



Larp Realia

Analysis, Design, and Discussions of Nordic Larp

Edited by Jukka Särkijärvi, Mika Lopenen, and Kaisa Kangas

Solmukohta 2016
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■ Jukka Särkijärvi and Mika Lopenen

Introduction

Twenty years is a long time. Twenty years ago, we were barely Neanderthals of larp. Out of our caves, discovering fire by accident. Soon, boffer wheels followed, and before we could blink an eye, we have entered the space age of larp theory. Solmukohta 2016 marks the conference’s fifth complete circuit, and we are reaching for the stars. We haven’t been making books that long (we had barely found written word in those ancient times), but we’re catching up. Larp analysis, theory, and design documentation have flourished, and we are living in the golden age of what larp can achieve. This year’s Solmubooks, *Larp Politics* and *Larp Realia*, are dedicated to celebrating both the journey and what is yet to come. While *Larp Politics* concentrates on the political aspects of larp, *Larp Realia* takes a look into what has been, how it has been achieved, and how we can proceed.

Thus, we have organized this book into three chapters. In the first, *Analysis*, writers tell of the lessons, sometimes surprising, that their larps have taught them. Mike Pohjola writes of the seven-country larp campaign *Baltic Warriors* and the challenges of adapting the same game to the cultures and play styles of different nations. Josefin Westborg discusses using larp to educate teenagers about norm criticism, racism, and GLBTIQ issues. Siri Sandquist, in turn, tells how she gender-flipped the classic *Mad About the Boy* with unexpected results that nevertheless lay bare the hidden assumptions about gender in our culture. Nathan Hook gives us a rundown of how his psychodrama scenario larp form was developed. From Spain, we hear of the larps *la sirena varada* and *Fillos do Trono*. As José Castillo Meseguer tells us, *la sirena varada* is an example of how larp can inspire players to create art within the game. Finally, Laksmi Irigoyen Regueiro uses the Galician historical larp *Fillos do Trono* as a case study in her theory that examines the building blocks of story.

The middle chapter, *Design*, is in many ways the meat of this book. It is the collection of practical

ideas and “how to” guides, some tried and tested, some still theoretical, for actually making these wonderful games of ours. To begin with, we have Theo Axner and Susanne Vejdemo tell us how to turn meetings and palavers into rewarding game content. At the other end of the spectrum of human communication, Kamil Bartczak tells us how to do the same with actual physical violence. The writing team Charles Bo Nielsen, Anders Gredal, Cécile Othon and Claus Raasted describes in two articles how they managed the character-writing processes of some positively enormous larp projects. Mikko and Minna Heimola discuss how they dabbled in the very flow of time in two historical larps, and how it worked in the end. Bartek Ziolo pinpoints what makes Skyrim such an excellent game and muses on how it could be adapted into a larp. Simo Järvelä talks about designing against experiential uncertainty. Janou Brouwer finishes this chapter with an article on space and how players used it in an unexpected manner.

Finally, we come to *Ongoing Discussion*, a selection of articles that contribute to or serve as excellent starting points for discussions in the field of Nordic larp. Bleed has been a hot topic these past few years; Martine Svanevik and Simon Brind have studied how it can hit even before the game. Christopher Amherst continues analysing the results of the Larp Census, this time from the angle of representation and community. Sonja Karlsson’s article opens up the discussion on how larp can intersect with law and things we might want to consider before that happens, while Jamie Harper takes us to the meeting points and dissimilarities of larp and interactive theatre. Lastly, Kristina Leipoldt and Larson Kasper provide us with a moment-by-moment reflection of cooperating with Syrian larps – complete with the first recipe in any Solmubook!

So welcome! Please join us in these reflections; we sincerely hope they will add to the ongoing discussion, spark new ideas, and provide new foundations for future insights.

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We would also like to thank our intrepid proofreaders, Tonja Goldblatt, Minna Hiltula, Mo Holkar, Risto Paalanen, Mari Saarhelo, and Markku “Markku Vesa” Vesa.

We are most grateful for Solmukohta 2016, without whom this book would not have been possible, and the editors and writers of previous event books. It is a good tradition we are joining.

Analysis

■ Mike Pohjola

Baltic Warriors: A Participatory Documentary

“Of course the epidemic of zombie Vikings is a problem, but we must also consider the needs of the economy. How many jobs are we willing to lose to combat the zombie Vikings?”

Baltic Warriors is a transmedia project dealing with the problem of eutrophication in the Baltic Sea. I see *Baltic Warriors* as a participatory documentary, a framework within which participants can engage with the facts and reality of the environmental challenges of the Baltic Sea. Since *Baltic Warriors* is a transmedia project, participation happens in many different ways, through different media.

In the summer of 2015, we made seven larps in seven countries as part of the wider *Baltic Warriors* project. In the process, *Baltic Warriors* became the most international larp campaign in the world. I was responsible for designing both the transmedia project and the larps we ran in 2015. This article deals with some of the design ideas present.

Baltic Warriors was a participatory documentary and a work of transmedia. It consisted of several overlapping media – the most prominent of these being larp. The larps themselves bordered on political satire, but were grounded on reality by a scientific framework and a panel discussion with real experts after each game.

Mythologization

How can a documentary about the Baltic Sea have zombie Vikings? Won't that make it fiction? What do zombie Vikings have to do with eutrophication? These are the questions that immediately spring to mind when hearing our tagline, “an ecological transmedia documentary about zombie Vikings.”

“Mythologization” means restatement of a message as a myth. We restated the message of “eutrophication causes dead zones” with the myth of “zombie Viking.” In the fiction of *Baltic Warriors*, the explanation went like this: Eutrophication causes anoxic dead zones deep within the Baltic Sea. Since sunken sailors cannot decompose without oxygen, they are perfectly preserved. Now they are moving again, and these underwater undead attack cities on the coast.

The dead zones and eutrophication are intangible subjects difficult to describe and even harder to show visually. We see their direct and indirect causes – such as the algal blooms and the lack of edible fish – but cannot really show them. We definitely cannot interact with them in a larp.

The zombie Vikings, on the other hand, are a powerful image that we take as representative of the Dead Zones and eutrophication. When we said “Zombie Viking,” the participants would interpret it as “eutrophication.”

To minimize the risk of trivializing important issues, we made sure to have our facts straight. We had plenty of scientific and activist background material. Everything had to point to the actual cause of revitalizing the dead zones and changing the policies that create them.

Thus we mythologized the problem to make it more tangible. This helped both in participation and in visual representation.

Structure

Each event had the following structure: first briefing, then the game, and finally a debate.

The briefing usually included a short lecture on eutrophication and its causes and effects. The larp itself was divided into two parts - a political conference and the attack of the Viking zombies. After the game, real-life politicians, scientists, lobbyists, environmentalists, bureaucrats, and other experts took part in a debate and discussions.

In a typical *Baltic Warriors* game, the parliament is deciding upon a local issue connected to eutrophication. In St. Petersburg it was building a sewage treatment plant, in Sopot reopening a phosphorus dumping ground, in Stockholm curtailing agricultural emissions. The vote is tied, but some political parties have not made up their mind yet.

There are three politician characters from these parties, asking for citizen input at the event. Lobbyists from Baltic Balance, environmentalists from Committee for Saving the Baltic Sea from Eutrophication (CSBSE), and activists from Earth Without Borders, but also entrepreneurs, journalists,



Organizer Mike Pohjola played host to most of the events, here in Tallinn. Pre-game. Photo by Juhana Pettersson.

scientists, radicals, and concerned citizens, try to influence their decision. During the conference, there are plenty of opportunities for the characters to blackmail, threaten or bribe each other. The right-wing media personality Niko Drake (played by myself) hosts each event and tries to make the environmentalists look bad.

As the conference reaches its conclusion, the Viking zombies attack. This launches the second part of the larp. There is chaos and mayhem, attendees are turned into zombies one after another, everyone is running around. However, there is still time to bribe a few politicians or make sure your name does not get into papers.

As the zombies represent eutrophication, the way to defeat them is related to clean water. Carrying clean water in your hands protects you from the Viking zombies. Until the water leaks out. If the characters manage to carry enough clean water into a silver cup, and say the protective words, the Viking zombies will return to the sea.

