plan into action before the sun comes up and enjoy the shocked expressions of the game masters when they find a whole village left to die in their own pool of blood for no apparent reason or plotline.
31. Create a real bio-chemical weapon made of rotten meat and eggs and go around using it on unsuspecting victims that pass out from one sniff of its fumes.
32. If you happen to see a girl wading through a stream wearing a leather mini skirt and bra while holding a sword in each hand – run! An encounter with such an opponent, while fun, will certainly inflict you with -10 moral damage and serve you a very serious ass whooping.
33. Make sure to triple cross anyone you play with. Why not use this tried and tested gimmick for unlimited fun and confusion – pretend to be a peasant who is a ninja spying for a rival samurai clan, but who in reality is a rogue warrior sworn to protect geishas and the innocent.

In a nutshell

Making a larp is hard work and you can never satisfy everybody, but in the end what really matters is that the people who took part in it had FUN!

There will always be things that can go wrong – the plot might be too complex or too shallow; the location physically taxing; the weather horrible; the props cheap; and the players out of control. But that is just something any game master has to live with, and they'll go with the flow once players take over their vision.

It really doesn't matter how the game is played or organized, what matters is that players find their own bit of heaven in the simulated reality – whether it be in exploring a fantasy world, looking for treasure, sitting around a campfire talking to friends, or even burning, pillaging and raping.

Nobody really cares if you are an outstanding actor or an incredible fighter. Don't expect anything and do the unexpected – that is something that will guarantee you and all the other players immeasurable joy and innumerable memories.

Anything is possible in a Latvian larp – so go on and choose your own poison. The only thing that you must do to have fun is forget about the outside world; forget what you *have* to be and be exactly what you *want* to be.

Towards a larp-acting culture

A manifesto

Morgan Jarl

3

PLAY

PERFORMANCE

STATEMENT

Acting is the basis of all role-play. The acting of a character, of a role, of a relationship or a function in the narrative – of any number of dramatic purposes. The act of role-playing is the act of acting – as soon as you take on a different persona than your own, play enters the realm of acting. Whatever approach we have to larping and role-playing games, we engage in acting. Most larpers don't reflect on their acting more than in order to consider whether it is believable or not; some do not even do that. This manifesto is a challenge to the weak acting culture of the larp community, and a call to all larpers to develop a stronger one.

This is not a manifesto of how larps should be, nor how they should be made. It is a call for those who truly create a larp – the players – to consider their play and thus their acting. As such it also reflects on the approach of creating larps, in that acting is a new dimension for an event to be considered and defined by the organizer. I am proposing to diversify

the acting at larps by unifying larp participants behind the concept of acting. To do this we need to commit to practice and to develop our sense of style.

Unification

What is the difference between acting and playing? This is a peculiar linguistic problem that takes on different aspects of language. In the different languages of the Nordic countries the meanings of ‘play’ and ‘act’ are very different, and the activities that fall under ‘acting’ in English would be expressed by several different words in Swedish (my native language). Thus we need to look at the activities of larping as covering both terms. Play is the basis of all acting, be it larp, stage or screen acting. But when I speak of a unification of acting I do not mean that everyone should act the same way – rather I claim that we need to start looking at the cultural aspect of what we are doing as “acting”, in the same sense in which it is used by other dramatic arts. We have focused on “play” for several years – both in the sense of games and gaming and in the sense of child play. Now it is time for us to focus on the analysis of our activities through the lens of “acting”.

Sense of style

Throughout the Nordic larp scene we have a variety of styles in acting. This is mostly an unconscious lore that has developed in different groups, and in most cases not something that is really consciously acknowledged. We need to develop a sense of style in our larps and in our larp-acting. We need to develop a culture of unified acting styles with each event, so that the vision of a particular larp is reached, and so that the discrepancies between different players with different acting styles are diminished. Oftentimes a bad larp experience arises when two players have different expectations of, and approaches to, the acting in a larp. A humorous acting style might collide with an immersionist’s realistic style, and the experience for both players would be jarring – as if they were living in different

worlds, which would bring the player out of the fiction. This effect can be minimized if the organizers are conscious of what is expected from the participants, and the participants in turn approach the larp as actors rather than players. But this takes practice, and perhaps even formal or informal training.

Commitment to practice

Within all other art forms there exist movements towards excellence in the practice. In the larp community this exists too – though mainly in the production of larps, not in the participants’ acting. We need to develop methods, systems and infrastructures for the training of larp actors. We need to find solutions to develop our art form beyond the first steps of characterization. I am not proposing to create elite actors but rather to follow three rather simple steps to support participants in this development:

- Develop clarity in larp writing to assist the development of a common acting style in each production.
- Set up acting courses that everyone in the larp community can partake in.
- Finally, find ways of approaching character creation that are based on theatre and film rather than on role-playing games.

Larp is physical, not verbal – it is a corporal and visceral experience and art form, not primarily an art form of the mind. We create the experience of a larp through verbal and physical action, not through the character sheets of pen-and-paper games. We need to look at the physical representation, at the relationships and at the goals and aims of the character in a new way, to create deeper and more believable characterizations. We need to look at stylization and formalism – the heightening of certain elements and the clarity and unity of the aesthetics of a production. To understand the larp writer’s vision and to realize it together demands practice in larp-acting, understanding of human nature and relationships, of the motions

and dynamics of both the internal and the external world. Starting to analyze and internalize these things is intrinsic to developing the larp-actor. Training is almost necessary to do this.

There are several methodologies used within the dramatic arts to analyze acting, to practice acting and to train the actor. Everything from Constantine Stanislavski's *Method of Physical Action* and Michael Chekhov's *Psychological Gesture and Imaginary Body*, through Keith Johnstone's Impro games of status and the deep emotional immersion of Method acting, to Indian dance theatre and the Rasaesthetics™ of Richard Schechner, should be looked at for the development of the larp-actor.

We need to unify behind this concept of acting to develop the player into an actor – from someone who plays, to someone who acts.

Elements of Harry Potter

Deconstructing an edu-larp

Malik Hyltoft & Jakob T. Holm

4

EDUCATION

DESIGN

RESEARCH

“I cast upon you the curse of lead!” says the wizard’s apprentice with a touch of triumph. “I counter thee with lithium”, the opponent responds with confidence. The two cloak-clad youngsters then engage in a magic contest, exchanging questions countered by answers, snarled like words of power: “What’s the atomic weight?”, “Which group does it belong to? Is it a subgroup or primary group?” Accompanying the words are dramatic sweeps with wands and protective gestures with spell books. The questions and answers are about the chemical characteristics of the two periodic elements in question.

The point of this article is to elaborate on game-based teaching methods, as used in Østerskov Efterskole, on the basis of a case study. We will describe a learning game used in lessons in August 2008, then we will explain how it functions in relation to the larger narrative framework of the teaching in that period. Subsequently we will offer a theoretical background and terminology for the praxis. The study also compares

experiences had when applying the above-mentioned learning game to different groups of pupils, one group inside a narrative frame and one outside. The first group is a group of students from Østerskov Efterskole who are on a narratively situated field excursion; the other is an ordinary class in the public school system. In the discussion we will offer our view on how the structure strengthens the learner's concentration and motivation by ensconcing the learner in layers of narrative frames and "Chinese boxes" of game levels.

The edu-larp school

Østerskov Efterskole, situated in the North of Jutland in Denmark, is the first school in the world to have tried to implement edu-larp as a general teaching method. For further description of the school, see Hyltoft (2008).

Teaching through larp is chaotic, confusing and even messy and a school which takes on edu-larp as a method will have to expect to be challenged on its values, especially regarding order and regularity.

When a class is in session people are generally everywhere – or nowhere to be found. Everyone talks at the same time and at the climax of the day the classroom resembles the pit on the Stock Exchange more than the hallowed halls of education. After completing the first classroom play test of a very early edu-larp, "In the Same Boat", with a class of 6th-graders, and having spent 90 minutes in pandemonium, Mads Lunau, the current principal of Østerskov, remarked: "We have created chaos, and it works". Lunau, Hyltoft and Jakobsen (1991).

The chaos is generated by every single pupil chasing after his or her goal at the same time; goals that are designed to lead to learning. It is not feasible for the pupils to play and larp without generating chaos. Consequently, Østerskov Efterskole is embracing chaos through the more accepted term, "play", in their official one-line value statement: : "It is of value that we are able to play."¹ (Østerskov Efterskole, 2008).

¹ Value statement for Østerskov Efterskole in Danish. The faithful translation of the Danish version does not carry the value of the short almost understated expression into English. For the main stream Danish reader, the first line of the value statement is often seen as quite provocative: "Det er værdifuldt, at vi kan lege". The statement is officially sanctioned by the Ministry of Education.

The observation that chaos is synonymous with learning activity is an important aspect for evaluating the observation from non-larp game tests later on in this article.

A slice of edu-larp at Østerskov

What we offer you here is a slice of educational gaming from a day at the larp school Østerskov Efterskole in Denmark. It is a science class at Østerskov Efterskole during the theme week *Eastwood School of Wizardry and Witchcraft*, which refers strongly to the Harry Potter universe. But it is a special day. The pupils are on an in-game field excursion to the Ministry of Magic, which in off-game reality means to a conference centre, where VIP's from the Danish Teachers Union and representatives from the Ministry of Education have invited us to “perform” an example of our teaching methods. And the pupils are showing off!

The situation, in the pupils' own words, is a kind of climax for this particular week. It is for them a culmination of a week as wizard apprentices with in-game “lessons” in the fundamental necessities of *ars magica*, i.e. *Grammaticus Britannica* (English), *Configuratum* (math) and *Alchemy* (chemistry). During and between lessons, the edu-larp is spiced with constant rivalry between the four student houses for mastery of the most powerful spells, given out at the end of every day to the most excellent of the houses in that day's trials and lessons. And on an individual level there is rivalry as well, to collect the best grades and thus to expand their spell repertoire and improve their skill to cast them.

The Alchemy game

The students are wizards' apprentices who are about to learn the basic principles of alchemy and spell components. Before they are unleashed in the laboratory, however, they have to display rudimentary knowledge of the components involved in potion brewing and spell casting – which in

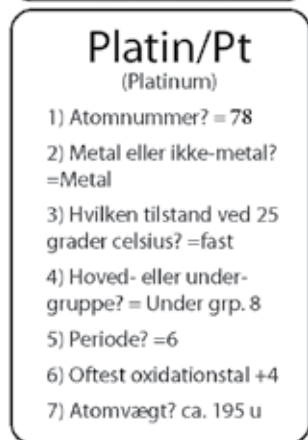
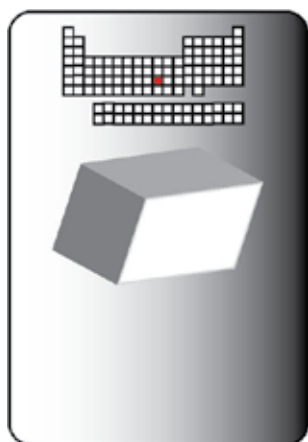
this universe are two aspects of the same thing – but using two different means to deliver the magical effect. The potion can store the magic until needed, delaying the effect, while the spell casting creates an immediate effect. The same understanding can be transferred to chemistry, where reactions might be slow and contained or fast and dramatic. Before allowing the students to play with the real thing, they have to train with proxies of the components (which are the cards) to show their worth. The teacher is in the role of the master alchemist, whose instructions must be followed to the letter! He sets the rules of the training session and controls the transition from one phase to another.

The spectator on the side will observe teenagers dressed up like Harry Potter, flipping, switching and bartering laminated cards for an hour or so. For the in-game apprentices it is a matter of excelling in this class of alchemy, so that they may score experience points to further develop their magical skills with new spells and greater proficiency – an ongoing process lasting the whole week.

The game is designed to teach the basic organising principles of the periodic table of elements, and to train the recognition of periodic elements and their chemical characteristics. The object is to make the system logical and meaningful for the students, so that they may henceforth navigate it more easily – in an exam situation for example.

As a learning objective, the periodic table of elements is actually fitting the game form and the target group quite well for a number of reasons. First of all, the periodic table is governed by stringent rules filled with exceptions – as are board games, card games and pen-and-paper systems. Secondly, the target group is role players, who are already skilled at understanding and navigating complex rule systems. An interesting question to be examined in this article is how The Alchemy game works with a group of pupils lacking this basic understanding.

Components of the game



- (top) The back of an info card with a grey scale background, which reveals to the observer that this is a metal. The box-shaped figure indicates it is a solid metal and the small red dot in the mini-periodic table shows its location in the table of elements.
- (bottom) The face of an info card with the key information the opponent must figure out to counter the spell.

The physical components of the game are 60 plastic-coated paper cards with various texts and coloured symbols. To effectively activate all pupils, a set is needed for every four – which means a total of 300 cards for an average class of 20. There are two different types of cards: info cards and symbol cards. Obviously, each card has two sides, the back (for all to see) and the face (for the holder to see). The face of each symbol card has printed on it the symbol of a periodic element, but not the element's name, for instance “H” for hydrogen, “He” for helium etc. There is nothing else on the face of the symbol cards. On the back is a background colouring and a symbol. The colouring symbolizes whether the periodic element printed on the other side is a metal or a non-metal (the game disregards the few semi-metals to reduce the complexity). The symbol communicates the phase of the element (solid, fluid or gaseous) at 25 degree Celsius and an atmospheric pressure of 1.

The info cards have similar backs with regards to the background colouring and phase symbol, but differ in one regard, as there is also a printed mini-version of the periodic table, where the place of the corresponding element on the face is marked.

On the card face eight pieces of key information about the element are printed: The name and symbol, whether it is metal or non-metal, the phase of the element, the number of the main or subgroup (in which column in the table it is situated), the number of the period (which row), the most common oxidation number of the element and, finally, the atomic weight in units.

Each periodic element is represented in the game as both a symbol card and an info card, thus there are two decks with the same number of cards – the symbol deck and the info deck.

Illustration

Jakob Thomas Holm

Phase one: the classical memory game with a twist

A wizard must be able to recognize and remember the different components to be able to use them correctly for the intended purpose (magic is a tricky business and even the smallest mistake can be disastrous!) Phase number one trains the apprentices to this end.

The master alchemist instructs the apprentices to lay out the two decks clearly separated on a table, but otherwise in a random pattern. Each apprentice then flips the cards in turn, always starting with a symbol card followed by an info card. If they match the correct elements they remove both cards, placing the symbol card in a discard pile and the info card in front of them as a “point scored”. The apprentice continues until he/she fails to match correctly, at which point the cards are flipped back (remaining in the same position) and the turn proceeds to the next apprentice. When all cards have been matched, or when the master alchemist gives the signal, the game moves on to the next phase.

In this first part of the game, it is an advantage to know the general location of the elements in the system, but luck and sheer mnemonic talent goes a long way too. Before even flipping a symbol card, the apprentice has to choose which card to flip on the basis of the information offered by the colourized background (metal/non-metal) and the symbol (solid/fluid/gaseous). The more uncommon the combination of these two elements, the greater the chance to flip the corresponding info card (for example: in all sessions mercury was matched first, along with the other few liquid metals). However, the uncommon combinations are bound to be exhausted rather quickly, at which point knowledge and memory become essential. When the symbol card is flipped, the apprentice may remember the general location in the periodic system of the revealed element, which allows him/her to guess on the basis of the mini-periodic tables on the info cards. At this stage, the status of being metal or non-metal helps guide the “guessing”, since the non-metals are grouped to the far right in the table of elements (with the exception of hydrogen). The memory of previously flipped, unmatched cards may also help the apprentice.

In phase one the basic learning strategy is to facilitate a recognition of the names of the elements, their phases and their metal/non-metal status. The pupils acquire an understanding of the ratio of metals to non-metals and the commonness of different phases, through the visual outlay of cards on the table. They are required to make qualified guesses to score points; as they go, they gradually learn the basic physical and visual characteristics of the elements. Also, they pay great attention to the moves made by the other apprentices, since it is valuable information for them when their own turn arrives.

Phase two: the battle of wits.

A good wizard needs to know how to defend himself from hostile magic – quickly and surely. The only way to learn this is through trial and error, again and again...

When all cards have been removed from the table, pupils arrange their info cards so they can hold them in a fan, as you would normally hold playing cards. They are now free to move around and engage each other at will, in magical contest to win cards from their fellow pupils – each card representing a spell component that may be used to conjure a spell. This is done by posing a challenge, pointing out which card they would like the opponent to use and vice versa. They now ping pong the eight questions on each card back and forth, while trying to find the answers by either decoding the information on the back of the card, by knowing or just by guessing. If any pupil should run out of cards, they may pick one at random from an extra deck held by the teacher. At some point, most of the pupils have figured out how to decode the mini-periodic table and symbols and many battles become ties with no winners. When this stalemate ensues, normally after twenty minutes, the game is taken to the next phase.



■ Two pupils locked in combat...

Photo

Jakob Thomas Holm

Phase three: combining components in potions

Mixing good dragon blood with evil dragon blood is an explosive mistake, fairy dust and rose petals make a love potion, but troll's blood rarely mixes well with anything. Recipes and compatibility of components is the next step to learn, when you know the rudimentary of the components themselves.

The cards with which the pupils end up now have to be combined to “potions”, that is chemicals, in a way defined by the element’s oxidation number. This involves bartering cards between the pupils. At the end of this phase of the game, the pupils then score points on the basis of how many cards they hold, and how many successful “potions” they have put together. Thereby they learn the basic principles of ionic bindings of elements.

End game : the narrative payoff

At this point the Alchemy class is almost finished, but the end game is still to come. The pupils have scored experience points, which they can now try to multiply with the risk of losing some or all of them. This is done by returning to the spell-casting system that pervades the whole week. They may choose not to engage in this rivalry for magic supremacy, they may opt for conducting organized raids against pupils from other houses, or they may even try to steal experience points from their closest rival within their own house. Only the points awarded for the Alchemy class can be lost or won – not points from previous classes. When the Master Alchemist dismisses the class, the points earned and won may be used to buy new spells or to hone the effects of those already known.

This return to the overall narrative frame, the pupils as apprentices at a school of magic, improving their skill all the time, choosing certain paths of magic lore, is part of the individual pupil’s own narration. So are the enmities and alliances, and the intrigues that they spawn.

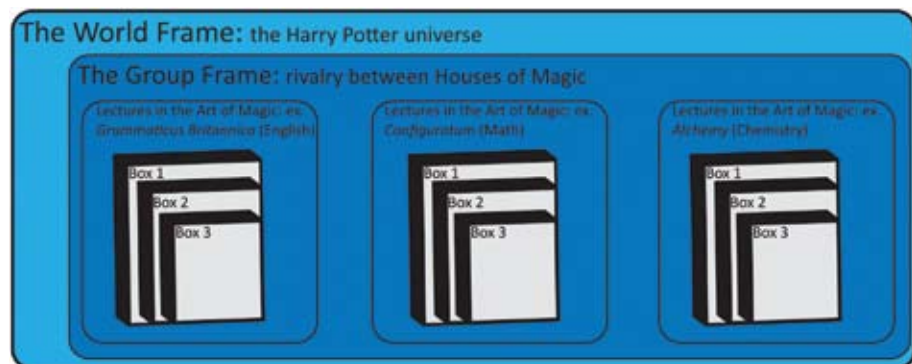
The frames and boxes

The Alchemy game is designed after what we at Østerskov like to refer to metaphorically as a “Chinese box model” (which refers to the colourful boxes within boxes of Chinese origin) to fit into the frame of the general edu-larp. “Chinese boxes” is synonymous with opening dimension within dimension as the game progresses, in the plot as well as in the learning focus. In a learning perspective this means that the layers of challenges are gradually revealed for the pupils, introducing more and more complex material meant to meet the individual student at their respective levels, each layer building on the foundation of the previous one. In a narrative perspective, it means that the story ideally can be unfolded gradually, and also be limited to a certain time frame, while preserving a momentum in the pupils’ eagerness to explore the game. It is important to distinguish between the term “frame” and what we mean by “Chinese boxes”. The frames refer to the contexts that govern our social interaction as defined by Erving Goffman (1959), which in turn is adapted to a larp context as defined by Lars Konzack (2007). A world frame means all those aspects that define the reality imagined in the game world, from religion to physics. The group frame means the design for the social interaction of the roles.

- An illustration of the structure of the edu-larp: The two outer frames define the larp setting and group dynamics. During the week, different events (or lessons, if you will) take place, composed after the Chinese box-model. There were actually five *lectura ars magica*, but they could not all fit...

Illustration

Jakob Thomas Holm



The World Frame

Building a cosmology of an imaginary world from scratch and making it work is a tremendous effort. Historical facts, political situations, technological states, (meta-)physical realities, philosophy etc. – all of these aspects must be either sufficiently explained or convincingly disregarded for the world to appear coherent. Consequently, most larp designers build on existing genres or works when designing their world frames. They use genres commonly constituted or strongly inspired by movies, tv-series, books, computer games or existing role-playing game worlds (Waade 2006). This remediation is useful since role players to some extent use these genres to establish and negotiate a mutual understanding of the world frame (Holm 2006).

Using a world frame constituted by the Harry Potter books and movies builds on a “willing suspension of disbelief” (Konzack 2007:87) due to the fantastic elements characterizing these imaginary worlds. Although the school’s architecture and interior are a poor substitute for the grand and enchanting halls of Hogwarts, the imaginary world of Harry Potter still holds some advantages. First of all it is known intimately by pupils in pictures and words, so that they know what they are supposed to perceive in-game despite the poor symbolization offered by the physical off-game reality. There might for example be a mutual understanding of what the Ministry of Magic is, making it easier for the teachers to act, although they may take the shape of ordinary-looking teachers watching the pupils (the power of an audience is not to be forgotten, as will be discussed later in this article). Both teachers and pupils know the meaning and authority of this institution thoroughly.

Yet, the Harry Potter world offers several advantages which at the same time are potential drawbacks: the setting is a school and the characters are in student-student and student-teacher relations. The daily rituals of a boarding school, with common meals, lessons and lectures is easily produced, but also dangerously close to a common schoolday reality. Much effort is therefore put into changing the small habits, for instance

the students have to address the teachers and each other differently by title, the tables are arranged differently for meals, the food is as mysterious-looking as possible and the teachers deliver off-game messages in an in-game fashion.

The Group Frame

What the Harry Potter world does promise is the possibility to work magic. It is the basic premise for the existence of Hogwarts/Eastwood, the very reason for the pupils' presence here, and it is from this capability that all stories emerge and unfold. Magic in larp is also a huge challenge for many obvious reasons – and especially in the Harry Potter world where magic is quite visual in the spectacular sense. Nevertheless, having leather-bound spell books and nicely crafted wands to wave around goes a long way. They become tools to reinvent the bodily language in the imaginary world. The wand can be aggressively gestured with, be arrogantly dismissive or even teasingly sensual.

When resolving the magical effect of the social interaction of spell combat, improvisation cannot stand alone, but must be governed by game mechanics. Otherwise, the spell-casting becomes a meaningless gesture without consequence. We chose to integrate spell-casting in the larp with a pen-and-paper system with dice-rolling, skill level and attributes. In a larp setting this poses some problems, since it introduces a meta level that removes the pupil from the live action element of the larp. On the other hand it solves a major practical problem associated with implementing a challenging system that the pupils can explore, without too many risks for suspicion of cheat and misinterpretation, since it really matters for the pupils that the right person wins or loses in a fair manner. Written rules, and the element of chance that the dice rolling supplies, deliver this.

In practices, every pupil has their spell book, which contains both their personal spells and the attributes needed to cast them. It also contains the rules for spell battles and the rules for further advances in more complicated and powerful spell-casting.

Another element the world frame of the Harry Potter universe promises is the grouping of wizards' apprentices in faculty-resembling houses, with a large degree of rivalry between them. The four houses at the Eastwood School of Wizardry and Witchcraft were further divided into a "younger" and "elder" faction, reflecting the house's 9th graders and 10th graders. In every lesson in magic two rivalling factions from different houses were present to increase the level of competition. At the end of the day, the total experience points scored by each house determined which one was awarded the honour of receiving the powerful spell of the day, which would give that house's pupils an extra advantage when battling for experience points in the lessons the next day.

A case on the effect on larp-framing in edu-larp

We wanted to see how the actions of dressing up, assuming roles and acting within a narrative frame affected the learning facilitated in this specific case. Or, to put it figuratively: what happens if we remove the two outer frames in the illustration, constituting the whole live action role play aspect, and move the set of Chinese boxes of *Alchemy* to another environment, such as a public school class?

This test was run at Borremose Ungdoms- og Efterskole on January 8th, 2009. The school is comparable to Østerskov Efterskole in all respects except for the founding principle being Christianity as opposed to larp.

In order to assure the same level of teacher experience, the test was run by Pernille Roving, a teacher from Østerskov Efterskole, who also participated in the enacting of the Alchemy Game in the earlier instances.

The Alchemy Game has also been run with the group of pupils at Østerskov Efterskole, who did not have the opportunity to participate in the trip to the Ministry of Magic. Notes on the test game at Borremose

Ungdoms- og Efterskole in the forthcoming comparison will apply to both of these games.

The test game

The test game, which was observed by Malik Hyltoft and had two of the usual teachers of the class as assistants, was met by the pupils with a positive yet cautious attitude.

In the initial stage, cards were laid out on tables and the memory game commenced. Although prompted to stand up around the table (actually the chairs had been stored away), the pupils collected chairs and they all played the game seated. Some, but not all, tried to excuse themselves from participating. Excuses varied – from discarding the game as stupid even before it commenced, to one student claiming that he wanted to use his book instead, now that he for once had remembered to bring it along.

As the game progressed, all pupils eventually joined in for the greater part of the time, but participation and activity level never reached the intensity of the games enacted at Østerskov, where all pupils participated throughout the activity and often created a ruckus.

In the test at Borremose, pupils also lost concentration further on into the game. Already in the challenging phase, two boys started a mock fight over the cards instead of using the intended challenges, and in the end almost one third of the class was not participating in the activities.

An observation (which will call for further analysis at some other point) was that the pupils at Borremose, who were not within a narrative frame, changed the rules of the game on their own accord and were seen cheating in several instances. A significant case was when a boy who had grave difficulties understanding the subject matter “stole” a stack of unused cards from a table and handed them in for his score, eventually winning the game.

In the evaluation after the game, the pupils at Borremose offered very few non-committal opinions, like “nice”, “interesting” and

“different”, whereas the background comments such as “let’s just shut up until they have to let us leave” were far more telling. Group evaluations from Østerskov, in contrast, are usually very long, and everybody wants to have their opinion heard.

In the evaluation conducted with the science teacher of the class, she expressed great satisfaction with the game for its capacity to cover the subject matter and activate the pupils. Although these remarks stand in some contrast to those from the pupils, they can possibly reflect the general mood in the class.

It is necessary to point out that while differences between the implementation of the game at Østerskov and Borremose may indicate a positive effect of using frames and boxes to encapsulate the subject matter of the teaching, they may also simply reveal a difference in the pupils’ opinion about school activities in general. They do not, however, indicate a difference in the academic level of the pupils. In this respect, the two groups are evenly matched. If there was indeed a difference in the opinion of the pupils regarding school activities in general, it still remains to gauge whether this difference stems from a higher level of motivation obtained by presenting teaching as larps rather than regular lessons.

At the time of writing it is our contention, however, to conclude that much of the difference can be ascribed respectively to the presence and absence of the narrative frame.

The effect of narrative frames and the “Chinese boxes”

One of the most important goals of didactic planning is to keep the learner active, participating in the activities that prompt learning. This is not just important because of the obvious purpose of having the learner acquire the subject matter, but also because inactivity and lack of participation leaves the learner (or, as it often happens, the teacher) with the task of reactivating and joining the learning process again. This effort can be quite hard and does not always prove fruitful. Once the learner is outside

the activity, he/she is in conflict with the educational micro-system, and quite possibly alienated from it.

Through the use of frames and “Chinese boxes”, the learner is effectively goaded deep into the complex of the educational micro-system. Every frame or box is a virtual wall, keeping the learner within as soon as the box is entered.

Let us imagine that a pupil, for some reason, loses interest during the second part (box) of Alchemy and needs to restart. He/she will still be holding cards in their hands from the playing of the first box, thus keeping them in touch with the overall process and tempting other pupils to challenge them and try to force them into activity again. Should this not suffice, they will still be participating in a competition with the other houses for merits or demerits, giving their friends yet another reason to try and coax them into participating again. That failing as well, the teacher still has a chance to address a dissatisfied apprentice wizard before he/she turns into a disenchanted young teenager. In other words: Every time a pupil enters the narrative frame of the larp or opens another box in the game and goes in one level further, it becomes more likely that he/she will maintain focus long enough to benefit from the activity.

Pupils in test games at other schools still experienced the activation effect of being in a game, but when this nevertheless failed to keep them active, they were sometimes separated from the teaching activity. At Østerskov Efterskole this is a quite seldom occurrence, and during the Alchemy Game it was not detected at all. It is impossible to ascribe this difference for sure to the use of narrative frames at Østerskov Efterskole. Other possible reasons could be lack of teacher authority or disillusionment with the general school situation; but in both these cases – which have seldom occurred at Østerskov – one could argue that teaching method, mood and mode still account for the higher level of morale.

Using games and narrative frames to keep learners inside the learning activity is not foolproof; but it does make it a lot harder to quit than just putting down your pencil.

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Ten comparisons between UK LRP and French GN

Tadeusz Cantwell

5

SCENE

PLAY

DESIGN

Introduction

In this article I will compare British and French live role-play, and ask the question: are they the same? In the U.K the abbreviation LRP or (live role-play) is used instead of LARP, (live action role-play) which is used in the U.S. In France GN (*Jeu De Role Grandeur Nature*, roughly ‘Actual size role-play’) is the equivalent term, but it only refers to events longer than twelve hours. Smaller events are called ‘*Soirée Enquête*’, roughly translated as ‘murder party’.

The term ‘rubber sword LRP’ is also used in Britain, referring to games, typically fantasy, which use latex weapons for combat. Both the British and French events I attended come under this term.

My experience with LRP comes from three British systems and two different games held by a French *association*, *Les Deux Tours*. By talking to the organisers from this and other *associations*, I noticed similarities that will allow me to talk about GN in France, which has over one hundred and twenty separate organisations. To begin with, I will make two generalisations: British games are usually long running campaigns, while French clubs generally organise smaller games.

1. Organisation, players, copyright

The structure of the organisations in each country mainly explains their respective differences. In Britain many organisations are a limited company, with one founder who designs a system and runs a campaign. While in tabletop RPGs ‘system’ tends to refer to the game mechanics, in British LRP it has become a catch all term for the mechanics and the world background, and by extension the organisers. A game is normally set up so that all the different races and people have a reason to be in the same place, a focus point for the world. Since rules are written to match a background, it would be difficult to use one set of mechanics for a different world background.

To survive, the organisations need to make a small profit, which allows them to reinvest into the game year after year. They rely on a small amount of highly motivated volunteers to assist in running the events. For the main people behind the L.T. (Lorien Trust) and P.D. (Profound Decisions), running their system is a full time job which they rely on to pay their wage.

In France, systems are run by associations, and therefore by a committee and an elected president. These associations are recognised as a hobby under French law, which gives them benefits such as not paying tax. Members are required by law to pay a yearly fee to the organisation. Their main focus is the hobby, not profit. Members are expected to volunteer time to help run the club, though the work is mainly done by a smaller group of active members.

As a result, French organisations rely on collaboration – especially the smaller ones, where the club hierarchy and game organisers are the same people. They need to find people to fill positions for the different games the organisation runs each year. The British model of a single person in charge allows for crew to come and go over its history. L.T. history has shown this model can survive large changes in personnel working for the organisation. Staff positions such as head of plot, security, rules or administration can be held for many years.

French players do attend games run by other *associations*, but identify themselves as belonging to a ‘home’ *association*. This distinction is blurred in the *Île de France* region around Paris, because of good public transport and over thirty *associations* in the area, giving players more choice than in regional areas.

British players have a stricter client/customer relationship like that of a consumer buying a product. Some people do volunteer to become staff and over time are associated with a system.

In France the now defunct *Terres du Sud* (“South Lands”) attempted to create a national game with an ongoing campaign, similar to the L.T. They had connections to C.P. (Curious Pastimes), a breakaway organisation from the L.T. C.P. players attended *Terres du Sud*, as characters from the North land.

France has the *Fédération Française des jeux de rôles grandeur nature*, a.k.a. the FédéGN. This represents the hobby nationally, and has among other things been able to negotiate fixed insurance rates for the *associations*. The U.K. does not have such an association. Organisers have the option of communicating on the Rule7 forum about holding events, but this forum does not represent the hobby to the public.

In the U.K, organisers generally refrain from basing LRP on copyrighted material. The list of LRP systems on Rule7 has two ‘unofficial’ games based on such material. In France the *associations’* not for profit status has meant they are left alone when using copyrighted material. Examples include, *Discworld*, *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Warhammer*, *The Matrix*, *Star Wars*, *Deadwood* and *Harry Potter*.

2. Rules

British rules systems are used for many years and go through version changes. For example the L.T. and P.D. are now on version 3 of its rules systems. A new system, Eos, has been honing its rules after each event, for its ongoing campaign. Since the organisers have played in different British systems, new ones tend to be a mix and match from other games, with new ideas added. Many organisers begin by working for other events and organising sanctioned observing their effect and influences on the game world. To uphold rules P.D. and Eos have referees and head referees. The L.T. has four positions: Head of Rules, Senior referee, Referee and Marshal. Marshals are the most common and do not have the power to adjudicate over the death of a player's character. Players know most combat situations will not result in character death. To become a marshal and referee requires taking a written test and an evaluation.

Learning the rules can take a few games. Even then, players tend to learn only what is relevant to their character. The L.T. rule book is 63 pages long, Eos is 84 pages, P.D. does not have a unified third edition yet, but would be of a similar length. This does not include pamphlets about your race/culture, skills, magic spells etc. Learning the rules for Eos was simpler for me than it would be for a new player, as it had similar concepts to the L.T. and P.D.

If a French club ran three separate one shot events, it could have rules written for each game. This disposable attitude means there is less of an emphasis on the rules. It is seen as important that they are followed, but there are not always staff whose main job is to adjudicate on rules. In a large battle they will often try to be monsters, guide plot and ensure the rules are being followed – all at the same time. Some French organisations have '*orgas*', the equivalent of a referee. Some *associations* run on-going campaigns and rules. I wasn't able to get any information about them.

The complicated rules written for the *Esterel* setting became a problem. The large amount of things which could be added as a bonus led to rapidly changing character abilities and much confusion. It seemed to

breed a reckless interpretation of the rules. Once, while playing a zombie, I had 'holy' water thrown in my eyes, naked flame passed near me so I would die in flames, and was body checked against a wall by someone with a strength bonus.

In both countries the rules tend to stay in the background. Out of character calls tend to happen in a fight if a weapon does extra damage. Spell effects are explained in the casting. "By my power I knock you down" and the player falls on to their back or squats down for thirty seconds. Play stops occasionally over a failure to understand rules in an important situation. Mostly a player will either reread the rules or ask a member of staff if something happens that is not understood.

3. Quality of equipment

The quality of equipment used is very different, especially the latex weapons. The U.K. has a number of professional and semi-professional manufacturers of weapons that need to conform to the minimum requirements set by the big three systems. Before a player can join a game their weapons and armour are examined by a qualified weapons tester. Any item found to be unsafe cannot be used in-game. This has established an overall standard for the country. In stark contrast, the events I attended in France had no weapons testers. Weapons made by the organisers were crudely constructed and would have been sent to the bin if they had found their way to the U.K. A weapon with the carbon fibre core exposed at the pommel was not considered a problem. They also had arrows whose protective head was barely bigger than the eye socket. People were shooting from a height, in the rain, into the enclosed space of a tunnel, all things that would have been considered dangerous in the U.K.

However, the set dressing in *Les Deux Tours* was of a high standard. Much time, imagination and ingenuity went into bringing plotted events to life, often from basic resources. While British LRPs also put an effort into props and set dressing, their focus is more on creating broad strokes

of a world for the players to move around in, making it harder to build sets for specific things.