And then the conference ends. The politicians tell how the votes from their party will be divided, and the attendees find out whether the proposal passes or fails. This finishes the larp.

The final part of the event is the debate. Real-life politicians, sometimes even Ministers, were present at the event. Other panelists included scientists, lobbyists, environmentalists, bureaucrats, and experts. I was representing the larper community and the motivations of the transmedia documentary.

Both the larp and the debate were filmed, and later compiled with interviews of the participants into a short video going through that event.

Continuity

These were not the same event run again and again, not exactly. It was also a campaign where the larps form a coherent storyline. With mostly new participants every time, it took some effort to get this through.

The characters were, broadly speaking, always the same. One of the politicians would have an ex-spouse present, and possibly their child as well. The child would be employed at a start-up of some sort. The spouse would be a lobbyist. The politician would have a horrible secret, and indeed, so would everybody else. But the names, genders, backgrounds, and motivations could be different.

For example, what is a horrible secret in one country (“I had an abortion!”) would not be an issue at all in another country. Sometimes conservative politicians would be in the government, sometimes in the opposition. In some countries religion played a significant role, at others it was completely absent. Of course, each time the players also interpreted their characters differently.

Before most larps we showed a few video compilations from previous games to set the mood, to introduce reappearing characters, and to give the players a sense of continuity. This worked fairly well, and the videos were also available online. Baltic Balance, CSBSE, and Niko Drake were present in every larp, and most larps had at least one other character from a previous larp. Participants from the Tallinn and Stockholm games joined the grande finale of the campaign, a bigger larp in Helsinki.

Players and organizers updated social media aggressively both in and off game during the run of the larps. Sometimes players would tweet in-character a while before the larp, or days after it. This also allowed players to search for content from previous larps and get vital clues on some of the plots. Social media posts are still visible with hashtags #balticwarriors and #bwingame.

We also employed a more traditional method, the book. The book was a combination of guest-book and clipbook. It had fictional news explaining the events of the previous larps. It had lists of signatures from previous characters. It had comments, claims and questions reaching from one larp to the next. After the event, the video documentation was published online to create closure for the participants of that larp and a teaser for those coming to the next one. This way the larps formed a part of a bigger whole.



Organizer Cecilia Dolk played a recurring activist character, this time in Tallinn. In-game. Photo by Jubana Pettersson.

Levels of Participation

The larps and debates were meant to be open for public, and most of the time happened in public spaces such as museums or galleries. The Danish larp happened outside, on Christiansborg Slotsplads right by the parliament, sharing the plaza with a big demonstration.

To make it easier to join in, we provided different levels of participation. The most intense one was participants signing up beforehand and receiving a character. Some of these were experienced larpers, others experts with no earlier participation experience.

Another possibility was to simply arrive at the location before the event and play a “concerned citizen”. These participants were told they’re attending a political conference on such and such issue and want to share their opinion. They were then given some opinions to choose from. Sometimes these concerned citizens became very vocal characters as the players threw themselves into the event.

The third level of participation was to simply arrive at the scene to witness the larp and the debate with no intention of interacting. These participants would also be concerned citizens but they had the option to just “watch the larp”, which is difficult for most participatory experiences.

In Kiel, the director of the museum wanted to “just watch”, but then agreed to play a concerned citizen, and then got so into it that she made key speeches at the event. Her concerned citizen never failed to mention that she was a mother of five.

There was also a fourth, almost accidental level of participation. Some people just wandered in without knowing there was a larp going on. This could happen at museums and other open venues. Sometimes these accidental participants would just watch, sometimes interact quite a lot with the characters. By the time the Viking zombies attacked, they would have figured out that it was fictional.

At the Historical Museum in Stockholm, a Romanian man walked in and started participating actively and completely in character. Afterwards he told us he’d had no idea what was happening.

Sometimes it was difficult to know who was who. In Kiel there was a 90-year-old man with a walker who followed the fictional debate for a long time. We were sure he was a gallery goer who got the wrong idea. Turned out he was related to one of the participants.

The participants were also encouraged to interact with outsiders. This ranged from demonstrators bumming our coffee in Copenhagen to Viking zombies chasing sunbathers on a Polish beach. It was also possible to participate completely online via social media, but this happened very little.



The zombie festival Zero Hour lent us their zombies for the Helsinki larp. In-game. Photo by Sigrid Reede.



Workshopping the zombie action. Pre-game. Photo by Pavel Matuszewski.

Gender and Ethnicity

We wanted the larp to represent each country in a nuanced, inclusive way. To not to impose inclusivity could have resulted to a situation where each character would have represented the ethnic majority of that country, men would have always been in positions of power, and queer characters would have been forgotten. (It could also have turned out fine every time, but we wanted to make sure.)

The solution to this was gender neutral characters and making sure ethnic minorities were included. Obviously, we were not familiar with the ethnic make-up of each nation, so this job was left to the local producers with the following instructions:

“When localizing the characters, notice that ethnic minorities should be represented as well. It doesn’t have to be overtly apparent, but they can be seen in, for example, names: Hagert is a Romani name, Länsman a Sami, von Rettig an old noble name, many characters have a Swedish last name, some might be of Russian, or German descent.

For an Estonian game, for example, having an Ingrian name, a Jem, a Romani, a Latvian, a Võro, and a Seto, might work. And several Russians, of course. We leave the job of finding the key minorities in each country to the local organizers, but we do want the minorities presented by many characters.”

Sometimes this produced the desired effects of inclusivity. At other times, some local players took it as a cue to play with harmful stereotypes: “Ah, I’m from a Finnish background, therefore I must be a violent drunk!”

Gender neutral casting is not uncommon in Nordic larps, and in this case it made it possible to cast each character to the player most suitable for it regardless of their gender. The characters could be any gender the players could pull off, typically their own. This was never seen as a problem as such, and the majority of politicians and other decision makers ended up being women.

The only slight problem was when it came to characters who had a romantic or sexual relationship with each other, such as being a married couple. Sometimes these relationships would be straight, sometimes queer. As far as we know, no player or organizer had a problem with this.

However, it did lead to a worrying scenario in Russia. We had two sixteen-year-old players in the larp. This was perhaps the only time we had minors in these larps. By coincidence, we also had two female characters in a long-term romantic partnership. Our local producer became a bit anxious when we wanted to invite politicians and the media to attend the event. After all, we would then have been a foreign agent spreading homosexual propaganda on the under-aged, an act punishable by imprisonment. Fortunately, we were not incarcerated.

■ Info

Baltic Warriors

Produced by Kinomaton

Made possible with the support of the Goethe-Institut

Producer Sarita Sharma

Creative producer Harmke Heezen

Transmedia and larp design Mike Pohjola

Larp producer Juhana Pettersson

Character writer Kaisa Kangas

Media and social media Cecilia Dolk

Documentation Jaak Kilmi & Petter Karlsson

Helsinki, Finland. Pilot. August 30, 2014. Allas.

Tallinn, Estonia. May 9, 2015. Suur-Töll. Local producer Aapo Reitsak.

St Petersburg, Russia. June 7, 2015. Taiga. Local producer Olga Vorobyeva.

Sopot, Poland. June 22, 2015. Klub Atelier. Local producer Piotr Milewski.

Kiel, Germany. July 11, 2015. Kiel Kunsthalle. Local producers David Pusch and Maite Ruizy-moreno.

Copenhagen, Denmark. August 8, 2015. Christiansborg. Local producer Claus Raasted.

Stockholm, Sweden. August 22, 2015. Historiska Museet. Local producer Cecilia Dolk.

Helsinki, Finland. September 12, 2015. Ateneum, Goethe-Institut, Rakennusmestareiden liitto. Partnership with Zero Hour.

As the host character Niko Drake, I tried to play against these sentiments. Drake was slightly racist, chauvinistic, pompous, and authoritarian. For example, he called all German women *Fräulein* (“Miss”), made disparaging comments of Estonians in Estonia, and downplayed all environmentalists in general. He was a sort of villain, after all.