Players from both countries accumulate large amounts of equipment, which is brought to enhance the game. In French games there is no time-out period during the night, so the players bring enough to create a living space for their group. This is essential to fill, for example, a large castle. For personal costume, they mix and match for that character and event, resulting in a sometimes generic look. In the U.K., costume and props are made with a system in mind, adding details that enhance the world and add to its evolution. British players earn social 'brownie points' for impressive costumes and props. This can help to keep the suspension of disbelief in a scout camp, which is where many games are held.

4. Health and safety

In the UK safety rules are considered to be very important. The L.T. and P.D. have security personnel that guard camps, put out unattended fires and deal with troublesome people. A section of the rule book is dedicated to the safety rules. They also have out of character calls to alert people when real injuries occur, such as 'man down' and 'medic'. The British have a strong health and safety culture that expects rules to be in place to protect people from unnecessary injury. Grappling is not allowed because of the potential dangers. In some games, people have suggested wearing an armband to indicate they agree to grappling. This has yet to be allowed.

In France, the site at Fort Les Bancs is very dangerous. This is explained in detail in the rulebook. Hazard tape is used to mark dangerous areas and toilets. Players are told to watch out for each other and take action if they see someone in danger. At *Esterel* rain made the stony ground very slippery. This caused a few injuries. The final fight was moved because the terrain was unsuitable for a large pitched battle. *Les Deux Tours* events are known as 'drinking weekends'. This gave the organisers headaches dealing with players who were a danger to themselves.

There were no rules for grappling, but it happened to me twice to bring a dramatic end to a fight. Such moves were usually telegraphed (i.e., moving in a way that shows the other player their next action) and could be fun, such as with the adventuring party group. They played parodies of stereotypical role-playing characters beginning at level one (where the norm was level five). The two surviving characters charged my minotaur NPC. I fell back trashing about wildly while a sword was impaled between my arm and body. When a similar situation happened with a more serious group, I had less warning and their actions were more aggressive.

5. Locations for events

The majority of British games are held in scout camps. This is not always suitable for the larger organisations, so the L.T. rents a private park and P.D. this year is renting land with a view to purchase. Land has also been bought by other companies to be developed and rented to LRP groups. This is happening because scout camps are not the best solution for holding events. Rising prices, unattractive buildings and difficulty in securing locations has resulted in the need for alternatives.

France has an abundance of available castles and other suitable locations. They can also go to Spain to a 'western' film set for a wild west game, or the desert in Tunisia for a Star Wars game.

6. Players and plot arcs

British systems vary from the top down plot of the L.T, to the largely player led plot of P.D., to the even mix of world and player generated plot of Eos. For L.T., the head of a faction will be told that a threat exists to the world. They will tell their faction, who then organises a response. In P.D. characters set their own goals, mainly working against each other. NPCs are invisible to player character's and the small bit of world plot is shared during play. Organisers provide an extensive background for the characters to come from, and check that submitted character backgrounds match the game culture they will play.

Events outside the game location controlled by the plot team have an impact on play to simulate a dynamic world. This could be a tribal invasion in the game in response to new settlements or items from another place becoming available as trade routes open up. Character design is largely in the hands of the player, which the organisers can later incorporate in the world. In P.D. and EOS players can explore, build items, conduct research, learn spells and skills. These downtime activities keep a character alive for players and give them something new to bring to the next event.

In *Les Deux Tours*, background, character and plot are tightly integrated. The organisers write many of the character backgrounds, planting numerous plot hooks that link to the story. Each group has an organiser attached to them to supervise its creation. Behind the appearance of freedom lies a linear path they are expected to follow. In this bubble the rest of the world has little impact in game. In the '*Esterel*' game this caused conflict between players and organisers. One example is a pirate group who had excellent costumes and acted in-character for the whole game, drinking very potent rum. They did, however, not care about their detailed plot arc, ignoring the clues set out by the organisers. They had to be told out of character where to go next for the scripted adventures.

Strong conflicts were also established amongst the various groups in the background. If one group was to kill the characters in another group, the complex web of links between player and world background would break down. So the organisers spent as much time battling to keep the status quo, as they did running the game. It was not understood that if you establish warring factions this would be the result. The strength of the monsters in the final battle was supposed to be decided by a series of small battles. When the players were not organised to win these battles, it was changed so that an event would be a challenge, but they could not lose. The monsters died when it was dramatically appropriate. This resulted in a fantasy theme park that could have worked, if the darker themes had not been mixed with the original Shrek concept.

In *Malatere* this conflict did not happen since it was set in a pseudo-medieval world in which all the characters were officially Christian, so most of the player versus player conflict was covert. For example a bishop was murdered while alone at night, and a nurse maid took away a baby in her care to murder it, as she came from a rival faction.

7. Character death

Esterel had a ritual to bring back dead characters as a way to avoid players needing to change characters if the first one died. In general French organisations can find it difficult to bring in new characters during a game. This is partly because games are a one shot or a trilogy and, there is less scope to play new characters. Players are not used to character death and are not always happy when it happens.

In the U.K., the cycle of character life and death is much more accepted. In this way the campaign evolves with people arriving, dying or leaving, causing the power structures to change over time. There is also a belief that the danger of character death enhances the game.

8. NPCs and monsters

An NPC or ‘non player character’ is a character made by the organisers and directed what to do. Their role is to flesh out the game world by providing local flavour or enemies to fight.

British games have two main approaches to using NPCs. The first is where players put aside their main character and become someone else for a short time. This could be to represent an attacking force, a messenger, a high diplomat from another continent etc. In high combat games such as the L.T., the attacking force becomes the ‘monster’, with no instruction other than to ATTACK! and die on the swords of the players. The second approach is to have a dedicated crew who play a variety of roles, sometimes for the weekend.

In *Eos*, characters that were still relevant to the story were played by the same person at different events for continuity. The *Les Deux Tours*

NPCs had minimal background, monster roles had none. The detailed character backgrounds written for some players would be similar to an NPC in the U.K., especially in how they match players to roles.

P.D. and Eos strive to make no distinction between player characters and NPCs. At *Esterel* my NPC role was taken over by a spell. When our attack was finished an organiser had to explain you can't keep him, he's an NPC. At *Malatere* I played an English soldier and was told we had a strong Christian faith to explain why we didn't kill the wounded. To take the castle, a known Satanist was employed. I became upset in-character because I had developed a pious nature, taking the angry words from the holy orders seriously. To the organisers it was just plot, the contradiction was irrelevant. Further, only the head of the English soldiers had a character background. The rest of us were expected to be generic soldiers for the weekend, while running the camp and going on patrol and interacting with player characters. During the first night I was given the role of a captain since I am a native English speaker. I remained so in the eyes of the other players and NPCs, despite the group having an official captain. This made me unofficially in command when he was absent, which happened frequently as the game progressed. We essentially roleplayed with the players with little feedback from the organisers. I felt a great opportunity was missed to give us character backgrounds to enhance the world. In Eos or P.D. this level of compatibility would be very important in creating a unified world. There would be a background to explain everything and an NPC would be free to respond in character.

9. Creating a make-believe world

As you can see, the approach to creating LRPs are very different in France and the U.K. This is partly because of the values placed on different aspects of the game. *Les Deux Tours* originated from a medieval re-enactment group, so they place a high value on the physical surroundings. Players sleep in character, food is provided by their group or bought in game. Sleeping areas are the exception – they are semi-private and have modern items. The organisers pack as much into the weekend as possible

for the players' enjoyment. They create a detailed world that matches their background, and the player is expected to enjoy the game by following the plot. Conversely this left much less opportunity for character development. Not following the plot for character reasons is viewed negatively by the organisers, because there should be no other logical choice.

British systems create a world with broad strokes, leaving character complexity and development to the player. They also ensure that actions have consequences when the next events plot is written. This allows for long term character development, which is needed to bring players back year after year. To *Les Deux Tours* players U.K events do things that would put them off. Staff wear high-visibility jackets, time out stops play at night, people have an unofficial break when eating. Players have their character details sealed in a card-sized laminated pouch, referred to as a "lammie". A "lammie" can be visibly attached to an item that has something of significance. The "lammie" then needs to be filtered out by the player's mind.

10. Behind the scenes

Office facilities and a website are necessities in both countries. Systems with downtime need databases to keep track of the expanding number of items. P.D. has a row of computers at an event to check player information. Payments and downtime resources and actions are managed on their website. The L.T.'s game operations desk still uses paper, with computers in the back office. *Les Deux Tours* have a simple computer based system, managing player information and the written plot.

Conclusion

As I have shown, LRP and GN are not the same, because of the way they are organised. *Les Deux Tours* has received a tough reception in this article, since they are my only example of French LRP. Going to their events has been a lot of fun both in and out of game. I especially like how key moments are planned for in a game, which can outshine the broad strokes used in British systems. In both countries they are trying to reach the same goal: to provide a fun game for the players.

A combination of country size, culture, laws, and accepted methods of operation has influenced the organisations' respective implementation. However, if you are engrossed in character with others around you, the methodology becomes irrelevant. You have reached your destination of playing a role in a live environment. At the end of games in both countries one thing remains important: Did you have fun? If the answer is yes, then the journey was worthwhile.

Larp in Kamensky forest

Anita Myhre Andersen & Erik Aarebrot

6

EDUCATION

DESIGN

SCENE

In October 2008 some 40 people gathered in the Kamensky forest outside Minsk, Belarus, to arrange and participate in the larp “1943”. This larp was the product of one and a half year of work. For many of the participants it was the first larp they had ever attended. As such, the larp was intended to serve both as an educational activity on the topic of the Second World War (WWII) *and* as a training case for a group of Belarusians on how to organize larps. We, the two article authors, participated in “1943” as the only foreigners. This article is an account of our experiences with helping, training and finally participating in this Belarusian larp. Much of the work revolved around transferring larps from the Nordic cultural context to the context of Belarus. Many larpers will probably nod in recognition when reading of the many challenges that the Belarusian larp organisers faced during their planning and implementation. In this respect, the

article might serve as a check list for organising larps: in addition, we also try to share some of the unique experiences of shaping a larp and an educational programme in an authoritarian regime.

Origins and background

“How could I know how it feels to be abused?” is a question that is frequently asked by participants of larps which aim at studying, exploring, and educating on the issue of human rights abuses. Such questions, and the discussions on approaches, techniques and strategies for optimizing larps, are the basis for Knudepunkt. Two years ago, at Knudepunkt 2007 in Denmark¹, these discussions were given a novel focal point. Prior to Knudepunkt, Tue Beck Olling raised the question of whether larps could be used as a tool for democratization in Belarus. This question generated a considerable amount of curiosity and enthusiasm in Kristin Hammerås and the two article authors, who then proceeded to ask the Knudepunkt organizers if this could be one of the themes for the 2007 congress. This evolved into the keynote theme *Why larp can change the world*. Knudepunkt invited a host of organisations to showcase and discuss how they had gone about creating educational larps, with the explicit agenda of exchanging ideas on how to organise larps within the authoritarian regime in Belarus. Knudepunkt also invited an educational NGO from Minsk that had expressed interest in larp methods. Here we must note that we have chosen not to include the names of the Belarusian organisations and people who were involved in this article. This is a precautionary measure seeing that the Belarusian political environment is not a particularly forgiving one. We will return to this later.

Knudepunkt proved to be a fruitful arena to discuss the issues of educational larps. In the final discussion and brainstorming some 30 people, all of whom had worked with different larp projects, participated in the sharing of ideas on how to create a larp in Belarus. Two years down the line, quite a few of the ideas from Knudepunkt have been realized.

¹ Seeing that “Knudepunkt” has different spelling from year to year we chose to apply the 2007 host’s spelling when discussing issues that were raised there, i.e. in this text Knudepunkt with a d, refers to the 2007 Knudepunkt in Denmark.



- 1943 – “Liquidate the bandits. If you know anything, inform the German authorities.”

Photo
Erik Aarebrot

Initial contact and project development

Inspired by the suggestions and thoughts that emerged at Knudepunkt, the question as to whether a larp could be created in Belarus became one of “how” rather than “if”. A lot of ideas were floated by different people during Knudepunkt, but perhaps most importantly the Belarusian participants were very inspired. Their main field of expertise is youth and civil courage and they saw larps as a potential new way of conveying such civic education. Initially, however, the starting-point was an agreement between the participants and the Belarusian NGO that it would be an advantage for those who were interested in the Belarusian case to visit Minsk, in order to see the country, meet the people, conduct a workshop aimed at creating larps, and lay plans for the future. After some deliberations, a group of four Norwegians decided to go to Minsk. Egil Engen, Kristin Hammerås and ourselves travelled to Minsk in the summer of 2007, in order to conduct a two-day workshop with the Belarusians.

The workshop was based on simple theatre exercises and dialogue, and was greeted with persistent enthusiasm. The first day revolved around improvisation and creative exercises aimed at mapping topics, characters and settings. The second day was dedicated to creating a mini-larp that took its cues from the first day, and that would involve all the participants. It was scripted before lunch and played in the afternoon. While we might argue that this mini-larp was of a moot quality, it did serve its main purpose, namely as a reference point for further planning. Most of the participants had never taken part in a larp, and as they discussed how we could have improved the mini-larp they also started to realize the potential pertaining to this type of activities. This recognition was brought into the planning process, and as a part of the planning it was decided that a group of the Belarusians would visit a Norwegian larp in order to deepen their understanding and develop their experience. Thanks to Margrethe Raaum, Tor Kjetil Edland, Hanne Grasmø and Egil Engen, a group from Minsk was thus invited to the Norwegian larp *Sturlaria 2*. After the visit

to Norway, the Belarusians started in earnest on the task of creating their own larp in Belarus.

The aim of the project

Creating larps usually requires extensive preparation; this is even more the case when creating a larp in an authoritarian regime. In addition, the Belarusians had the expressed vision of using the larp for educational purposes. Specifically “[t]o develop new and effective mechanisms for involving young people into civic education, civic participation and democratization processes in Belarus.” They wanted their larp to serve as an educational vessel alongside their other initiatives. Their vision of using larp methods in conjunction with the approaches they already were using prompted them to formulate their specific aims for arranging a larp in Belarus.

The objectives of the project were as follows:

1. To use the memories and material about World War II in modern civic education programs for youth in Belarus for honest revision of national and European history of the 20th century.
2. To provide a comparative analysis of similarities and differences of Belarusian and Norwegian history and reach some effects of intercultural education and understanding.
3. To conduct an analysis of civil courage phenomena and behaviour both during World War II and nowadays as examples of responsible citizens’ position for young people.
4. To develop media-pedagogic approaches for modern civic education in Belarus.
5. To share experience between Belarusian and Norwegian specialists of civic education working with young people.
6. To develop larps and role-playing as effective educational tools for working with youth in Belarus.



■ Freedom of speech in Belarus

This image is part of a campaign on Belarus carried out by the Polish Amnesty International and was found at http://socialcampaigns.blogspot.com/2008_01_01_archive.html

The project formulation was done in cooperation with two organisations from Bergen, which contributed with their experiences of using larps in an educational context. The final text stipulated to create a project articulated in three stages. In the first stage, the Belarusian organisation would visit Norway for extensive workshops on larp planning and execution, development of educational content and contextualisation of larps. In the second stage, the Belarusian organisation would challenge their members to create and execute their own larp. Finally, in the third and final stage, the results of the larp would be analysed and subsequently disseminated. To achieve all these goals, the project was envisaged to last for almost a year, in order to allow sufficient time both for the project participants to visit each other, and for the thought process on the methods to mature in Belarus.

For this discussion, it is important to keep in mind that the settings in the Nordic countries and Belarus are quite different, both when it comes to the regime and to the experience with organizing larps. While larp has existed for about 20 years in the Nordic countries, it has been an unknown concept in Belarus. In the Nordic countries larps started out with small groups of people that combined scouting with tabletop role-playing. Using fantasy and action elements from role-playing, they changed and improved the outdoor activities of scouting. Scouting combined with role-play and simple costumes became the start of the Nordic larp movement. In these first years, larps mainly revolved around fantasy themes. The organisers created their own fantasy settings inspired by fantasy literature, films and a host of historical and mythical sources. Gradually the larp scene in the Nordic countries developed, and the first political larps in Norway emerged in 1997. Subsequently, numerous historical larps have been arranged and continue to be popular. The political and historical larps changed the view of what larps could and should be, and significantly expanded the perception that larps should only be recreational; the political larps acquired an emphasis on debating problems in our society, and the historical larps tried to recreate history as shown by historical sources and literature.



■ 1943 – Sleeping area from one of the village houses

Photo
Erik Aarebrot

Political and historical larps have blossomed on the Nordic larp scene. Such efforts pervade the entire larp scene, and many recreational larps include elements of history, societal critique or exploration of the human psychology in both their planning and execution. However, while political and historical larps have definitely made an impact, most larps are still created with the purpose of simply having a good time. Few larps are made with the exclusive purpose of education.

This, in turn, highlights the contextual difference between working in Belarus and working in the Nordic countries. While Nordic larpers enjoy the freedom to plan and execute the larps of their dreams, the Belarusians wanted to use larps to show what such dreams could look like. To state that the aim of their larp was “honest revision” of WWII within a present-day Belarus was a bold and ambitious proposition, but nonetheless an important goal in order to secure their intent of using larps as a means to improve the Belarusian society. In short, they wanted their larp to have a purpose.

	Nordic countries	Belarus
Societal context	Democratic	Autocratic dictatorship
Larp experience	20 years	Limited
Larp development	Gradual	None
Larp purpose	Mainly recreational	Educational

■ Overview of the differences between the Nordic and Belarusian larp scene at the start of the larp development

Directed larp – entertainment versus education

Most of the time, larps are intended to create a particular atmosphere, elicit a certain delight or even just some kind of respite. The Belarusian NGO wanted their larp to have a special focus on the educational application of these methods, which was reflected in the project formulation.

They wanted the project to encompass some of the ambiguities of the Belarusian society, and to leave room for the participants to reflect on their own position within this society. They intended the larp to serve as an arena for learning and reflection. In addition, they expressed the wish to create a framework for a larp that could be re-used, in the sense that they would use the same roles, setting and rules for different participants at later stages. This would ensure that the dividends of the efforts that went into creating the first larp would be multiplied over time as more participants were able to experience it.

However, given the nature of Belarusian authorities, finding a theme for the larp proved challenging. They needed a theme that could be at the same time acceptable for the authorities, and also yield possibilities for discussing how we wished our society to be.

The Second World War – as focus for historical critique and investigation

After thoughtful consideration it was decided to go for a Second World War theme. WWII fits the bill of a non-provocative theme perfectly. Belarusian authorities still treat it as the “Great war of the Fatherland”, intertwining the Soviet myth with their own modern state building. Therefore, creating a larp based on WWII would not pose a threat to the authorities as a provocative and challenging event. At the same time, it is the very myth of the WWII that makes it an interesting case to work with. Simply reading entries on WWII in Belarusian school books from different periods over the past 60 years yield a huge amount of material that is both contradictory and propagandistic. The Belarusian organisation wanted to deflate this myth by exploring the circumstances that were not perceived through the lens of the “Great war of the Fatherland”, such as the role of Polish partisans, the brutality of Soviet forces and the rampant despair of the civilian population caught between warring parties that did not consider their torment as part of the equation. These themes were at the core of how the Belarusian organisation saw the possibilities of

using WWII in an educational program to address the complexities and insecurity of the present-day situation in Belarus.

The Belarusians chose “1943” as the name for their larp, as it is a central year when delving into the uncertainties of the war. The war was still largely undecided and the population still had to relate to all the warring factions. As good fortune would have it, WWII has also been a theme that the Norwegian larp scene has acquired vast expertise on, through the *1942* and *1944* larps. The collective efforts of the organisers of these larps deserve ample appreciation for their contribution to this project, in form of inspiration to greater endeavours by their example of meticulous preparation and execution.

The final project applied for a total budget of some 400.000 DKK and this funding was allocated to the project at the end of 2007.

The build-up and the preparation for the larp

The first stage of the project started with a one-week workshop in Bergen. A core group of organisers came to Bergen to discuss and learn about different methods of larps and education. The focus for the workshop was the application of larp methods in an educational setting, with several different approaches, ranging from on-the-spot theatre performances to full-fledged larps, subsequently discussed in detail with the people who created and executed them. Special attention was given to the development of educational material and to what learning effects can be achieved when combining this with larps. In particular the long-term effects, such as heightened awareness, sustainability of learning through experience and the relationship between larp and schoolroom education were the object of discussion, both through observations and through data gathered from the various projects. In addition, there were segments on civic engagement through larps and how larp methods can be used in civic action. Furthermore, an entire day was devoted to presenting the work that had gone into creating *1942* and *1944*. Finally, a discussion on ethical matters was conducted, envisaging what possible scenarios organisers

can encounter in planning and executing an educational larp. The group of Belarusians took the experiences from the Bergen workshop with them back to Minsk and set about creating a framework for the execution of the larp.

The next stage of preparation was to gather in Vilnius for a second workshop. Vilnius was chosen for its relative good accessibility for both the Belarusian and the Norwegian groups. This workshop included two people from the Norwegian team², the core organisers from Minsk and some 20 interested youngsters that intended to prepare and participate in the larp. For this workshop the Belarusian organisers had recapped the input they had received during the first workshop; they now wanted to transfer some of their experiences to a new group of people, whom they envisaged as the key personnel in the forthcoming work. To this aim, they sought to recreate some of their own positive experiences.

From these premises, the workshop focused mainly on creating an atmosphere for creative development of content. The workshop participants were divided into three separate groups that worked with documentary, art and theatre based on the broad themes of civilian courage and WWII. The work of these groups was then presented in plenary sessions. On the basis of the content input, the Norwegian group tried to utilise some exercises that would delve into different topics of organisation, costume design and character development. While these sessions ranged from the general and creative (such as comparing historical costumes on the basis of photos from the time period) to the topical and detailed (such as listing and specifying *all* the different warring groups in Belarus during WWII), they were all organised with the purpose of giving inspiration to the participants. In many cases the Norwegian participants would emphasise different aspects of planning when asked the same question, but this was a conscious choice by the organisers, seeing that all preparations would be carried out in Minsk. It was therefore crucial that the Norwegian input would not be determining and setting a constraint on the Belarusian participants. Rather, the Norwegians should be more of a resource, a possible source of guidelines. Much of the time was therefore

² The article authors being the two Norwegians.

devoted to questions and answers, where the participants could probe whatever ideas or problems they fretted over.

As a point of discussion it can be mentioned that the Belarusian participants were as diverse, creative and engaged as any group of larpers. Nothing else was expected, but it is significant to stress this since any ideas, cues or directions we chose to share with the group were interpreted by the group. In the process they chose to heed some advice and reject other. While this was frustrating – in the sense that we felt we could not properly convey the collective wisdom of our experiences, it was also humbling to “let go” of such a project, and entrust the entire workload to these “new and inexperienced” people. In many ways, this was asking organisers *not* to do what they thrive best doing: organising. However, the entire *raison d'être* of the project rested on building the larp capacity of the Belarusian group.

Hence, the rest of the preparations were carried out in Minsk by the group of core organisers together with the interested participants. As a matter of special interest it can be mentioned that the organisers in Minsk chose to outsource a major part of the larp, specifically location and scenography. The larp called for a village setting around which the action would revolve. It was decided to rent a small 19th century housing enclave to provide the right frame. The people renting out the farm houses also provided authentic clothing, food and animals. Therefore, leasing this farm solution significantly reduced the workload of the organisers, who could then focus their attention on scripting roles, aiding participants and all the other general bits and pieces that need to fit together in a larp. Here we would also like to mention that the larp lost a fair number of organisers and participants through incidents imposed by the authorities. There is an ample amount of paranoia in the Belarusian way of government. The fact that the governmental secret service is still called KGB, some 18 years after the dissolution of the USSR, speaks volumes as to where they find their inspiration. Hence, events of any size are hard-pressed to avoid the government's glaring eye. This has a range of implications. Amongst them is the difficulty of proper gathering places (on our first visit we had to hold

our workshop in a office building during vacation days), and byzantine visa applications, both for entering and exiting Belarus (although we are told that the EU/Nordic visa regulations are not too agreeable themselves, either). Now, explaining and detailing the measures that were taken to accommodate the work with organising the larp in the Belarusian political environment lies outside the scope of our article, and can be explained more accurately by the Belarusians themselves, but it will suffice to say that this is an issue that needs certain consideration if one wishes to arrange larps in Belarus.

The larp

On the day when the larp was to be enacted, everybody got into cars and buses and drove some 3 hours out of Minsk through the seemingly endless forests of Belarus. After 3 hours we took a right turn in the middle of nowhere. This brought us on to a dirt and mud road for another half

■ 1943 - Larp scenery

Photo

Erik Aarebrot



an hour (including some local-style off-road driving) to a small group of houses in the middle of the Kamensky forest. Coming from the huff and gruff of the October Minsk, the silence of the scene was poignant: no sounds, crisp and clear air, beautiful autumn colours and a cluster of late 19th-century buildings. After a quick tour of the surroundings, in order to scout the area, the groups set about arranging their camps and positions.

The larp had four groups of roles. The villagers comprised some 20 roles and lived in the main village houses. They “controlled” the main resources of the vicinity, i.e. the housing and the food. Many of them had relations among either the Red or the Polish partisans and would help them during the night. The Germans consisted of a squad of 7. They moved into the village during the first night and occupied one of the village buildings to use as their quarters. Although they were mainly seen as a threat and as intruders into the village, the aim of the larp was partly to show the human sides of the German soldiers. The largest group of partisans were the Red partisans, who counted some 6 roles. While the Red partisans did enjoy the advantage of relations with a number of villagers, it was the intention of the organisers to show also that the Red partisans were nevertheless at the fringe of reason during the war, causing considerable suffering to the local population. The final group was the Polish partisans. The story of the Polish partisans is by and large neglected in history-telling in Belarus, and part of the aim was to show that they were also a part of the WWII events. That is not to deny that they committed any acts of violence and cruelty. Some 5 roles were cast for the Polish partisans, who also had some relations in the village.

In addition, the participants were divided into two subgroups, according to their religious beliefs – Catholics or Orthodox – which was and still is a common scenario in Belarus. Their religious beliefs also had an influence on their status in the village, their standard of living and their attitude towards other subgroups.

As English speakers, we, the article authors, were cast in roles of English journalists who had joined up with the Polish partisans. The Polish commander addressed us in English and the rest of the troops

in Polish. The communication in and between the other groups was in Belarusian. We point out here that the members of the Polish partisans were not well versed in Polish, but that this was in fact an intended effect. Many members of the Polish partisans were recruited by Polish commanders through arguments of ancestry or association, which effectively recruited Belarusians to the Polish army. To keep up the impression of cohesion, the command language was Polish. The Belarusians had only a rough understanding of Polish, and a not insignificant amount of our time was spent drilling the troopers in addressing the commander correctly in Polish.

As the Polish partisans convened in the forest north-west of the village, our first priority became establishing a proper camp. The month of October is a unpredictable month and we wanted to set up our camp-fire and sleeping quarters before the daylight abandoned us. As night set, the camp had a hearty fire going and the first overtures of role-playing could commence. The Polish partisans convened around the camp-fire and were assigned their new Polish nicknames by the commander. Our squad consisted of “Speedy” (the commander, known for his apparent swiftness), “Whitey” (named after his blonde hair), “Comedian” (because of his keen sense of wit), “Paper” (on the basis of her close relationship to writing and reporting events) and “Little brother” (given his junior position in the group).

Commander “Speedy” set about instructing and organising his troops, and planning incursions into the village in order to secure ourselves food and water for the coming period. He included a general account of Polish history and chided both the reporters and his Belarusian troops for not knowing enough about the proud history of Poland. After this he moved over to planning the raid we would perpetrate on the village. He deemed us as having good chances on entering the village, since they were celebrating the day of the dead. This would ensure that they were all in one place and that they would have celebration food dished out and readily available. All his stories and commands were punctuated by doling out traditional partisan forest survival food; onion and garlic served on a thick

slice of pig's fat on bread, washed down with a hearty helping of vodka. Not only providing nearly excessive amounts of energy and the authentic war-time partisan breath, this also built up a direct and unequivocal motivation to rob the villagers of their – hopefully – more succulent and delicious food. At this point our group still drifted from being in-character to out-of-character without reservations.

Even though there had been clear instructions to “maintain” the character identity, i.e. be in-game as much as possible, it turned out that the concept of role integrity was a general problem. Many of the participants moved in and out of their roles, some times talking out of role, pulling out mobile phones, asking technical questions about the larp, and so on. This was made even more evident by the fact that the organisers' main means of communication was text messages. However, these lapses of performance can be readily explained by the fact that this was the first larp for all but a handful of the participants. Though they knew that they were supposed to be in-character, they had no experience in doing so for such an extended period of time. The problem was addressed and dealt with in the course of the larp, when role performance and continuation were encouraged by the organisers. This was also keenly discussed among the participants after the larp had ended.

The Polish raid of the village was successful. We returned to our camp with our pockets stuffed with stolen apples and bread. The lack of food was one of the fundamental driving forces during the war, and this was supposed to be replicated the larp. Historically, the partisans brutalized the farmers and the villagers in order to get food. Much of the historical ambiguity of the partisan heroism stems from this need to get their hands on food. However, the organisers had failed to consider an element of the Belarusian character. It seems that most young people in Belarus are well-schooled in forest life; most of the participants, anticipating a long, cold weekend in the forest had brought along plenty of food. In addition, almost all of them were skilled at picking mushrooms and other aliments from the forest.

With food more or less secured for the foreseeable near future, commander “Speedy” went about organising his insurgence. During the evening and night we received visits from “Whitey’s” relatives from the village, and eventually we got reports that a German squad had entered the village. The Nazis were played by a group of re-enactors who had exerted themselves to create authentic uniforms and haircuts. Later, in debriefing, we were told that they had also played the role of the oppressor in a convincing manner, giving a brutal and unkindly impression to the locals. Although one of the aims was to challenge the one-sided impression of the Germans, this proved difficult. Even though the Germans did try to show their human side, the natives did not want to see it and continued to have a very fixed stereotype of the German soldiers. This indicates how deeply this stereotype is rooted in the culture; even the participants themselves reported during the debriefing that they had been excessively positive to the Red partisans’ plight. As a reaction to the imposition of the Nazi regime in the village, commander “Speedy” chose to change tactics. A plan of observation and raids was adopted.

The Germans controlled the village during daytime without much resistance. The Polish partisans maintained a careful distance during daytime and, though not by our own free will, we neither encountered Germans nor Red partisans. We sneaked, crawled, observed and planned our strategies. When we could we got some sleep, maintained the fire, prepared food and thereby upheld morale and discipline. Our commander kept an impressive tempo, and there was no room for squandering time or resources.

At night-time the partisans had a more liberal reign. The Red partisans had extensive support from the villagers and managed to exploit this to their advantage. However, they did not succeed in uprooting the stereotypes that saw them as polite and servile in the meetings with the villagers. Again, the abundance of food might help explain this. The Polish partisans, on the other hand, managed to come across as more unpredictable and intimidating, at one point kidnapping two villagers in order to recruit them to the Polish partisan cause. As it turned out, this was actually a

ploy by the organisers, reintroducing in the play two participants that had been killed, but it worked well and the two were successfully introduced to the Polish partisan group.

The larp ended on Sunday, when the Nazis had finally had enough of the partisans' incursions and had achieved their main goal, i.e. keeping a set of secret documents from the partisans, moving these documents out of danger and assessing whether the villagers could be redeployed for work elsewhere. These three tasks were set for the German group at the very beginning of the larp, but also for the two groups of partisans, who were told that it was of the utmost importance to find and seize the secret documents from the Germans.

However, the partisans failed to secure the documents and, after killing some of the adversaries around the main house, the Germans gathered the locals to be taken away for transportation to Germany and burned down the house. Before marching through the woods they set the house on fire, which was technically solved by throwing in a smoke grenade.

After the larp, we gathered in the living room and for some hours debriefed on our experiences and what we had learned from them.

Lessons learned by the organisers

Larps are by definition free and unrestrained, in the sense that they are whatever the participants make them to be. This was demonstrated to the full to the organisers of "1943". They had planned a series of scenes and events that were to occur during the larp. However, they all obtained different outcomes than what was envisaged. This can be exemplified by their plans to show that the Germans were more human than they are normally pictured, and the partisans somewhat more grim. All participants were asked to consider their good and their bad traits and to portray them both during the larp. This was done in order to serve one of the major goals of the organizers: humanize the German occupation forces and differentiate the Red partisans. How the portrayal was to be carried out was largely left to the participants' own devices, but as the larp proceeded it became clear

that some of the factions did not want to, or were not capable of, portraying their bad traits. In order to facilitate the situation, the organisers decided to arrange some timed activities that would depict these participants in a worse light. The Red partisans were given instructions to be cruel and unpleasant with the villagers during one of their visits; screaming, yelling, being abusive and brutally stealing all the village food. Yet, despite such direct instruction, they did not manage to do so. Instead, they sneaked into the village during daytime and talked friendly to the villagers. When they were discovered by the Germans they had to be helped by the villagers in order to escape. This led the Germans to line up and execute three of the farmers for collaboration with the Red partisans.

This was of course not a problem in itself, but it did change some of the plans that had been made by the other player factions. Some of the women in the village had planned to ask the Germans for a dance during the afternoon, but naturally the execution created a very negative atmosphere around the Germans and as a consequence the dance was never organised. Consequently, the participants were hampered in their efforts to act out the facets of their characters and the project to humanize the German occupation forces and differentiate the Red partisans in some ways failed. This cannot and should not be attributed to any particular individual, but it does illustrate the difficulties that larp training should be able to tackle.

The fact that the local girls did not get to dance with the Germans because of the Red partisans' conduct shows that it can be difficult to provoke certain actions through sheer planning. The aim of trying to dispel the stereotypes of the Germans seen only as evil and the Red partisans seen as only decent and respectable during the war was not successfully met. The organizers wondered afterwards if it would have been better not to interfere in the game. The issue could then have been solved in different ways. If, in a prospective future game, they could for instance have given the parts of the German military leader and the leader of the red partisans to experienced and instructed players, who then could have coordinated these happenings in-game without any external help from

the organizers. By putting experienced and instructed players in key positions, the organisers would have the possibility of controlling the game more fluently. This is of course especially important in a game that aims at teaching specific knowledge.

In addition, there were some negative observations regarding how people played their roles. A number of the participants expressed frustration with what they perceived as cheating. Some players refused to act accordingly when they were shot or wounded, continuing to run, even when requested not to. Some others were refusing to take the role seriously, making jokes about present-day issues and removing the suspension of disbelief. One of the participants was so outrageous and belligerent in playing his role that the organisers choose to send him home in order to preserve the game atmosphere.

However, these examples are not representative of the feedback from the debriefing. The participants were exalted and engaged when they discussed the larp. The feedback commentaries ranged from the larp's ability to break with the stereotypes from the wartime, to the use of costumes, to the experience of living the character, but most, if not all, the problems were addressed with problem-solving points of view. A lot of emphasis was given to what larp had changed for the participants and what they discovered for themselves. Many of those who played villagers said that they now could better understand their grandparents, having had an experience of how it could be during the war. The emotions prompted during the larp were strong and realistic, an effect the participants had not fully anticipated.

A recurrent question among the participants was when there would be a new larp. It was evident that the larp process has been both rewarding and appealing. As one of the project's original goals was to "develop larps and role-playing as effective educational tools for working with youth in Belarus", one of the key missions was to establish larps as a work method. With participants evidently wanting more larps, the first step to reach this goal has been taken.

All in all, the feedback from the participants in Belarus did not differ very much from other feedback from larpers in the Nordic countries. Some ask for more focus on costumes, some on scripting roles, some on developing in-game rules, and so on. Rather more striking was how the experience of larp can be shared across borders. Obviously the political situation of Belarus makes organising more difficult, but once on site the participants lived inside the larp with the same intensity and determination as well-accustomed larpers would, in fact sometimes even more so, as the novelty of the approach triggered their imagination.