Documentary Participation

The aim of the whole project was to increase awareness of the eutrophication of the Baltic Sea. A documentary film could have the same aim, while using different artistic methods to reach it.

A person passively watching a film might become more aware, but will have no first-hand experience in interacting with the topic. A participant who has delved into these issues and debated them (in a fictional environment) will be motivated to know more and will remember tackling them.

However, what we lacked was a proper call to action. This is something many documentary films and non-fiction books also lack, although some have it. “Okay, I’m aware! What do I do now?” We tried to come up with one in the planning stages, but found no easy answer.

Perhaps the best call to action would have been to attend a demonstration that’s just after the larp and really needs the larpers to be there. What also might have worked is something along the lines of: “Call this person and tell them to vote this way in Parliament!” Or: “Donate 10 euros to this NGO.”

In reality, our call to action relied on the participants being more aware of the situation, and of how it is handled. How decisions are made, how lobbyists and public opinion affect it, and what the end results are for the sea. There are ways to affect these things, such as working with NGOs and political parties, giving money to the right causes, changing the structures, and raising the awareness of others. And, of course, running these larps and writing these articles.

There are not many participatory documentaries in the world, but some larps and transmedia productions have certainly had similar aspirations. *Europa* (2001) explored life in a reception centre for asylum seekers. *Conspiracy for Good* (2010) raised money for building school libraries in Zambia. *Halat hisar* (2013) mirrored the lives of Palestinians living under occupation. There may be other examples, but the field is certainly not widely explored.

Sometimes giving two hundred people a very intimate feeling and knowledge about an issue is more powerful than giving two hundred thousand people a theoretical understanding of it. Often both are necessary.

■ Ludography

Baltic Warriors (2014-2015): Mike Pohjola, Juhana Pettersson, et al., Helsinki, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Kiel, Sopot, St Petersburg, Tallin, Helsinki. Organized as a part of project Baltic Warriors by Kinomaton Berlin in cooperation with the Goethe-Institut Finland. <http://www.balticwarriors.net/>

Conspiracy for Good (2010): Tim Kring, Christopher Sandberg, Martin Ericsson, Mike Pohjola, Staffan Jonsson, Tom Liljeholm, Bob Soderstrom, Daniel Chilla, Jim Martin, Zach Craley, et al., London. The company P, Tim Kring Entertainment, Nokia.

Europa (2001): Eirik Fatland, Irene Tanke et al., Vestby Norway.

Halat hisar (2013): Fatima Abdulkarim, Kaisa Kangas, Riad Mustafa, Juhana Pettersson, Maria Pettersson, and Mohamad Rabah, Parkano, Finland. Pohjoismaisen roolipelaamisen seura. <http://nordicrpg.fi/piiritystila/>

■ Josefin Westborg

Alfa/Omega A Larp About Norm Criticism for 14-year Old School Kids

We at LajvVerkstaden (the Larp Workshop) work a lot with doing edularps for schools. Most of our projects start with a request from a school. So did this one. A school contacted us and wanted help to get through to the teenagers when talking about norm criticism, gender roles, LGBTIQ and racism. They felt that it was hard to engage the teenagers and make them engaged in the subject. It easily became very preachy and teenagers are not good at listening to preaching. We decided to create a larp on the theme together with the teenagers to make it relevant for them. The larp is for 60 participants. There are always four from us at LajvVerkstaden and we have two to four teachers that also participate in the larp.

In this text I will start going through the fiction, after that I will explain the design the way it is today and then I will end with some reflections about the larp design and some of the choices we have made in the design.

The World

The larp ended up being a science fiction larp. It is set on the planet of Epsilon, which is a planet that in many ways resembles Earth, only more technologically advanced. Epsilon is a fascist society run by their president Thetys, who has been elected for over 20 years through rigged elections. Epsilon has a huge space fleet which they use in the ongoing war with another planet. There is a high military presence in everyday life. Religion is not important on Epsilon, but there is a caste system. They have what they call a “Tau”. There are two different Taus, Alfa and Omega. In the Epsilon culture, it is believed that you are born with your Tau but that it does not really show and manifest until you hit

puberty. Then you get to do a test to determine whether you are an Alfa or an Omega. Before you take the test, you are considered to have both Tau and are seen as a child – not a grown up. There are rumors that not everyone gets their Tau. This is mostly considered to be an urban legend, and if anyone from the government or police heard this kind of talk, you would be in great trouble. To define what it meant to be an Alfa or an Omega, we asked the teenagers to answer the following questions: What characteristics are important to succeed in society today? What characteristics are important but not very valued in our society today?

The answers to the first question became the description of an Alfa. We got answers such as: self-confident, social, independent, logical, proud, superior, have a big network, straightforward, and so on. The answers for the second question that describes an Omega ended up being: shy, soft, in need of structure, follows orders, submissive, caring, humble, indecisive, and so on. The way the Taus are seen is reflected in all of society. Alfas are the ones that have almost all higher positions when it comes to jobs. They are doctors, CEOs, lawyers, scientists, and so on, while Omegas are nurses, builders, cleaners, caretakers, and such. Alfas, of course, have higher salaries than Omegas. In every election Alfas have two votes, while Omegas have one. This is because Alfas are used to governing things and know more about how to run a country on a high scale than the Omegas do. There are more Omegas than Alfas in total. Up until 15 years ago, it was against the law for Alfas and Omegas to marry. You were supposed to stay within your own Tau. It is now legally possible, but it is still frowned upon by most of the society.

Since Epsilon is at war, they have compulsory military service for everyone. A lot of people stay in service after the mandatory period is over. Alfas as officers and Omegas as soldiers.

After school, all children and teenagers participate in *Thetys' Young Souls*, who are a cross between scouts and Hitler Jugend. In TYS, the young can earn stars by doing things that are approved of, and lose them by not behaving correctly.

The Larp

The larp is slightly modified after each larger run to make it better. There will already have been changes to the design compared to what is written here; however, at the time of writing, this is the latest version that has been played.

Characters

All pupils play teenagers on Epsilon. They get a name and a short text about their characters. Every character have three goals that they want to succeed with during the larp. That can be “I really want to become an alfa” or “You want to find someone else who is worried about their Tau and ending up in the wrong one.”

They get a certain number of stars that their characters have so far managed to collect in Thetys' Young Souls. The players from LajvVerkstaden play evaluation personnel sent out by the government to run the test. There are always two Alfas and two Omegas. One of the Alfas is very just, but the other one thinks Alfas are superior to Omegas. One of the Omegas is very considerate, and the other thinks it is wrong and disgusting to mix Alfas and Omegas. This will be used against the pupils during the larp. For example, some of the pupils' characters will have mixed parents, and this might be commented on. They might also get affirmative action. “Oh!! You have mixed parents? I just want to say that it is totally fine. There is nothing weird about it at all. Maybe we should make this clear for the others also? Maybe you can shake hand with everyone here and present yourself and say that you have mixed parents? Just to show that it is ok?” or “Well, that was an interesting choice. But I see here that you have Omega parents so one could not expect anything else I suppose.”

The teachers are playing Escorts, citizens who are doing their mandatory “test service”. It is almost like jury duty, but your job is to be a good representative for your Tau and to help the evaluation personnel with whatever they need help with.

Story

The larp is about two hours long, and the narrative is focused on the Test day, the day when the teenagers of Epsilon get evaluated and get to do the test to determine if they are Alfas or Omegas.