■ Overview of lessons learned

	Situation at the outset	Lessons learned
Larp experience	Limited	Character and game rules training is important for common understanding of the larp and leads to a better larp.
Larp development	None	A common goal is useful to organise work.
Larp purpose	Educational	Education <i>can</i> be entertaining. While a sombre backdrop is apt for serious topics, enthusiasm and energy can sift through even when dealing with such issues.

Conclusion

At the outset of this project there was much enthusiasm and curiosity; curiosity about the whole setting up in Belarus and enthusiasm for a project with an objective beyond enjoyment. As project participants, we can only conclude that the journey has been a challenging, invigorating and amusing one. It has been challenging in the sense that transferring and communicating our own ideas and projects across borders, both culturally, structurally and linguistically, requires more presence and improvisation than in more ordinary situations. It was invigorating to experience that collective ideas are used, rejected and improved through the process of creating the larp. Not least it has been amusing too, through all the laughs and stories we have been part of during the last year and a half. It has been absolutely remarkable to be part of a team that has put their efforts in doing something for the first time and to witness the nervousness, playfulness and creativity involved in making a larp from a spectator's perspective. It is wholly thanks to the group assembled in Minsk that the result on-site became a resounding success.

In conclusion it has to be said that the Belarusian political environment does not facilitate working with these kinds of projects, and many of the considerations we had to take have not been included in this article. Should anyone be interested in further information on these deliberations, we are available for dialogue and questions. Nonetheless, we can state that working in Belarus has been an extremely interesting and gratifying process. The people there outshine the authorities and remain a constant source of hope and optimism.

Role-playing games and education in Brazil: how we do it

Wagner Luiz Schmit, João Batista Martins & Thales Ferreira

7

EDUCATION

SCENE

RESEARCH

While still a minor phenomenon, role-playing game techniques have increasingly found a use in education in Brazil. In this article we will present a brief historical survey, focusing especially on teaching materials such as adventure books, tabletop books and some of the larp techniques used by educators inside and outside of classrooms. But we also aim at presenting some examples of how these techniques work in practice, including our own experience of them, and we will argue the importance of having a strong basis in educational theory to guide such interventions.

A short history of RPGs in Brazil

In Brazil, the term "RPG" usually refers not just to tabletop role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons*, *GURPS* or *Vampire*, but also to solo adventure books, like those of the *Fighting Fantasy* series; to larp, called "live action" or simply "live" (few people would recognize the "larp" term here); to single-player computer/videogame RPGs such as *Final Fantasy*; and to multiplayer computer/videogame RPGs such as *World of Warcraft*.

Most larps in Brazil take place in the old *World of Darkness* from White Wolf, published here by Devir. There are also occasional larps in genres such as medieval fantasy, science fiction, super hero, horror and others as well. Some characteristics common to Brazilian larps are: dramatic portrayal of a character, simplified rules systems and a mixture of conversation in in-character and out-of-character modes, with a slight emphasis on the latter.

Despite increasing research on the subject, there is no authoritative text on the beginning of this hobby in Brazil. It is agreed upon by older players that the appearance of RPGs in Brazil took place at the end of the 80's, through exchange students and English teachers who brought games from the USA. Given the high cost of games, books and modules, the instructions were often distributed via photocopies, which makes it harder to determine the history of this kind of game in Brazil.

The first RPGs to be released in Brazil were *Aventuras Fantásticas* (Fighting Fantasy), published by Marques Saraiva, and *GURPS*, released by Devir – both in 1991. The first RPG created by Brazilians was *Tagmar*, published by GSA later that year. In 1992 this same publisher launched the first RPG with a complete Brazilian setting, *Desafio dos Bandeirantes*, which mixes historic content from the colonization times with Brazilian legends. Also in 1992, GROW launched a simplified Portuguese edition of *D&D*, called *Dragon Quest*, and in 1993 released the full translated version of *Basic Dungeons & Dragons*. At this time, in São Paulo, the *Encontro Internacional de RPG (International RPG Gathering)*, the first event of this

kind in Brazil, was held with a lecture by the creator of GURPS, Steve Jackson.

By 1994, RPGs had expanded their reach in big centers, like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, receiving a great boost by the release of the Portuguese version of the Storyteller system, with its primary title *Vampiro: A Máscara (Vampire: The Masquerade)* by Devir. It was with this release that larp was popularized among the players of tabletop RPG.

The release of *Vampire* and the spread of *AD&D* in super heroic comic books by Abril Jovem helped to promote RPGs in Brazil; the average Brazilian consumer, however, has a low purchasing power and is not in the habit of reading (usually a basic RPG book has close to 300 pages, and several books are needed in order to play), which contributed to drive big toy companies like GROW and Estrela, and big publishers such as Abril Jovem, away from the market.

The national scene changed a lot with the arrival of *D&D* 3rd edition and its open d20 system in 2001. Slowly there appeared other small publishers, sometimes with a short life span, which translated or created content for the d20 system. The national games such as *Daemon*, *3D&T* and *Tormenta* also saw an increase in popularity, especially among beginners.

Despite the development of RPGs in Brazil – led mainly by publishers and toy companies – the reach of RPGs in the field of education has been limited. We can suggest three main reasons for this:

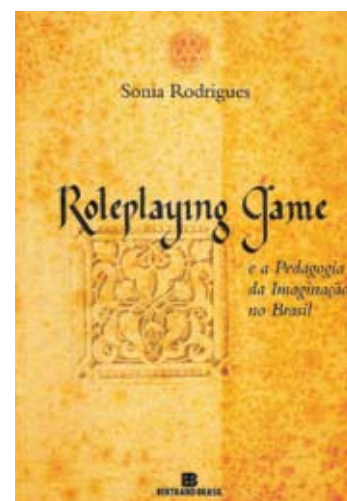
- The ignorance of educators on the possibilities of RPGs as a teaching/learning tool.
- The lack of systematic research on the applicability of RPGs in the school context (there is little research published on the relationships education/RPG and school/RPG).
- With this lack of research, it is hard to have a theoretical discussion (with methodological and epistemological implications) which can promote the insertion of RPGs in the educational context.

In game conventions, some old gamers here say that RPGs and education were related from the beginning in Brazil, because role-playing games were used by English professors in the mid-eighties, but this discussion did not enter academia until 1997, when Doctor Sonia Rodrigues finished her thesis about tabletop RPGs and their application in education.

The academic production and discussion through events like the *Simpósio de RPG e Educação* (Symposium of RPG and Education) began to increase from 2000. The last Symposium (the fourth one) was held in 2006. While activity on, discussion lists on RPGs and education has been a bit low, the academic production is increasing continuously and we now have over thirty dissertations and theses. But the production of role-playing material with educational purposes has stopped, while accessing the academic material (like papers, dissertations, theses, monographies) is very difficult. That is: research is being conducted, but the results are not widely disseminated. They are not published in book form, and accessing it in the research libraries is complicated or even impossible. Generally, the easiest way to obtain a dissertation or thesis on the subject is through the author himself, but even in this case only a few will contribute printed or electronic material.

In the commercial sphere, some companies have produced RPGs directed at the educational field. These publications represent a small initiative by some Brazilian publishers to produce material to enable the use of RPGs in the educational field. They also represent the independent initiative of some authors who have invested in the articulation of RPGs with educational purposes.

In the symposiums previously mentioned – *Simpósio de RPG e Educação* – many reports of experience referring to the application of RPGs in the school context were presented. These conferences are opportunities for people who use RPGs in schools to present new material, in most cases created by the players themselves, and the result of their experiences with the available material. However, there has not been more profound discussion on the educational basis that may endorse these practices.



In the next chapter, we will describe some of the materials – books, character sheets, etc. – used by educators that try to use RPGs in school. We have selected the better known titles and will present their main characteristics. Our presentation will be followed by a quick evaluation of the quality of the material available and its possible uses in the school context. In some cases, we have direct personal experience with the use of the material, and present this. In others, the description is limited to a summary and assessment of the methodology in the material.

Descriptions of materials and techniques

Out of the Blackboard (Saindo do Quadro)

The book was used as a basis for the study of RPGs and education since it was the first one to be released (1996) and it presents a basic methodology for the use of RPGs in school. In sequence, it:

- Points out the qualities of RPGs for use in school
- Provides a series of tips for conducting a game and its pedagogic use;
- Discusses questions like violence and addiction;
- Brings a series of ready-made adventures that can be used as an intervention model.

However, this book lacks theoretical references in education, and the validation of its affirmations through research. It resembles a group dynamics manual for corporate training, which is the probable source of inspiration for the author.

Methodology: the teacher chooses a subject, applies a series of questions about this subject to make it closer to a real use and transforms this

information into an adventure to be used for an entire class. Each student can represent a simple character (which can be himself) or the class can be split into groups. The rules may be improvised by the game master or they can be an adaptation from a commercial title. The teacher may use ready-made characters or create them himself. The adventure can be also ready-made or created by the teacher (the latter is recommended by the author).

FLER – Ferramenta Lúdica de Ensino por Representação

This was one of the first texts to explicitly explain how to apply the tabletop RPG method in a classroom, and may have influenced some interventions in schools. It is a text that was made available on the internet by the author for a while. It is a short and simple text; nevertheless it contains several typing and design mistakes. It is not a text for educators, but for experienced game masters that may want to take RPGs into the classrooms. In this case the teacher is a co-star if he is not a game master himself. The author states in the text that FLER is the result of months of research, but does not present the results of this research, neither in the text itself nor in any accompanying paper.

A summary of the FLER technique: So that everybody in the class may take part in an adaptation of the tabletop RPG for the classroom, the participants must be divided into four categories: (1) The game master (who must know how to play RPGs and be familiar with the educational content of the class), (2) players (students who will role-play the game characters), helpers (who help the players in making decisions), (3) consultants (the teacher, who may roleplay a character, an NPC – non player character – or provide information to the players), and (4) the actors (students that roleplay previously rehearsed NPCs and that help in the flow of narrative, possibly using costumes). There are two or more game tables in the classroom at the same time. The structure of tabletop RPGs is also presented in a simple form.



- Players playing SIMPLES, a system for live and tabletop role-playing with educational purposes.

Photo
Marcos Tanaka

SIMPLES

SIMPLES is proposed as a manual for first-time users of tabletop RPGs and larp with educational purposes, but its rules system is vague and unclear, which can be a problem for an educator who is a beginner with RPGs.

It is a very good book, however, for those who have a little experience with such games, mainly with larp. If those interested can get their hands on other materials for beginners, such as the first Mini-GURPS, or find a local group to experience a larp, the book becomes much more interesting.

We did not follow the book's recommendations for tabletop RPGs, which appear to be based on FLER. The strong point of the book, and the part we used the most and with great results, was the larp part.

The book offers examples, results, a detailed methodology and several suggestions. Besides, the larp itself involves a bigger number of players than the tabletop RPG, which makes it easier to use with a whole classroom, as we will see in the larp methodology.

Larp and SIMPLES

The notion of larp proposed by Risys (2004) is directly related to the possibility of developing cooperative activities in the learning process. Usually the students are directed to a mission and they, in group, must acquire a series of weapons, artifacts, potions or information that are in the possession of an NPC (also role-played live by monitors/teachers/facilitators or students trained for this function).

This interaction between students/players and NPCs may occur in a small "class" on some subject that the teacher wants to work on, as long as it is related to the game, as well as tests – usually group dynamics adapted to the game – to obtain the weapons (or information, artefacts, etc), that are also connected to the theme of the game/class.

After the intergroup interactions, the teams discover that they possess only one part of the information needed to complete the mission, and

to solve this problem they have to join forces with the other teams sharing their respective weapons, artifacts, information etc. “Without union there is no solution”, is the common message of these larps. The cooperative side of these larps is clear – without the cooperation between the teams there is no possible way to win the game. Individual victory is not possible.

Also, during the game, each member of the group (that is, each character) is essential in some moment or in some interaction with a NPC, pointing out his importance for the team, and especially the importance of every person to the group, which is fundamental when working on self-esteem and “seeing the other” in cooperative games and/or in an educational process” (Riyis, 2004, p 36).

Riyis (2004) presents us with a series of topics that point to very positive results of the use of RPG in the school context. On the subject of recognizing the cooperation and motivation, the results indicate that:

“100% of the students considered the game great or good, indicating an elevated degree of satisfaction. The answers that related to the question of cooperation were correctly answered by 85% of the students. Finally regarding the content, 75% of the students got at least 75% of the questions and more than 90% of the students got at least 50% of the questions, indicating also the learning of the content.” (Riyis 2004, p. 41).

The teachers involved with the proposition of using SIMPLES in the school context related:

“... a significant increase in interest [on the part of the students] for the themes seen, as well as a significant difference between the groups that participated in the games and the groups that had only regular classes. There was also an increase in results on the simulated tests to enter an university made by the students that were trained for the role of NPCs. In places where there were played tradicional RPG, questionnaires indicated

that there was also the acquisition of the content, with 100% of the students answering correctly at least 50% of the questions (against 67% of the students that didn't take part in the game) and an average of 80% correct answers (against 72.5% in the control group)" (Riyis 2004, p. 47).

The author of SIMPLES states that the success of RPGs as a teaching strategy for education is related to the playfulness of the activity (without losing content), the development of verbal skills, and the possibility of development of abilities such as cooperation, respecting others, problem-solving, imagination, creativity and use of concepts in practical situations, among others. To him, using larp is preferable to using tabletop RPGs due to the fact that with larp we have the possibility of increased playfulness and more movement, the activity is visually more attractive, it has a bigger possibility for corporeal expression and development, and the cooperation is more evident. (Riyis 2004, p. 35).

It is important to note that, to Riyis, both "live" and traditional RPGs can be important tools for the educational process in schools, since they promote the solution of problem situations, the application of concepts to practical situations of day-to-day activities, interdisciplinarity, oral expression (specially in the traditional game) (...) and corporal expression (especially in Live Action). Besides that, these modalities, in the sense that they are based in subjective relations, also promote concern and mutual respect, cooperation and group work, and cooperative learning.

The idea of mixing larp with cooperative games in a festive mood is very good and really works, but it is an activity that demands previous preparation and is very tiresome. It also needs a few support personnel (who can be students or other educators, between three to four for a group of forty students).

When we applied this methodology to work on the concept of ethnic-race diversity with students grade school students, we divided the class in four groups. The premise was that a space creature was transforming

everyone on planet Earth into zombies, that is, people were losing their cultural identities. The groups discovered that the spirit of the earth could banish the space creature and bring everyone back to normal, but they needed to find out how to summon this spirit. The groups were informed that the elemental spirits of nature knew how to accomplish this. The elementals were NPCs (educators from a course that we were conducting on the use of RPG in education), and each of them could give part of the incantation to a specific team after talking for a while about Indian culture, Afro culture, European colonization etc; they questioned the group on the subject and received the correct answers (the questions were elaborations on previously used material given in class); subsequently, the group passed a “test”, a group dynamic activity with cooperative characteristics. In the beginning the groups started competing to see who would banish the creature first, but they soon realized that alone they could not complete the goal by themselves. A real negotiation then started among the groups, where some students tried to convince their classmates that they could all “win”. In the end, all groups united performed the incantation and celebrated the result. This activity was well received by the teachers of the school, and the students learned the importance of respecting those who are different. With each student-group the total time of the activity was close to two hours, but several days were needed for the preparation of the activity.

Tabletop RPG in SIMPLES

SIMPLES provides a series of tips for tabletop role-playing to be used in classrooms. In Brazil, since classes have many students (generally between 30 and 45, but sometimes reaching 150), it is the suggestion of the author that students be divided into groups and that each group represents one character (each student in the group could represent one heroic characteristic of the character).

Another option suggested by the author is that each member of the group assumes one function, which can be variable during the game. These functions may be: speaker (declares the actions of the character),

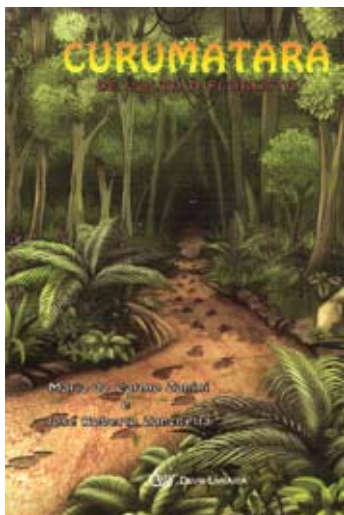
player (rolls the dice when needed), senses (receives information in private to relay to the group), note-taker (writes down information on the character and game), researcher (searches in the material for the solutions of the game), and other possible functions.

Another solution to the problem of the great number of students in classes proposed by Riyis is that a small group of students be trained and assume the position of helpers in the game. In this sense they would be game masters for a small group of students (4-6), and the teacher would be the coordinator of the activity. The class would have several small game groups, each with a previously trained game master (GM). This helper GM, due to the training and the responsibility of conducting the game for his classmates, would take upon himself to study more on the subject of the game, improving his own learning. In time, the teacher allocates this position of helper GM to different people, so that several students can experience it. Of course, this solution requires a lot of work in preparation, but it has the advantage of being easier in the application phase. If the teacher chooses this option, he/she must make it clear to the helper game masters that they are not playing against the characters.

According to Riyis (2004), the RPG game usually has the following phases:

“1) The teacher prepares the setting, the adventure and the characters (the teacher may allow the students to prepare their own character, which is in itself an interesting activity with an enormous pedagogic potential). 2) The teacher distributes the characters among the students, one for each student, arranging them into a group or designating functions for each member. We advise the teacher to design the groups, at least in the beginning, so that the teaching-learning process occurs in the best possible way. 3) The teacher explains the rules and flow of the game to the students. 4) The teacher, “wearing the hat” of the game-master, introduces to the students the world prepared by him, calling them to take part in the story,

and to tell it in group. 5) During the adventure, the teacher introduces elements of the content that he plans to work on, in a situation-problem way, inside the context of the game-story. 6) The ending of the adventure is made in a way that it leaves the students wanting more, at the same time as it allows the teacher to use the concepts worked on in a learning situation.” (p. 21)



Curumatara

Curumatara is a solo adventure where the reader is a boy who meets a Curupira (mythical figure from the folklore of the Brazilian Indians, which takes the form of a red-headed boy with feet turned backwards to confuse hunters) in the middle of a city and can help him to return to the Forest. The story has many narrative lines and several possible endings. During the story the reader is faced with questions about topics such as the Indian language, disease transmission, fractions, environmental impact of the construction of hydroelectric power plants, aluminium recycling, use of maps and some information of the legend of the Curupira. The book comes with a small insert with a guide and a rule system that enables the reader to become the narrator in a tabletop session. The acronym “RPG” is not mentioned anywhere.

While the book itself doesn’t mention the use of RPGs for education, the following information is available about the book:

Curumatara, de Volta à Floresta is a solo adventure, an interactive book with numbered paragraphs, in which the reader decides the order that these paragraphs are read, deciding what the character should do in each point of the story. In this book the reader must help Curumatara to save the animals of the woods near Frederico das Emas, where a hydroelectric power plant is being built. **The book passes through several cross-subjects in the curriculum of the basic teaching.** (DEVIR, 2008) (bold-face ours)

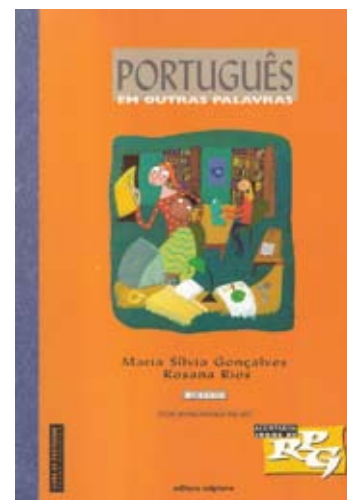
Portuguese in other words (Português em outras palavras)

This is a Portuguese text book which comes with solo adventures as a “bonus”. There is no pedagogic proposal for the use of solo adventures by the professor on the insert of the pedagogic advisory body or on the insert of the adventures themselves. In this manner the adventures seem out of place, out of context. In the opening of the solo adventures insert, called “RPG game” in the book, the possibility of playing in group is mentioned, but how this can be done is left unexplained.

Even so, this has inspired some Brazilian teachers. Pavão (2000) mentions in his book that one of the reasons for his research about reading and writing among RPG game masters was the fact that children said they would take a “game-book” (another name for a solo adventure) to a desert island. In our town we were called by a private school to work with RPGs since the children loved the inserts of this collection of Portuguese text books and were already conducting game sessions for each other, even modifying the stories. Nevertheless, teachers and educationalists did not really know what to do with the material nor with the children. We prepared an action plan with RPG workshops in the library and gave a lecture on RPGs to parents and teachers. Everyone was excited by the game and the proposals, yet the project was aborted by the principal because, according to him, this game would not help the school students to pass the *vestibular* – a test that Brazilian students take in order to gain access to the University.

During the first “Simpósio de RPG e Educação” in 2002, the author Rosana Rios said that one of her objectives with the inserts was to improve the taste for reading and the production of fantastic literature. Besides that, she made it clear that

“(…) since we were dealing with 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th grades, I included elements of History, Geography and Science that were connected to these grades, so that there was also an



interest for the school, and so that the adventures made the reader interested in continuing later and to be aware of situations which suddenly could prompt them to say to their History teacher something like: “look at this, I can make an adventure out of this...”” (Rios, 2004, p. 225)

Mini GURPS series (Série Mini GURPS)

The Mini GURPS series is composed of five tabletop RPG books for beginners, in which the first three have a setting based on Brazil’s history, the fourth on the European crusades and the fifth is a police investigation adventure that depicts the life and work of the artist Cândido Portinari.

Each of the first three books in the series consists of a brief, but clear, explanation of role-playing, a brief explanation of the rule system and a solo adventure that was designed to demonstrate the game dynamics and the way in which the rules are applied; the character creation system for this setting is also explained, along with a description of the game world, an adventure with tips and instructions so that the beginning game master can conduct the game session, an explanation on how the game master can create his own adventures in this scenery and some ready-made characters.

Even though it is not a thick book, only some forty pages long, we had good experiences with its application to first-time players. Its cost was low and it is a relatively self-contained book: the use of the GURPS Lite (Generic Universal Role Playing System – a tabletop rules system from Steve Jackson games) is optional since all the rules needed to play are already contained in the supplement. We are planning to possibly create material with the same structure as the first books, yet with an “open” rule system, under an open license like Creative Commons. This appears to be a viable alternative to help creating game groups in libraries and cultural centers, and to help teachers that wish to do extra class activities.

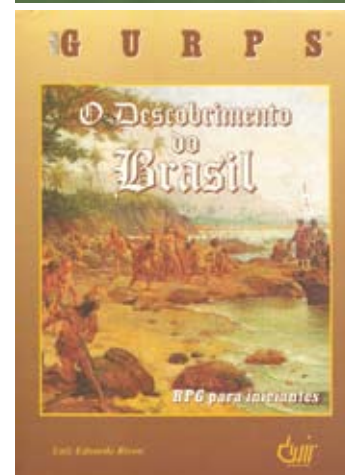
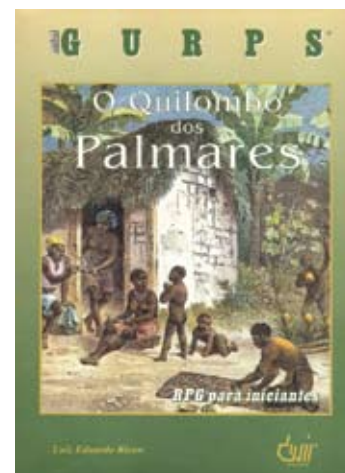
The problem of the Mini GURPS series’ educational use is that, with the exception of the last book, they were not designed for this specific

purpose, since the material was made for use by one person (solo adventure) or a small group (we would risk saying no more than six players). Therefore, using it in a class with forty or more students (a common situation in Brazilian schools) is quite impracticable, yet the material can still be used as support material or in activities outside the classroom like game groups in the library.

The last book was made specifically for educational purposes, as we can see in this excerpt:

“This publication is the final product of a long construction process of an RPG adventure capable of transmitting pedagogic content. (...) We thought of the three neurolinguistic types, in a way that can capture and maintain the attention of the persons that may come to play this adventure: visuals, kinesthetics and hearing. (...) above all, it is important that the adventure is presented in a spirit of entertainment and relaxation, so as to let the learning take place in a subtle manner to avoid rejection of the activity by the students. Participants should only care about the present objective in the adventure, which is to find the painting. This way, they will unconsciously achieve the greater purpose of this activity, which is to learn a little about Portinari.” (Lourenço, 2003, p. 37)

The book has been recommended for teachers and educators in events, discussion lists and web sites. The book is a tabletop adventure created as a tool, a technique to be applied by an educator with the objective of teaching some aspects of the life of Candido Portinari (a well-know Brazilian artist). Each scene of the adventure presents a series of materials and contents to be “learned unconsciously” (Lourenço, 2003, p. 37) by the students. There are a series of implications in this: among other arguments, made in the session about the relationship between RPG and technical pedagogy, that the role of the teacher becomes less important,



and that the usual teaching process does not work and must be disguised as entertainment.

Although we did not use this particular book we are aware that it contains several characteristics that we consider important to present the game for a group of first-time players: The rules are simple, the adventure is well-written, has many tips for the game-master and it comes with six ready-to-use characters with adventure hooks.

A few considerations regarding the use of RPGs for educational purposes

From the educational point of view, we understand that the practice of RPGs in the school context cannot exist without a theoretical reflection that describes this activity as a methodology of teaching or learning. We do not believe that it is sufficient to just create material and techniques inspired by RPGs and apply them with educational purposes; there is a need for some reflections on the why and how to do this – “educational” here is to be understood in the wider sense, i.e. not just in schools.

To illustrate this point, we’ll recount the experiences of one of the authors (Wagner Luiz Schmit), which took place while developing a RPG project for an institution that hosted low-income teenagers in the city of Londrina (Brazil).

This experience was connected to a cultural project of the Secretaria de Cultura da Prefeitura do Município de Londrina, called Rede Cidadania, which had the purpose of introducing cheap entertainment forms that increased the access to and the production of culture. One of the locations where this project was implemented was the Guarda Mirim de Londrina, an institution that gave support to the school and offered several activities during the students’ leisure time (if the students went to school in the morning, they spent the afternoon in the institution, and vice versa).

The initial objective of the intervention was to teach teens to play tabletop RPGs and to develop their own rule system and scenarios. The activities took place through workshops that happened once a week in three-hour sessions.

During the course of the work, we observed that some participants were unable to get involved with the story and develop their character, which led us to question the reasons for these difficulties.

It was necessary to change the strategies of RPG development. Based on the development theories from Vigotski, an experiment was conducted: Instead of narrating an adventure as usual (describing situations, asking players to roleplay their characters, occasionally drawing on a sheet and having the support of complex character sheets) we used a kind of “proto” tabletop RPG – the game *Hero Quest* – a board game where players are heroes with the mission of exploring dungeons, killing monsters and finding treasures. This game format put the participants in more concrete situations and the answers that were needed to solve problems presented during the game were made more realistic with the game pieces.

We could perceive that this change led the participants to get involved in a different way with the proposed activities, taking part in the game and interacting in a more effective way to solve the problems faced in the adventure.

We could conclude that the initial difficulty in making abstractions was related to the difficulties in reading and writing, and that these were also interfering with the school work as well as with the participation of the teens in the proposed activities.

In this sense, the activity realized with the game *Hero Quest* served as a diagnostic tool: through it we could see what the students were able to do, what were the difficulties and the potential they had with solving problems. Based on these initial observations, once more drawn on Vigotski’s theories, an intervention plan was elaborated to help develop abstract reasoning, reading and writing.

The plan consisted in using RPG games with increasing complexity, which would require more and more development of the social, emotional

¹ “[...] we call actual development level the level that the child achieved in the process development and that is determined with the help of tasks that the child herself solves alone (...) the proximal development zone is the distance between the current development level and the level of possible development, determined with the help of tasks solved with the orientation from adults and in cooperation with smarter colleagues (VIGOTSKI, 2004, p.501).

and cognitive abilities. In this light, the organization of the activities was done based on Vigotski’s concept of the zone of proximal development¹.

Thus, starting with board games such as *Hero Quest* – in which the participation of players is not so intense – little by little, the players were presented with the characteristics of more complex RPGs, which implied a deeper characterization and representation of the characters and a greater freedom for the players in the game world. At a certain point, as the players mastered the rule system and the game flow, the board was removed. From this point on, the use of more complex rules was introduced (like those in GURPS) and the players had great freedom of action with their characters. Together with the RPG workshops, several meetings took place, in which music was discussed, movies were shown and solo adventures were presented, as well as books with themes that were related to the proposed adventure. This way the participants had the possibility to improve their capacity (as the knowledge regarding the social reality in which the adventure took place) to create their characters and own adventures.

In the course of the activity, significant changes could be perceived in the development and learning process of the participants of the workshops. One year into the project, the participants who had shown great difficulty in reading and writing were asking to borrow reading material and were preparing their own games. When parents were asked about possible changes, we were informed of significant improvement in school activities.

What can we learn from this? First of all, role-playing – and the experience conducted by Wagner confirms this hypothesis – is a powerful instrument in the promotion of the integral development of people. That means that this game not only applies to cognitive abilities used to solve the proposed tasks, but also involves aspects related to the social development of the participants: it requires cooperative solutions, as well as a certain degree of affection. The players must develop a pro-active attitude towards solving problems, which requires a participation in the collective

of the game in which the activities are realized, leading participants to a more complex perception of the social reality in which they are part.

Such experiences also illustrates that RPGs must be presented in the educational context with very explicit objectives. The proposers must have a clear idea of the motives that support the use of this activity, which implies a clear theoretical position with an educational vision as the basis for the activity – that is, this game cannot be thought of as just another technique to be used with students, but as a tool that has a meaning for both the people who propose it and for the people who take part in the workshops.

Final considerations

We see that in Brazil, the practice of role-playing games is still sees very little use in the educational context. Even though we find several game proposals in the market that are directed towards the educational context (some with content developed with a basis in the school curriculum), these games are are still very far from most Brazilian students.

This division between the RPG market and the use of such games in the school process can be related to the lack of research on the topic, as well as to the difficulties in accessing the research regarding RPGs in the educational field. This means that the country still does not have an educational culture that sees the RPG as a useful instrument for the integral development of the students, or even as an educational tool that promotes teaching and learning. Such difficulty has led educators to use RPGs in class for the entertainment that it promotes – as an “out of the ordinary class” – which results in a practice that is without any theoretical reflection.

Another difficulty derives from the intense debate involving theorists and players regarding what an RPG is and what its main characteristics are. On the one hand, this discussion is very interesting, in the sense that it can show new possibilities and directions for using RPGs in an

educational context; on the other hand it can create more confusion, since such arguments are not based on or oriented towards research regarding the interaction between RPG and education.

We believe that the intersection of RPGs and education is still a field to be developed in our country. The research involving such games, as well as their applications in the educational context (in spite of the material available in the market), are still not consolidated. We consider it a matter of fact that role-playing games, in general, are very useful tools for education. This situation leads us to seek the further development of a theoretical background and solid, useful practices.

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Notes on designing repeatable larps

J. Tuomas Harviainen

8

DESIGN

DOCUMENTATION

RESEARCH

Larp design is a multi-formed beast. The variables are numerous, ranging from scale to local playing culture to player selection. One design issue that has thus far been sadly overlooked is the ephemeral nature of the product itself – most of what has been written about creating larps has been geared towards a designer-supervised single-run project, not repeatable scenarios. This article discusses variance in the latter type of larp, and then gives guidelines for creating them.

In some ways, the concept of repeatable larps has been with us for a long time. Many a rule system contains an introductory scenario that can be used to teach the mechanics and social setting of a setting like *a World of Darkness*. Likewise, there are both scenario books and single-concept larp systems available, in printed form and online, which are designed to support multiple runs.

In my opinion, however, there are several different types of repeatable scenarios available, with some types being far more advanced than others. This is not to say that the advanced ones are better, just that it is possible to design for several styles of play. A simple scenario is easy to comprehend and run, while a more complex concept requires much more effort, but in turn may also offer something much more significant. *Trapped* (2003), a four-player scenario set in an elevator, by Mike Young, is very different from the massive literature adaptation *A Nice Evening with the Family* (Westerling et al., 2007).

The key: narrative

The core question in variances on repeatable larp development is that of plot. Does one want the game to follow the same plotline every time, or one of a few potential ones, or to have something semi-random to arise from just basic seeds planted in the material? Each type has definite strengths – and clear weaknesses. Through a few examples – which I of course cannot really describe, given the ephemeral nature of larps – I will outline the central issues.

The first of these is whether one wants the game to contain one main plotline, or several, or many completely non-collaborative ones. While naturally a question of importance in the design of almost every larp, this becomes even more imperative when designing repeatable works: The choice of plot integrity usually defines every other aspect (with the possible exception of game size). As Aksel Westlund notes, in his “Storyteller’s Manifesto” (2004), this is mostly dealt with through balancing personal character material either in tune, or more or less in dissonance, with the main story arc(s).

For example, my own simulation of a horrible hang-over morning, *Prayers on a Porcelain Altar*, is designed to cater for emergent plots. In other words, the script is created through planting various story seeds – called *fabula* in larp studies, after Eirik Fatland’s definition (2005) – in the setting and the character material, but the goals of each character and



player are left almost completely in the hands of the players. This means that while some plotlines are more likely to emerge than others, the game master has absolutely no control over what is to emerge. The scenario therefore changes significantly from one run to the next. Players may thus attend the same game several times, with the scenario changing a lot more than in a more typical repeated run. The downside is that a game considered great on one run can be a huge disappointment on the next one, and this may be regardless of how “good” the players are.

In contrast, *A Nice Evening* was based on a tightly scripted set of plots, tied around a central one (for a more thorough description, see Hultman, Westerling & Wrigstad, 2008). The plots, in this case, were drawn directly from books and cinema. That sort of structure virtually guarantees, through the use of “plot waypoints”, that the main stories stay intact while players are still granted a significant level of freedom. Some of the most successful repeated-play designs even rely on this to create functional play: The witch-trial game *Salem 1906*, the first version of which was written by Yair Dicky Samban and Osher El-Netanyahu in 2004, is



built on a rigid plotline, but depends completely on players gathering up momentum (accusations and alliances) to feed that rigid plot. It is a game of pointing fingers at others, both creating and requiring lots of interaction. This is an excellent method for making sure things change while they stay the same, but it is heavily dependent on the player's willingness to feed the scenario. It also requires reaching a critical mass of opinion. And, furthermore, there is a chance of sidetracking the whole main plot, which is something that few tight-plotted larps really survive. As El-Netanyahu notes on running *Salem*:

“Players start to inject their own materials to the game and hype it higher (like trying to implant blood on the flour bought from the Nurse store, and painting pentagrams over the houses of the proctor's household). However, it takes the focus a little away from the conflicts I originally intended to confront with, so when it showed, I had to make a decision about how much to let it be in order to let the initiative-takers

- Prayers on a Porcelain Altar at the Utrecht School of Arts, Utrecht, the Netherlands, June 2008.

Photo
Lennart Quispel

come to self expression, and yet, preserve the atmosphere fit for players that do confront with the originally designated materials.” (Personal correspondence, used with permission)

This is a problem that became highly apparent in my run of Nick Huggins’ small séance larp *Communing in Darkness* at Ropecon 2008: with every player trying to control the ouija board at once, nearly all of its channeled spirit messages got scrambled. And as the game is staged around a progression of that information – several sessions at the board, during which more messages appear – the later parts did not make much sense to the players. However, the scenario’s interpersonal parts and general mood were still able to keep things enjoyable for the players. There is an extremely important lesson in this: In designing a scenario that leaves your hands, make doubly sure that the game can be enjoyable even if the main plotline fails to manifest. Even a very experienced game master will consider it problematic to alter the course of someone else’s work, despite witnessing that the game is not unfolding as it should.

Some repeated scenarios have a tight plot even while appearing completely free-formed. A designated start and a designated finish is still a plot, as is obvious in the case of the bomb shelter larp *Ground Zero*, which was run three times in Finland (1999-2001). As Heidi Hopeametsä, who has analyzed its player debriefs, notes (2008), the game was essentially an immersion into a non-plot, non-task-solving situation. Yet this was set in the middle of two scripted events: the entry to the bomb shelter, and the inevitable drop of the bomb. This is essentially the same thing as a game with mandatory waypoints.

The differences in these forms are far more important than one thinks. The emergent type is more precarious, in that there are no guarantees of a repeated similarity in player experiences, but it is also more interesting to repeat in the long run. When you do not know at all how things will turn out, following the game becomes more than just a question of success vs. failure.

On the other hand, a game with waypoints or a major plot is easier for others to run, and more predictable in both the good and the bad. In my experience it does not stay interesting for an organizer as long as an emergent one does, but that is not really the main point, now, is it? The first real question is: “How close to my vision of what is to happen in the game do I need the game to be?” And the second one, “How certainly do I want that to happen over multiple runs, when I am not necessarily in control, but it is still organized with my name on the game?”

There is a difference in designing a repeatable work so that you will run it yourself, and in making a script that anyone can run. The former you can correct as you go along, the latter, when the script is published, you cannot. It is therefore important to have the game as perfected as possible when it goes public.

■ New Voices in Art at Knudepunkt 2007, Denmark.

Photo
Britta Bergersen



Running instructions

This is where the next step of the plan comes in. Not only does the plot require an assessment of future adaptability – so does also the running environment. Any good repeatable scenario comes with proper running instructions. Those instructions, normally, contain at least data on proping, environment, number of characters and game duration, but may have a lot more: I personally include theme, mood and style data in all of my repeatable larp scripts. In my view, these are essential when designing something that leaves your personal control. Even very serious games like *Prayers* or *Salem* have been known to slip into parody on occasion, unless these details are communicated in advance.

My personal suggestion is to draft the running instructions after at least two runs that you have supervised yourself. After that, if it is possible, update them after each two (or so) runs, regardless of whether you or someone else organized them. For example, I toned down the amount of blood on “the sheets upstairs” from three to one liters in the game master instructions of *Prayers*, in response to player feedback on that part dominating the game too much – despite that part not being really significant in the runs before and after that feedback. Try creating a document of *full disclosure* that supports balanced play without (in theory) any supervision. This means that you also need to realize game elements that you have subconsciously added into the practicalities of running the game. Whatever you, for example, clarified in an opening speech or a debriefing session should be automatically included.

Game style is an important factor here: Some repeatable scenarios do not need much of a style guide. For example, *New Voices in Art*, a repeatable larp about a cadre of young artists at the opening of their joint art exhibition, gets along just fine with a simple list of mostly practical things, but also includes some implicit playing style guidelines in the statements given to each artist. This, however, is still open to interpretation: The same emotional pieces can be stated in sarcastic tones, in parody, or very seriously. This makes the game interesting also plot-wise – with next

to no fabula, the scenario can evolve into very different directions simply due to player choices in *style*, not just action.

In contrast, *Prayers* sets the mood to a nasty, offend-the-player-if-you-want feel in the player handouts. The default style, in my view, sets the tone on how fabula develop into plots, even as players are given lots of leeway. The style is further mentioned in the game master information, as in the case of *Prayers* the playing style is an essential ingredient of the scenario:

“You may therefore need to emphasize the fact that in this scenario, people are recommended to be mean to the each others’ characters based on traits that the character shares with its player. This means that it is completely legal to call the character of an overweight player “fat”, make racist and gender-discriminating remarks if it fits one’s own character, and so on.”

These are all also factors that you need to take into account when converting a one-run scenario into a repeatable one. In addition, it is quite likely that you have made some subconscious choices. Pay most attention to what you may have tried – consciously or not – to accomplish via things such as typecasting players. Remember that doing running and playing instructions is very different from documenting a successfully run game of yours.

Catering for audience variation

The point of player selection brings us to the next key part on the line: the selection of players. This is important, because you no longer can do it yourself. It is therefore necessary to create two mechanisms that ensure player enjoyment and game functionality. The first of these is an enhanced character selection process. While you can’t influence who is going to play, you can influence who plays whom. For example, the small ready-to-run

Parlor Larps described by John Kim (2008) use a system of three pairs of traits, so a player can pick the character that is (probably) most suitable for him or her: Dark/Light, Goal-oriented/Emotion-oriented and Simple/Complex, creating eight basic templates. My own games use a system of brief character descriptions, based on which each player picks one character. An example, from my *A Serpent of Ash*, which deals with the remnants of the Liberated, a failed charismatic cult:

A_____ – Timothy’s ”favorite disciple”, despite not being a member of the inner circle. Studied chemistry.

E_____ – The most talkative member of the Liberated. Even more active than the others in everything. Was unemployed at the time.

H _____ – Helpful, like an extra mom/dad who would always give you comfort. Studied mathematics.

Note that the descriptions need not match player expectations completely – the people in this example are described as they were five years ago – but the fact that players choose both increases the likelihood of the match and the probability of the player being at least basically OK with the character, as she/he has personally selected that character.

The second mechanism is more problematic: You have to be quite certain, and open, about to what sort of playing interests does the game mostly cater. A good repeatable scenario either needs to offer several styles of play at once (typical of the emergent plot type) or to state clearly what sort of play will be favored (such as the obvious theatricality of *A Nice Evening*). Otherwise things like local playing habits will play havoc on what you have designed: The stereotypes, from drama-oriented Swedes to just-for-fun-playing Germans and competitive British larpers, are real enough. Say what sort of play is promised and what sort of play is expected, and you may end up offering a random, foreign audience a new experi-

ence. But if you do not, they may accidentally consider your work just a failure and a waste of time.

One further technique to enhance your chance of success is the multi-layering technique I have discussed in an earlier article (2005). It is essentially a system of making sure that the game has more than one level for the players to perceive. For example, a player in *Prayers* may concentrate on in-character insults while – as a player – actually pondering what some bloodstains upstairs mean, or a crowd member may ponder *Salem* as a metaphor for modern society while listening to the accusations. A game can take place on several levels at once. This increases the probability of unknown players enjoying the scenario, as they have something of interest at hand, in case they are not fully immersed in the character or drama-playing itself.

And on a final note on player selection, make a realistic calculation on how many players your larp will actually need to run properly, and which characters should be cut from the game if there is less than an optimal number of players. Then write these instructions down.

On the question of special purposes

There is one more thing to note, and that is the design of repeatable scenarios for purposes other than pure enjoyment. My own most popular works, *Serpent* and *Prayers*, double as research projects, and thus have been written to support the testing of certain theories and phenomena. Done right, a repeatable script takes a life of its own, producing results of varying quality for years to come.

The issue of multiple-use educational larps, however, is trickier. Most of those can be considered repeatable works supervised by the designer, and often, as Finnish educational larp researcher and designer Jori Pitkänen notes (2008), require joint preparation with the players. Yet a few, such as Zentropa Interaction's democracy-teaching political larp set in the 1950s, *I Statens Tjenste* (see Wellejus & Agger, 2006, for a thorough analysis of the game), have been written to stand on their own.

They are curious things to create, as even the idea of knowing what others elsewhere may need to learn is quite arrogant. As they nevertheless are suitable for teaching practical skills and attitudes (as per Lieberoth & Harviainen, forthcoming), they will very likely soon be the most common type of repeatable larp available.

Everything stated above about repeatable scenarios is also accurate on educational and research games, with the following exception: in such larps, plot comes second after purpose. When creating a game that has a goal outside play *and* still leaves your sphere of control, make damn sure all emerging major narrative supports the intended purpose of the scenario.

The guidelines

Anyone who has ever written a successful larp will also be able to design a larp for repeatable play. The key is in writing down enough of the small things one usually handles personally, including most probable variations. Most game masters are so used to off-handedly fixing problems that they rarely notice them. Write every such thing down.

Make sure the plot is interesting. Especially that it is interesting for yourself – there is no point in designing a game for multiple runs, if it's not interesting to organize those runs. All the best repeatable larps have one thing in common: people have said that they would want to attend them again. New players will always bring the most significant changes with them, but only with a suitably designed plot structure will they be able to make full use of that potential.

And while at it, it is necessary to make sure that the scenario will be enjoyable to several types of players. The further your work travels from your own hands, the more likely that it will encounter people who do not share your views on larping. Take that into account early on – you do not want to be considered a lousy designer.

When all this is done, and you have hopefully run the game at least once, write down everything you note as even marginally significant. If

you do it right, the game document itself will be the real “game master” on every subsequent run – players will read the right impressions from it, and the new organizer will know what the game is really supposed to be like. That way it is ultimately still you who controls how much the scenario changes, but you get all the good sides of being surprised by the players. And this is what your vision deserves.

Naught may endure but mutability.

Checklist

- Is there a special purpose to the game?
- What sort of plot structure am I using, and does it support that purpose?
- Is the plot structure supported by enough fabula?
- Have I clearly stated what sort of play is expected?
- Does the larp offer potential players something besides the plot and the primary style of play?
- How many players does this scenario need at minimum, and in which order should characters be removed?
- Would I want to run this game again myself?
- Will I be always involved in running this larp? And if not, have I written down everything mentioned in this checklist?

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Tabletop RPG meets performing arts

Bringing pen & paper role-playing to the stage

Florian Berger

9

PERFORMANCE

TABLETOP

At first this looks like an ordinary tabletop role-playing session. Three guys at a table. Describing, debating, occasionally speaking in character. Nothing you have not seen before, and admittedly not too exciting to watch. But then: As the game master goes on explaining a dangerous path across the mountains, a large image appears behind the three, showing that very rocky pathway through jagged cliffs, partly covered with moss and grass. Soft music begins to play, emphasizing the uneasy mood of the way. You almost believe you can see the two characters walking in the image.

A few minutes later, one player stands up and walks some steps away from the table. Warm light fades in, and you see that in the dark another participant has been waiting who now portrays a non-player character. The scene that has been set up in your mind by the descriptions before now begins to take physical shape on the stage in front of you. While you

are drawn into the action, you wonder for one moment: is this still tabletop role-playing? And if not – what is it then?

It is August 2008. In Leipzig, Germany, four role-players and two actors have set out to incorporate performing arts techniques into tabletop role-playing and to bring the result to a theatre stage, with inspirations drawn from cinema, actor reading sessions and poetry performances. As the game master of that evening, I will describe the foundations, preparations and the result of our experiment in this article. Come and follow me.

Shaping the idea

Shortcomings at the table

I have been playing tabletop role-playing games since 1995, and over the years I have become more and more dissatisfied with the setting these games are actually played in. I wanted to take part in an exciting story and go through an atmospheric experience. Instead, I found myself sitting at a dining table covered with scribbles and cola bottles, looking at a wall opposite the window. To me, such surroundings have always interfered with the vivid imagination of strange places and dramatic events.

In my experience this is not an uncommon problem: depending on how much they felt distracted by their surroundings, the players I have met have developed a number of approaches to improve the situation of the game, such as:

- darkening the room
- using dim sources of light, like candles
- playing background music, predominantly film music
- bringing accessories to the table like a puzzle, an old key or the like

These have become fairly widespread techniques for pen-and-paper players. On the other hand, costumes, cloaks and dresses are rarely found at the table (except at RPG conventions) and have remained within the domain of larp.

Playing around with the above approaches, I finally came to wonder: how – and how far – can one intensify the tabletop role-playing experience by customizing the gaming environment in the real world?

Gathering inspiration

However, that thought did not come out of the blue. Back in 2005, I watched the movie *The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes*. The story takes place on a mad scientist's island, and the motion picture features impressive, disturbing, hard-to-decrypt imagery, oozing with a mysterious symbolism.¹

Walking out of the cinema I was impressed by how a strong (though uneasy) atmosphere could be created simply by using gloomy, symbolic images. I immediately thought about using this as a device at the gaming table by means of *video projection*, yet unresolved difficulties – how do you set up a satisfying projection in a living room? – prevented me from trying it for some time.

The second inspiration came when the German actor Rufus Beck did a reading of *Drachenglut* (by Jonathan Stroud, original title: *Buried Fire*) at the Leipzig Book Fair. Beck is critically acclaimed in Germany for his Harry Potter audio books. He turned up with a laptop which he read the text from, but which he also used to play some atmospheric sounds in the background – not necessarily music, but shifting ambient-style sounds to reflect enigmatic parts of the story.

As mentioned above, I have been playing background music myself at tabletop RPG sessions since 2004 with very satisfying results. “There are certain pieces of music you use”, one of my players recently said, “that flip a switch in my mind, and I am there, right in the game world.”

¹ There is a trailer on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOxn6XkCYRA>

To me, Beck's performance underlined the power and the importance of this technique and set the seal on using background sounds for the experimental session that began to take shape in my head.

The most recent inspiration was Benjamin Bagby's recital of *Beowulf*.² Bagby performs this poem from the 8th century BC in original Old English (Anglo-Saxon), a language which has been out of use for hundreds of years. Being an actor, he uses just about any possibility entailed in his voice and body: whispering, shouting, declaiming, singing, gesturing. He accompanies himself on a reconstructed Anglo-Saxon harp.

I own the DVD and I watch it regularly for fun and inspiration. To me, Bagby is a storytelling archetype for every game master. But he especially provides examples of techniques that can be used within performing arts-oriented role-playing. I have been thinking about bringing an instrument to the table for some time, to comment on the action and create transitions. Bagby shows how to handle such a device in an effective way.

² Available on DVD at <http://www.bagbybeowulf.com/>. A fragment can be watched on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VX_mDfRib8k

The concept: making fun sound serious

When an occasion was at hand to finally bring these ideas to life (more on that later), this was the concept I suggested to my friends and players, trying to persuade them to participate:

The *foundation* of what we are about to do is the well-known form of tabletop role-playing, using pen, paper and dice. Procedures and responsibilities are the same: the game master controls and describes the action, the NPCs (non-player characters) and the circumstances; the players control their respective characters.

The *idea* is the considerably increased effort of the game master to create a vivid impression of the events and the atmosphere for the players.

³ For the function of the “playing field” see also Huizinga (1938).

The first component is a special *room*. The game shall be played in an environment which explicitly differs from one’s habitual home environment or spare time surroundings. The location shall be quiet, spacious and have a minimum of distractions.³ Theatres and cinema auditoriums fulfill a comparable function; smaller theatres seem particularly suited for this style of playing.

In that room the game master shall use *music, noises, sound effects* like reverb or voice distortion as well as *image and video projection* during the game to create moods or to accompany and comment on the action. Using these devices shall never be a goal in itself, but serve the storytelling instead. Handling the media technology must not disturb the flow of the game.

The game master shall adopt a broad range of *storytelling techniques*. In addition to descriptions, monologues and direct speech of NPC, he shall play an instrument where applicable.

The game master and the players shall use the space and the quietness of the room to physically act out confrontations and dialogue. The possibilities to do so when sitting at the table are usually very limited. In performance-oriented role-playing, the participants shall leave the table every now and then to physically perform scenes. There is no need nor demand for professional acting; rather, it is about visualizing and getting a feeling for the arrangement of the characters. Should someone not wish to leave the table, he/she is not forced to do so. Only the game master *must* use the space offered by the environment, be it only for monologues.

By using music and projections and acting out scenes, the session inevitably takes on some features pertaining to performing arts. As a consequence, an *audience* can be admitted to experience the story from the perspective of a passive observer. After adequate preparation, persons from the audience may be involved in single scenes, joining in at a sign of the game master. The session, however, is *not improvisational the-*

atre, and although a satisfying public performance may be an interesting by-product, it is not the goal of the game.

Because of the increased effort both in storytelling and in the usage of multimedia, the game master becomes the shaper of the experience to a much greater extent than in an ordinary tabletop game. Thus the term *auteur role-playing* can be introduced, as an allusion to *auteur film-making* and *auteur theory*.⁴ Instead of setting up a canvas where players can do whatever they like, this concept rather suggests that the players use their characters to contribute to the game master's vision of the story.⁵

To my present knowledge, a game modelled on this concept had not been tried out nor documented before.

I must specify that these ideas were *not* inspired by the role-playing games published by White Wolf, Inc. (such as "Vampire" or "Werewolf"). True, there are similarities in the approaches: role-playing is understood as a *storytelling game* with the game master being the principal storyteller. Also, live-action is regarded as a valid form of gameplay.⁶ However, mixing tabletop, larp and performing arts techniques and bringing the result before an audience sets us apart from these games.

From a larp point of view the question may arise as to why I chose to maintain the tabletop concept without turning it into a Live action role-playing game as a whole. The answer is that all those techniques were meant to *enhance and strengthen* a tabletop experience. In an experimental session I wanted to find out how well they serve this purpose. Acting out dialogue and scenes happens to be one of the devices of performance-oriented role-playing, but the session could have been conducted without using live acting at all. When the occasion was at hand to perform the session, all devices were tried at once. Although it resembled a larp event in appearance, conceptually we always remained adherent to the tabletop style of play we were accustomed to.

⁴ See also Truffaut (1954)

⁵ See also The Manifesto of the Turku School at <http://www2.uiah.fi/~mpohjola/turku/manifesto.html>: "The role-playing game is the game masters creation, to which he lets the players enter. The game world is the game master's, the scenario is the game master's, the characters (being a part of the game world) are the game master's. ... This does not mean that the game master should tell the players what their characters should do."

⁶ See also Davis, Graeme, Rein-Hagen, Mark and Wieck, Stewart: *Vampire: The Masquerade*. White Wolf Publishing, 1995.

Preparations: setting up for the journey

The occasion

Renting a stage, motivating participants and finding an audience for such an experiment are not as easy tasks as one might think. I have been turning the ideas mentioned above around in my mind for quite some time, and there were several obstacles that held me back.

Firstly, renting and setting up even a small theatre stage for a private gaming session is both expensive and not very satisfying if there are only a few people involved. Secondly, making it a public performance with strong elements of improvisation might scare off participants who like to play, but are afraid to perform. So I decided early on that the first performance should not be public, but rather have a limited and selected audience. Thirdly, how to convince ordinary tabletop players to participate in such an unfamiliar event? Experimental larp sessions are *far* less common in Germany than they are in the Scandinavian countries. The kind of game we were about to play might raise eyebrows even amongst active larpers here.

The solution to all of these obstacles came with my private birthday party in August 2008. This was a splendid occasion to rent a small theatre which also had an adjoining cafe where the party could take place. Approaching possible participants with a wish for my anniversary made refusal just a little more difficult. In addition, it provided a willing audience of about 40 people, most of whom already knew each other. Finally, the occasion of the anniversary enabled me to raise some financial backing for the performance.

The participants

The active participants were:

- Florian B. (myself) as the game master
- Long-term role-players Alexander M. and Stephan S. as players
- Another role-player, Volker G. and professional actors Stephan T. and Tilla K. as NPCs
- Yves B., who works for a local TV station, as light and sound engineer

I decided to involve only two main player characters. One reason for that was to make it easier for the audience to keep track of the story. Also, with more main characters we would have had less play time for each.

Briefings

Alexander M., Stephan S. and I have been working on a role-playing world and rule set for a couple of years now⁷, and we know each other's style and preferences. Both at first had some objections to the project; while Alexander quickly decided to face it head-on, Stephan said he would participate, but still continue to consider role-playing as a kind of private activity that in his mind does not belong on a stage.

7. <http://www.drei-rpg.de/>

It had been clear from the beginning that our world and rule set would provide the canvas and rules for the session. I prepared a basic background situation with a city involved in border skirmishes, and we created the two main characters. Being the two principal players, Alexander and Stephan received no information on planned in-game events or developments.

Next I approached Stephan T. and Tilla K. Neither had any previous RPG experience. While the two agreed to participate, I learned to my surprise that improvisation is considered a very difficult process by actors who are much more used to developing a character from a given text. I

had planned to create several characters and assign them on demand, but then I decided to give one fixed NPC to each. We had two preliminary meetings where I revealed my plans for how the action could develop in-game.

At this point it was clear that the game would center around these four players, so I just had a quick arrangement with Volker G. via phone and email; he would just have a short appearance on stage.

Yves, who was going to be responsible for live light and sound engineering, was instructed just like all other participants. He received all the documents about the playing style, the content and the characters, as I wanted him not just to turn knobs, but to adjust light and sound according to the pace and the intensity of the action.

All players were asked to wear darker colors at the performance, no funny prints and no bright shirts, following the principle of minimal distraction. As laid out in the concept, there were *no costumes* as such, yet we had some props such as a walking stick, some chairs, a cup or a handkerchief.

Time frame

The playing session was scheduled to start at 21:30. There had been some previous debate about how long it should last. Though entertaining the audience should not be the goal of the game, we did not want to bore them either. I decided to fulfill the expectations an audience might have about the duration of such an event and therefore to use approximately one hour.

The stage

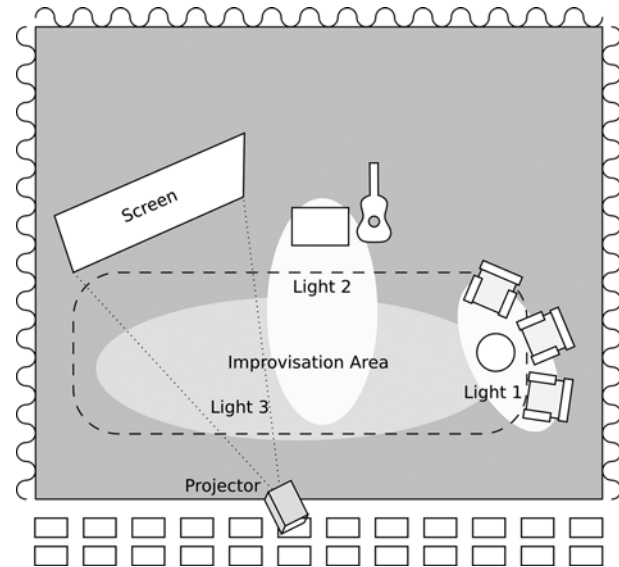
The stage is about six meters wide and five meters deep. It is mainly used for smaller and independent theatre productions. In our setup, the left side of the stage was dominated by the *projection screen*. I placed the projector in the first row of seats close to the mixing desk where Yves B. supervised the media technology. In the middle of the stage there was a solitary *music stool* for me to perform longer monologues or play guitar. The table and the three chairs were on the right side of the stage and a bit closer to the audience. The free area in front of the screen, the stool and the table was intended for *acting out scenes*.

Lighting, sound and projections

The theatre featured professional lighting equipment and a technician to do the setup. Together we prepared three areas of light: a spotlight on the music stool which left the rest of the stage in darkness; a warm light on the table and chairs; and a broader light for the “acting area”. During the game Yves B. faded the lights in and out.

The music and the video source for the projections came from a laptop. Since an “auteur” game master must have complete control over sound and images, I wrote a program for that purpose which I could run from a computer keyboard that I put next to the table. The program was able to fade images and music in and out at the press of single keys.

All images were based on photographs taken by me over the years. They showed mountains, lakes, skies, medieval houses, walls or details like locks. Following the principle of minimum distraction as explained above, no



■ Sketch of the stage setup

Illustration
Florian Berger

humans or animals were in the pictures. I edited the images to make them look somewhat more mysterious than ordinary photographs, so that they resembled things as they would appear in the game world. Additionally, I prepared a map of the fictional world for projection to show where the action took place.

The performance: letting scenes roll

An introduction

Though tempted to start the game right away, I began with an introduction for the audience. Most of them were unfamiliar with any form of role-playing games, and no one had heard about the particular fantasy setting of the story before. The introduction was done with all lights on and no music or projections, to separate it clearly from the actual game. I explained what tabletop role-playing is, what we were about to try and that there had been no rehearsals.

■ Setting up the stage

Photo

Alexander Marbach



The role-playing session began with a pre-arranged projection of text and images, accompanied by music, telling about the in-game background situation. This served the purpose of putting players and audience in the desired mood for the game. Next I, now in the role of the game master, picked up the story told so far and went on to introduce the setting and the characters.

The game

The actual game unfolded as usual as an alternation of actions, descriptions and dialogues between players and game master. Upon the start of a new scene or the characters' arrival at a new location, I would go to the "acting area" and portray some NPC that the players were going to encounter. Among the locations for the action there were an inn, a market place, the ruler's palace and some places in the wilderness. When a scene ended, I often went to the music stool to tell about subsequent events or play an instrumental piece on the guitar.

There were very exciting moments when the additional players had their call and acted out their respective NPCs. Especially the actors found interesting ways to bring their characters to life. For example, Stephan T. invented a recurring line that his character would use to greet the player characters, showing his inner distance to them. This developed into a kind of running gag and made the audience respond to every appearance of the character.

The end

Over the course of the game it became evident that a role-playing session has a much slower pace than a movie or a play. The game took almost twice as long as scheduled and did not find a truly satisfying ending, though a fairly consistent and interesting story had emerged. We finally came to a point where the main location, the city, was about to be attacked. It would have fitted the story well had the characters decided to leave the town after all that had happened, but since they opted for staying and fighting, the game



- Still setting up. The screen is in place

Photo
Alexander Marbach

- Acting out with a professional actress. The white background is the projection screen.

Photo
Thomas Sandkühler

would have lasted even longer. Therefore, it was necessary for me to do a cut and end the game with a monologue, suggesting the further development of the story and the characters. This was foreseen and arranged with Yves before, so the monologue was pronounced at the music stool with me in the spotlight, followed by a fadeout of all music and lights and some time of darkness. Naturally, the audience applauded, and then everyone went on to celebrate the game (and the anniversary) with some scotch whisky.

Results: lessons learned

The author's impressions

The performance was an experiment in more than just one way. I tested a variety of techniques in parallel, and I will now comment on each one separately. The components tested were:

- the room: unfamiliar, big, sparse, quiet
- lighting: lighting moods and fades
- projections: orientation, comments, mood
- monologues and instrumentals performed by the game master
- acting out scenes on stage
- incorporating other role-players and professional actors as NPCs
- playing before an audience
- enhanced authorship of the game master throughout the game

What follows below are my personal impressions and reflections.

The room

In the room there was an atmosphere which differed considerably from “living room” role-playing. Its size allowed thinking and playing in scenes and bigger gestures. In addition, it offered the possibility to alternate between closeness and distance, which is not possible in an ordinary tabletop session. So an area of 6x5m proved to be sufficient space for a tabletop playing and occasional acting out.

My overall feeling concerning the room was not very comfortable, which I now attribute to its emptiness and size. The big floor, the black curtains and the sparse furniture made it hard to sit back and relax. On the one hand, this made me more active; on the other hand, I wished myself back to a cozy couch from time to time. My impression was that this kind of room does not yet provide the ideal surrounding for intense role-playing; the factor of feeling well and at home is not to be underestimated (see the end of this article for future ideas). Looking back I think it is advisable to have a warming up session in such an unfamiliar environment to get a feel for it. In our case we only had the stage for one night, so there was no time for such a session.

Lighting

The spots and lighting moods in the different areas, and especially their fading in and out when appropriate, provided an essential contribution to the atmosphere; only the light defined the meaning and impression of the different places on stage. A theatre stage is therefore a very good place for this style of play, even if there is no audience, because professional lighting equipment is mounted in the right places and there usually is an experienced technician to help with the setup. In addition, the role of the live lighting engineer is not to be underestimated. He or she must be able to follow the flow of the action and sometimes anticipate the game master’s intentions. That was why I instructed Yves as if he had been a player (see above).

Projections

The projection of a map was a nice alternative to a hand-scribbled sketch, and also allowed the audience to understand the spatial relations of the different scenes. Regrettably, I could not use the projection software to its full extent, since I was not able to trigger the images without looking at the keyboard. Besides, I was locked to my chair when I wanted to change images because of the computer keyboard that was placed there. Even a wireless keyboard would have looked odd if I had carried it around. My next approach is going to be a programmable remote control in conjunction with an infrared receiver connected to the laptop. This would provide a small device to change music and images to be used anywhere on the stage.

Sadly, the projections had to be faded to black for almost all acting scenes, in order to avoid projecting the image on the players. A projection from the rear would have worked out a lot better, also because in that case the players would have been able to react to the imagery.

When the projector had been turned off, the big white screen turned out to be a strange background for the scenes. An unobtrusive

- During the game. On the left a glimpse of the projection

Photo

Thomas Sandkühler



screen would have been better, but might be harder to build. Of course this problem does not occur when using rear projection, where there is no need to turn the projector off completely.

Acting out

In my view, the acting out of characters by using the space provided proved to be the strongest part of the experiment. Although the acting was intended as a supplement to the imagination we created at the table, often the physical components that are missing in tabletop role-playing made it easier to play the character and deepened the experience. I will give two examples: the character of Alexander approached a commander, trying to change his mind on how to deal with the crisis that threatened the city. I described the hall and the throne of the commander, put a chair on the left side of the stage, took his role and asked Alexander's character to enter. Alexander came from the dim light and could now incorporate the physical distance between us into his acting. A second example: the two player characters tried to obtain information at an inn, which we made up by putting some chairs here and there in the improvisation area. Tilla played the innkeeper, I remained at the table. Sitting in the middle of the stage, Stephan S. asked out-of-character whether there was a lone person present that looked like a salesman. I said "Yes, some tables away from you", and described what he looked like. Then Stephan – now in character – looked around the inn and made me be the salesman, because I would portray that person anyway and I was actually sitting some tables away. He left his companion and approached me, and we acted out the dialogue at the playing table. These possibilities led to a stronger profile of both the characters and the situation as such. The acting component ("role-playing" in the sense of the word) pushed the strategic parts of the game into the background. Whether one likes that or not is of course a matter of personal preference.

Audience

Reactions during the game showed that the spectators were able to follow the story and appreciated what happened on stage. However, I consider the audience to be a distracting factor:

- The whole stage geometry was designed towards a watching audience. I would have preferred an orientation towards the players, a much more closed-in stage layout (table and screen). That way the attitude would have been „playing for ourselves“ rather than „playing for someone else“, and it would also possibly have improved the impression of the room.
- The natural demands of an audience watching a stage performance kept interfering with the flow of the game; in particular the necessity for speaking up (since we did not use microphones), and requests for more detailed explanations of actions or characters to allow the spectators to follow the action.
- The factor I was most conscious of was time. Under normal circumstances, I would have used a much slower pace for the game. Thinking of the audience, we imposed a limit of roughly one hour on ourselves, which created considerable pressure once we exceeded that time-limit. Especially during scenes between the main players and the actors where I was not involved and which I did not want to interrupt by force, I often felt uneasy and thought “this is taking too long, the audience is getting bored”. In a private session I would have sat back, relaxed and watched the action roll instead. To keep concentrating on acting scenes, I mostly shortened travels of the characters that normally are affected by random encounters. At the end of the game this led to a feeling of rushing through the locations. Without an audience, the same story normally would have been played over a course of about four hours.

Auteur-style role-playing

My ambitious plans of an auteur-style role-playing game have not been fulfilled by the experiment. According to the concept, the experiment should have been an experience created by the game master using monologues, music, images and NPCs, with the players contributing the character actions within the constraints of the overall story arch. But I clearly underestimated both the duration and the impact of the live action scenes. Although, as the game master, I still controlled the media devices and in theory could interfere with any scene, the initiative of the participants, especially the NPC actors, greatly influenced the road which the story took. The best example is Stephan T., who by his own initiative dropped important information about a planned assault on the city long before I had intended it. This of course greatly changed the pace and the direction of the story, while all I could do was to react to this development. It turned out to be a good and exciting turn in the end, since that way Stephan T.'s character seemed much deeper and more important to the players; it also created a sense of the story coming from all sides, not only from the game master. Dividing up hints and clues between NPC players may therefore be a valuable technique for further sessions. My final impression is that this session was rather a collaborative piece of art. *Auteur-style* role-playing worth its name must to a greater degree be the product of the game master.

Impressions of participants and spectators

The overall impressions of the players and actors were that the experiment worked out pretty well – an interesting story had emerged, there was satisfying role-playing and a feeling of flow. In the audience there were mixed opinions. “I liked the projections”, someone said, “Together with music and light they created a great atmosphere, like at the movies.” Someone else added “Now I have an idea what tabletop role-playing is about. I do not necessarily want to become a role-player now, but it is an interesting activity.” Some spectators stated that it was difficult to follow



■ The game master plays an instrumental piece

Photo
Thomas Sandkühler

all the names of the characters, especially since I played several NPCs as the game master. Almost the whole audience agreed on one thing: the performance was “too long” (see also my notes on that above). Since there are movies or stage performances that last considerably longer than the two hours we needed, I attribute this to the amount of imagination and concentration required to follow the action. After all plays and movies visualize the action to a great degree, leaving not much for the recipient to picture and remember.

From a player’s point of view, Alexander M. explained that the audience had been a stimulus for quality, but also disturbed the game by changing the agenda. “I had the feeling of owing something to the audience – after all, on a stage an audience is not to be ignored”, he said.

The typical game elements (such as the rolling of the dice) were found to be underrepresented by several participants. Volker G. suggested a “dice cam” to incorporate this into the projections and thus engage the audience.

I had a special interest in the impressions of the professional actors, since they had not been in touch with role-playing games before. Stephan T. found that the (already simplified) rules were still pretty complex. “It was strange to see you negotiate ‘Do I hear him saying that or not’. An actor would just pass over that problem or act out speaking quietly.” He also perceived the background music as a “killer”: “The permanent playing of mystic music made spectators sleepy. Less could be more here.” To Tilla K. it was unclear who could be a possible audience for this kind of performance. “At best it could be a niche event, like a sophisticated music session which might be fascinating for the musicians involved but not for the listeners.” Finally Tilla said that “bringing tabletop role-playing to the stage automatically makes theatre productions the reference. Thus, the visualization will always lag behind – and who wants to be ‘second best’ forever?” To the actors, tabletop RPG seemed closer to radio drama than to stage play, so they suggested further experiments in that area.

Future work

Looking back, I think that tests of single components would have yielded better results. But the anniversary brought about the unique chance to try it all at once, and this being an experiment, the outcome was not bad after all. For further tests I will split the original concept into two approaches:

- Approach 1: *Audience-oriented Role-playing*. Focus on performance, respecting the demands of spectators, all in all closer to improvisation theatre. I will involve actors with improvisation experience; at the time of writing, contacts have been made to a group of actors specialized in improvisation.
- Approach 2: *Auteur-style Role-playing*. No audience, smaller and cozier room. Tests with music, projections, acting area, monologues and instruments.

So this is what we did in August 2008. Thank you for following me that far. If you participated in a similar event and would like to share your experiences, I would be glad if you got in touch with me.

Thanks

I would very much like to thank everybody who made that performance possible. Thanks to Thomas Sandkühler and Alexander Marbach, who took the photos in this article. A very warm “Thank You” also to Matthijs Holter and Tor Kjetil Edland and all the others from the Knutepunkt 2009 team.

Pix or didn't happen

Juhana Pettersson

10

DOCUMENTATION

Intro

Role-playing games, both larp and tabletop, are an ephemeral art form. The games are usually done only once, and people hear about them through word of mouth. Now, in the era of unprecedented ease in publishing stuff on the internet, is the time to change this and start documenting games properly.

Body

I don't know how many role-playing games I've created or run. With larp, the number is small enough that I can make an estimate. Tabletop games, I have no idea.

Some time when I was twenty, I started to give numbers to the sessions in a tabletop campaign. Kulak #1, Kulak #2 and so forth. I didn't do this when I was in high school and in junior high, and I've never played so many role-playing games as I did during those years.

For me personally, the motivation to document role-playing games was born of a desire to have some record of the things I've created. Role-playing is ephemeral by its very nature, but I didn't like the feeling that there was no evidence of all those games I ran as a kid. I have some memories and some indecipherable notes, but that's all.

When it comes to role-playing in general, I think documentation is important for different reasons. Those games that have been written about are the ones that enter the canon of Nordic role-playing. Others fade into obscurity.

It's not just a matter for art larps and other ambitious productions. Every game benefits from having great pictures. It's a peculiarity of Russian larp culture that they take their larp photos very, very seriously. Because of this, the internet is full of great-looking Russian larp pictures. I'm sure all the players who played in those games look at these gorgeous images of themselves and think: "Man, that was a great game".