We start the larp by welcoming all the pupils to this important day in their life. The welcoming is done by an Omega that fails and loses track. One of the Alfas steps in and tells the Omega to step back. The students get told that they are special. That someone in their group have parents that have contacts very high up in society, and there is a message on its way from Thetys (our strong leader) himself. But since there will be a little while before we have downloaded the message, we will have to pass time. We then tell them that all the stars they have gathered in Thetys' Young Souls no longer matter. They are going to become full participants of society today, and then the stars do not matter anymore. Then the Omegas walk up to the students and rip away all the stars they have on them. The students will get a chance to earn new stars during the day. These new stars will affect their time at the Tau academies they are going to after they have gotten their Tau. The one with the most stars will get to choose roommates, get to choose a room first, get to choose what courses to study first among the ones that are not mandatory, etc. At this point they will get a chance to earn their first star. We want them to socialise with each other and find someone who has Alfa parents, someone who has Omega parents, and someone who wants to become an Omega. We give them a pen and paper and tell them to talk to each other. The first one to come forward with the right answers gets the first star. Then it is time for the message from Thetys himself. It is a short movie with Thetys saying:

Dear adepts. Today is the day when you will get your Tau. The day when you will become citizens. The day you will find your place in that which creates Epsilon and its solid foundation. We have all stood where you are standing today. Even I. If anyone is feeling nervous, I want to be very clear: you have no reason to be. Our loyal evaluators will find the Tau which exists in all of you. This is a big day. An important day. A great day. Today you will decide how the rest of your lives will be. Make me proud!
Everyone applauds and then we make them say the oath that everyone on Epsilon knows:
Leader: Our leader!
Everyone: Thetys!
Leader: Our Land!
Everyone: Epsilon!
Everyone: Our land, our destiny, our duty!

After this it is time to start the test. The pupils are divided into four groups that go out to do one test each on four different stations. Between each station, one of them will be in charge of the group and how it presents itself at the next station. During all stations, we ask them about their name and take notes in our papers as soon as they do something, good or bad. For example: “You chose to answer the same thing as the person before you, interesting?”

“What was your name again? Asivol? Ah, yes I see.” *makes note*

During all the tests, we can give the students stars or take them away. The four stations are:

Station One – Interpretation of Tau

Here they will work in small groups. Every group will get a problem presented to them. They are asked to present this problem to the other groups in a way of their choosing. They are not supposed

to solve the problem, only present it. The problems are stupid ones, such as: “A car is driving on the street. At about the same time a person on the streets falls down. What Tau was the driver in the car?” When they do not understand what they are suppose to do, we just pretend that is part of the test. When they have presented the problem we ask if they are happy with their presentation. Then we ask the other groups if it was a good and clear presentation. We ask the others to provide the motivation behind their answers and to tell us what the question was (what Tau was the driver). Then we ask the others to answer the question and explain why they think as they do. After that the next group takes their turn to present. Often all groups do not have time to make a presentation. This is not seen as a problem.

Station Two – the Sticks

Here they are asked to go together in pairs. One pair gets two thin sticks that they are supposed to balance between their open palms. The others form obstacles with their pairs, which the pairs with sticks are supposed to get through without dropping the sticks. When they get through, the next pair takes their turn with the sticks.

Station Three – Interview

Here they all sit together in a ring and answer questions about the different Taus and explain why they think as they do. It is considered good if they disagree and there is a discussion. We work a lot with follow-up questions to make them reflect on and explain their thinking on the subject. An example: What Tau do you think would be the most appropriate to send off to first colonise the star system 3A?

Station Four – the Ball

Here they all stand in a line. One by one we ask them to step forward and use a small juggling ball to express an emotion.

Afterwards, they move one last time so they end up at the station where they started. We ask them to stand in line with the person they think is most likely to become an Alfa on one side and the person most likely to become an Omega on the other. We pretend to take notes about who is standing where. When the tests are done, the players from LajvVerkstaden who play the evaluators meet up to look through the results to see who will be an Alfa and who will be an Omega. At this point, the escorts (teachers) assume responsibility for a while. They make the students work in groups of four to write a tribute poem to Thetys. What Tau the characters will get is already predetermined. There is a very small number of characters that are written to want to stand up against the system; characters who think the system is wrong and who do not want to have a Tau if they cannot have both. If they have played a lot on this and tried to stand up, we note who they are. We then find them and take them to the side to ask them off-game if they want to be taken away during play to not come back. What happens is that their character will be sent to a work camp and never be able to return to society. The players will just wait outside the room until the larp ends, and they will miss about five minutes of the larp. If they think this sounds fun, we will take them out later. If they do not, they will get a Tau like everyone else.

Finally, we gather everyone around and ask them for the poems they have written. The four who have written the best ones will get a star each. Then we just grab one randomly and drop the rest on the floor and declare it the winner. We also ask the students to read it aloud in front of everyone and give them their stars.

We tell the students that we now have found their Taus. That it has been very clear as always. We go out into the four smaller groups. During this phase, we take away the students that did not get a Tau but got sent away to camps. If anyone asks for them, we pretend they never existed and say that

everyone who is supposed to be present is present. In each group, we ask them to stand in a line. We then call them by name one by one. When their names are called, they come up to their evaluator, who either gives them a necklace with green beads that stands for Alfa, or a red band made out of fabric that stands for Omega. We name their Tau with a set phrase:

“Nilon!” *Nilon steps forward*

“You are now Omega Nilon. Congratulations!”

Everyone applauds.

When everyone has gotten their Tau, we gather everyone together. This time, we separate the Alfas and the Omegas from each other. Since they now will study at different academies and not have as much contact with each other, we can just as well start separating them at once.

We end the larp by holding a pompous speech about the life that is ahead of them and how we together will create Thetys’ dream of a strong Epsilon. We end the game by reading the oath together again.

The Learning Goals

In the curriculum of the Swedish school for thirteen to fifteen year olds, you find this text:

“The school should actively and consciously influence and stimulate pupils to embrace our society’s shared values and allow them to be expressed in practical daily action. The school’s goal is that every student

- *Can consciously form and express ethical standpoints based on knowledge about human rights and fundamental democratic values and also on personal experiences*
- *Respect other people’s intrinsic value*
- *Takes a stance against oppression and abusive treatment that humans are exposed to, as well as contributes to helping other people*
- *Can empathise with and understand other people’s situation and develop the will to act with their best interests at heart”*

We have based our debrief and post-game discussions on this text. We always start with letting the pupils share their thoughts about how they are feeling at the moment and how it felt to larp. This is because we believe that when you have had a new experience, you need to talk a bit about it so you can move on to reflect on it afterwards. We ask the pupils how they think it would be to actually live on Epsilon. Most of the time those who played characters that became Alfas tend to think it would be fine to live there, but those whose characters became Omegas do not think so. We ask them if it would matter if one would become an Alfa or an Omega if one lived there. Here most of them agree that it would.

We ask them how they think we decided if they were going to be Alfas or Omegas. When we tell them that it was pre-decided, the ones who became Alfas tend to be very disappointed. We also ask them if they think the tests were good for determining how they are as people, and if those tests can say anything about who they are, who they will be, and what they are good at.

We then move on to talk about whether there are any similarities between life on Epsilon and life on our world. Is there anything on Epsilon that could represent something in our world? Most of the time, the students can make the connection to racism – that people get treated differently because of their Tau / skin colour. We then draw two squares and write Alfa over one and Omega over one. We ask the students to name what distinguished the two Taus. We write the things in the squares. We start talking about whether there is anything in our world that we as a society believe you are born with and will affect how you act. When someone mentions gender, we make two new squares under the

Tau squares and ask them to list things that society connects to male and female. They will see that the words that end up as male correlate pretty well with Alfa, and that words that end up as female correlate pretty well with female. This is where it usually gets really interesting.

From here, the discussion can go in different directions depending on what the students talk about – though we try to connect it to the larp experience they just had. We usually also mention LGBTIQ rights and that on Epsilon was illegal to marry outside your Tau not too long ago – and how this is connected to homosexual marriages, which were not possible in Sweden until 2009 and still remain so in many parts of the world.

After this we discuss norms. We talk about what a norm is and about bad and good norms. We ask the students to think about what norms they know of that they think are good and bad. We discuss norms in different parts of the world, and what happens if you break a norm. Who can do it? Who cannot? Why? We end the day by talking a bit about the grounds for discrimination that exist in Swedish law and what it means.

We also send the teachers material on how they can keep working with these questions and others that have a connection to the larp, including practical exercises that they can use in their teaching. By making the connections to common experience and by listening to their classmates, the students will connect the sometimes abstract subject of norms and ethics to a specific experience and develop a deeper understanding for the subject.

Thoughts From the Designers

As I mentioned at the start of this article we update the larp almost every time we run it. That means we have had a lot of different designers at different stages of the process. Here are some of the thoughts we have on problematic parts of the design and why we made the choices we did. There is of course more but I have chosen to share some of the major things we talk about when we look at the design.

One of the things we have struggled with the most is that it is so strict. The participants can not really affect the game in any way or get the chance to play more freely with each other. We have tried to change this in different ways. We have for instance given them some time between tasks where they get the chance to just larp with each other. This did not work out at all. As soon as they did not have anything to do, they dropped out of character and stop larping.

They also have a hard time maintaining the feeling of being oppressed in a system that is making everyone fit into the norms. Most of them have no relationship to living in a oppressive state, which is a good thing, but it makes it harder for them to take it seriously and to know how to act on it. Since the oppression part is so important to the post larp discussion and the learning process we have chosen to let this larp be strict and very railroaded.

Another problem with having a very oppressive setting is that a lot of the ingame initiative from the pupils will get discouraged instead of affirmed. We have tried to ease this by showing them how to play on oppression and how to stand up against us in the game. We tell them that if they think it is fun they can keep pushing by talking back to us. Then we will keep going and intensify the way we play with them. If they do not like us going hard on them they can just back down or agree with us and we will also back down. This does not, however, solve the real problem but I am not sure if we can fix this without having to change the setting and loose the learning experience.

Since almost all of the pupils are beginners we do not have any herd competence to help them along. They can only look at us to get guidance on how to larp. We have of course done some workshops with them before the larp but that only gets you so far. That also means we need to give them things to do all the time so they have something to act upon or react to.

One thing that we are looking into for the next round of design is to add more intrigues. Right now

there is only the main story arc and the individual goals of the characters. Adding group intrigues should help them get more of a group spirit and give them something to play on and interact with each other without us leading them. Hopefully this will also get some group dynamics going within the four smaller groups.

Overall the game works really well. It is a challenge to create larps that are fun, give room to a lot of improvisation and also gives a strong learning experience for an audience that has never played in a larp before. But the challenge is fun; some of the best moments are when the game is over and the pupils start to get the connections. For example, one of the pupils who had been disappointed to have become an Omega saw the connection to gender and exclaimed “OH! I see what you did there. Nice. I see. And yes, you got me.”

design choices necessary. I will also look upon the differences in worldbuilding within the fiction from the same perspective.

A Short Presentation of the Different Games

It's a Man's World starts off under the same premise. Three years ago all women died of a mysterious disease and only the men are left. Three years later, the government starts a fertilization program. Families of three apply for the chance of having a child through the artificial wombs the government state they have managed to develop. We used a lot of the game mechanical design from *Mad About the Boy*, but as far as the fiction goes this is where the similarities end.

The reason of this is based on the differences between the genders in our own society. Naturally, civilization doesn't break down to the same extent in a world where only the men survive. The majority of political leaders are men. The majority of jobs concerning infrastructure such as communal transportation, electricity, IT and communications, economics, and maintenance are held by men. The only area where the all-male society really collapsed was within child care and medicine where many of the nurses and child caretakers disappeared over night. But this was easier to recover from and living standards were not as noticeably changed by the disaster. However the world of *It's a Man's World* was a world without hope of surviving. Where the women still had the possibility of using sperm from the sperm banks, and the technology already existing in cloning, a future where new children would be born was not impossible in *Mad About the Boy*. These possibilities were gone in *It's a Man's World*. The thought of reproduction was lost, and the human race was going to slowly die out. The government claimed to have invented artificial wombs that were now in need to be tested. This was, however, a lie. Instead, against all odds, one woman had survived. Her code name was Eva. She had got protection from the state on the condition that she goes through with four pregnancies. The hope was that scientists could study them and perhaps be able to create an artificial womb, but it was a weak hope. The children might bring happiness to a few men, but the survival of the human race based on this one woman was a fragile dream. This contrast between a broken down society with the hope of resurrection in *Mad About the Boy* and a stable world slowly dying is one of the most obvious differences between the two games.



■ Siri Sandqvist

Mad About the Boy and It's a Man's World

In August 2013, Elin Gissén and I attended the all-female run of *Mad About the Boy* (written by Trine Lise Lindahl, Tor Kjetil Edland and Margrete Raaum) in Sweden. *Mad About the Boy*, based on the graphic novel series *Y: The Last Man*, is set in a dystopian world. All men have died of a mysterious disease and as a result, civilization as we know it has collapsed. Three years later the Nordic Union has set in motion a fertilization plan. Families of three individuals have been chosen to apply for insemination from the sperm banks, in the hope of creating the first generation of this new world, of rebuilding humanity. Unknown to anyone, a single man has survived the epidemic. In the second act this man, naked, terrified and traumatized runs into the centre. All of a sudden the game changes themes. If the first act was all about the competition between the families to get a child, and about the relationships between the participants of the program, the second act becomes a game centered around the man. Power over the man. He is completely without agency and at the mercy of these women who all desperately want to possess him. Almost everyone wants him, as a breeder, a token, a lover, or a victim to save.

In August 2015, Elin Gissén, Johan Nylin, Staffan Fladvad and I ran a larp called *It's a Man's World*. For Elin, the idea of making a male version of the *Mad About the Boy* was born instantly that summer in 2013 but it would take two years for it to become reality. A lot of the original game design was preserved and applied in the new scenario but a lot of changes also had to be made as the dynamics looked vastly different when we organized a larp about the extinction of women rather than men. In this article I aim to discuss what design choices we made as we adapted the scenario for this new world and how the difference in agency and power between the genders in our real world made some

The Woman and the Man

The man in *Mad About the Boy* is a victim, and in many ways a prop. He is there to force the women to confront each other, to take action, to fight over him. As he runs in bruised and naked in the beginning of the second act he is a surprise to everyone, and he is very obviously not in control over himself. This is an important part of *Mad About the Boy*, that we could not keep for *It's a Man's World*. The reason for this is the power balance between genders in our world. Women are the ones with less power and the victims in most sexual crimes. To put a woman naked, and vulnerable in a context of 30 men longing to be fathers was a way too unsafe space for any female player. Arguably it would have been equally as hard for the male players. Since the narrative of our society is that women are the weaker sex and men are sexual predators, the scene gets a different meaning when the roles are swapped. It ties into a number of different accounts of gang rape, structural oppression of women, and violence against females. It would have been playing too close to home in a way we did not feel comfortable with. Instead we chose to give Eva all the agency, all the power over her own body and what happened to it. Rosalind Göthberg, the player of Eva also reflected over this when first asked to play the role. She stated that she felt safer playing the part knowing that her character would be in complete control over the situation. This was achieved by some simple changes to the design. First of all we let the government and the administration be aware of her existence. This gave her not only her own power but the power of the whole state. She also had a brother among the characters, there to speak for her and give her advice. However we made perfectly clear that the decision in the end would be hers, and hers alone. She did not enter naked and bruised but in an orderly fashion, fully clothed. However, this design choice had some effects that we had not initially thought of and that changed the game mechanics quite a lot. I will reflect more on that below. In hindsight the game might have been equally as interesting without any female presence at all. We wanted her there for one reason above all else: to see how the all-male culture and dynamic changed as a woman entered the scene. Would it affect the behavior of the men? As I will explain, it did. Not only because of her presence but because of the fact that she was placed in such a position of power. The male players had no other choice than to try and impress her if they wanted a child.

A Male Space

One of the goals with making a gender-segregated run of *It's a Man's World* was to create a safe space where men could discuss and explore modern masculinity in a separatistic forum. As a cis woman and organizer this was of course a strange situation. I was helping to design and run a larp that I was not allowed to see or participate in. From the moment the larp began I was locked into the kitchen where I and a male volunteer were cooking, and the other two women on site, Elin Gissén and Rosalind Göthberg (the player of Eva) were hidden away in the blackbox. We as organizers also made the choice of not including the female organizers and player in the debrief. This to make sure that the players would not feel prevented from speaking freely by the presence of players that did not identify as male. If this was really necessary or not can be debated. One thing we organizers wanted the participants to explore was what masculinity became when it was deprived of its counterpart, femininity. Did feminine expression increase in value? Did masculine friendship become more open, more tactile? Did the loss of femininity in society create a void, or were feminine attributes made redundant? Unfortunately we failed in our design when it came to giving the participants the space for this discussion and exploration. We would have needed more workshops around worldbuilding and relationships to make it playable, and if there ever will be a rerun, I think that is the main point to change in the design. As it stood now the participants were just given a larp without women, but not sufficient tools to use the space given.