Autodocumentation

My practical motivation for documenting larps has been to have pictures and other material I can use to make a presentation of my own games. I want to have something on my website from each game, and I want to be able to explain with pictures what I've been doing. I've made games in an art context where this kind of documentation is necessary, but I also like to have a memory of the things I've created.

My first major game was Luminescence, with Mike Pohjola. It had twenty players, semi-naked, wallowing in a roomful of flour. The game was produced in just three days, and as often happens in situations like this, documentation suffered. We, the game masters, were not present during the game, and were unable to obtain photographs.



■ A still from the video documentation of the larp Luminescence

After the game was over, I asked the players to recreate some moments from the game, and shot it on video. This material, about fifteen minutes, is the only actual record of the game. Thanks to the specific visual character of the game, I've been able to use stills from the video as photos, but normally you can't do this: the video frame resolution is much too low for the purposes you need still images for.

Otherwise, asking the players to recreate key moments was a very successful strategy. Since the players were hyped up after the game and they have all the stuff in fresh memory, they were able to perform very well. I was able to move among them with the camera in a way that would have been impossible during the actual game.

Shooting video from an actual game tends to result in squalid-looking footage in which nothing happens. So much of role-playing happens inside the players' heads that even the most action-oriented game doesn't look so hot when you look at the video record. Part of this is because it's really hard to get in there to shoot proper images without getting in the way, but it's also because when you remember a game, you think of all the meaningful moments, all the action, all the drama, but when you shoot video, it looks like you have a record of all the boring stuff instead. The same problems probably plague the editors of a reality TV series like Big Brother. A dramatic recreation is the perfect solution. The players perform for the camera the things they have already experienced inside their heads.

My book about role-playing games, *Roolipelimanifesti*, was published a year after we made Luminescence, in 2005. I included two example games in the book, an outline for a tabletop campaign and a larp scenario. To publicize the book, I ran the larp in an abbreviated form at the 2005 Ropecon role-playing game event in Finland.

The game is called Ala-aste (Elementary School), and is the worst-documented game I've made. It was about a class of fifth-grade school-children during a normal school day. To prepare for the game, I ran a workshop to help the players to regress to the appropriate level of mental cruelty and primitive social dynamics.

The official Ropecon photographer of that year, Olli Rinne, wandered in just then by accident. I asked him for the pictures afterwards. They proved surprisingly good. The workshop was very physical, with the players wrestling on the ground, and photos with action are always better than photos with no action. I suspect the photos were better than any that could have been shot during the game. These pictures and a few scraps of paper the players doodled on during the game are the only thing left from that game.

By 2008 I felt I had learned my lesson, and had decided that I would document rigorously every game I made. For once, I would have proper pictures!

I made a twenty-player art game for the Freefall larp festival, produced together with the Solmukohta 2008 Week in Finland prequel event in Helsinki. The game was called Muovikuppi (The Plastic Cup), and was about material stuff. The characters were a family dividing an inheritance and the central physical metaphor in the game was that the players would express themselves by smashing cheap, light green Ikea coffee cups into the ground.

Destroying 200 coffee cups is pretty harsh on the floor, so the game was played on parking lots. This also made the cleaning easier. There was no scenography, except for some funky lights when the game was played for the first time. I figured that, since the players would have to stretch their imaginations anyway, the game wouldn't suffer if I hovered around taking photographs and shot video.

I don't think the game suffered, but the photos were not very good. I now have a large selection of pictures showing people's backs. Since I was off-game, it was hard for me to get into a good position to shoot without being a nuisance.



■ Pre-game workshop of the game Ala-aste.

Photo
Olli Rinne



■ A recreated scene from the larp Muovikuppi.

Photo
Staffan Jonsson

One of the players spontaneously decided to recreate some of the game-play after the first game and took photos, and during the second game a player shot pictures while she was playing. These images were far superior to those I shot. The players were inside the game, and thus better able to place the camera where it should be.

The video I shot is mostly useless, since it just shows a bunch of people talking and occasionally smashing coffee cups. Even the destruction looks boring if you're not close enough to really understand what's happening.

My most recent game is called Lumimyrsky (Snowstorm). I made it for the Finnish role-playing convention Ropecon in the summer of 2008. It was a ten-player, one-room game relying heavily on text and music. The in-game story was about three teams of workers lost in a snowstorm in Antarctica. They seek refuge in an abandoned base. While there, they begin to suspect that there might be another person there, a mysterious "eleventh".

I made one of the characters a photographer and another a photo hobbyist, and gave the players small digital cameras before the game. The pictures the players took form the main record of the game. This strategy is not so easy: the photography has to be integrated into the story of the game, and is limited by the photographic abilities of the players.

Still, I got enough pictures to make it okay. I hedged my bets by designing the lights in the game area so that the pictures would probably be dramatic no matter how you shot them.

Another thing I did in Lumimyrsky was to put a digital voice recorder, a device much smaller than a pack of cigarettes, under a table in the game area. I guessed the players would congregate around this table for much of the game, and the device had a quite good microphone for picking up voice even a long way off. Thus, I have a voice recording of the entire game.

Sometimes you have to ask yourself what the documentation is for. When you listen to the recording of any role-playing game after the fact, it sounds slow, boring and superficial, no matter how brilliant the game

actually was. I have no idea what I should do with this recording. I made it because it was easy to make it.

Why to how

How to document your game depends on the purpose of the documentation. The Russians don't document their games because they need a portfolio for an art gallery like I do. They document their games because they want to have pictures in which they look really cool.

Even though our purposes are different, we both want fancy photography. I edit a Finnish role-playing magazine called *Roolipelaja*, and we regularly publish articles about larp featuring large numbers of color photos. You can really tell who's been putting some thought into their larp pictures and who hasn't when you look at the stuff submitted to us. Sometimes, the images are gorgeous. Other times, they're intensely boring, stuffy pictures of people in costumes posing, taken with a flashlight.

The best pictures are taken by an actual photographer.

The next best pictures are taken by the players, during the game. Often this is not possible. It's hard to justify cameras in a fantasy game, although I suspect that, in many cases, the players wouldn't mind.

The third solution is to fake it, and ask the players re-create events and situations after the game. Make sure there's enough light, remember that fancy angles often make for better pictures, action is better than no action, and never use the flashlight.

The best documented game I have seen is *Dragonbane*. They had to document properly because many of their sponsors wanted to see what their money had been spent on. I didn't participate in the game, but I have a fair idea of what happened after going through the *Dragonbane*: the *Legacy* documentation book and DVD.

The book tells the story from the perspective of the production. With all the problems the larp had, the production story is quite interesting, and it's rare to have documentation about a game focusing so much on how the game was created and produced.

The book hovers somewhere between a document fulfilling promises made to sponsors and a complete historical record of the game. I'm sure future larp historians will be delighted with the DVD, which contains a preposterous amount of text files, pictures and other effluvia from the game. My favorite was the pdf file which contained the instructions for the driver of the giant mobile dragon.

I suspect that most larp organizers don't feel as great a responsibility for future generations as the Dragonbane team did. Their desire to create a historical record was quite extraordinary. Nevertheless, one of the things you learn from the Dragonbane documentation is that having good pictures is gold. I never really understood the dragon or the village before I saw the many photos they had. You get it when you see how small a human being is next to these immense constructions.

The Dragonbane documentation is organized so that the story of the game and the best pictures are in the book. The DVD is a storehouse which has everything. It's useful if you have a lot of time, but hard to approach. It works well when you first read the book and then explore the DVD archive.

A larp produces a surprising amount of documents. There are character descriptions, promo pictures, player material and maybe a website. Compiling all of this and adding photos taken at the game makes for perfectly serviceable larp documentation. Making a data dump like the Dragonbane DVD is very easy, even when you don't have the energy, resources or motivation to actually publish a book like the Dragonbane people did.

No visual

So far, I've been talking about larps, but tabletop games can be documented too. When I was a kid running Advanced Dungeons & Dragons 2nd edition games, I hit upon the idea of documenting the game with a voice recording. I suspected my players would not be happy, so I made the

recording in secret by hiding a Walkman with the earphones plugged into the microphone jack under the game table.

Afterwards, when I listened to the recording I was surprised to discover we sounded like a bunch of hysterical kids high on ice cream and soda. When you play, it feels like you're killing orcs and saving princesses (or just killing orcs, as we weren't really big on the princesses at that age), but when you listen to it, it's giggling fits, bad jokes, endless off-game comments and fighting.

Recording tabletop game sessions is almost useless as documentation. A friend made a record of a gaming session for an academic study of how people navigated the various levels of fiction and reality in a game, but – apart from special cases like that – I think we need something else.

In 2006, I started a campaign called Tuliunikko (Fireflower), about superheroes in Hollywood. I created a primitive blog for the game. The plan was to write a report of each game and publish it there. The blog was a useful way to give the players material about the game world, and I used it to publish or link to stories or pictures that somehow related to the campaign.

My blog didn't have a 'comments' function, because of primitive software. I saw what you could do with a game blog only after Mike Pohjola started his Tähti (Star) game. He used a proper blogging platform and also wrote descriptions of all the game sessions, as well as doing all the other things that I had done. But thanks to the comments, we, the players, were able to comment on his descriptions of the game, make our own links, and – most surprisingly – allow for people who had nothing to do with the game to make their own comments and requests.

The blog is not a documentation tool as such, but using it alongside a tabletop campaign leaves behind an accessible, already published record of the game. People who don't play in the campaign can read about it and players can refresh their memories after long breaks between game sessions.

The traditional, if exceedingly hard, way tabletop games have been documented has been through the publication of role-playing game books.

These books are often based on someone's game, but usually all the trivia and incidents of the original game have to be shorn away before the thing can be published as a proper role-playing game.

Mike Pohjola published a role-playing game based on the Tähti campaign. Reading the book, you get a much clearer idea of what the game is about, but the original game blog is much more faithful to the game that was played. Although Pohjola created both, the book was based mostly on his vision, while the blog reflected the communal effort of creating a game together.

There are some classic examples of tabletop campaigns being recorded via a published game. The Dragonlance novel *Dragons of Autumn Twilight* is based on an actual role-playing campaign also published as adventure modules. After the book was published, the authors (Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman) felt that basing their books on the game was too restricting and didn't make for a good story, so the second and third instalment in the trilogy were novels first, and games second.

The great thing about the Dragonbane documentation book was that it allowed the larp to be documented as it was. It was not Dragonbane: the Roleplaying Game, but an actual record of the game itself.

The problem with the blog and the published game is that neither of them really documents the methods and formal innovations made in a tabletop game. A published game can't, by necessity, be a reflection of the actual game, and there's no need to discuss the game on an abstract level in a blog if it's made primarily for the participants.

Most importantly, all of these documentation methods fail to capture the actual experience of playing.

Player experience

Player experience is the Holy Grail of role-playing game documentation. Recording sound, shooting video, taking pictures, all run into the problem that larp and tabletop games are not geared for performance. Much of the game is internal, and because of this, games seem unspectacular when

viewed from the outside. Even dance and theatre are hard to document this way, and they're supposed to be seen by an audience.

Role-playing is meant to be experienced from the inside. If you really want to record the totality of your achievement in role-playing, you have to document what the player feels and experiences during the game.

I started larp with *Vampire: The Masquerade* games. They were long-running campaigns, and after each game, the players were asked to write a report of the game for the game masters. They usually wrote about what their characters did, but sometimes they also talked about their own experiences in the game. In retrospect, the bits about personal experiences were the best part.

Those Vampire games left behind a record describing what had actually happened in the games, not just the game master's vision of what she thinks should have happened. The Vampire games were really big on secrets, so the reports were for game master eyes only. In a contemporary game with a more open design aesthetic, it might not be a bad idea to have a website where all of the reports would be published after each game.

The only way to get to the player experience is to ask the player to describe it. If you really want to document the player experience in your game, you should ask the players to write reports of their own or interview them after the game.

This is not always easy. The Dragonbane people asked players to write reports but very few actually did so. As a result, the Dragonbane book is weakest on this. After my larp *Lumimyrsky* I attempted to create an after-game discussion with players to have some record of their experiences in the game, but it wasn't very successful. The game was held at a convention, and people were anxious to leave for other programming.

Still, these are obstacles that can be overcome. It's generally a good idea to manage expectations by telling the players in advance what is expected of them, so they know they'll have to articulate their experiences after the game.

The Finnish bomb shelter larp Ground Zero inspired an email list discussion after the game. The game was emotionally transforming, and a

lot of the players wished to discuss it afterwards. This was great for documentation purposes, because email exchanges create an automatic written record that's easily quoted and edited into some kind of a whole.

Writing is an often-overlooked method of documentation, and also the best. Nobody is going to understand what larp pictures mean without an explanation. Often, a 500-word description of the game written by the designers is worth more than a thousand pictures. Since role-playing is not primarily a visual medium, you can best explain in words what the game was like, why it was designed the way it was, what happened in it, what worked, what didn't, and what it was about.

Word out

Publishing game documentation on the internet is really easy, especially if you use a blogging platform like Wordpress. It takes me about an hour to write a description of a larp I've run and upload some pictures.

Other ways of recording a game are more expensive (the Dragonbane way of publishing a book and a DVD) or rely on the whims of editors (publishing an article in a game magazine). I try to provide a platform for people who want to showcase their games in the magazine I edit. While we feature maybe twelve larps each year, over 150 games are made in Finland annually, many of those interesting and innovative and certainly deserving of wider notice.

Retroactively, Luminescence has become the best documented of all my games. This is because my co-creator Mike Pohjola and I have written about it so much in various publications and platforms, from the role-playing game portal rpg.net to the various Knutepunkt books over the years.

Crucially, for rpg.net I wrote a straightforward description of the game and what it was about. There are two ways to write about a game for a publication like the Knutebooks. You can write about the game and its central themes and creative agenda, or you can use the game as an example to make a point of some kind. Articles in the first category are

quite rare, articles in the second quite common. The theory of larp benefits from whatever insights these articles contain, but often they are also the only lasting record of the game they incidentally describe.

The 2008 Solmukohta book *Playground Worlds* contains some exemplary examples of larp writing. Jonas Trier-Knudsen's *Stupid Stories: Using Narrativism in Designing Agerbørn* explained very well what the game was about and why it was made, but also gave an impression of how it felt to participate. Bjarke Pedersen and Lars Munck's *Walking the White Road: a Trip into the Hobo Dream* was similarly excellent, all the more so because it documented a game with a very small number of players. Johanna Koljonen has always written about larps with emotion and recognizability, and her description of *Dragonbane* here remains the best account of how it felt to actually play in it.

I've published documentation from my larps on my website. I run a tabletop campaign called *Tuliunikko 2* (a sequel to the original campaign) which has a blog (in Finnish). I've found that apart from being very easy, having a record of the games I've made is kind of satisfying. I like to talk to people about my games. Why not take it to the next level?

Ludography

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Britta Bergersen

The in-game photographer

Interviewed by Eirik Fatland

11

DOCUMENTATION

ART





- Britta, her bike, and her suitcase of equipment at 1942 - *someone to trust?*

Britta Bergersen has been a fixture of the Norwegian larp scene since the early 90s, the first and one of the most active “in-game photographers” at Norwegian larps. We are grateful to feature several of her pictures from past larps, many of which have not been published before, as illustrations in this book.

Rather than just bringing a camera to larps, Bergersen prefers to incorporate her presence and equipment as full parts of the game. This is difficult to do at larps set in pre-industrial societies, requiring hidden cameras, making the act of taking photos a purely off-game matter. But larps set in the present or recent history provide plenty of excuses for a character to carry and use a camera.

At the larp *1942 – someone to trust*, Bergersen played a visiting portrait photographer who was hired by the community of a Norwegian west coast hamlet to take confirmation and family portraits. At *Once Upon a Time*, set a half-century earlier at the American frontier, she played a portrait photographer with her own studio. It proved so popular that there was a queue forming outside every morning of the game. “Playing

a photographer is usually more work than play”, she observes, “but the real reward comes afterwards, when developing and looking through the photos.”

A photographer in real life as well, she runs a private studio alongside a museum job preserving vintage and contemporary photos. Her larp photography unites her professional and private lives, letting her explore her interest in vintage photographs by recreating the conditions of their taking. For the character of photographer at a historical larp, she brings along period equipment – cameras, dark room equipment and backdrops – and also researches typical poses, situations, and aesthetics of the era. When in-character at *P13*, a hostage drama larp set to North Dakota in the 1970’s, Bergersen brought along a period Instamatic™ camera. She proceeded to document the game in a way familiar to most of us - drawing on her extensive research on family photography, she imitated the aesthetics of 1970’s family pictures.

Most Norwegian larps are documented only through pictures of players after the larp. Bergersen, too, has a collection of such memorabilia but prefers to take pictures while the players are in-character: “You can see it on their posture and facial expression. The in-character photos look authentic, like pictures of historical people. Afterwards, no matter how much they try, they still look like larpers.”



■ Fishermen at 1942 - *someone to trust?*



■ A scene from the futuristic larp *Ultrapolis*



■ A scene from the futuristic larp *Ultrapolis*



- A corridor at *Europa*, a larp about Nordic refugees seeking asylum in a central European country.



- An asylum seeker in front of the reception centre at *Europa*.



■ Kitchen staff at *Europa*. Bergersen also played a cook, and this photo was taken in-character.



- An asylum seeker at *Europa*.



- Two proletarians arm-wrestling at *Kybergenesis*, where Bergersens character was employed to take propaganda photos. The photo was developed in game.



- Photo of an in-character policeman at *Kybergenesis*. The picture was developed at the larp location, and damaged due to light being let into the darkroom.



■ Players at a cyberpunk genre larp, held in the library of a Norwegian boarding school.

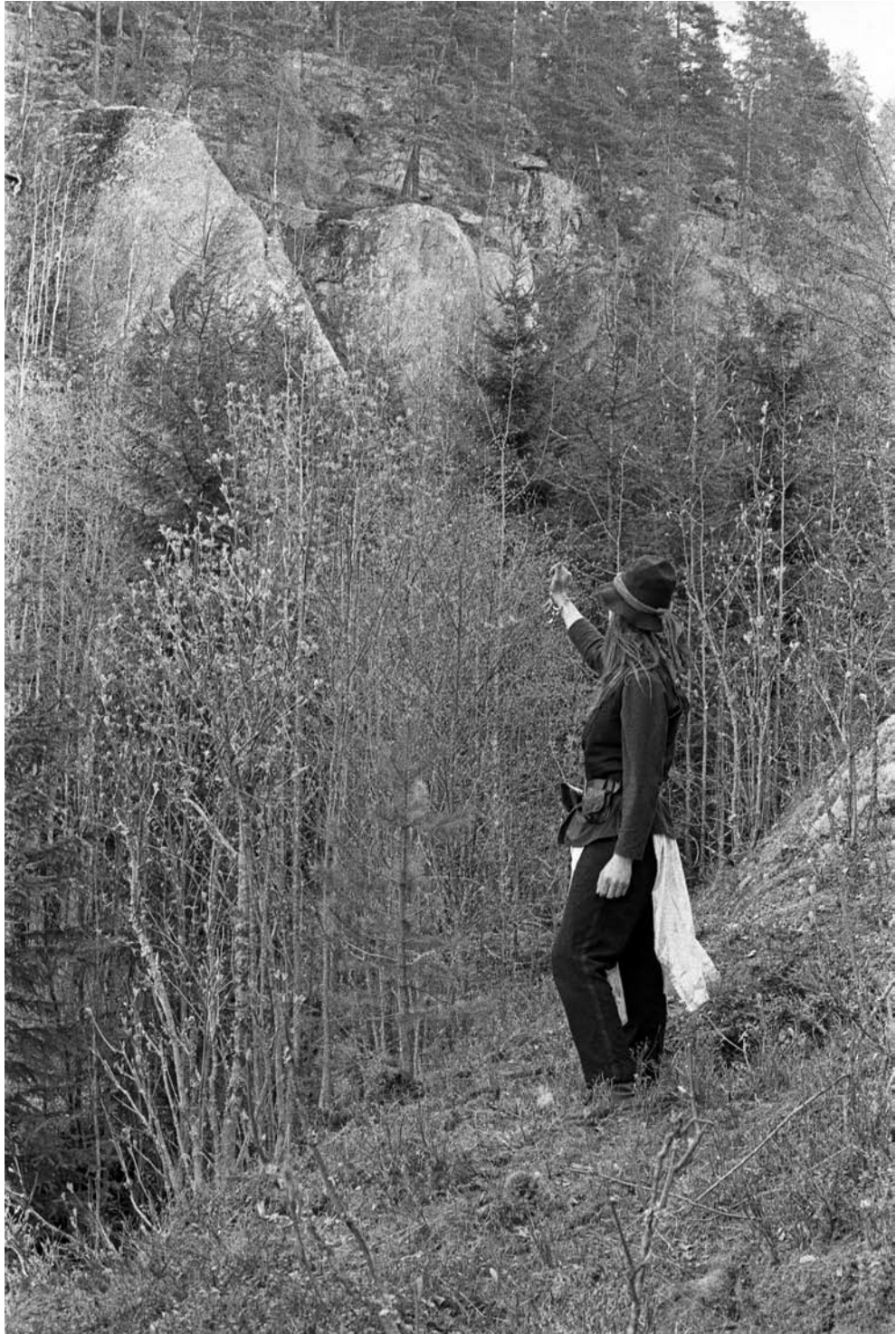


- In-character photography from *Once Upon a Time* – set at the American frontier in the late 19th century.





- Characters at the larp "P13", shot in conscious imitation of 1970's consumer photography.



- A scene from *Wanted*, an earlier frontier larp: an Apache invoking ancestral spirits by the sacred mountain.



■ Black Crow,
an Apache, at
Wanted.



- A hulder, a mythical creature, portrayed by a player at a Norwegian fantasy larp.



- Tree and lake, the iconic backdrop to Norwegian fantasy larps.

Creating a character

A summary of a process with exercises and advice

Morgan Jarl

12

PLAY

Introduction

This article is written as an introduction to a methodology that is useful for creating more vivid and thorough characters for larp. It is about the creation of the personality and the physical representation of the character as the first part of a three-part article series about character creation and larp preparation for the player. The second part is about the character's relationships, goals, morals and background, while the third part is about the social position of the character and the interaction with the surrounding culture. These two parts will be published on my homepage¹.

In this article I present some exercises that have been picked up from the world of theatre and been used to great avail by both beginners and veterans of larping. These exercises are used in workshops and it might

¹ <http://www.interaktivproduktion.se/pedagogik/texter.html>

take some time to carry them out. I advise you to pick a few, try them out and then use what works for you. Do not overdo it – bite off as big a chunk as you can handle at a time. Try to focus on what the exercises make you *feel like*. It is not a question of necessarily portraying a character by the exterior representation and copying from the real world like in theatre or film, but rather a way of helping you find what makes the character different from yourself and what helps you get into the game. Many of these exercises are *hooks* that you can use to pull yourself back into the game again if you feel you have lost the flow/character/play.

These exercises are geared towards making the character a “second skin” for the player, but what you come up with is not written in stone. Everything you create can change at a later point in the cyclic process.

Archetype and basic background

We start character creation by thinking of a concept or dramatic archetype for the character. You can do this by starting to form a mental image. Make this as specific as possible. Start applying words to the image: Young woman coming of age, slimy bad guy sidekick, wise and helpful old man, evil megalomaniac scientist etc.

Also, decide some basic background for the character. Where is it from? What does it do for a living? Any major traumas? The basic background of a character will be important for developing its body and personality later on. There is a big difference, for instance, in how a farmer and a clerk move. Similarly, there is a big difference in your body posture and state of mind if you were abused as a child, compared to if you were not. Therefore think at least briefly about the background of the character and let it keep growing in parallel with the rest of this work.

Personality development – the personality tripod tool



■ *Illustration*
Morgan Jarl

The personality tripod is a way of thinking about your character in a simplified manner that can help you find the basic psychology behind your character's actions. You choose three personality characteristics that describe your character. This tripod is basically a skeleton of your character's personality that you then flesh out by adding nuances and tints created by mixing these characteristics. Compare it to mixing two painting colors together creating different colors. If a character is proud, irritable and stubborn it is very different from a proud, irritable and loving character. Three is a good number to use, since that gives us a well-rounded character without complicating the acting too much. It keeps your work focused and simple.

Gestalt development process

We will now look at how your character is going to be physically represented. Your body is the basis of your character, but you move like you do not just because of the body you have, but because of the image you have of yourself. Everyone can change the way they use their body to represent someone other than themselves. You can catch someone else in a gesture, an intonation, a specific rhythm and a phrase they often use. It is even easier to create a physical representation of a person who does not exist since your imagination and exploration have free room to play.

Always be aware of what or who you feel like in the following explorations. What emotions or characters do a certain way of moving elicit in you? Find out what makes you feel like the character you want to portray.

The physical tripod tool

We will look at a tripod of physical characteristics that can work in a similar manner for your body as the Personality Tripod Model works for your mind. As you work through this guide, remember that just because you decided something in an earlier step, it does not mean that you cannot change later on. During the larp you should not think consciously of these factors, just let your character-work influence what you do and help you during your game.

Explore the walk (10-30 min)

To start off with you should try out some walking. Walk around the room, without engaging others. Work on your own. Explore the difference in your body if you put down the inside of the foot first, or the front, the back or the outside. Walk with your toes pointing inwards and outwards. Explore long strides or short strides. Combine the different ways of walking. How does it change your body, breath and face? What does it make you feel like?

Explore the center of gravity (10-30 min)

Next let us explore the center of gravity. Stand in a neutral erect position with legs apart and head up. Try shifting the weight around in the body. Try it high, held in the head or chest, or maybe low, deep down in the pelvis. In front of the body, making you fall forwards into your walk, or maybe behind you so you pull yourself along. Try the sides; what if the center of gravity is slightly to the right? Walk around with the different centers of gravity to try how it affects you.

Explore the focus (10-30 min)

Finally, we try out different points of focus. The point of focus is easiest understood as the leading part of the body, where the character's movements originate from. Is it the hands, the head, the nose, the forehead, the chin, the chest, the stomach or the groin? Try leading from different parts

of your body, walk around the room and examine things, sit down, do a dance, greet someone etc.

Discuss what you have found in the different exercises with your friends. Putting the experiences into words will make it easier to move on to practice later on.

The physical tripod

Now try a few different combinations of walk, focus and center of gravity to feel the difference and see what kind of people you come up against. Now think about what kind of person your character is and apply the physical tripod to it. A farmer might have a low center of gravity to lift heavy weights and handle animals, a postal rider might have a turned out, wide stance from all the riding and a warrior might lead from the chest in a proud manner. Try to find the body you would connect to the character you are to portray. Play around by walking, sitting, standing, laying down, jumping etc. in your character's body.

When working with these aspects, always remember the work you have done with your character concept and revise if you feel it is necessary. In the third part of this article series we will also touch upon status and other ways of interacting with the surroundings. This might change your perception of your character's body too.

The breath and the voice of the character

Now we move on to breath and voice. To change the way we speak will make us feel very different from our everyday persona.

Examine breath (5-15 min)

That which brings life to our bodies is the breath. Examine how you breathe; just breathe in and out and observe. Try breathing low, down in your stomach. Try breathing with the lower ribs in the back. Then try the front of the chest; breathing with the whole shoulders; very shallow high up in the chest. Walk around and move in different random ways and see

how the breath animates you. If you choose a certain breathing for your character, how does that influence the body you worked on and its movements?

Examine rhythm (5-15 min)

Try playing with different speeds and rhythms. Can the breath be short or staggered or slow? See how the character moves while tired, or excited, or in a hurry, or angry. See where the mental activity of a character can influence the rhythm, someone who is slow in the head might be slow also in physical appearance or not.

Character rhythm and breath (5-20 min)

Now try the same exercises with the character you are working on specifically in mind. How does the posture of the character change the rhythm and breath? How does the character personality-work influence this work?

Voice of character (10-30 min)

You might already have an idea of how your character's voice sounds, or you might have no clue. Start with trying out sounds that come from the character breath, then simple words, and finally full speech. Think of the kind of expressions your character would use. Where in the mouth does it put its words? Does it have a lisp or a stutter? What pitch does it have: low, high or mid range? Does it tend to pronounce certain sounds a bit quirky? Think of speech patterns: Long sentences or short? Rhythmic or droning speech? Round or sharp phrasing? Far back in the mouth or far forward? Nasal voice? Do not make a funny voice but experiment, try things out. Make sure that you can sustain the speech too. You don't want to lose your voice the second day of a larp. Refer back to your personality work here, too. The voice plays a big role in how we perceive someone's personality.

Character mask

A character mask is not just something that the actor wears over his/her face (it could of course be), but rather the full physical attire of the character. Try to dress your character; costume, make up, tattoos, other body art, personal props and accessories. Be as specific about these things as possible, play with them. See how they influence the character's movements and concept as defined before. You might get a character tic by having a personal prop like a whistle, or an accessory like a bracelet. Does your character carry a small bag or a pouch, or does it have pockets? What is in these bags/pockets? It might also help with a history behind every item you have, which will give your character more background. You can do this whole process along with the creation of your character's final background. (See the History development in Part 2 of this article series)

Emotional development tools (passions and movement qualities)

With a clear sense of the character's body and mind, we can start on a more nuanced exploration by including passions and moods, by examining how the character moves with different qualities. These exercises are bonus exercises that you can do if you would like to deepen the internal work of the character, making it more systematic. In general these elements can be created in collaboration with other players in relationship improvisations (See the Relationship and History development in Part 2 of this article series), but some individual exploration is sometimes helpful.

Quality of movement

Now let us try some different qualities of movement. In character, try to be soft, hard, pushy, pulling or sharp; like water, or fire or wind; like different animals. If these qualities influence your play it might give you different emotions or states of being. If you can feel the way in which your

character is soft then it might be your character – and not you – that touches your character's beloved.

Moods of character

We have already tried some exploration of emotions and moods, but now let us be somewhat more systematic about it. First try out, in your own body, how you would move if you were Sad, Angry, Scared or Happy. Do not necessarily try to experience the feeling, but examine how the breath moves and the body moves when that particular emotion is inside you. Try to sense it objectively in your body, not to feel the emotion in your soul. Now apply the same exploration to your character's body and mentality.

Concluding words

If you have done all this you have probably spent between one and four hours, which is more than most people normally spend on these exercises. You might find that you come back to the ideas of the character's body over and over again, trying new stuff out. This is great. Personally I make my characters second nature by taking them on while I am out walking, so that I become the character walking rather than myself. This helps me clearly define the character's personality, background, relations to and view of the world etc. I have time to look at things, to think as the character would and to get the tics and mannerisms right. This is the way I would do all this work, rather than setting aside several hours of specific work time. I hope this has helped you in some way, and that you can use these exercises/techniques Do not hesitate to contact me with ideas and questions.

Face and figuration in RPG play

William J. White

13

DOCUMENTATION

RESEARCH

TABLETOP

Abstract: This article employs a perspective that sees issues of *face* (i.e., social identity and connection) and *figure* (i.e., meaning and metaphor) as fundamental features of communication in order to examine a snippet of actual play from a game called *Spirit of the Century*, run and recorded by the author at a gaming convention for an “actual play” podcast. The in-depth exploration of this moment of play underscores the multiplicity of frames within a role-playing game and the sophistication with which players negotiate these frames for both diegetic and metacommunicative purposes. The implications of this analysis for game design are briefly sketched.

It may be too much to say that role-playing in any form is a serious thing, but like many activities undertaken for pleasure, it is a thing that we do in fact take seriously—for example, by wanting to understand how it works, and how to make it work better. With respect at least to the two major forms of face-to-face role-playing (i.e., tabletop gaming and larp), one insight that consistently emerges in the analysis of play is its *multiplicity of frames*—as both social encounter and creative performance, a role-playing game is several things at once, and so “good play” requires the ability to navigate this multiplicity and perhaps even leverage the ambiguity that results for creative ends. For example, Brenne (2005) shows how laiv players (Norwegian larpers) shuttle back and forth between fiction-generating performance and play-sustaining metacommunication in order to generate and maintain both the *diegesis* (Montola, 2003) of the game (i.e., the fictional world) and the solidarity of the social encounter (i.e. the playing of the game as a lived experience). In this way, distinctions among real and unreal often become blurry; Waskul and Lust (2004) observe that role-players “inevitably find themselves a part of ‘but one infinite game’” (pp. 352-353) as they recognize the extent to which their so-called “real world” personae are also at least to some degree enacted roles rather than true selves.

However, despite this blurring, we are never confused: we do not mistake the game for reality, the fiction for the truth, nor the parts for their players. Or do we? Consider this excerpt, taken from the early moments of a tabletop RPG game:

- [1] (13:30) GM: Rex, didn't you in fact take out a huge loan to finance the construction of the Redhawk? And doesn't that mean that if you lose the race, you'll also lose the company? What do you say to that?
- [2] REX RICH: Who's asking this?
- [3] (13:42) GM: I'm asking this...I'm the, I'm the, I'm the, um... ah—

[4] REX RICH: Well, I mean is there...

[5] (13:47) GM: —I'm the narrator.

[6] [Laughter]

[7] REX RICH: Okaay...

[8] [Laughter]

Several interesting things take place in this segment of talk. The GM's initial statement is an attempt to contribute to the shared diegesis. He asks the player it affects to validate his contribution, either by accepting or rejecting it. But the player does neither! He turns the contribution into a *problem* by asking about the source of the “factual” diegetic claim: where does it come from? The GM is clearly discomfited by this problematization. He has no immediate answer, and when he finally finds a response, it is met with laughter from the others around the table and an ironic rejoinder from the player himself. The player's “Okaay...” does not mean that he accepts the answer: the drawn-out vowel sound with its falling inflection signifies doubt and skepticism.

This essay explores this moment of play in order to say more about *diegetic negotiation*: the way in which players coordinate their contributions to their shared understanding of the fiction. The analysis is centered on an 80-second excerpt of which the transcript above represents the first several seconds. The game in question is a four-hour convention slot of *Spirit of the Century* (Donoghue, Hicks, & Balsera, 2006), a tabletop RPG of pulp adventure in the 1920s; players of the game expect there to be fisticuffs and swordplay atop out-of-control zeppelins, dogfights and car chases aplenty, and a modicum of mad science and mystic secrets. This expectation emerges from the rules themselves, which feature an extensive discussion of pulp's genre conventions, and is reinforced by “epitexts” (Genette, 1997) such as on-line discussions in which over-the-top pulp action is bruted as a mainstay of the game (Ellis, 2008). It was recorded for a podcast called *Virtual Play* (M. White, 2008a) that extracts snippets of gaming sessions in order to discuss interesting aspects of role-playing

for an audience familiar with small-press or “indie” tabletop games. The audio recording of the complete gaming session is available on-line (M. White, 2008b). The excerpt was selected because it seemed likely to reveal some interesting dynamics of play bearing on the question of how speech at the table is used to introduce new elements into the fiction of the game—what has been called contributing to the “shared imaginary space” (Edwards, 2004) or the employment of “incorporative discourse strategies” (Hendricks, 2006) as well as interactive diegesis construction (Montola, 2003).

Before continuing with the rest of the excerpt, however, a short summary providing the context of the game is necessary. Following the excerpt is a brief theoretical discussion to animate the analytical reading of the transcript that is the heart of this essay.

The game

There are six people around a table in a hotel ballroom of no great size. The Game Master (GM) has recruited five players, each of whom has selected a character prepared by the GM for the adventure. The characters are thus “pre-generated”: players receive a *character sheet* detailing their character’s game-mechanical abilities and attributes as well as a two-page summary of their fictional history together, divided into pulp-like episodes, e.g.:

SCIENCE WONDER STORIES #4 “Rex Rich and the Sky Pirates of Africa.” At war’s end, when Rex Rich and Jack Redstone attempt a record-breaking around-the-world dirigible flight, their journey is cut short over equatorial Africa by a squadron of sky pirates, who shoot down Jack’s scout plane and take Rex’s dirigible in tow to a secret base. Their leader AIR-BARON ZEVO challenges Rex to a series of contests to demonstrate the superiority of *homo futurian* -- Futurian man! Meanwhile, Jack befriends a tribe of intelligent apes who help him repair his plane. Homing in on the radio beacon that

Rex secretly activated, Jack manages to find and infiltrate the Futurian base. Together, the two friends make their escape, and Rex returns to Hub City with secrets taken from the Futurians that he will use to start his own aviation company.