"I do not think we actually explored masculinity much in workshops or throughout the game – it was a game about fatherhood, but much about the masculine tendencies and aspects that are very common in our regular world was lacking from the game." – Simon Svensson, participant

The result of this lack of preparation for the participants was that the larp became centered around fatherhood rather than masculinity and the result was that many players left the venue without any strong emotional experience. This was even more noticeable in the debrief after the larp.

We created a debrief forum on Facebook after the larp, (where women were allowed). However there did not seem to be much need for this service. In a discussion with Rosalind who herself had organized a larp about gender roles together with Lukas Renklint, Elvira Fallsdalen and Eva Wei, we discovered that the same could be said in regards to her project, *Sigriddotter* (Daughters of Sigrid). There had been separate debrief-forums for male and female players after *Sigriddotter*, mostly with the men in mind, to give them ability to discuss their experiences without being judged by the female players. The female forum was bursting with activity directly after the larp whereas the male forum had almost no posts at all. This lack of postgame debate and debrief noticeable both among the male players at *Sigriddotter* and after *It's a Man's World* are interesting. That men don't have the same need for a separate forum to be able to openly discuss masculinity might be traced back to the fact that masculine culture is the norm in most parts of our real life society. Women and nonbinary people are in a larger extent required to change their way of expression, and to leave space for men in real life, and therefore have a larger need of an environment where men have been removed to openly and freely share experiences. Another explanation for the greater need of debrief is a societal acceptance and approval of expressing emotions and sharing them with others. This ability to share feelings with others is something largely removed from today's western version of masculinity. When I asked the participants why there had been so little debriefing done in Facebook groups after the larp the main reason was that the experience had not been very emotional so they did not need to debrief at all.

"The story itself never became that interesting to me since it felt like it was very individual narratives, what the other groups did, did not really interest me..." *"...We were all under supervision and our goals were to be perfect. The game-design was too oriented towards winning, was too gameistic. Otherwise you can always flirt, bribe or buy your way to success at larps, but here you could only win by being as perfect as possible. I went to the larp because of my interest in masculine culture, not fatherhood. And I don't think the larp explored masculinity at all..."* *".... Maybe men aren't used to and uninterested in being in a situation where the ability to change their future is dependent on their ability to adhere to the system, how well they behave..."*
– Carl Nordblom, participant

His points are well made. There certainly were some problems in our design of the larp when it came to bring the focus from fatherhood to masculinity, and very few players had an emotional experience at the larp, as stated above. But what interested me even more was this notion that men dislike game design where there is only one way to succeed. As a cis woman in today's society, that is the normal way of things for me. You can be successful in a patriarchal society if you adhere to the rules and norms. Many cis men might not feel familiar with this disability, and therefore it becomes limiting within the game. Instead, they try to work around it, and when that is not possible, instead feel frustrated. In many ways, the ordinary characters of *It's a Man's World* are in a power situation not unlike that of women and nonbinary / transgendered people in today's society. An interesting situation for sure, but maybe not what we as designers were aiming for when we wanted to make a game about masculinity.



Two close friends entering the main hall,
photo: Johan Dahlberg

Making Masculine Culture

One of the reasons the game design was not sufficient to give the players space to explore masculine culture might be the differences between the genders in our real world. At *Mad About the Boy* the first act centered around female culture. This seemed to happen organically, and the focus was very naturally on how women related to each other when there was no men to compete with for power and agency. This did not happen as naturally in *It's a Man's World*. Beside the need for more worldbuilding one reason might be that masculine culture is the hegemonic culture of our society. To remove women and nonbinary people from the context doesn't necessarily change the cultural context. The result becomes more plot related, because cultural exploration is not an instinctive need. This was not a problem in *Mad About the Boy*. However there were strong changes in the feeling of the game between the different acts in *It's a Man's World*.

"I was surprised that I did not stand out more during the first act of the game, even though I was very physical with my close relationships. Instead many men massaged each other, held each other, cried together. It was overall a very feminine making of relationships during the first part of the game. When Eva was introduced in the beginning of the second act this changed. There had been no need to establish masculine hierarchies before, but when she showed up people quickly re-entered a competitive behaviour towards each other, in fighting for her attention." – Lukas Renklint, participant.

This competition was in a way designed by us. It was explicitly stated that when Eva arrives they need to impress her to get a child. But as the player of Eva explained, the reestablishing of the masculine competitive behaviour did not impress Eva at all, instead she was looking for men who had more feminine attributes such as caretaking, love and emotional vulnerability. Men that connected with Eva on a personal level, not men that expressed classic masculinity. The reintroduction of classic masculine behavior triggered by Eva was therefore not tactically beneficial but rooted in the masculine culture of real life.

"The display of weak masculinity, feminized masculinity was not problematic before the woman was introduced and all of a sudden being a feminine man became something negative again" Lukas Renklint reflects.

Organizing for Men

"Coming to this larp as a transgendered male was in a way a safe space. Normally I steer clear of feminine expressions during larps because that makes people gender me wrongly. Here the premise was that we were all men so I didn't have to worry about that. Still in some aspects it was hard to know if you fit into the group. If you were included in the masculine community. This was especially clear during the after party. I didn't want to behave in a macho-way but also struggled with the feelings of not being a real man." – Lukas Renklint, participant

First of all I want to state that a majority of the participants were wonderful, and it is natural that a larp with this kind of theme attracts a large amount of feminist men. It was in all aspects a political larp with a feminist agenda. I, as the female organizer in charge of participant communication did however notice some differences in how the communication worked at *It's a Man's World* in comparison to other larps with mixed-gender participants I have been a part of before. As a woman I seemed to encounter some participants that used ways of expressing themselves that to me seemed hard, or in some instances like domination techniques. These individuals would most likely have acted this way no matter whether it had been a mixed-gender or a male-only larp, but since our focus from the beginning was questioning masculinity, it became extremely obvious in this context. In a way I as an organizer learned more about masculinity from organizing the larp than I think the players learned from participating in it. I noticed how I would step in without reflecting and try to calm down discussions that I read as aggressive conflicts on social media. I also noticed that my ability as an organizer was questioned more than I am used to. This "harder" kind of communication was most likely in many respects a difference in expression that I, as a woman got interpreted differently than a man might have interpreted it. This continued on site, where the majority of men at the venue made me and the other women more sensitive to masculine behavior and domination techniques that on occasion were used against us. This feeling of alienation that came with the physical restrictions during the larp continued in some aspects during the afterparty. The almost exclusive male context made us women more conscious of our behavior as well as their behavior toward us.

"In reality I think I was in need of more physical touching during the debrief and also more emotional conversations with some of the players. However I did not want to be "that woman" that got more physical with the male players. Instead I waited to let the men take the first step." – Rosalind Göthberg

Playing Trans in a Monosexual Environment

In *Mad About the Boy*, one of the playable characters is a trans man, and during the 2013 run in Sweden I had the privilege of playing him. It was one of the most fundamentally strong player experiences I have ever had. His story naturally became quite different from the stories of the female characters. He became someone who tried very hard to be the man everyone was missing, to be every man. And his failure in being that, by the fact of his survival became strong and emotional. Therefore, it was important to me that we would have a trans woman in *It's a Man's World*. I knew how strong that experience could be. However, no one wanted to play her, and in the end we had to do the larp without her family present. It is understandable. *It's a Man's World* marketed itself as being a larp about masculinity, and therefore no one was interested in playing the female. Maybe part of

the participants' reluctance to take on this part also had to do with stage fright. As male attributes are glorified in our society it is easier for a woman to incorporate male attributes whereas female attributes in men are frowned upon by society. I know that many men hesitate to portray women in larp out of fear of doing it wrong, in a way that becomes demeaning to femininity. The difference in the game is worth noting though. The trans character gave something to *Mad About the Boy*. A bitter-sweet reminder of the men lost, but also visibility to transgender people and the fact that they exist and would continue to exist in the dystopian world we portrayed. Now there was little play with the glorification of female attributes. One of the players chose to go down that route, dressing in more feminine clothes, but overall *It's a Man's World* became a man's world indeed, and perhaps the impact of the last woman, Eva became more notable in that regard.