It is early in the game. The GM has set the scene: it is the spring of 1921, and the characters are present at a fly-off between two rocket-planes at an airfield in New Jersey to decide which one will be put into production by the U.S. War Department as an intercontinental interceptor. One of the competing rocket-planes, the “Redhawk,” is the brainchild of the pre-generated player-character (PC) Rex Rich, a wealthy aviation entrepreneur in the mold of Howard Hughes; the other PCs include Dr. Einstein (observing on behalf of the League of Nations), local girl reporter Lucy Lovelace (looking for a good story), private eye Max Mensch (in the employ of Rex Rich, keeping his eyes peeled for trouble), and Martian rebel Tan-Gliil (come to Earth secretly seeking the aid of Dr. Einstein).

So much has been explicitly narrated by the GM and accepted by the respective players. An interesting feature of *Spirit of the Century* is its use of descriptive character elements called “Aspects.” These are short phrases that encapsulate some essential feature of the character, including possessions, life experiences, attitudes, relationships and so forth. For example, the character Rex Rich has an Aspect called “*I’m Paying You—Just Make It Fly!*” which impressionistically conveys both the intensity of the wealthy aviation entrepreneur’s will and the brusqueness of his manner. The rules make clear that Aspects are double-edged. Invoked by the player, they provide either a game-mechanical or narrative advantage; “compelled” by the GM, they produce a penalty or disadvantage to the character. Negotiating these invocations and compulsions requires a currency of “Fate tokens” that represent the ebb and flow of advantage and disadvantage.

In the first few minutes of the game, before the excerpted segment begins, the GM has explained these rules to the the players and then started to put them into practice by going around the table to each player and

presenting him or her with a “compel.” Dr. Einstein’s player has accepted a compel of his Aspect *Devout Pacifist* and begun asking nosy questions of the supervisor of the test, General Douglas MacArthur. The player playing girl reporter Lucy Lovelace has accepted the GM’s claim that her editor will bury her story on an inside page unless it is a good one, and started looking for a story that will make headlines. At this point, the GM turns his attention to the Rex Rich’s player, and addresses him as his character. Play then proceeds as above: the player problematizes the GM’s contribution, the GM stammers out a response, laughter and skepticism result. The remaining portion of the transcript indicates what happens next.

The transcript

Each individual “utterance” is sequentially numbered for ease of reference; the GM’s utterances are marked with a time hack to provide a sense of how the utterances are distributed in time. The orthography is more or less standard, with some effort to represent pauses, interruptions, talking-over, disfluencies, and so forth when they are markedly present in the audio recording. However, the extensive and specialized transcription scheme of conversation analysis (see Schiffrin, 1994, for a summary) was not judged to be necessary for the purposes of this analysis.

The structure of the transcript establishes the problem this essay attempts to explore. The GM’s first remark to Rex, at the utterance marked [1] above, is diegetic: the GM proposes that something is true in the game-fiction (namely, that Rex’s company is at risk), and anticipates that Rex’s player will regard this as an opportunity either to accept or reject the proposal, and in so doing he will make a performative statement about the player’s vision of his character. The utterances at [2-5] are an attempt between the player and GM to reach some sort of intersubjective understanding of the warrant validating the GM’s diegetic effort. In [6-8], the failure of that attempt becomes clear, as we have seen above.

The rest of the transcript picks up below from this point. At [9-12], the players engage in some ironical play that has the effect of demonstrating

the unsustainability of the GM’s warrant—they are unwilling to allow a “narrator” with the explicit ability to address the characters, perhaps because this violates their sense of appropriate genre conventions or “interaction codes” (Fatland, 2006), so that [13-23] shows the GM reframing his diegetic attempt game-mechanically rather than narratively, and the players cooperating in that reframing. Finally, the utterance at [24] by Dr. Einstein’s player—notably, one of the authors of the game being played—is a kind of coda to the episode.

[9] TAN-GLIIL: It’s your guilty conscience.

[10] REX RICH (theatrically): Damn! How does it always know?
Why now?

[11] [Laughter]

[12] MAX MENSCH: And where does that voice come from?

[13] (14:00) GM: So let me make some, lemme, um—yeah—um, I’m sorry—I should say that what I’m, what I’m, what I’m, um, what I’m looking towards, what I’m *eyeballin’* on your sheet is the Aspect—

[14] REX RICH: Yes, but *That’s a Risk I’m Willing To Take*.

[15] (14:16) GM: Yes, exactly. And notice that one of your stunts is, um, like “Gambling Man”—

[16] REX RICH: Oh, okay.

[17] (14:22) GM: —and that means that risk-related compels are doubled in strength, so that if you want to get out of this, you have to pay me *two* Fate, or you can just take the two Fate. So your company is now on the line—

[18] REX RICH: Oh, I see.

[19] (14:34) GM: —so that if you lose the race, then...

[20] TAN-GLIIL: Then *you lose it all!*

[21] (14:40) GM: You lose it all.

[22] REX RICH: Well, I can't make a claim like that without backing it up, so I'll take it.

[23] (14:45) GM: Okay. That's a risk you're willing to take. Good, good, good. All right. Um, okay.

[24] DR. EINSTEIN: That's a lovely stunt for really amping up your Fate point total. (14:50)

The calculus of face and the geometries of figure

Two fundamental concepts for making sense of the multiplicity of frames in this short excerpt of play—in which, nonetheless, much takes place—are *face* and *figure* (W. J. White, 2008). The idea of face comes from the work of sociologist Erving Goffman (1959; 1967; 1969), who defines it as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). In other words, face is a currency of social interaction signifying that one is adhering to the norms, conventions, and other social expectations to which one's claimed role (or “line”) makes one subject. Usually, Goffman says, *all participants* in a contact work to save or preserve each other's face, with the goal of sustaining social solidarity (although sometimes aggressive facework is undertaken for strategic reasons, to “put someone in her place,” for example). So moments where face seems to be threatened, and then is either restored or lost, promise to reveal something about the dynamics of play as communication.

But paralleling the social dimension of face is the meaning-related dimension of figure, or figuration. This idea acknowledges that language is meaningful from more than a purely instrumental calculus of how it enables us to one-up others in social interaction: we use words to establish intersubjectively our sense of the shape of the world—how things are, in other words, and what they mean. One approach to this aspect of talk in a general sense is communication scholar Michael Silverstein's (2004) discussion of the “poetics of discourse”: the rhetorical or semiotic patterning taken up by participants in discourse as they make ideational distinctions

and connections in their talk. In plain language, our use of words establishes associations and contrasts as the things we talk about (including ourselves) are either likened to each other or distinguished from them. For example, consider the instance of an Austrian woman who had survived the Holocaust at Auschwitz and an SS physician who had served there but had been acquitted of war crimes, meeting in front of cameras at the behest of a documentary film-maker (Frankfurter & Cernyak-Spatz, 2000). Despite the obvious and acknowledged social inhibition under which the interlocutors operate, they establish a web of meanings oriented around culpability and innocence, accusation and vindication: the woman asks the physician why he served the regime so faithfully; the physician offers exculpatory formulations: his arrival at Auschwitz was accidental, his refusal to select prisoners to be killed was laudatory, and so forth. In this way, the “discourse space” constructed by their talk is occupied by distinctions between choice and necessity: “You served [the Nazis] to the end,” the woman says, and that ultimately is the distinction that separates them.

More generally, the concept of “figuration” draws upon the rhetorical concept of the *figure*: the use of pictorial, metaphorical, or poetic language (rather than literal, plain speech) to organize or express ideas. Narratives are figurative in this sense: by showing us the attributes of the hero on the one hand (he or she may be young, handsome, brave, inexperienced) and those of the villain on the other (old, scarred, calculating, cunning), the story establishes contrasting “philosophical pairs” (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969) and invites us to evaluate them, positively or negatively. The process of establishing these pairings—as in revealing characters via storytelling—is figuration.

Facing the game master

That facework takes place in this excerpt is easy to see. The threat to face begins at [6], when the GM finally manages to respond to Rex Rich's question at [2] ("Who's asking this?") by saying "I'm the narrator," at [5]. That claim is met with laughter: a sign that something unexpected or incongruous has been said. Note that there initially was a potential threat to Rex's player's face—if the GM had had a ready response to the player's query and that response had been met with acquiescence by the other players, that is—but by the time the laughter occurs, almost 30 seconds into the episode, it is clearly the GM who is discomfited. Rex Rich's non-plussed response to [5] "I'm the narrator" is at [7]; he uses the word "Okay," with a rising and drawn-out inflection on the second syllable; he is not sure what to make of the GM's claim. The GM's discomfiture grows worse as the players playing Tan-Gliil, Rex Rich, and Max Mensch engage in what reads as a kind of mockery, playfully imagining the GM's diegetic attempt not as the words of an external narrator but instead as Rex Rich's conscience addressing him, at [8-12].

Beginning with [13], the group begins to repair the threat to face. The GM reframes his initial attempt at diegesis by bringing in an "ally"—Rex Rich's character sheet, which holds the Aspect that the GM was trying to invoke in his initial utterance—and the players help him! Both Rex Rich and Tan-Gliil anticipate the GM's words (at [14] and [20], respectively), and Rex Rich provides positive feedback at [16] and [18], signaling his agreement with and understanding of the GM's technical and game-mechanical explanation before accepting the compel in a way that preserves his own line as player at [22]. Dr. Einstein's comment at [24] provides an additional face-saving element by framing the episode as an exploration of the game-system and its capabilities.

Digging deeper

The level of face is mere surface, however. Its calculations rely on the deeper geometries of meaning drawn upon and articulated in play. The first distinction that emerges in this game-talk is the one between “narrator” at [5] and “conscience” at [9] as potential in-game interlocutors for a character. A diegetic authority claim premised on the strength of GM-as-narrator was rejected by the players; similarly, the alternative presented of GM-as-conscience was also rejected—Rex Rich’s theatrical response to the pangs of conscience at [10] must be taken as ironical or even ludicrous.

In that context, an interesting distinction emerges at [12-13] between “voice” (in Max Mensch’s joking contribution to the discourse) and “eyeball” (in the GM’s effort to repair and re-assert his diegetic authority). The effect of this distinction is to shift the question of authority from being warranted by a *voice*—whether that of an external narrator or an internal conscience—to being justified by *sight*: ironically, the GM begins to claim diegetic authority on the basis of *what is already present in the game*, what is *visible* to him in terms of what has been recorded about the characters. The players accept this justification, lending their support to the GM’s diegesis by treating it as established fact.

This is particularly visible in terms of the reasoning Rex Rich offers in accepting the compel, at [22]. He says, “Well, I can’t make a claim like that without backing it up, so I’ll take it.” The player *takes ownership* of the Aspect *That’s A Risk I’m Willing To Take* at the level of the character, “backing it up” by accepting the compel—not because it is game-mechanically advantageous to do so (as Dr. Einstein indicates at [24]), but because it is true to who the character is. In this way, the fiction is allowed to drive (or at least rationalize) the face-saving move that validates the GM’s diegetic contribution from all the way back at [1], in a way that is particularly sensitive to the concerns of face: it brackets off the question of “who said that?” by accepting the risk taken by the character as emerging from the player’s own understanding of the character himself rather than

as an obstacle interposed by the GM (at the level of the table), or a query posed by another character (at the level of the fiction). Dr. Einstein's comment does two things, in that case: it praises the GM's construction of the characters as consistent with the philosophy of the rules, and it contributes to making a distinction between the fiction (as a thing with story and characters) and the game (as a thing with rules and players).

Conclusion: the dissociation of voice and eye

Through processes of face and figuration, the game progresses in such a way as to constitute both the fiction of the game-world and the social interaction at the table (more broadly, the social encounter). In the players' use of language, we see their attentiveness to matters of face (i.e., the integrity of the social situation) and figure (the coherence of the networks of meaning they have to draw upon). The most interesting observation to emerge from this analysis is the "dissociation" (distinction) of voice and eye that emerges from the GM's attempt to repair his diegetic authority, a dissociation that partakes of and contributes to other distinctions. We observe *what is heard* and *what is seen* being evaluated according to different diegetic criteria, the first associated with *the fiction* and the second with *the game*; the first with *play* and the second with *the rules*; in other words, we see the construction of the difference that Roger Caillois (2001) calls the difference between *paidia* and *ludus*, where the former is characterized by the child-like appreciation of unrestrained playfulness and the latter by a sometimes fussy insistence on adherence to the rules and procedures of the game for their own sake.

This analysis reminds us of that distinction, with its implication that an important consideration in the design and play of face-to-face role-playing games is attention to the alternate ways in which diegetic and metacommunicative contributions can be marked (or masked!) so as to make them less (or more) ambiguous. For example, one can imagine a game in which *what is said* must remain strictly in-character while *what is seen* (gestures and use of objects, e.g.) has a game-mechanical or rules-

based effect on the game. Such a constraint might have a fruitful impact on creative play.

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The Vademecum of the Karstic Style

Andrea Castellani

14

DESIGN

SCENE

STATEMENT

In December 2007 I launched a project for the organisation of at least one experimental or alternative larp every month in the city of Trieste and in nearby locations along the Italian-Slovenian border, especially on the Karst, the limestone plateau which surrounds the city and where I currently live most of the time. In our first sixteen months we have organised 24 larps, ranging in participants from 6 to 23 people and in duration from 2 hours to 3 days.

This project has helped me clarify my ideas about those particular larps which focus on giving the participants an experience (even though larps focusing on storytelling and competition were also included in our programme), and at some point I understood that most of the problems encountered during larps of this kind could be avoided by introducing a

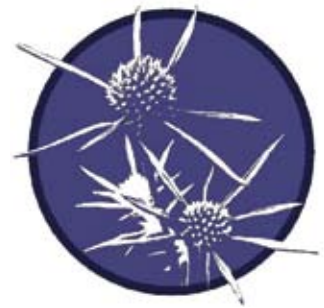
clear set of norms for participants and organisers. For this reason I decided to write this Vademecum of the Karstic Style, which is officially in use for most of our larps as from January 2009, although the fourth run of *La ferrovia scarlatta* in October 2008 had already followed all of the norms later included in the Vademecum. A vademecum (Latin *vade mecum*, “go with me”) is a reference work intended to be carried along at all times: I think the word fits very well with the intended purpose of this paper.

Needless to say, I do not think the Karstic Style should be the only way to do larps; it is just the way I am trying to do this particular kind of larps. Actually, I think the larping world would be horribly poor if everyone agreed that there is only one way to do larps, no matter if it were this way or not.

Chapter 1: Basic principles

1.1. Live-action role-playing (commonly abbreviated to *larp*) is a medium of expression featuring many different styles. This vademecum formalises the Karstic Style: a style aiming to give the participants an intense, deep, realistic, emotionally and intellectually stimulating experience, to be enjoyed together but from a personal point of view provided by a fictional character. Secondary goals may be present, but only when their existence does not hinder attaining this primary goal.

1.2. Character immersion (a traditional but controversial expression which, in the English version of this vademecum, roughly renders the untranslatable Italian expression *immedesimazione nel personaggio*) is the primary tool which the participant should use to play his or her character. For the purpose of this vademecum, character immersion is defined as two interconnected and interdependent phenomena, each giving rise to the other: the situation when a participant feels the same emotions as his or her character, and the situation when a participant assumes his or her character’s personality. Secondary tools may be used only when



■ The Karstic Style logo

they do not hinder using the primary tool (character immersion) and attaining the primary goal (experience).

- 1.3. What a participant sees, hears, smells, touches and tastes is what his or her character perceives; what a participant does not see, hear, smell, touch and taste is what his or her character does not perceive. This applies to the larp proper, not necessarily to pre-larp preparation.
- 1.4. Any kind of person can participate in a Karstic Style larp, not only experienced larpers. Anyway, organisers should not admit those who proved to be unable to handle strong emotions or to follow this vademecum.
- 1.5. Using repeatable scenarios is allowed, as long as it is clear that they are not larps by themselves: they are just useful tools to do larps. A larp is made of people and their interactions, not of words printed on a piece of paper.
- 1.6. The authors of the scenario (if there are any) and the participants (including the organisers) are all to be considered as the larp's creators. This implies that all the participants have responsibilities: larping is a communal undertaking, which cannot be reduced to a customer-seller relationship.

Chapter 2: Norms for all the participants

- 2.1. A good participant is one who considers himself or herself not as a mere customer but as a co-creator of the larp, giving all of himself or herself to the project but respecting the larp's concept as defined by the organisers, even if it is against his or her personal preferences. A good participant does not exaggerate, does not pretend and does not simulate while playing his or her character.
- 2.2. The character sheet must be written, adapted or approved by the organisers, and it should contain only the character's "skeleton": that is,

the minimum necessary information for the larp to be run according to the organisers' concept. All the rest should be created by the character's player through personal deepening of the character (for example by using questionnaires) and through confrontation with the organisers and the other participants (for example in pre-larp workshops).

- 2.3. The participant should try to make his or her character as different from his or her true self as possible, while still taking ideas from real life experiences involving his or her family, friends and acquaintances.
- 2.4. Banal characters should be avoided at all costs. A participant's job is to enrich the character's "skeleton" to make it a real person, not to deconstruct it to make it an empty archetype.
- 2.5. The participant should test his or her character, both in everyday business in the days before the larp and by playing short scenes with other participants during pre-larp preparation.
- 2.6. Clothing and other means of physical identification with the character are very important. Every participant should seriously take care of his or her character's appearance and help other participants take care of theirs.
- 2.7. During pre-larp preparation, every participant must state explicitly which interactions involving sex and violence (both physical and mental) he or she personally deems acceptable for himself or herself in the larp. All the other participants must keep these choices in mind, especially those playing characters likely to have this kind of interactions. As people have various standards about what is acceptable in a larp and what is not, and as their reasons might be extremely personal, nobody has the right to ask a participant why he or she deems a certain interaction unacceptable, neither during the larp nor before or after the larp – let alone the right to criticise his or her choices, directly or discussing with other people.

2.8. The safety words in use are *kutt* and *brems*. *Kutt* (Norwegian for “cut”) must be shouted clearly by any participant when a serious accident requires the larp to be interrupted at once, for example when someone gets seriously hurt or when a situation arises where continuing to play will likely result in a serious damage; when *kutt* is invoked, all the participants must immediately leave their characters and handle the situation. *Brems* (Norwegian for “brake”) should be pronounced clearly by any participant when a situation that might become unacceptable for him or her is about to arise; when *brems* is declared, those responsible for the situation must immediately moderate their behaviour. Again, nobody has the right to ask the participant invoking a safety word why he or she did it, neither during the larp nor after the larp; and using safety words should not be subjected to criticism, either directly or indirectly.



■ Pre-larp workshop for “La ferrovia scarlatta”.

Photo
Valentina Addis

2.9. Once the larp has started it should have no interruptions, except when someone invokes the safety word *kutt*. Sleeping, eating and personal hygiene should always be part of the larp.

2.10. Once the larp has started, a participant can never act or talk as his or her true self instead of as his or her character. Thus, questions to the organisers are allowed only if it is absolutely impossible to continue otherwise.

2.11. Personal relationships between participants should never influence their characters’ behaviour.

2.12. A larp is not a way to fulfill escapist fantasies, to “win” against other participants, to vent frustrations or to be disrespectful to someone else while “protected” by a character.

Chapter 3: Norms for the organisers only

- 3.1. A good organiser is one who cares about the other participants' needs, communicates clearly the larp's concept to the other participants before they sign up, helps the other participants attain character immersion, and does not consider the other participants as mere tools but as co-creators of the larp, willing to give all of themselves to the project. A good organiser's primary goal is to assure that the other participants enjoy an experience; in some cases, enjoying an experience himself or herself might be secondary.
- 3.2. A larp should always be centred on a main theme; of course, this does not mean that secondary themes are not allowed.
- 3.3. Promoting a larp as featuring a certain theme, or stating it explicitly in the participants' material, may be useful for the participants in focusing on that theme, but doing so will not automatically centre the larp on that theme. Organisers should rather make the theme an important topic in all the characters' conflicts, and set the larp in a situation where the characters cannot avoid dealing with it.
- 3.4. The fact that a larp should have a theme does not mean that it should become a way of promoting the organisers' view on the subject. Larps should intellectually stimulate the participants, not indoctrinate them.
- 3.5. Pervasive larps (that is, larps where the border between fiction and reality is intentionally blurred) are appreciated; but organisers should take measures so as to keep interactions with non-participants at a non-bothering level.
- 3.6. A larp may feature high levels of secrecy, as long as unveiling or protecting the secrets does not become the participants' main goal at the expense of their enjoyment of the experience.
- 3.7. Larp adaptations of works from other media are allowed; but if an organiser decides to do an adaptation, then he or she should discard



- Some participants in “La ferrovia scarlatta” pose for the camera after the larp.

Photo
Andrea Castellani

everything relying on the original medium's strengths, and rely on the larp medium's unique strengths instead.

- 3.8. Larps divided in scenes or acts, or connected as campaigns or chronicles, should be avoided.
- 3.9. Larps trying to support measurable competition between participants must be avoided. Avoiding competition between participants does not mean avoiding challenges for the characters.
- 3.10. The larp's time-span should cover some very important (ideally the most important) hours or days in the lives of the characters.
- 3.11. Emotional turning points are very important for the participants' experience, and a larp's concept should always include situations where they are likely to arise.
- 3.12. The presence of a main storyline planned by the organisers is irrelevant or even dangerous. Participants are co-creators, not an audience nor mere spectators.
- 3.13. Mechanics should be implemented only when absolutely necessary, and can be implemented only if they are not perceived by the participants as external to the larp's world. This does not apply to pre-larp preparation, when any kind of mechanics is allowed.
- 3.14. Organisers should never start creating a larp's concept from the setting. This does not mean that the setting is useless: an appropriate setting can improve the participants' experience a lot, but it has to be chosen after the rest of the concept is clearly established, not the other way around.
- 3.15. It is not allowed to use a "fake" object to represent another (for example a toy gun representing a real gun, or a wig representing real hair), unless they are so similar that no participant would be able to tell the difference. Settings which require using such objects should be avoided.

- 3.16. As safety concerns might lead one to represent several interactions involving sex and violence (both physical and mental) by simulation, and as no kind of simulation is allowed, organisers should set larps in situations where sex and violence are extremely unlikely to happen.
- 3.17. As no kind of simulation is allowed, organisers should set larps in situations where the supernatural does not exist or is representable without any simulation.
- 3.18. Using a repeatable scenario usually run at games conventions is not an excuse for organising a larp with no preparation, casual clothing and inadequate location, as it often happens at most games conventions. Every larp should be organised as a unique event of its own.
- 3.19. If an organiser needs to modify a repeatable scenario in order to give a better experience to the participants, then he or she should do so (given the authors' permission).
- 3.20. Choosing and preparing a credible location is very important. Existing locations are preferable to constructed, artificial ones.
- 3.21. Organisers should not distribute characters randomly. They should consider the concept's requirements first, but also the participants' abilities, preferences and physical appearance; moreover, they should take their time to think about the distribution and to modify the character sheets if needed.
- 3.22. Pre-larp preparation and post-larp evaluation are extremely useful phases that may even take more time than the larp itself, yet these phases should not last longer than necessary – be aware that this is very different from “longer than a lazy participant would like”.
- 3.23. If a character's past contains key events that are crucial for the development of that character's personality or emotions, then these events should be played out in short scenes during pre-larp preparation, or brought to life in the participant's mind through a light trance.

- 3.24. Organisers should never be noticeable as something external to the larp. In the cases where, for some very good reason, an organiser cannot play a character, he or she should be hidden from the participants' view.
- 3.25. An organiser's character must never be designed for the purpose of directing the larp's events towards a certain direction. However, some organisers might be allowed to play their characters giving prominence to tools other than character immersion, if this improves the other participants' experience or is necessary for safety reasons.
- 3.26. Organisers should always include at least one piece of music in the larp. The music must be internal to the larp's world; even better if it is to be played or sung by the participants. Poetry may count as music.
- 3.27. Organisers should always see to it that the participants perform at least one ritual in the larp. The larp should preferably be opened and closed by rituals. If a ritual involves music to be played or sung by the participants, even better. Dance may count as a ritual.
- 3.28. Organisers should take care to arrange specific moments for the participants' social needs before and especially after the larp.
- 3.29. Lastly, organisers following this vademecum should always either drop one of the norms in Chapter 3 at their choice, or add to Chapter 3 a new norm which is not stated here. Yes, this is a provocation, but the meaning is as follows: never rely only on fixed norms, and never forget about experimenting. Larp is a young medium, in desperate need of experimentation. It would be terrible if this vademecum should not be clearly perceived as outdated ten years from now.

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Ludography

La ferrovia scarlatta (4th run, 19th October 2008): Andrea Castellani (author and organiser) and other 6 participants; Trieste (preparation), a train from Trieste to Sacile (larp proper), a train from Sacile to Trieste (evaluation), Italy. English *The Scarlet Railway*.

Români: Un'altra vita, da capo (1st run, 7th and 8th March 2009): Andrea Castellani (author and organiser), Anca Burescu (author) and other 8 participants; Gozd Martuljek, Slovenia. English *Români: Another life, from scratch*.

Philosophies and strategies of pervasive larp design

Markus Montola, Jaakko Stenros & Annika Waern

15

DESIGN

RESEARCH

The majority of live action role-playing games are enacted either within a strictly confined area or in the middle of nowhere, in wilderness. However, there is also a minority of larps that are played in the streets, amongst unsuspecting bystanders. This minority has recently been gaining wider recognition. These *pervasive larps* are played all around a city, they invade players' everyday lives, and involve outsiders.

This paper maps the design space of pervasive larp. Firstly, we discuss different philosophies of pervasive role-play, looking at desired game experiences and cultural conventions of different forms of pervasive role-play. Secondly, we present a list of strategies that have been used successfully to realize such games.

Pervasive games are games that break the usual boundaries of games. While regular games are played at a set place and time by certain volunteer participants, pervasive games are different: These games are either played out in the open, or they invade players' everyday lives, or they can involve outsiders and bystanders. In our earlier work (Montola, Waern & Nieuwdorp 2006) we have defined a pervasive game as a “game that has one or more salient features that expand the contractual magic circle of play socially, spatially or temporally”.

This blurring of the traditional boundaries of games usually leads to the point where players are unaware of where the game ends and ordinary life begins; they often are unsure about whether a certain object, place or person is related to the game. While this is often a source of pleasurable gameplay, it can also occasionally be a cause of significant problems in the game.¹

Numerous larps and other games have influenced this paper. As these games are generally poorly documented and mostly exist in oral tradition, we have not provided references to exact larps.² This paper is based on a report originally produced in the IPerG project (Montola, Stenros & Waern 2007).

Pervasive larp design philosophies

Larps can be designed in order to meet a number of goals and purposes. In order to inform design, we first need to create a rudimentary classification of larp design philosophies: These philosophies are holistic approaches to larp organization, addressing both the form and the function of the game. While the vast majority of larps are conceived for recreation and entertainment, other uses include education, simulation and artistic expression. These functions can be further analyzed: Recreational larps, for instance, can produce plea-

¹ For a reader unaware of our views on pervasive games in general, we recommend having a look at our work discussing pervasive games in general (Montola, Stenros & Waern forthcoming, Montola 2005, Montola, Waern & Nieuwdorp 2006), the ethics of pervasive games (Montola, Waern, Kuittinen & Stenros 2006) and pervasive games in a larger cultural context (Stenros, Montola & Mäyrä 2007).

² We have used the following pervasive larps as background information: *Det længste dag* (Denmark 2005), *Europa* (Norway 2001), *Ghost Express* (Finland 2001-2002), *Helsingin Camarilla* (Finland 1995-2004), *Helsinki FTZ* (Finland 1997), *Isle of Saints* (Finland 2001), *Neonhämärä* (Finland 2008-), *Pimeyden maailma* (Finland 2004-2005), *Prosopopeia Bardo 1: Där vi föll* (Sweden 2005), *Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum* (Sweden 2006), *Rikos kannattaa* (Finland 2006) *Sanningen om Marika* (Sweden 2007), *The White Road* (Denmark 2007) and *Tre grader av uskyld* (Denmark 2006). Many non-pervasive larps also provided insight for this report. These include *Amerika* (Norway 2000), *Carolus Rex* (Sweden 1999), *En stilla middag* (Sweden 2007), *Hamlet* (Sweden 2002), *Mellan himmel och hav* (Sweden 2003), *Panopticon* (Norway 2003), *Pelageya: Clarissie* (Finland 2005), *Pitkä perjantai* (Finland 1997), *Ringblomman* (Sweden 2004), *System Danmarc 2* (Denmark 2005) and *The Executive Game*-series (Finland 2001-2003). In addition, many pervasive games and research prototypes have influenced our work: *Uncle Roy All Around You*, *The Beast*, *vQuest* and *Epidemic Menace*, by way of example.

surable play through physical exercise, social play, mental challenges and so on.

Most of the design philosophies discussed in this paper are applicable to regular larp as well as to pervasive larp. Going pervasive is one way of creating strong experiences, but closed larps (which Martin Ericsson (forthcoming) has called *ecstatic furnaces*) have their own advantages. For example, the 360° illusion larps (Koljonen 2007) have worked out very well in creating visceral experiences. Then again, some of the philosophies (like hiding in cityscape) are very particular to pervasive larp.

Some of these philosophies can be combined with each other, whereas others have conflicting goals. Below, we also discuss how we believe the different strategies would work together with the more detailed design strategies.

City as a backdrop

Urban pervasive games always have a relationship with the surrounding city. Yet the attitude towards the city needs not be active: The city can just be something in the background. Games that are not specifically designed to be played on the streets and just happen to take place there belong in this category, as do games where the designer simply treats the city as a setting, a backdrop.

City as a backdrop is closer to a lack of philosophy than to a full-blown design attitude. These games are pervasive by accident, not by designer intent. Often the players choose an attitude towards the city from the other philosophies – one that suits their character.

Most of the city games that were played in the Nordic countries in the 1990's belong in this category: The games just happened to take place in the street.

Supported by: Design strategies that do not rely on a factual world and that clearly define the game as a game, e.g. Scene-to-Scene Play, Ludic Markers, and Ensemble Construction.

Conflicts with: Design strategies that require players to take an active attitude to the surrounding world, e.g. Double Life Roletaking, Reality as a Sourcebook, Social Playground, Play as If It Was Real, Performative Play, and Outsiders as Obstacles.

Hiding in cityscape

Many pervasive larps aim to hide themselves in cityscape. They prioritize a way of playing that does not interfere with the outside world and avoids causing public disturbance or involving outsiders. The advantage of this design philosophy is that it allows the excitement of play in public places, while keeping the social weight of gameplay low. Many people may consider public pretence play embarrassing, or find transgressive public play immoral. Thus, larps that hide in cityspace offer the most casual form of pervasive larp.

Typically, the larps hiding in cityspace utilize settings where hiding is an intrinsic part of the play. The wizards of Harry Potter refrain from magic in presence of muggles, the vampires of *World of Darkness* mask their true nature from mortals, spies and agents hide from everyday people – as well as from each other. Thus, bystanders are seen as a challenge, an obstruction that needs to be avoided.

Supported by: Strategies that create a hidden layer to society, e.g. Double Life Roletaking, Ludic Markers, Indexical Propping, Runtime Game Mastering, Unfamiliar Surroundings, Urban Exploration, and Outsiders as Obstacles.

Conflicts with: Design strategies that require social interaction with outsiders, e.g. Social Playground, Pronoia and Exploration, and Performative Play.

Altering perception

Games can be used to show a familiar environment from a fresh point of view. The players become tourists in their own town as they start perceiving the world in a different way. Often the players are encouraged to visit places they would never venture into on their own, and to have a different type of agency and empowerment in the cityscape; they are trained to look for openings, entrances and exits.

These types of games often draw on urban exploration and other public space movements, but they can also be used to re-enact and teach history. The philosophy is similar to that of societal dialogue (see below), placing larger emphasis on city space and de-emphasising the artistic or political message – these games can be about teaching or entertainment.

Games that have used this philosophy have included the *Prosopopeia* series (looking behind the scenes of a city) and *The White Road* (hitchhiking and roads).

Supported by: Design strategies that emphasise alien experiences in everyday life, e.g. Linked Tasks, Coordinated Social Networks, Extremely Long Duration, Onion Model of Participation, Reality as a Sourcebook, Social Playground, Pronoia and Exploration, Unfamiliar Surroundings, Urban Exploration, Emergent Play.

Conflicts with: Design strategies that separate game space from real space, e.g. Scene-to-Scene Play, Ludic Markers.

Doing things for real

Doing things for real is entertaining, fun and insightful. Many larps look for visceral, tangible experiences as their central source of pleasure. In a traditional fantasy larp physical experience is created by simulated combat and playing outdoors in wilderness. *Hamlet* served players with extravagant banquets; *Carolus Rex* was played in a real submarine to create a holistic 360° illusion of *being there*.

Whether it means crawling through tunnels in urban exploration style, talking with homeless people, conducting realistic crime-scene investigation with floating condoms in the toilet or trashing cars with jackhammers, doing things for real creates a pleasurable sense of physical immersion.

Supported by: Design strategies that emphasise physical and social activity in real or realistic settings, e.g. Indexical Propping, Sensory Pleasure, Reality as a Sourcebook, Social Playground, Pronoia and Exploration, Unfamiliar Surroundings, Urban Exploration, Play as If It Was Real.

Conflicts With: Symbolic design strategies that tend to emphasize distance from the action, for example Performative Play may conflict.

Merging game with life

Seamlessly merging larp and life, intertwining the players' ordinary lives with content created for the game, can lead to deeply engaging pervasive larp. In pervasive larps this has mostly been explored in the *Prosopopeia* series.

Merging game and life creates a hardcore game experience. When playing the game, players are toying with their real lives. If the concept of the game is “play yourselves but you are all highlanders, like in the movie *Highlander*”, you may have to be prepared to fight a deadly duel at any time.³ These games cannot easily hide from bystanders: if another highlander attacks you in broad daylight, the hiding phase of the game is over.

In a game that merges game and life, it is crucial that all the constructed parts of the game seem natural. If the scenography, the supporting characters and the props are not authentic, the players will detect (and sometimes get irritated by) the seam between the ordinary and the ludic dimension. Subscribing to this philosophy constrains the game fiction.

³ While at first it would appear that merging life and play is only relevant for larp, tabletop role-players have produced similar experiences as well: For example players might play a tabletop role-playing game, appearing “as themselves” in the diegetic world.

Supported by: Design strategies that strive to blur the border between game and life, e.g. Extremely Long Duration, Double Life Roletaking, Indexical Propping, Sensory Pleasure, Reality as a Sourcebook, Social Playground, Pronoia and Exploration and Play as If It Was Real.

Conflicts With: Design strategies that separate play from life e.g. Scene-to-Scene Play, Ludic Markers, Performative Play.

Societal dialogue

Some pervasive larps seek to engage in active dialogue with their social environment. The purpose of such dialogue can be politically or artistically motivated. These games have a message that is aimed either at the players, at bystanders, or society as a whole.

Larp is an involving and participatory form that allows players to experience the message of the game. In traditional larp the dialogue with society is created through the discussion generated by the game. In pervasive games the characters can engage the surrounding world, and bystanders can have direct access to the game.

Recently, the politically aware larps have discussed issues such as societal inequality (*System Danmarc 2, Europa*), gender (*Mellan himmel och hav, Ringblomman*), recent history (*Ground Zero, 1942 – Noen å stole på*) and societal control (*PanoptiCorp, .laitos, Momentum*).

Supported by: Design strategies that emphasise social interaction with the real world, e.g. Extremely Long Duration, Reality as a Sourcebook, Social Playground, Emergent Play, Performative Play.

Conflicts with: Design strategies that hide the game such as Outsiders as Obstacles

Strategies supporting the design philosophies

In this section, we will look at a palette of more detailed design strategies that can be used to produce pervasive larps. The strategies have been divided into four groups: *structure*, *play attitude*, *ludic environment* and *ordinary environment*. This does not mean that a designer must choose one strategy from each group – many in the same group work very well together. It is probably also possible for an inventive designer to combine those which are seemingly incompatible.

Structural strategies

First, we will look into the strategies addressing structural issues of pervasive larps. These strategies illustrate how players are divided into groups, how they work through the plot and how the game is paced.

Linked tasks

Linking tasks means that players must have succeeded with one task before they can address another one. In linked collaborative tasks the whole becomes larger than the sum of its parts.

In *Momentum*, a group of players were provided with mathematical data that could be used to triangulate coordinates of a hidden stash of game props. However, because the players did their math wrong, they ended up searching in vain in the wrong neighbourhood in Stockholm on a rainy October night. A boring math exercise of decryption and triangulation is given relevance and context, but at the same time the task of searching for the hidden stash is enhanced by the successful triangulation, as it creates a sense of accomplishment.

Yet if the game includes tasks or puzzles entailing a possibility of failure, it is important to communicate this eventuality as well as the actual failure, to the players in a concrete way. It is important to design

the result of failure as well, and not only what will happen when the players succeed.

In the *Momentum* example there was a twofold price for failing: The player group lost time due to their error, and the long night wandering in the wrong area created a strong experience of failure. In *Momentum*, which strived for a feeling of ‘playing for real’, this added to the experience of realness. In a less realistic game, this would probably have been a very unsatisfying experience.

A failure should not entirely stop the game’s progression, but at the same time it must mean something to allow the players to realize that their actions actually do have effects. Furthermore, linked tasks should be related to each other. The triangulation task would not have been a linked task had it been followed by a completely unrelated decryption task. The interrelated and interdependent subtasks contribute to the feeling of tangibility.

Coordinated social networks

Pervasive role-players seem to greatly enjoy the feeling of being a part of a large network of players. Since an individual player has a very limited view of the game, it is quite easy to create an illusion of a large network of players. A powerful tool to arrange this is to coordinate the game community with other social networks. For instance, when the player of a petty criminal realizes that both her victims and pursuers are actually played by other players, the illusion deepens, but when she realizes that there is also a game-related wedding party going on that she has no role in at all, the game world becomes all-encompassing. The player understands that she does not know just how large the game really is.

Talvitie (2006, 2007) discusses methods of constructing social networks in games. The background philosophy of his approach is based mainly on information flow: If some characters throw a party while others play vampires at that party, the asymmetric information makes dangers and opportunities of vampirism very tangible. Killing a character with an actual played history is a deeper experience than preying on a non-player

character created to be killed. Through controlling the flow of information and social dynamics in a game, it is possible to design the ways in which players *perceive* the game and the environment around them.

In *Prosopopeia* games the players were basically in one big group, and the illusion of a bigger social environment was created through game master characters, informed outsiders and NPC characters accessible through emails and chats. (The mediated communication made it easy to hide the fact that the various non-player characters were played by one person on one computer.) However, *Momentum* split up the group, by assigning four simultaneous tasks to the 30 players. Each task had to be accomplished successfully in order for the whole group to achieve their goal. The beauty of this example is in the way actual and illusionary networks were combined. Through splitting the players into smaller groups, the players received a tangible impression of the game taking place in many places simultaneously.

Scene-to-Scene play

Pervasive larps, or larps in general, do not have to be continuous. Though this is not common practice, there have been a number of games where the action is broken down into shorter scenes that are staged at different places or times. This brings larp closer to theatre, as each scene is much shorter than an ordinary larp. Scene-to-scene play can enable high intensity playing, with continuous emotional and physical engagement by the players.

There are two ways of creating scene-to-scene play: continuous and interrupted. In continuous mode the players never go off-game, but travel from one place to another to stage the scenes at suitable places. Most pervasive larps that take advantage of the city actually use this mode – the game is in the background when active play is not taking place. Examples of this kind of playing include many Finnish city games such as *Neonhämärä*, *Pimeyden maailma*, *Rikos kannattaa* and *Ghost Express*. In interrupted mode the playing stops between scenes and the players are not in character as they move from setting to setting. This also enables

breaking up the temporal structure of the game. Games that borrow elements from freeform role-play can use these methods; one such game was *En stilla middag med familjen*.

The essential aspect of scene-to-scene play is that the players must be willing to adhere to the plot. These games are heavily game-mastered and if the players do not play along, the game collapses.

Extremely long duration

Typically, the shortest larps run for one evening, while long games need a weekend or a week to be played out in full. With pervasive games, there has been experimentation with very long larps, games that run for months and possibly indefinitely. Temporally expanded role-playing is appealing, as it can create a strong illusion of reality.

The most significant issue pertaining to extremely long durations is that players need to be able to fit the game together with their ordinary lives. They need to manage to navigate somewhat easily between the game and the ordinary. Depending on the double life strategy chosen, outsiders and family members may become a central part of the game.

Another difficulty entailed by this strategy is the huge effort required. The game masters need to produce a lot of content and prepare to be actively involved in game mastering for long periods. If the players feel that they could have received the same game experience in a shorter time, their motivation to play will decrease. The players also need to invest a lot of effort, time and money to participate in the game. Player investment in general is a challenge – the game needs to be interesting enough for players to sacrifice such a large part of their life to it. Finally, the game masters – if they are running the game in real time – need to be on call almost around the clock. The workforce required to do that, not to mention the information system that ensures that whoever is on duty knows all plot threads, requires a lot of dedication.

A practical approach is to segment long duration larps into high and low intensity periods. If participants know that weekends are the most active times and that nothing much happens on Wednesdays, they can

plan their time use, both in order to avoid stress and in order to be present when the interesting stuff happens. The most common long-duration larps are campaigns with set game days when playing is intensive, with far less intensive play between games.

If the game is played between prepared larp sessions, the social networking sites of the internet can turn out to be very valuable: *Neonhämärä* for instance utilizes Facebook as a valuable communication tool, both between characters and between players.

Double life roletaking

When a game merges with life or goes on for a long time, there is a risk of the game world getting in conflict with the real world. This conflict needs to be mitigated in order both to maintain the enjoyability of the game and to not interfere excessively with ordinary life.

Double life means that while on a surface level players seem ordinary (perhaps they are even playing themselves in a fictional context) but they have a secret identity. For instance, a spy game could start with an email from a (fictional) intelligence agency that recruits the player as an agent. This way, the player becomes a character in the diegesis of the game. In *Killer* the player is also the character.

Prosopopeia-series used a Possession Model to create double lives. In these games, the players played themselves believing that it is possible to be possessed by ghosts, and they *also* played a ghost possessing them. The diegetic duplicate characters were possessed by ghosts of the long-dead people. This allowed the game to hide while still merging game with life: When a player went to work, she could just suppress the spirit for the time being. When the player focused on playing, the possessing spirit gave her goals, motivations and character to be role-played.

Many pervasive larps are played with vampire characters, as inspired by White Wolf's *World of Darkness*. Contrary to the first impression, these characters are always based on a very different philosophy: If your diegetic duplicate is turned into a vampire, the change restricts your everyday life

so much that the benefits of the double lives are lost. Especially a lethal allergy to sunlight makes hiding in plain sight very difficult.

Onion model of participation

Larp is a demanding form of play and expression, involving and initiating new players in challenges. The onion model of participation is one solution to the problem: In this structure the pervasive larp is surrounded by games and mass media offering other less demanding play modes. (See Dena 2008a, 2008b for tiered participation in alternate reality games.)

For instance, the outer layer of *Sanningen om Marika* was a television series shown nationally in Sweden. A small fraction of the viewers also participated in an alternate reality game played on the Internet, and a tiny cluster of alternate reality gamers participated in larp-like live events.

The model allows the organizers to stage real world events with a manageable number of participants while still offering content to a much larger audience., This is possible especially since some of the online content can be recordings and recounts of the live events. Another advantage is that the model allows participants to choose their own level of involvement and mode of participation.

Ludic environment strategies

The strategies relating to ludic environment explicate design approaches to the diegetic game world. How is this world built? What is the driving idea behind it? As these games take place in the vast ordinary world, the game world often consists of ludic bubbles spread in the environment – bubbles that require constant engagement and maintenance work.

Ludic markers

One of the central decisions of a pervasive larp is whether to use ludic markers or not, and which ones to use. Ludic markers are symbols that explicitly denote some object, person or place as a part of the game.

Rikos kannattaa required all players to constantly show a badge and all the *Neonhämärä* players have to use white armbands, making sure that players would always be able to distinguish between players and outsiders. Symbols can be also used to designate certain areas as particular gaming zones: While players of a typical street larp can venture to any restaurant to have lunch, they should be considerate of other people in public and semi-public places. Many players would not even want to play in an overtly extrovert manner in a space where that is frowned upon; it may be thought of as embarrassing or inconsiderate. Therefore, symbols are often used to designate secluded or more permissive areas as game zones, spaces where characters can more liberally act out scenes that would attract attention in other public places. Often these areas are secluded, but in large cities there are also squares, parks or marketplaces where social attitudes are more permissive. These are the typical areas for street artists, beggars, and people handing out flyers. Adding a few pervasive players into the mix will not surprise or shock anyone.

Carefully placed symbols can also serve as game clues. If players are supposed to break down a door, ludic markers can be used to guide them to the right door. It is usually advisable to design the markers in a way that fits the game's theme and content.

The main danger entailed in ludic markers is careless use. Game masters should be extremely careful to remove unnecessary markers and to not put them into inappropriate places. If players erroneously believe that a place or a person belongs to the game, they are likely to take liberties in their behaviour. If players think that game masters expect them to break down a door and this door is marked, they probably will do so. Badly designed ludic markers will also break the illusion of a game world. The off-game rune of Swedish larps fits well into a fantasy setting, but is less appropriate in a modern agent story.

Indexical propping

An indexical prop is a game object that represents *itself* in the diegesis (Montola & Jonsson 2006). In some game settings, a plastic gun can be a symbol for a robbery, or an iconic representation of a real gun. In an indexically propped larp, a plastic gun represents a plastic gun.

If indexicality goes far enough in both props and scenography, this creates an aesthetics where everything feels like a prop and thus nothing is really considered a prop. A great advantage of this method is that it allows players to solve puzzles and tackle other challenges in a real and tangible way. Players can freely toy with anything they encounter.

In games that merge life and play, indexicality can go even further. Even though in a regular urban larp a jacket may signify another specimen of a perfectly identical jacket, in *Prosopopeia* the jacket signified exactly the same jacket owned by the exact same person: The indexicality included the social and historical context of the “prop”.

Sensory pleasure

Computer and console games have long strived to produce maximal audiovisual enjoyment for players. Pervasive games should not forget this strategy – a pervasive larp can expand sensory pleasure to all five senses. Sensory enjoyment comes in many shapes and sizes, ranging from a good dinner to a moonlit lake and beyond. Creating sensory pleasures requires considerable effort and resources, but it significantly enhances the experience.

One way to achieve sensory pleasure is creating an overall aesthetics for the game. This would mean that locations would be chosen with the aesthetic value in mind, and all props, scenographed locations and character costumes would have to be designed so that they reflect a coherent aesthetics. If this approach is used, it is important to design also all marketing material – such as the game website – so that it introduces the theme to the players. It should be remembered that emphasizing a genre might conflict with a realistic playing style; if everything looks and

feels like 1980's cyberpunk, then the players are prone to act in a manner stipulated by stereotypical cyberpunk fiction.

Depending on the design philosophy, unpleasant experiences can also be utilized. Finding a game artefact from an actual junkyard or walking through the town in a rainstorm can be enjoyable, though physically unpleasant experiences.

Sensory pleasure is a good choice especially to larpwrights creating events for less experienced players. An inviting aesthetic can soften the otherwise possibly stressful experience, and coax hesitant players into play.

Reality as a sourcebook

Pervasive games can use the environment they are set in as an endless source of game content. A clever design allows players to use reality as the all-encompassing sourcebook for the game world, inviting them to spend time poring over books in a library or navigating numerous websites. Especially pervasive puzzle games often use reality in this way. Players might need to learn Morse or read up on local history in order to solve a riddle.

One approach is to use historic sources on myths, fables and superstitions and make these come true in the real world. For instance, in the world of *Momentum*, Enochian occultism was real. The game masters had read up on the subject and included pointers to that material in the game, effectively introducing a vast resource for constructing very hard puzzles for the players.

When the internet reality is used as a sourcebook, it can also quite easily be extended by means of fabricated content. It is relatively easy to clone and alter an entire website. A game that relies on both fabricated and real world information blurs the line between diegetic and authentic content – which can be a powerful experience for the players.

Runtime game mastering

⁴ Runtime game mastering is also known as puppet mastering in the alternate reality game culture (see McGonigal 2006b).

Runtime game mastering is the process of influencing the flow of a game in real time.⁴ Most larps are game mastered to a greater extent. In pervasive larp, game masters need to use a *sensory system* to acquire information about the state of the game; an *actuation system*, to change the state of the game; and a *decision-making system*, to determine the preferred changes. This can sometimes be done in a very simple way by a game master who participates in the larp as one of the characters. In classic tabletop role-playing games, all three functions are embodied in one person, while pervasive larps often require technological tools.

⁵ Jonsson & al 2007b provide a full description of *Momentum* game mastering. See also Jonsson and Waern 2008

In *Isle of Saints* the players were expected to independently report their activities (extradiegetically) to game masters with cellular phones, both revealing their plans and describing the past events. As self-reporting can distract the game experience, *Momentum*⁵ selected four players as undercover *controllers* who acted as spies for the game masters and actuated changes by secretly guiding the players. In general, having informants in the player group often proves very useful, as it is very difficult to understand a larp situation through sensory equipment only.

Surveillance technology can be somewhat useful for game mastering. Hidden microphones can provide accurate information on the game, if the microphones can tap into crucial player discussions. Video feeds are less useful, as they mainly reveal which players are in a certain location or when a player arrives or departs. The use of surveillance technology is of course legally regulated.

Online play is an immensely valuable way to create both sensing and actuation. *Momentum* used several online characters played by the game masters, who maintained several simultaneous discussions with players via instant messaging, chats and emails. The players never knew who played these characters, nor that they sometimes were even played by the same person.

Ordinary environment strategies

A pervasive larp can take very different attitudes towards the public space around it. The relationship between the game and the city is one of the most definitive aspects of pervasive larp design. The everyday environment that envelops the play can be approached as a background, a playground, a feedback machine, and as an obstacle.

Social playground

Larps that treat their environment as a social playground take an active stance towards bystanders. These games encourage, even require players to speak with outsiders, playing on the conflict between the diegetic world view of the player and the everyday view of the outsiders.

Players can be gently coaxed into interacting with outsiders in several ways. The game masters may plant instructed players among a crowd of non-players, or leave important information with real outsiders. The player character can also inspire players to interact with outsiders: for instance, a detective character might ask people near a murder site whether they saw something strange an hour ago, or an animal-rights activist could engage in a provocative discussion with a bystander wearing a fur coat.

While on the one hand it can be stressful, social play with outsiders can reward the player with feelings of fun and insight about the social conventions. Playing the part of a vampire or a madman may serve as an alibi for social experimentation and breaking of conventions. Jane McGonigal (2006a) states that if people are given specific instructions to act in a certain way in public environment, they will surprise themselves with their own daring and ingenuity, and also find that the environment is surprisingly receptive to these advances. Games offer the possibility to commit the forbidden actions one wants, while still granting immunity against it as “it’s not real” (Porembe 2007). Socially expanded role-playing can provide *empowerment* to act against social constraints. The social playground approach is an especially valuable tool for a designer wishing to use game as a political or artistic device

Pronoia and exploration

Games where players can never be certain about who is part of the game and who is not, and where the game actively engages players wherever they go, create a sense of positive paranoia, called *pronoia* (McGonigal 2006c). It is the feeling that the universe is plotting behind your back to make your life/game better for you.

When players understand that their game is situated in the social, historical and physical context of a real, living urban environment, they seem to love exploring both content and context to the fullest, curiously disregarding boundaries to find how far they can push and still find recognizable parts of the game. The exploration fun lies in the feeling that the entire world is part of the play and wherever the player goes, more content turns up.

The totality of the surrounding world needs to be demonstrated in order to create a good illusion. As Koljonen (2007) points out, a plausible universe should deliver surprises: “To make the player accept the border of the game as something else than the border of the fiction, it is the duty of the truly illusionist game master to demonstrate that characters, plots and information could, and sometimes will, cross them”. Pronoia emerges as players start seeing the game everywhere.

Unfamiliar surroundings

People have clear ideas about what is the correct kind of behaviour in a certain public space. Breaking these societal norms can be difficult for many people. If the game design is supposed to support transgressions, it helps if players are placed in unfamiliar surroundings (with people they trust, see *ensemble building*). A player is more prone to act in a weird way in a city that she is not familiar with – and, more importantly, where the bystanders are not familiar with her. Large cities provide a certain anonymity, and that anonymity awards a wider range of agency.

It is also possible to use the unfamiliar surroundings as a starting point; to stage a game in a strange setting, creating the conventions and style of play there, and then move the game to an area that players are

more familiar with. In this way, players would be disposed to routines that they would never have established in the familiar settings.

Urban exploration

Urban exploration as a term covers all the activities where participants examine the normally unseen parts of human civilization. This activity usually takes the form of infiltrating abandoned structures, off-limits areas, catacombs, sewers and other tunnel systems. The customary rule is to “take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints” (Ninjalicious 2005). Urban exploration and pervasive larp can easily be combined. The thrill of going to places that usually are unseen is transferred to the game.

Urban Exploration is far from safe; visiting many of these places is either illegal, dangerous, or both. Minor bruising is a possible consequence in almost all interesting environments, whereas major hazards include a risk of falling from high places or getting exposed to chemicals in sewers. Consulting guide books (e.g. Ninjalicious 2005), experts, and local authorities is advised. Players need to know what they are signing up for and they need to be properly equipped and prepared – they should have double flashlights, gloves and clothes that stand wear and tear. A compass may come in handy in tunnels.

Emergent play

Emergent play happens when players take the game to unexpected and unplanned directions. In tabletop role-playing games and non-pervasive larps, emergent play happens only on the players’ initiative. In pervasive games, on the contrary, environment and non-players drive emergence.

From the game master’s perspective, while emergence is a free and inexhaustible source of game content, it also needs to be designed. The designer can try to either curb or encourage emergence by driving the players to think and act outside the box, or by trying to contain the game as much as possible (in *Rikos kannattaa* the players were forbidden from disrupting non-players and thus had limited interaction with them). Especially social play with non-players seems to display considerable

authenticity and realness, and many players have considered it highly pleasurable and thrilling (e.g. Montola & Jonsson 2006, McGonigal 2003).

Play attitude strategies

Equally important as the approach to the city is the attitude adopted by players towards themselves – and towards bystanders. Players can see themselves as performers, simulators or just players, and the non-players can be regarded as an audience, an obstacle or as co-creators.

Play as if it was real

Playing the game as if it was real is both an instruction to players and a serious consideration for game masters. The gist of the strategy is that the larp is not a Hollywood action movie but a down-to-earth event: As the players have (probably) never been engaged in a car chase or a shoot-out, the characters probably would not do so either – not diegetically, and especially not physically.

This strategy works well together with indexical propping. Its main drawbacks are the heavy constraints to game fiction and the limits it places on performative character play. In art, realism is just another aesthetic choice. In a film noir setting, it might make sense to beat up a bartender to get him to snitch about someone you suspect to be a spy, but a game may crave a realism that is often out of the question. If the game wants to incorporate elements from genre fiction, surrealism, absurdism or any other unrealistic style, it must be done with care.

Performative play

Many pervasive games incorporate performative play, playing *for* an audience, e.g. in a fashion explored by street theatre and invisible theatre (see Boal 2002). In these games, the bystanders are not unaware players but just spectators. Performative play ranges from zombie walks and flash mobs to invisible theatre and games like *Pac-Manhattan*. There are times when pervasive role-playing games also adopt a more performative attitude, by

having the characters perform. In *Momentum* the players conducted elaborate and theatrical rituals as well as a fully fledged demonstration, which bystanders could witness.

Turning the whole game into a performance (or an installation), instead of simply treating a single player as a performer, is also possible. *Amerika* and *System Danmarc 2* are examples of games that also were art pieces staged in public in Oslo and Copenhagen. The trick here is to assign a clear role to the spectators so that the players can relate to them. Experiences of staging a larp in public while just telling the players to ignore spectators have not been encouraging.

Outsiders as obstacles

Using outsiders as obstacles is one of the most basic strategies in street larp. It fits well into fictional contexts featuring agents, supernatural elements, spies, and so on. The basic idea is that such characters want to stay hidden in urban areas. Cold war agents would not start a shootout in broad daylight even if it was important for national security.

There are two ways of using this strategy. The soft way is used in *Killer* assassination games. If a player commits a murder with outsider presence, she is punished by the referees. The latter might form a detective squad and try to arrest the player.

The hard way is to create a game rule that absolutely forbids being seen by witnesses. If this rule is still broken – accidents do happen – the sanctions can be diegetic or extradiegetic. In *Vampire* larps, revealing one's presence to mortals is punishable by death in game, and it is often also considered bad playing by other players.

In order to enforce this strategy, game masters need a way of obtaining information about transgressions. Most of the time, game masters can trust larpers to provide such information themselves.

Ensemble construction

Playing in public requires more courage than playing in private. It is also easier to slip out of the game when faced with the numerous distraction of a busy street than in an area specifically reserved for playing. Turning the players into an ensemble where they trust each other and actively support each others' play is a common strategy which encourages more liberated play.

One way to create an ensemble is to let the players meet in advance, e.g. in a series of pre-game workshops. In addition to having the function of introducing the players to each other, to the diegetic world and rules of the game, these meetings include trust exercises, discussions, shared character building exercises, etc. Playing a game together always creates a "secret society" of players (Huizinga 1938).

Ensemble construction techniques may conflict slightly with coordinated social network strategies, since trust and familiarity are central building blocks of a good ensemble. Many social network strategies exploit the fact that players have a very limited perspective on the game: Organizing ensemble construction workshops before the game would reveal such secrets to all participants.

Conclusion

Pervasive larp is a diverse and powerful form of expression that can be used for various purposes, ranging from entertainment to artistic expression and from education to societal exploration. A large repertoire of design patterns has been used in such games, allowing a wide variety of different games to be created. We have here presented several design philosophies of larps that treat their environment in several ways, ranging from indifferent (City as a Backdrop) and secretive (Hiding in Cityscape), to embracing (Doing Things for Real) and involving (Societal Dialogue). We can even argue that there is a certain philosophical progression detectable in the design philosophies from City as Backdrop and Hiding in

Cityscape towards Societal Dialogue: The larp communities wanting to proceed toward the rarer forms of pervasive larps need to both learn new strategies and to unlearn others.

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Excavating AmerikA

Eirik Fatland

16

SCENE

DOCUMENTATION

PERFORMANCE

Once upon a time, in the centre of Oslo, there was a place called AmerikA. Spelled just like that – a “k” instead of a “c”, and the last A capitalized. If you wrote it by hand, you would circle that last A, graffiti-style. It was neither a continent nor a country, but a smaller place, a single location: A large, magical garbage heap which came alive, pulsating with light and life, attracting the crazy, the destitute, the incomprehensibly visionary. It grew out of the asphalt to exist briefly but intensely, for one weekend of the autumn of 2000, before it disappeared – far more suddenly than it had appeared. It was called, by one visitor, “the greatest thing in Norwegian art since Munch”. And it was a larp.

It was, by most measures, the largest larp ever held in Norway. It took almost a hundred organisers and volunteers, organised in multiple networks, committees and subcommittees, to build the whole thing. Production-wise, it was the size of a Swedish 1000-player larp, or a British

3.000-player fest. It drew on the services and sponsorships of dozens of companies, institutions and organisations. It was played by hundreds, closely watched by thousands, observed by tens of thousands. Its economy was modest, relying on material donations and volunteers rather than cash – but had services been paid for the normal way, AmerikA’s budget would have been in the millions of Euros.

It is also, perhaps, the most forgotten larp in Norway. Google it, and you will find only some sporadic mentions on larper websites. Most larps suffer this fate – as endeavours, they are similar to sandcastles, reaching their most complete state the moment before they are washed away by the tide. But the large, ambitious, unique larps are usually rewarded with a longer life. Amongst the old-timers, we still talk about the larps of the 1990s. We still invoke the ghosts of *Kybergenesis* or *Knappnålshuvudet* or the Bronze Age larp of 1996. Our favourite larps stay alive as online photo galleries, as Knutebook reports, and as nostalgic conversations. Not so with AmerikA. More film and megapixels were used, more videotapes recorded, to document AmerikA than any other Norwegian larp – but the documentation has been conspicuously hard to find, online and offline.

To this amateur archaeologist of lost larps, the relative obscurity of AmerikA poses two interesting questions. First: If it was forgotten due to mistakes made, might there be something to learn from those mistakes? The “mistake” angle, however, does not ring true. Spectacularly ambitious larps have, in the past, caused a lot of talk even as failures – *Mineva*, a Swedish steampunk larp that was promoted but never held is still considered a canonical larp by some. Hence, AmerikA’s disappearance from the larp discourse must have some other explanation, and our second question is the more intriguing one: what has caused this relative obscurity?

I write as only partially an outsider. I was a late arrival to the Welt-schmerz network, the loose group that organized AmerikA and its smaller successor Europa. While a principal organiser of Europa, I was a player and only one of many helping hands at AmerikA, though perhaps with more access than most to the main organisers and internal discussions of AmerikA.



- The quiet place at the highest point of the mountain of garbage.

Photo
Britta Bergersen

Origins

However unique and untraditional, AmerikA was not born in a vacuum. The typical Norwegian larp of the 1990s would be set in the fantasy genre and last for five days of uninterrupted role-playing. The earliest such larps – heavy with swords and sorcery – were plagued by the problem of dead characters. Once a character was dead, the player needed a new character, and as a 5-day larp progressed it would get harder and harder to figure out which player is playing which character. Norwegian larpwrights began limiting the potential for character death and, hence, reduced combat and the kind of magic that kills characters. This dynamic, combined with



player preferences, led to a progressively stronger emphasis on the personalities, cultures, society and politics of the characters.

From approximately 1995, some of these cultural simulations – especially in Oslo – began commenting on contemporary society or recent history. The larps *Sunrise High* (a high school drama) and *P13* (a hostage-taking thriller) were pastiches of pop culture but also explorations of US society in the shadows of the Korea and Vietnam wars. *Kybergenesis* dramatized Orwell's dystopia “1984” in a larpified study of raw, totalitarian power, while the “Social Femocracy” larps (subtitled “*A Kindergarten teacher’s dream*”) were respectively interpreted as utopias or dystopias depending on which player you asked. The historical larps *1944*

■ A sample of the AmerikAns.

Photo
Britta Bergersen

and *1942 – noen å stole på?* (the latter also held in 2000, and a contestor for the title of “largest Norwegian larp”) brought attention to the realities of Norway’s World War II history, highlighting but also nuancing the official narrative of universal national resistance.

The Weltschmerz Network

It was from players and organisers of some of these larps that the “Weltschmerz Network” crystallized, with start-up meetings and brainstorm sessions held in 1998. The name is one of those seeming self-contradictions that characterize the project – *weltschmerz* (a sense of hopelessness, giving up on the world) was precisely the opposite of what Weltschmerz (the network) was trying to achieve. It was not irony – but the opposite: taking the component German words “world” and “pain” literally. The idea was precisely to expose the “pains of the world”, with the aim to change the world rather than withdraw from it.

The network was founded on the belief that larps might be used not just as political commentaries, but also political tools – playground worlds designed to affect change in the real world. There was some justification for this belief: players had reportedly walked off previous politically themed larps, especially *Kybergenesis*, with radically revised worldviews and political opinions.¹ And larps themselves were media magnets – a hundred costumed players in the woods drew far more press attention than a hundred protesters waving placards in the city.

A second, entangled, current also found its home in the Weltschmerz network: that of seeing larp not just as a form of art, but as something superior to traditional art: more democratic, more inclusive, more powerful in the individual experience and collective transformations it could effect. These two trends were, at the time, easy to unite. Politically themed art, and discussions on the political relevance of art, were once again becoming prominent in the art establishment, a discourse that resonated with the Weltschmerz larps. Furthermore, various artists and art movements – from interactive and environmental theatre to the net.art and interactive

¹ The ethical problems of such manipulative larpwrighting were not discussed much at the time. To our defense, the “radically changed worldviews” were still not the worldviews of the organisers.

installations of the 90s – had sought to make art more interactive. With some justification, the Weltschmerzners saw larp as the final form of this journey: an art form that was *inherently* interactive and participatory.

An important caveat: The Weltschmerz ideology was never formalized, and there was never complete agreement on what the ideology entailed, but a cluster of ideological statements could be seen in the slogans that surrounded the project: “The age of irony is over”, “nothing is true unless it is on television”, “Our world, served raw”, and “Fuck passive art!”. There were certainly Weltschmerz members who did not agree with any of these statements but participated nonetheless. Weltschmerz was a big tent, a blessing but also a curse which, we shall see, came back to haunt AmerikA.

From network to production team

As with ideology, so with organisation: There were tenets of a belief – in informal networks, flexible organisations – that were never brought to a cohesive whole but rather interpreted in different ways by different members. Among the network’s initiators were three old-timers of the Oslo scene – Hanne Grasmø, Attila Steen-Hansen and Erlend Eidsem, who were to serve as AmerikA’s director, producer and lead scenographer, transiting from “network members” to hierarchical positions in the process. Still, networked modes of organization could be seen in the way different subdivisions of the hierarchy were given unusually extensive autonomy to make major decisions on their own domain, whether it was dramaturgy or the physical shape of the garbage heap, and further recruit organizers and volunteers through their own personal networks.

While most of the other Weltschmerzners were larppers, several had only a tangential connection to larp and a stronger connection to either “art”, “politics”, or both. The network met partially on an e-mail list, partially at brainstorm sessions where ideas for future projects were freely discussed.

From those early brainstorm sessions came the concept of a series of “continent larps”, each one focusing on “world problems” with a continent as metaphor, and the notion of placing a garbage heap in the centre of Oslo. When the time came to put ideas into action, they were combined and the “slum town” became AmerikA.



- The Fortress of Washing Machines, home to SevenS, black-clad women who communicated only through song. In the background: headquarters of the national labour unions.

Photo
Britta Bergersen

Concept

“Garbage 1:

Waste. Trash. Rats. Blood. Stains. Rags. Leftovers. Dust.
Rust. Stench. Fumes. Puke. Broken. Damaged. Buried.
Hidden. Forgotten.

Garbage 2:

Shreddable commerciality.”

- from the AmerikA website²

² The original pre-game version of the website is located at <http://weltschmerz.laiv.org/AmerikA/index2.htm>

The narrative, as it was marketed beforehand, was this: A winning lottery ticket has been inadvertently thrown away. Media has tracked its path through the waste handling system, to the garbage pile AmerikA, home to tons of rubbish and a few dozen homeless. Suddenly thrust into the limelight, AmerikA is sought out by treasure-hunters of all kinds, scavenging for the lottery ticket.

At the larp, some were to play the resident “homeless” – who had built their homes on the garbage heap – others to play secondary full-time characters, who were frequent visitors to the heap, and a final group were to play different kinds of invaders – treasure-hunters, tourists doing “slumming”, their guides and facilitators, as well as others. The genre was announced as “magical realism” – and while it was gritty, dirty and impoverished there was also magic aplenty, and a certain degree of abstraction. For example, the organisers declined to specify which country AmerikA was located in, never mind whether it was diegetically placed in the centre of Oslo.

AmerikA and America

The name was not only a reference to the United States, although distorted American flags and images of Lady Liberty featured in some of the promotional material. It was rather a reference to the Americas; north, south and centre; and to some aspects of what they represent to Europeans.

AmerikA the larp focused on liberty (seen in the main cast of characters), exploitative capitalism (seen in the primary antagonist), constructive capitalism and the American dream (hinted at in the in-game economy), and more than anything on consumerism and the rich-poor gap, manifested in the very public display of the garbage that is the hidden excrement of consumerism.

Still, these aspects of “America” were sources of inspiration, rather than a “message”. There was never one Message to AmerikA, never a single answer to the question “So what was AmerikA about?” There were plenty, overlapping and sometimes contradictory statements made either explicitly by organisers or implicitly by their work. It visualized poverty, and the rich-poor divide, but it was not a hardcore larp where players would feel, on their body, the life of the dwellers in Earths worst slums. AmerikA can easily be accused of romanticizing poverty, as many of its central characters were voluntary outcasts, dignified in their rags, well fed – presumably unlike the involuntary poor. But their dignity, romance, and semi-voluntary estrangement from respectable society would not be apparent to the casual observer. To the citizens of Oslo, the citizens of AmerikA were presented as pitiful, outcasts, the monsters of underclass given centre stage. Was it then a moral tale, about the inherent humanity of the impoverished, the romance of life to be discovered under a dirty surface? Was the tale meant for the role-players, or those who watched them?

The lottery ticket narrative, likewise, could be seen as a story about the search for happiness, symbolized by gambling wealth. But was it also a critique of this narrative – an emphasis on the futility of the quest for material riches? Who were the happier: the desperate treasure-hunters who did not find the ticket, the hobos who did not even search for it, or the yuppies who were so bored with their own wealth they needed to enter the slum for a taste of excitement?

And what shall we make of the choice of Youngstorget as the location for the game? Known to Norwegians as “maktens torg”, the marketplace of power, Youngstorget is surrounded by the offices of political

parties and the main labour unions. Was it to spite them or to identify with them that tons of garbage were placed in their midst and turned into a larp?

These questions cannot be resolved, for the simple reason that the answer will depend on whom of the organisers you ask, and the final form of the larp combined ideas from all of them. And, as we shall see, the intentions of the organisers did not necessarily match what actually occurred at AmerikA. Once the larp was left in the hands of its players, it took on a life of its own.

The characters

The number of “players” at AmerikA is hard to count. Some thirty to fifty players had prepared for months, including three full weekends of drama exercises (for one weekend of larp) to play the core community of the garbage heap. More full-time characters (nobody knows how many) were added as the larp came closer. During the larp came the one-shot characters, their players recruited from the street, who walked in for a few hours of play. Guided tours brought scores of tourists being shown around the garbage pile for half-hour trips. And finally, there were the spectators: people who stood outside AmerikA, staring in, observing, some glued to the spot for the entire weekend.

From this onion-like structure of participation, we find an onion-like structure of characters: at the heart were the *bergboer*³, the citizens of the garbage heap. They had little in common except for being outcasts, some voluntarily so. An old prostitute, a bottle-cap general, a mad preacher, a woman who was a cat, a non-abusive paedophile: this is just a sample of the characters that lived on AmerikA, calling it their “home”.

Outside these, but still full time characters: the invaders and ancillaries – the Real Life Company (RLC), a corporation specializing in “slumming” and extreme tourism, the gangs Crazy Dogs and the Rats, the seven women who lived in a fortress of washing machines and com-

³ The Norwegian word “bergboere” literally translates as “mountain-livers”, and can apply to someone who lives on top of or inside a mountain. Additionally, the word has folkloric connotations, as trolls were said to inhabit the inside of mountains. “Bergboer” is the singular, “bergboere” the indefinite plural and “bergboerene” the definite plural. In this article, I have used “bergboer” as the English plural form.





- (left) "Herr P", the oldest of the *bergboer* and the first to settle on the garbage pile.
- (middle) The woman who was a cat.
- (right) A character consorting with a sanitation worker (organiser).

Photo
Britta Bergersen

municated only through song, as well as groups who pretended to belong to one of the former categories but had sinister agendas of their own.

Then there were the part-timers – treasure hunters, expelled kids in search of a home, the General’s ex-wife, a DJ working for the Real Life Company – characters that would enter for a few hours with some minor connection to the society of AmerikA.