Concluding Thoughts

In many ways *It's a Man's World* was an experiment. We as organizers wanted to create a space for males to explore their own masculinity in the absence of women. What would happen to a culture that was completely isolated, baring the Scandinavian form of masculinity without its opposite. Instead what we created was a larp about fatherhood and loss. About complete dystopia, men softening up. It was in many ways the logical response to our design choices, some of it unbeknown to us until the larp actually ran. As we sat out to gender swap *Mad About the Boy*, we knew we would have to make some major changes in the design, but I don't think we understood to what extent it would change the themes of the setting until we were in it. A larp about fatherhood can very comfortably stay just that, without getting too deep into masculinity. A larp about motherhood is not diverted from a larp about feminine culture. Motherhood is such a central part of what it means to be a woman in our society that the two don't cancel each other out or eat as much time and energy to explore. One day I might return to the dream about making a larp about masculinity, taking my lessons from this first attempt, but for now it stands to see that we are more shaped by gendered behavior and gendered prejudice than we might think at first. The necessity of changing the power dynamic for Eva is one such example, the difference in society in the two fictions another. So we can conclude that our own society is still suffering from destructive differences between what we view as male and female. Otherwise these differences in design would not have been as important to make the game work.



■ Ludography:

It's a Man's World (2015): Elin Gissén, Johan Nylin, Staffan Fladvad and Siri Sandqvist. Sweden.

Mad About the Boy (2010): Trine Lise Lindahl, Tor Kjetil Edland and Margrete Raaum. Norway.

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■ Nathan Hook

History, Characteristics and Design of the Psychodrama Scenario Larp Form

Introduction

This article is the reflections and recollections of an artist-designer on the psychodrama larp form and the first attempt to codify the design rhetoric and design process for this tradition. It situated his development in a particular creative environment and identifies the key influences upon it.

The History and Development of the Psychodrama Form

Genesis and Forbidden Fruit

It all began in Norway. It was the week before Knudepunkt in 2009 and after the draining experience of playing Jesus in a last supper larp I went to a presentation by Frederik Berg on jeepform, followed by a few jeepform scenarios including *Drunk* (Wrigstad 2008) and *Fat Man Down* (Berg 2009). I had encountered jeepform previously at Ropecon, but without the presentation and seeing only a single scenario I hadn't appreciated the form at that time.

During the car trip onward to Knudepunkt a few days later with Frederik and others, jeepform came up in discussion. In my head at the time was Joseph Campbell's mythic structure model of the Hero's Journey; I had been writing an article about applying this structure to larp, which would later go on to be published next year in *Playing Reality* (Larsson 2010). I explained my idea for a three-player scenario about relationship cheating. It is scene based – a characteristic that stood out to me as separating jeepforms from other larps or “freeforms.” The initial idea was twelve scenes, based on

Volger's formalised phases of the Hero's Journey (described in Hook 2010). Influenced by Nordic larp discussions of *ars amandi* it included a new meta-technique for playing on intimacy: the actual “cheating” scene was played out by feeding someone a piece of fruit, deliberately open whether that was literal or metaphorical.

After Knudepunkt, Frederik as my direct contact and Tobias Wrigstad both mentored me remotely in developing this concept further. The general structure of the Hero's Journey remained but the number of scenes reduced to seven and the scene titles changed from directly referencing the Hero's Journey. In early drafts the scenario was called *The Forbidden Fruit* but I was guided away from the biblical reference to *Passion Fruit*.

The jeepform presentation had introduced the design rhetoric of bleed; designing to make use of emotions that cross between the play space and the everyday world. This led me to include what I termed the *hyperfocus technique*: as a pre-game exercise, find one small feature (e.g. a physical feature or a mannerism) of the player whose character yours is attracted to that you the player really are attracted to and spend a few moments mentally focusing on it. The intent is that during play when looking at the other player the player character experiences rather than just pretends the emotions they feel. I had been taught this technique by Tonja Goldblatt at *Dragonbane* (2006) and here codified it. During discussions this had exposed an internal difference of artistic style, with Frederik but not Tobias supporting this part of the design.

The scenario was first presented at Fastaval 2010, using an A4 glossy magazine layout that Frederik developed comparable to his own *Fat Man Down* (2009). The first run was off-programme after another scenario finished early. With hindsight, I can see my inexperience in facilitation skills back then. Nevertheless the effect was profound. One player later told me the first thing they did after playing was call their real partner because they felt like they really had cheated. Years later, I was told they still find it awkward to talk to their co-players because they emotionally feel like ex-partners. The scenario was run a couple more times at Fastaval in its actual programmed slot.

Dogs and Scales

Following Fastaval 2010 and *Passion Fruit*, I started reflecting on writing a next scenario. Aside from Nordic larp and the Fastaval scenarios, the other big influence on my thoughts at the time was my ongoing part-time study of postgraduate psychology. That influence and my own ongoing battles with depression led me to write *Black Dog*, a scenario based on models of identity theory about one character falling into depression understood as a loss of construction of the self. Players made a single protagonist and passed it between them, each playing it with respect to one identity. I am particularly grateful to J. Tuomas Harviainen for advising and running playtests of this and later other scenarios; this depression scenario proved particularly popular in Finland.

Black Dog included its own version of the hyperfocus technique, a scripted guided visualisation to help players each identify with the portion of the protagonist's identity they were playing. Playtests found adding this technique cut the warm-up, with players finding the right tone from the first scene.

Black Dog had been rejected by Fastaval 2011 but went on to become my most successful scenario, and I'm told it's been run at least once every year at Østerskov Efterskole. It has since been adapted into a filmed art piece *Some Later Primitives* (James, 2014), and into an *Ars Magica* version of the Grand Tribunal convention in 2014. It eventually ran off-programme at Fastaval in 2014.

I developed a third scenario, *Balanced Scales*. This was inspired by a section in one of my undergrad textbooks on social construction, about how the meaning of past events (and thus attributions of guilt) are socially constructed, and there is no objective meaning. I also wanted to write a scenario to experiment with the horror of narrative control loss, as included in *GR* (Wrigstad 2008). This scenario was somewhat rushed, but playtested when I was invited over to the Netherlands to introduce

Nordic freeform and jeepform to a group of Dutch larp organisers.

A more practical issue was how to present the scenario material. I lacked the skillset to keep producing the glossy magazine format efficiently, and regarded an A4 size booklet as too large to be easily carried at a convention and referred to during play. However, I wanted to avoid distributing it as a PDF – ownership of hard copies increases usage of the scenario and a bound physical book lends it greater authority and ease of use when the scenario is organised.

I compiled the scenarios into one unified book and self-published them using Lulu.com. This was my first foray into the world of book publishing. Writing to the US trade format book size (6 inches by 9 inches) also shaped the scenario presentation; I would often try to fit a scene description into a single page of this size for ease of reference, which kept the writing concise; to quote a jeepform mantra, 'limits foster creativity.' Pictures were removed except for a modified clipart image on the internal cover page for each scenario. The cover tool provided by Lulu included a green inkblot effect, which fitted the psychological elements and eventually finalised the title of the *Green Book* (Hook 2010b).

An understated book launch happened in Denmark in the pre-week for Knudepunkt 2011, with runs of *Passion Fruit* and *Black Dog* in the pre-week. I dropped the term jeepform that I had used initially for *Passion Fruit*; it was ambiguous whether jeepform was the name of a style or a brand name and my scenarios did have distinctive elements with a much greater focus on the psychological immersion than jeepform, as Tobias's reaction to the hyperfocus technique had shown. I had settled on the term psychodrama, which aside from its meaning in a therapy context has a literary meaning to refer to literature concerned with psychological forces.