Even less committed: the tourists, brought into AmerikA for even briefer periods on slumming tours, trash-techno parties, waving cameras and expensive electronics, tourists both in-game and off.

And finally, there were the spectators. AmerikA was walled off, but from the terrace on the north end of Youngstorget any pedestrian could have an excellent view of the larp. Some stood there for almost the whole duration of AmerikA, following the movements of a hundred characters – reality theatre before the break-through of reality TV. No-one thought to interview the spectators, or figure out what their experience was like, but the following anecdote is telling: late at night, a stranger walked up to the organisers by the gates of the larp, and exclaims: “I’m so exhausted... I’ve stood up there and watched for fifteen hours... now I have to get some sleep. But I’ll be back first thing in the morning!”

My own lens to AmerikA was through playing the character of Aronsen, the junk dealer. Our shop, mine and my assistants’, was an old bus, with half on the inside and half on the outside of the wall that surrounded AmerikA. We would buy items of interest from the citizens of AmerikA on the inside, and resell them to shoppers on the outside. Each customer was told not just the price of the artefacts, but also their history – “This lighter here may seem old and insignificant, but in fact, it was once used by a young man to light the cigarette of a young woman whom he had just met but would subsequently marry. And this old typewriter...” All of Aronsens stories were true, and when he bought artefacts their price were determined by the value of the stories that they held.

Gritty magic

Aronsens supernatural ability to sense the history of objects was an example of AmerikAs “magical realism”: there were no wizards or vampires or spells going “flash!” and “bang!”. No rules were needed to simulate this magic – it was embedded in the characters, enacted in dramatic expression and improvisation. Its magic was manifest in little things, oddities of nature, character back-stories, trivial yet symbolic.

Perhaps the closest cultural reference to AmerikA can be found in the movies of Emir Kusturica, and especially *Age of the Gypsies* – where the protagonist’s mystical talent at telekinesis, and visitations from the ghost of his dead mother, do absolutely nothing to save him from a life of crime, tragedy and poverty yet illuminate his story, lend to it some meaning and sense of wonder. And the lives of the AmerikAns were tragic, poor, sometimes criminal – but also strangely numinous with meaning.

Character development

For the players at the heart of the onion, a great deal of time was spent by the larpwrights on coming up with and refining character ideas. These ideas were sometimes written, sometimes communicated verbally, sometimes developed through discussions between player and larpwright. Further development happened at the drama workshops, where each character was associated with an animal and the players were led – through drama exercises – to “evolve” the character from animal to human, borrowing personality and body language from the animal spirit.

Of the *bergboer*, each character was individual, personal, and only the players have a complete picture of their characters. The individuality and subjectivity of the characters make them hard to document, unlike the achievements of contemporary Swedish and Finnish arthaus larp with their elaborate written texts. But the sheer joy of exploration that could be obtained from meeting, interacting with, and understanding



AmerikAs gallery of characters points to the larp as a truly extraordinary accomplishment of both role-playing and larp authorship.

However, as we progress further out from the centre of the onion, characters become increasingly brief and generic. The gangs Crazy Dogs and the Rats were unique and well-defined as groups, but individual characters were left for players to refine from a collective template. The Real Life Company was defined by function rather than personality – “Cook”, “Guide”, “Manager”. Work did go into supporting players in their individual character development, but it was nowhere near as refined as that spent on the *bergboer*. Some groups, such as “the witches” seemed like they were introduced only to increase the number of players: a larp cliché if ever there was one, and one that felt quite alien to AmerikA. At the extreme end, each tourist had only the character of “tourist”, in-game and off, probably the simplest playable generic character ever invented.

This, I should add, was neither coincidence nor necessarily poor craft: there was a conscious decision by the organisers to focus their creative effort on the central characters at the expense of the others, in the belief that excellent role-playing by the *bergboer* would carry the larp for other players as well as spectators. While this hypothesis may have been correct, it did not correspond well with larpers’ expectations of equal treatment and post-larp feedback included complaints of neglect or poor dramaturgy from non-bergboer players.

Dramaturgy

With any larp, we can talk of two dramaturgies – the one intended by the larpwrights beforehand, the *fabula*, and the actual observable interaction of players, the *larp situation*. At AmerikA, these diverged to an unusual degree.

Here is how I think the larp was intended to be played: a host of treasure hunters would descend on AmerikA, encounter and interact with its central characters, who might support or oppose the treasure-hunt

- A nighttime display of photographic art. The cross above was erected by AmerikA’s resident mad preacher.

Photo
Britta Bergersen



but in any event provide some fine role-playing. Since several false lottery tickets were planted, and at least one of the groups pretending to be the Lottery Commission had other, more sinister, motives, the plot would twist and turn until eventually the ticket would be found and the larp would be over. In the mean time colour would be provided by a number of minor plots, such as “The Rats” attempting to establish themselves on “Crazy Dogs” territory, the *bergboer* would be their usual entertaining selves, and the Real Life Company with their guests would watch from the sidelines.

In the larp as it was actually played, the lottery ticket was only one of several lesser stories, not particularly important to other characters than the treasure hunters. The central conflict of the larp situation came to be between the “citizens” – gangs and *bergboer* – and the Real Life Company (RLC). The attitude of the citizens towards the RLC was not clearly defined before the larp, but players naturally interpreted it as hostile. As the Real Life Company held slumming tours and sat perched on the roof of the café, laughing at the poor sods down on the ground, hostility increased.

The incident by the television temple

The turning point came on Friday evening, when a (real) camera crew with a (real) TV star⁴ were guided around AmerikA by the RLC as part of a (role-played) initiation rite for the spoilt (real/role-played) TV star. The TV team’s arrogant behaviour (not role-played, but interpreted as if it were) provoked the citizens in several different ways, culminating in a near-violent situation when the TV team tried to enter the Temple of Discarded Televisions, a holy place to many of the *bergboer*, and were surrounded by a mob of angry, threatening natives. The threatening behaviour of that mob is some of the most realistic-looking role-play I have seen at larp – the crowd were intimidating both in-game and off, furious both as characters and players. The border that separates role-play from authentic behaviour was particularly porous in this situation, as the camera team

- A moment of silent meditation inside the temple of discarded televisions. The text on the refrigerator refers to God and to Norway’s most popular brand of frozen pizza.

Photo
Britta Bergersen

⁴ The “star” in question was comedienne Anne-Kat Hærland, at the time the hostess of the show “Nytt på Nytt” on NRK, the Norwegian public broadcaster.

undoubtedly saw themselves as being outside of the game. Eventually, the team and its star, chose to leave rather than fight, and in the later report that aired on TV the scene by the temple is the final one.

The siege of the Real Life Café

The “TV team incident” was followed by several more incidents and constant tension. The climactic moment came on Saturday, when the RLC tried – unsuccessfully – to resolve tensions by holding a speech directed towards the *bergboer* from the platform of their café. Mid-speech, the café was stormed by 20+ citizens, and the RLC spent the rest of the larp on their platform in a state of siege, reduced to a symbol of the Enemy: those who had cast us out, or those from whom we sought isolation.

In retrospect, it seems obvious that the presence of a Real Life Company intruding on the grounds of AmerikA’s outcast society would lead to conflict. But the organisers had not intended this. The RLCs dramaturgical function was to provide a way for part-time characters to enter

- AmerikAns playing war-drums on a discarded pipe.

Photo

Britta Bergersen



the larp – its symbolic function was to embody the contrast between rich and poor, haves and have-nots, garbage producers and garbage collectors. That this contrast ended up as actual conflict is, at least in part, due to one of those small misunderstandings that can have big consequences at a larp.

How real is an unreal contract?

AmerikA had an owner – the character of the “Trash Baron”. She owned the ground upon which AmerikA stood, ran the garbage dumping business, and gave the *bergboer* permission to stay there in return for a small rent and other services. The Baron was the highest-status character in the game, and we were instructed that when the Baron said “jump!”, we jumped. The organisers had intended for the RLC to be present under the Trash Barons protection, and communicated this by holding a mini-larp where RLC and the Baron agreed on the terms of protection. At that mini-larp, agreement was reached, and the RLC promised to send a formal contract for the Baron to sign. During the time that passed between the mini-larp and AmerikA, no contract was produced. The RLC players saw this as an “off-game” matter – that the contract had been sent, read and signed without the need to role-play. The Baron’s court interpreted it as an in-game matter – that no such contract existed. Subsequently, when push came to shove at the larp, the RLC found itself without the Baron’s protection.

This begs the question: would things have happened differently, if this misunderstanding had not occurred? I doubt it. The “TV Team Incident” was situated on the border between in-game and off, characters and their players. The camera crew in all likelihood thought of themselves as off-game observers, and the behaviour interpreted as arrogant and provocative by the characters was merely the behaviour of professionals doing their job documenting people they thought of as actors.

When the players chose to interpret the camera crew as in-game, and express their hostility towards them through fairly real-looking

physical role-play, a boundary was crossed. The players did not disobey any formal rules of the larp, but they asserted their right to decide what was diegetic – a power traditionally held by the larpwright or gamesmaster. Similarly, the characters did not disobey the Baron’s orders, as no such orders were given, but they claimed AmerikA as their territory in unambiguous terms. This was AmerikA’s Rubicon moment – from that point, there was no turning back. I suspect that if the trash baron had subsequently proclaimed the RLC to be under her protection, she would not have stopped the rebellion but would instead have become a target of it.

Performing in the public space

AmerikA’s biggest claim to innovation was its situation in public space, asking its participants to simultaneously be role-players and actors, to play for the sake of their own experience and for the observers. What were the consequences of this experiment?

My own immediate experience was that it was extremely demanding. The moment I walked out from the bus wreck that was my in-character home, I felt the burden of all those eyes observing, felt that every move I made mattered (and needed to be well-executed), saw myself from the outside. It was not stage fright, but rather the exhaustion that comes from performing a difficult and demanding task combined with the immersion-breaker of constantly thinking about your role-play from the outside.

Even harder than role-playing against other larpers in public view was role-playing against customers in Aronsen’s Second Hand Antiques – we found it both tiresome, and ultimately impossible, to role-play our borderline lunatic characters against audiences who did not even pretend that they believed in our play. A role-played outburst of anger, for example, would be met with polite laughter from the “customer”, who saw all of this as entertaining, and did not even acknowledge that she had just been insulted by an angry shopkeeper. The customer’s behaviour

constantly negated our own. Eventually we gave up, and closed the shop to the outside.

The performers, the role-players and those in-between

Was my experience shared by all? Certainly not. Most players felt the pressure of performance, and many commented that they took frequent off-game breaks, a usual no-no at Norwegian larps, as a way to handle that pressure. But while some, otherwise capable, players withdrew into the shadows others – equally capable – received a boost from the limelight, and excelled when role-playing in the open spaces. A third group – perhaps the majority – felt the public role-play to be tiresome, yet nonetheless meaningful, and carefully alternated between public play, private play and off-game breaks.

This did not amount to an ideal larp experience, rather to several smaller episodes of meaningful play interspersed by off-game breaks. For me, the high points were individual meetings with other *bergboer* characters in the privacy of their shacks and tents. For a more extravert friend who played Peder P, Aronsen's stuttering wreck of an assistant, the high point was a romantic dinner, held in public view in the central space of AmerikA on a candle-lit table made of trash, seated on old toilets, where his shy, inept character managed to conduct a shy, inept and highly endearing date with a woman he referred to as "an angel". It was a beautiful private moment, viewed by thousands.

AmerikA confirmed, on one hand, that live role-playing can be done in front of an audience and remain meaningful to both role-players and viewers. But conversely, our experiences demonstrated that the skills and motivations required to enjoy and succeed at such performative play are not the same as those required to enjoy and succeed at a regular larp. In the years after AmerikA, I have several times seen experienced theatre actors entering their first larp – and withdrawing, due to exhaustion, after a few hours of highly intense role-playing. Their challenge seems to be the



- A romantic dinner, Amerika-style.

Photo
Britta Bergersen

same as ours, inverted. If any conclusion can be drawn from this, it is that “role-playing” and “acting” are two separate modes of behaviour and not subclasses of each other.

What leads some players to adopt a performative style of role-play, while others do not? Can these skills be learned? Can larps be designed so as to be fully enjoyable both as performances to be watched and role-play to be participated in, or must there always be a trade-off? Alas – Amerika does not give us enough information to provide any clear answers, except that the field remains problematic.



Hindsight is 360°

A surreal slum city in the centre of Oslo: surely this is media fodder? Yes, and no. Press coverage was disappointing, to say the least. Few took the event seriously, the journalists dispatched were mostly hacks, and the most significant coverage allotted to the larp came from the aforementioned “Nytt på nytt”, a TV programme devoted to low-brow satire. The carefully planned media strategy – based on trading exclusivity for quality coverage – fell apart before the larp started, when some journalists managed to get hold of three volunteer builders, grabbed some quick quotes and photos, and thereby “scooped” the event – obliterating interest from

- A player/character resting outside of the limelight.

Photo
Britta Bergersen

the rest of the media. In the end, AmerikA left a far smaller imprint on the public record than it had on the city of Oslo.

But what of the players? One explanation for AmerikA's relative obscurity might have been that it wasn't particularly enjoyable as a role-playing experience. Player reports vary, as they always do, and some reported very intense experiences. Still – the reviews, the few of them that made it into written form, and the many I have heard orally, were highly mixed. While organisers were thanked for their sacrifices, the words “Best”, “Larp”, “Ever” – that are routinely spoken after even mediocre larps – are conspicuously absent from AmerikA reviews. While the players of the *bergboer* were generally satisfied, though not always enthusiastically so, several of the outer rings of the onion were dissatisfied.

The conflict against the Real Life Company was important to the *bergboer*, but damaged the larp of the RLC players, who spent most of their time as besieged observers on the café roof, unable to realize any of the activities they had planned pre-larp. After the larp had started, players who had received “tacked-on characters” realized they were neither important nor particularly welcome – and felt, perhaps, unfairly treated. From several different angles, there were complaints that the “plots” left their characters with too little or too much to do.

Many of AmerikA's characters were deep, complex and well-defined, but the dramaturgy and social structures rehearsed old larp clichés, built over simple conflicts (“Group A and Group B are eternal enemies”) and puzzle plots (“someone has found the lottery ticket/Ring of Power/magic trinket – but who? Not everyone is who they pretend to be”). These “plots” ended up focusing on a few characters and institutions – which were actively sought out by others, leading to a severe imbalance in activity. In terms of aesthetics it was, to quote one artist who walked off the street and into AmerikA to join the larp movement, the “most important thing to happen in Norwegian art since Munch”. But as a larp, as role-played experience, it wasn't particularly memorable.

The political project of AmerikA was also lampooned by one sanctionious reviewer on the laiv.org webforum:

“How many of us left for Prague? How many stayed to clean away the trash? How many used plastic cutlery during the larp? How many are still drinking Coca Cola? How many have seen the garbage they themselves are made of?

Those numbers should tell us how good this was. And from what I have seen this far, we haven’t come a single step further”.

This critique, of co-players as much as organisers – is instructive, because it illustrates how little consensus there was in the feedback. Players criticized AmerikA *and each other* from wildly different angles, complaining about unfulfilled expectations: it was not a good enough larp, it was not a good enough performance. It did not keep its promise of innovative character-work, or it was too untraditional and difficult to play. It didn’t have enough “plots” or it shouldn’t have had “plots”. It was too political, it was not political enough. Every participant, every organiser, had their own unique dream of AmerikA. The communications, pre-larp, were well-written but ambiguous, making it easy for players to project wildly different expectations onto the larp. In the end, the fulfilment of any one dream would have to come at the expense of the others.

“How did it come to this?”

The radical seed idea, that of a politically and artistically transformative mega-larp held in the centre of Oslo, was impossible to achieve with the limited resources available to the Weltschmerz founders. As the project progressed, and ever-greater hurdles were encountered, the initiators took to selling off chunks of the vision, piecemeal, in return for a chance to realize it.



- Amerika as it appeared from the terrace overlooking Youngstorget.

Photo

Britta Bergersen

When human resources were insufficient, more and more people were brought on board and given the authority to make any decision in their domain. Amerika's dysfunctional dramaturgy was presumably caused by the fact that the character writers did not agree on what constituted a "good character" and a "good plot". Any one of their ideal dramaturgies might have worked, but the final mish-mash of dramaturgies and individual styles did not.

The greatest sacrifices were those made to secure funding for the larp. To prospective business sponsors, Amerika was sold as a grand spectacle, while political groups were assured of its meaning as a protest against consumerism and inequality while the artists who worked as scenographers were assured of its artistic purity. To the wider Oslo larp scene,



AmerikA was sold simply as a huge promotion of live role-playing itself. In this way, volunteers and paying players were recruited, and both were needed to get the accounts to balance, but the artistic and political edge of the project was dulled. In order to accommodate the wider larp scene which supported AmerikA, any mention of art and politics was eviscerated from the media strategy. But as one organiser confessed to me a few weeks before the larp: “We are whoring ourselves off to anyone who can offer the slightest bit of help”.

Things might have been different had AmerikA obtained a single large grant or single large sponsor early on. At the very least, it would have freed core organisers from the chores of fundraising and left them free to focus on actually making the larp. But the major funders of Norwegian

art and culture declined the applications sent by AmerikA, and the final budget had to be pieced together from an overwhelming number of other sources.

Judging the garbage pile

From the previous chapters, it is tempting to conclude that AmerikA was a failure, or at least a mediocrity. However: we do not judge a theatre play by how much the actors enjoy it. Is it then right to judge a public spectacle such as AmerikA by discussing the quality of “characters” and “plots”, by the metric of “player experience”?

I have neglected one group in my summary of reviews above: the observers. What was their outcome of the larp? Since we do not know their names or how to contact them, we cannot know. But what drove them to stay perched on the balcony a whole weekend, through rain and cold and darkness, to watch us role-play? Surely they were not watching a failure.

AmerikA tried to succeed as a larp, as a political demonstration, and as an art project, and I think it succeeded admirably on at least two of those accounts. As a larp, it was certainly imperfect, but innovative larps are never perfect. The project’s story, of organisers struggling with the impossibility of their ambitions, is similar to those of *Kybergenesis*, *Trenne Byar*, *Futuredrome* and *Dragonbane*. The first two are generally regarded as important milestones in Norwegian arthaus larp and Swedish fantasy respectively. Only timing and happenstance separates them from the latter two, which have a more mixed legacy.

AmerikA might have been a flawed role-playing experience. But it was, as many players commented, a great experience – living, for three days, in the pulsating, magical garbage-world, Art and Discovery and the Sense of Wonder behind every corner, fascinating stories being enacted by every person you meet. Had all pretensions at role-play been dropped, had

it been announced as a “Burning Man”-style festival in the centre of Oslo, would it have been better thought of? Probably, but “AmerikA the trash art festival” could never have been held without the resources of the larp scene – and without the role-playing, I think it would have been a poorer event.

I think it is safe to claim that it succeeded as art, as an aesthetic spectacle of multiple meanings to be observed and perhaps interacted with, and that this success was made possible only by it also being a larp with political ambitions.

When I summarize the player reviews, it should also be kept in mind that most of the players never posted a review, and most of the reviews posted were strangely fragmented, oscillating between praise and criticism, discussing random details but not the whole. Offline conversations have left me with the same impression: that something central is missing in our evaluation of AmerikA. We were asking whether AmerikA was a good or bad larp, and clearly it was both, but the question we really wanted to discuss was: “what did it all mean”?

Legacy and prophecy

With the benefit of eight years of hindsight, I can try to answer that question, and at the same time assess whether AmerikA was successful as a political project.

“How many of us left for Prague?” asked the sanctimonious reviewer above, and he was referring to the anti-IMF and World Bank protests that would occur a week after AmerikA. These were the European extension of an anti-globalization movement that had reached the West in the autumn of 1999, as AmerikA was on the drawing board, when a loose coalition of labour unions, anarchists and environmentalists succeeded in shutting down the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle.

While not many AmerikAns left for Prague, many joined the movement in the autumn of 2000 and spring of 2001, becoming founding members and core activists of the Norwegian branches of Attac, the

Independent Media Centre and Adbusters. In the summer of 2001, during the protests against the EU ministerial meeting, I walked with some fellow larpers through the streets of Gothenburg, every shop closed, police helicopters hovering overhead, and we reflected on how very larp-like this all was, how like AmerikA.

There was a spirit of angry optimism underlying those outbursts of aggressive protest. The conflicts of the anti-globalization movement were not new – what was new was the sense that it was finally time to do something about them. The age of global cold wars and local despotism was over, and it was time to direct our attention to matters higher up on the moral scale. The punks in Seattle, the Brazilian land squatters, the Korean farmers, were fighting the same angrily optimistic battle as the citizens of AmerikA throwing out the Real Life Company. It was a fight not over money and resources and ideology, but rather for a way of life, for the right to be poor and self-governed, however imperfectly, rather than middle class and enslaved.

In this sense, AmerikA was both prophetic and a self-fulfilling prophecy – pre-empting the global justice movement that would not fully arrive in Norway until some months later, partially with the help of radicalized larpers.

Were we influenced by AmerikA in our subsequent activism? Perhaps. If AmerikA's goal had been to manipulate its players into adopting such political persuasions, it would have succeeded admirably. But, as discussed initially, the larp's vision and content were so ambiguous that any claim of intentional manipulation falls apart. Rather: AmerikA became a political discussion by other means, a place where the aesthetic, philosophical and activist threads of the new politics were brought together, and digested by players through their own contributions and conclusions. AmerikA was where we met, and where these ideas met, and where they passed from abstractions into the world of embodied experience.

In another sense, too, AmerikA would be both prophetic and self-fulfilling prophecy: loudly and aggressively proclaiming the arrival of larp as a superior, participatory, form of art. When Swedish larpwright-turned-

pervasive game producer Martin Ericsson shouted “Fuck passive entertainment!” from the stage of the 2008 Emmy Awards, he was paraphrasing a slogan that had first appeared on AmerikA posters eight years earlier.

From angry optimism to defeated pessimism

The “global justice”, or anti-globalization, movement is still around. But it lost its momentum, optimism and spirit of inevitability when two planes crashed in New York in September 2001 and the global political climate changed. The vision of America which was mirrored in the Real Life Company – a well-meaning technocracy, oppressive only in its belief that consumerism and suburban villas were the birthright and duty of all mankind – has been replaced by the image of a wounded giant, full of vengeance as it falls. Recent years have shown the Europe of civil wars, ethnic cleansing, and dehumanizing bureaucracy – which was subsequently mirrored in the larp Europa – to be far more plausible than the angry optimism of AmerikA.

I think this is the reason we do not talk about AmerikA. Every day, the news reminds us of Europa (*asylum seekers drowning in the Gibraltar, neo-nazis throwing Molotov cocktails at houses of prayer*), or of 1942 (*tanks rolling into Tskhinvali, bomber planes hovering ominously over Baghdad*), or of a dozen other dark and brutal and war-like larps that have been played in the years before and after AmerikA.

But as for AmerikA, the brief and imperfect and aggressive glimpse it provided of an autonomous Utopia, a place where dignity could walk in rags, and the Real Life Company could be defeated; that vision was so fragile, so fleeting, that we cannot think back on it without feeling embarrassingly naïve.

And ultimately, I propose, that is why AmerikA deserves to be remembered: We have had enough of tragedies and dystopias, in larp as in real life. Fuck passive art! It’s time to resurrect the magically real.

Fun for everybody?

Katri Lassila

17

PLAY

STATEMENT

What does fun mean in a live action role-playing game? The idea of *fun* differs from player to player, from larp-writer to larp-writer. What is fun for one person can be depressing for another and stressing for a third one. Sometimes your personal history and childhood reveal what you experience as “fun” as a grown up. Sometimes your everyday life provides the tools to understand what you need in order to get the maximum enjoyment out of a game. The important thing as a game writer is to understand your players’ needs and try to fulfill them as well as you can. As a player, it is important to recognize what is fun for you and inform your directors about it.

I propose that the game writing should be an opportunity for both – the players and the directors – to express themselves in a social and creative way with each other, while considering the respective needs in cooperation.

Why do we play live action role-playing games? I cannot speak for others, but at any rate for me the reasons have stayed the same ever since I started. They can be put in an order, starting from the early childhood, when I played Robin Hood with my friends, attacked the cowboys as an Indian warrior or was kidnapped by the evil Black Knight as a medieval princess. I never had difficulties imagining the forest near my parents' house as the Forest of Sherwood, or the beautiful Finnish archipelago as the Great Lakes in North America. My little sister, six years younger, was sometimes Little John, sometimes servant or – more seldom – the High Queen herself. Then I was her loyal bodyguard, lethally wounded in the fight against the rebels. I continued playing till I was quite old, as my sister needed somebody to play with and I enjoyed it so deeply.

I was in my teens when I first read *The Lord of the Rings* (eleven times in a row, actually) and felt the urge to plunge deeper into the adventure myself. The films were the next natural step. I saw *The Last of the Mohicans* in the movie theatre seven times. I cried every single time when Uncas died in the end.

The urge for the adventure kept growing, and neither movies nor literature seemed powerful enough to boost my imagination anymore. Then I discovered tabletop role-playing games and got along with the adventures in the oldest Finnish role-playing club, *Kaksi Kuuta ry*¹. For a couple of years, the adventures around the table were enough.

When I was seventeen I went on a student exchange in Québec, French-speaking Canada, for a year. There I started to play live action role-playing with my friends. “Live Donjon”, as it was called there, nearby Montréal, was arranged in the woods and imitated the adventures of the tabletop games, with demons, vampires and wizards. The rules were always simple, based on hit point values and attack bonuses. The small forest in the peaceful village of Lorraine was the usual venue for the games and the dragon's scales were made of old car tyres. Childhood was still not too distant and the more complex plots weren't needed.

¹ *Kaksi Kuuta ry* (The Two Moons) is the oldest active Finnish role-playing club, started by four friends in Vihti in 1983. One of the original founder members later used to run the role-playing club at the University of Helsinki. The *Kaksi Kuuta* club started playing with *Dungeons and Dragons* (the first edition) brought from the US. Since then, they have been playing a wide range of tabletop and card games, the third generation of players gathering every Sunday afternoon. The club organised its first larp, *kaksivirtain kartano* (The Mansion of the Two Rivers) to celebrate its 15th birthday in the autumn of 1998.



As we grow up and get more experience in playing, the stakes get higher. As adults, we start to build more interesting stories in the games, longer characters, and surprising plots. We debate over the immersion or the pervasion. We take along pastiches from history, literature and art. We use techniques from the field of theatre or psychological research. The game itself is not enough anymore, but we are eager to tie it together with art, performance, or science. Why?

Some years ago I wrote a column in the *Roolipelaaja* magazine, where I questioned the idea of putting larp in the category of art or in a scientific context as at that time I did not understand why we needed to talk about the subculture related to art or science. Were we afraid that otherwise it would not be serious enough? Were we afraid not to be taken seriously when playing as adults? Was that the reason why the role-play research has become so important? Does it come from the need of giving the act of role-playing the credibility it would not otherwise hold?

Role-playing research in all its forms is undeniably a very interesting area. For some reason, however, all the research-based live action role-playing games I have been involved in have been more or less boring. The heat of adventure has been long gone. If I am to impersonate a deceived servant or a dying patient in a hospital, a war prisoner or a teacher in need of sex, I can enjoy that immensely. But for that I need the different levels of the game. I usually want to experience also the meta-level, the adventure outside the plot, immerse myself in the history behind it and distance myself to see the idea from the outside. The older I get, the more I want to hold the strings instead of taking all in as if I were blindfolded. The little particles of the game seem to be sometimes too similar compared to each other, as a great number of the usual plots of a game have been used as a rule in several others before. What makes the game unique is the whole, and I feel that the more experienced we get, the more we are able to enjoy the game as a whole.

- Troll and dryad from the romanticist larp Albión, which mixed the legend of Robin Hood, William Shakespeare's *The Midsummer Night's Dream* and Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*

Photo
Tuomas Hakkarainen
Erkki Tapola

Dead-serious confessing of my sins in the family gathering is not exactly my idea of fun, adventure or of a larger-than-life –experience. And that is why I larp in the end: To get the experiences I am not getting in my real life. And as my life has never been exactly dull, I find it more difficult, the older I get, to enjoy too realistic larps. At least the story should be level with the most fascinating novels of our history. And here we start with a problem, as very few of us are writers equal to Arthur Conan Doyle, Emily Brönte or James Fenimore Cooper.

I bang my head against the wall every time I try to create stories interesting enough for my players. Despite having arranged several games, I am still light-years away from my goal.

But even when I'm not enjoying impersonating an inactive wife sitting by the fire waiting for her husband to return from the hunting trip (why are still most of the inactive characters given to women, I wonder?), somebody else would probably enjoy that immensely. In a similar situation I first noticed how greatly the idea of “fun” differs from person to person. And it really does, more than you could imagine. It does not make much difference if you are man or woman, gay or straight. It is about the person, the player only, I have come to notice.

The Players as Characters

In my experience there are several different types of players, and all the types need different resources or stories in order to have fun from the game. Roughly, I tend to divide the larping people in five different categories. Of course the categories are in reality as many as the players, but for simplicity's sake I limit myself to the following ones:

1. The Adventure/Action/Romance Addicts

In this category I put part of myself. The “fisherman’s wife” characters² are not cut out for these persons. They need interesting and active characters, fights, kidnappings, quarrels, melodrama; they are able to solve big issues like the democracy’s future or the War Demon’s summoning. The adventure players are sometimes able to see the different levels in the game and use them wisely. By levels I am referring to the different layers of the game plots. We see the plots of the character, but also through the style of the game or the hints of the directors we are able to get a bigger picture. The different levels enrich the game: the narrative style of the characters, for instance tells us the style in which the game is supposed to be played. A wise player recognizes the meanings behind the given information or the hints in the text and uses them for everybody’s enjoyment. If addicted to romance, these players are easy to satisfy. Write a tragic triple drama or a Romeo & Juliet-story, and the players will enjoy the whole game. Often people with too little action in their real love life play these characters, or the ever-desperate romantics, like myself. Drama queens/kings fall often in this category, as they enjoy being in the center of the action.

2. The Meta-players

This is the other category I belong to. The meta-players see without difficulties the levels of the game. They are able to solve the mysteries nestled in the style of the game and use their knowledge of the intended playing style to create a more enjoyable experience for everybody. Some people are not capable of contemplating their character’s actions from the outside at all, and that normally gives a lot of headache to the directors, as sometimes it is necessary to judge the game by the drama and not by the personal victory or defeat of your character.. Meta-players are the opposite. They can be described as adult players. For them, the whole of the game is more important than the success or failure of their character. It is important to remind them that they are still players and not directors, and that

² The Fisherman’s Wife is a term created by Laura Kalli and used first at Ropecon 2003 to describe a dull character, as opposed to a character written by the standards of the adventurous romanticism. Fisherman’s Wife is a side character, with no plots or great interaction, coming from a character whose idea in a game was to sit by the fire, sew a net and wait for her husband to return from the sea. Similar characters with equally thin personalities can be found in most of the larps in soldiers, guards, servants, general’s wives etc. The goal should be to replace these fill-in characters with the helping players, as instructed by the directors.

they should not look after the others too much. Still, they are often able to dive deep into the emotions of their character and experience strongly all the feelings.

3. The Immersionists³

The opposite of the meta-players, in the sense that they are not capable of seeing the others in the game, but still play their character deeply from the inside. They reach the goals if necessary, but they often consider that as secondary to playing the character, being the character. The character's emotions are for them of the utmost importance. They are not interested in the game of the others, but are more than wonderful game companions as they are able to enjoy themselves and swim in the deep waters of their character's soul, often needing little guidance. They are usually easy players to cope with, as long as the director remembers that they act solely in their character.

4. The Munchkins

Yes, I think that there are munchkins also in the field of larp. Even though that normally means that the person in question only lacks some amount of imagination. The person acts based on the character's success and strives to achieve as much goods/riches/status/experience as possible. He/she (but in my experience way more often "he") is not able to see the big picture, nor act for the greater good of the story. That is the evil wizard you fired ten times with a lightning bolt and still he stands. Or Doctor Moriarty, who in the end should have fallen from the cliff but who didn't, and not because of the character's remarkable stamina, but because of the stubbornness of the player. I avoid these players at any cost. Given their strong character, one single munchkin can cause a great deal of suffering and even the death of the game. Players of this kind are the main reason why all my games are based on invitation. If a player acts destructively

³ I am not referring to an immersionist here as a player who is able to feel the character's feelings, but to a stereotype of a player, who sees the game from only his/hers character's point of view. The ability to feel the character's emotions is indeed strongly recommended and achieved by most of the experienced players, as I have noticed. Therefore there is no reason to divide players into immersionist and non-immersionist categories, as immersion can be reached by several different means and strategies. For most of the players it seems that the easiest way is the interaction with other characters, as I think that larp has always something to do with interaction and social relationships.

on purpose, I do not see a reason to let him mess about in the sandbox. The fun in larp is possible only if everybody plays along and follows certain rules. The rules in larps might sometimes be looser than in tabletop role-playing games, but they are equally important. If a player shows the signs of munchkinism, it is possible to save the situation by giving him/her some really unimaginably well-paying goal, which would completely satisfy the lusting for success.

5. The Shy Ones

Most of the larpers I know in Finland have been bullied in childhood. Some more, some less, but most of them in some ways. That is why there are also players who do not feel comfortable being in social situations. The shyness sometimes decreases with experience and age, but for some people it is still an issue difficult to deal with. In larp that means normally that a shy player does not wish to draw attention to him/herself in any way. The plots or ideas allocated to those types are sometimes in vain, as they only wait for the right moment to confess their dirty secrets to such lengths that the game ends. I avoid giving strong leading characters to these players, as they sometimes end up suffering more than having fun. It is wise to ask in advance about the player's preferences concerning characters. I prefer to discuss personally with all the players what their wishes are, or, if the characters are written together with the players, encourage them to tell me openly about their ideas and expectations. It is not the director's duty to change a player's nature; it comes in due time, if it happens at all. It is difficult sometimes, as you never know if they really are enjoying the game or not. But if you just trust that they are, and encourage them a little in advance, they may find all new tools from the game to open up a little bit in the real life. In larp it's easier, for instance, to give a speech in public, as the speaker can hide behind the character and the audience is consisting mostly of his or her friends.

As it is customary with narrow categories, few of us fit solely into one. Normally you find a bit of yourself in at least two, sometimes



■ Characters from Albión.

Photo:
Tuomas Hakkarainen
Erkki Tapola

even in all of them, as it happens with the character tests in magazines. Nevertheless, sometimes such categories prove a useful tool to understand what elements in a game provide the most fun for each and every player.

The Quest for a Larp More Fun

My idea of writing a larp is player-based. The fun is what the director wants to provide for the players and for him/herself. The fun of creating a world, the stories, and the fun for the players who actually enact the game. I do not intend to educate my players, nor use them as part of my art or of my research. If they pay for my game, they are paying customers, treated with respect as long as they treat me well, and they must get what they pay for.

What makes the task easier nowadays is age and experience. My players are older, they know what they like and are able to say it. They have been playing for a long time and they jump easily into their characters. They are kind, helpful and cooperative, willing to give their best in the game. They enjoy the game as much as the social circle around it. Usually I have not been satisfied with the games I have created, even when most players were contented. The goal of offering a remarkable experience in a short one-shot game is not an easy task. Maybe the challenge is just what keeps me going.

I wonder whether it would be possible to set up a game where everything would work perfectly? Is it possible to create a fun game for everybody, starting from myself and spreading to every single player? When we find out what fun means for a single player and for the director, it is then and only then that we are able to customize the same game individually for everyone, by carefully choosing the right plots and characters for the right players. It is then possible to reach the ultimate fun. The individual game design sounds like quite a complex task; it certainly is not the easiest one, but I think that it gives more than it takes. Of course this technique is not applicable to games with hundreds of players, but here the question arises: Do we really need games that big? In my opinion, if what is needed is the mass effect, then the crowds of similar soldiers should be played by the helping characters, not by the individually written ones. The game individually designed for each and every player? It seems impossible, you may say. Let's give it a try, I answer.