The Seeds of the Fruit Take Root

One of the players from a Knudepunkt 2011 play session was Taisia Kann. She went on to write her own scenario in this tradition, *Days of Our Lives*, about friends reconstructing a deceased person from memory. I gave feedback and mentored on this, as the jeep had mentored me. Aside from writing this scenario, she would also comment on drafts and organise playtests of my scenarios.

I went on to write *Crossed Roads*, a game about decisions. This was written as a response to Nordic larps where the character decisions had no consequences because results were predetermined. In this scenario characters try to persuade the protagonist to make particular choices with different levels of information and hidden personal agendas, a technique inspired by board games with hidden traitor mechanics such as *Battlestar: Galactica* (2008).

Given the success of *Passion Fruit*, I wanted to include at least one scenario in the next book dealing with romantic relationships, and came up with *Burning Arrow* using a more complex two-pronged version of the hyperfocus technique and exploring the use of phantom players. In this I was influenced by the phantom player technique discussed in the brief for *The Monitor Celestra* (2013). These three scenarios were published together in *Green Book Volume 2*, launched in April 2013.

At Fastaval in 2013 I played *The Curse* (Stark 2013), about couples dealing with hereditary cancer. While a fine scenario in its own right, two unintended things struck me from it. One was the scenario presenter going to smoke immediately after facilitating play on the horrors of cancer. The second was that while developing the diegetic relationship with my co-player we added a cat, represented by a folded up scarf. These two elements inspired my next two scenarios:

Sweet Nectar tackled addiction, using an adapted version of the phantom player technique. It was influenced by *Doctor Faustus* (Marlowe 1604) which I was studying this year; the protagonist's addiction is represented by a phantom player as a literal or metaphorical tempter devil. It was play-tested for the first time at Ropecon in 2013.

Turning Wheel was a scenario about having a cat (jokingly called "catform"). It was also inspired by

a recurring topic in larp conversions of trying to avoid the descension/decay narratives common in Nordic larp and instead have a more cyclic rhythm of ups and downs, inspired by seasonal cycles.

I went searching for psychological models to use as the basis for other scenarios. I had encountered the five stages of grief model used to give psychological depth in the Norwegian larp *Life Is Cheap* (2013). Influenced also by a counselling theory module, I wrote *Bitter Tears*, a scenario dealing with grief. This scenario was also a conscious attempt to write at an ever more abstract level, with different setups making it more like three different scenarios condensed into one.

These three scenarios were published together as *Green Book Volume 3* in March 2014, in time for another launch at Fastaval and Knudepunkt that year.

In October 2015 I produced a new shorter psychodrama scenario *Just a Little Peril* for the Golden Cobra contest. This was written according to same principles as the earlier psychodrama scenarios, with the additional restrictions of the contest. Unlike the others which went through expert commentators and playtesting, this was written for a contest deadline in a single day.

Offshoots of the Form Into Other Traditions

Literary Freeforms

This article will now digress to a form that developed within and emerged from psychodrama.

In Fastaval 2010 I had played *Growing Up* (Westerling, 2010), a scenario adaptation of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). It was certainly challenging to adapt a pre-existing story, and tackle the issue of introducing player agency to a pre-written narrative. I enjoyed it, if somewhat critical of the scenario's linear nature. In response during 2010 I wrote *Heart's Blood*, an adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). I attempted to resolve the design challenge of agency in two ways. Firstly, by dividing the game into acts with increasingly looser structure: The first act consists of fixed scenes to establish the characters, the second act consists of scenes with a binary question answered by play, the third act with multiple choice questions, and the fourth act by open questions, and the fifth act with original scenes. Secondly, it became a direct theme of the scenarios – Dracula is powerful enough to steal agency from others, but the mortal characters gradually reclaim their agency as they organise and grow to confront him.

From the jeepform and Fastaval scenarios I had seen, I had developed a dislike for inner monologue techniques as disruptive to the flow of play. *Heart's Blood* was a challenge to myself to write a scenario that heavily used this technique. The answer I found was to incorporate the monologues not as outside the diegesis but at a meta-level influencing it; the meta-level becomes the diegetic supernatural level. For example, the scene where Dracula summons Lucy into the garden is represented by Dracula's player monologuing Lucy's dark desires for the night, while Nina's player speaks both as her character and as Lucy's inner monologue to stay within the light. This later fed into the phantom player technique used in *Burning Arrow* and *Sweet Nectar*.

I formally regard *Heart's Blood* as a literary freeform rather than as part of the psychodrama tradition. However, it was created alongside it during the same period and has much in common with it. *Heart's Blood* was first playtested in the Netherlands, with the running joke that the Dutch character Dr. Van Helsing was still played as he often is in film adaptations with a German accent. It was published in standalone book form and presented at Fastaval in 2012 and at the Czech chamber larp festival in 2013. Gradually adapted versions of it have since been run ten times in the Czech Republic. It's also been presented at American conventions, where I'm told it was better received by tabletop players than larppers. *Heart's Blood* is the reason for the gap in time between the first and second *Green Books*.

I have since tried to continue this literary tradition but find it very challenging to design, wrestling

with the paradox of fitting in a pre-existing story and established characters without losing the interactivity and agency that is the strength of the larp medium. The story of Dracula lends itself to the larp medium because of its focus on a group of characters rather than a single protagonist. After launching *Heart's Blood* in 2012 I drafted a scenario about the rise and fall of the Roman Republic (i.e. the overthrow of the Kings of Rome mirrored against the death of Caesar) based on Shakespearean versions, but was never satisfied with it enough to playtest it. In 2015 as a response to the *Inside Hamlet* larp I drafted *Albion Divided* adapting from Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1606) which is currently in progress, but also facing these challenges.

Pan

After many years of writing these small scenarios, I wanted to scale up to organising full larps. During the psychodrama playtests at Ropecon in 2013, I had met Finnish larp organiser Kielu Blomqvist. We had stayed in contact and discussed doing a larp project together at a location she had available. Also during 2013 I heard about Bjarke Pedersen's relationship counselling horror larp Pan which fitted my interest in psychological play. I hadn't played it, but mentored by him I translated the scenario notes and rewrote the therapy content based on my academic background. Working with Kielu we organised an international run of it in Finland in 2014. I went out to run it three more times with ongoing further development, and I'm currently mentoring other organisers on future runs. For a further discussion, see Hook (2015).

While not the original author of *Pan* I have written much of the content in this version. The guided visualisation meta-technique included in scenarios such as *Black Dog* was incorporated into the larp as fully diegetic. The therapy content was inspired by real psychological models and diagnostic tools, similar to meta-techniques of the psychodrama scenarios. Thus I regard it as close to the psychodrama tradition, scaled up to the format of a full larp. It fulfils or is close of fulfilling most of the characteristics discussed in the next section.

Characteristics of Psychodrama Scenarios

Having discussed the history and influences of the psychodrama form, this article will discuss the characteristic elements of the psychodrama scenarios.

- Psychodrama scenarios are designed for strong emotional experiences. They may produce strong narratives or strong interpersonal drama as a means to that end and/or as a byproduct, but the primary design goal is to give the players a psychologically real emotional experience.
- Psychodrama scenarios are inspired by psychological models, perspectives or experiences. They do not require a deep understanding of theory, as even an outdated, flawed or 'popular' version of a model or perspective can be useful for this purpose; the accuracy of a model is less important than whether it is useful or not. Beyond formal models we all have our own psychological experiences to draw upon.
- Psychodrama games are replayable; they can be meaningfully played by the same group of players. Deriving from this, psychodrama scenarios do not have fixed characters, as playing the same characters would reduce replayability. Usually character creation is included as pre-play workshop exercises. Multiple sets of example characters are often included in the scenario brief.
- Psychodrama scenarios do not require an organiser. They may benefit from having someone to present the scenario and guide players unfamiliar with it, but it should be possible for players to read the scenario and play it as a group with no external organiser. This point is a stance against invasive organisers disrupting play. This means the scenario must be playable without any secrecy.

- Psychodrama scenarios default to being set in the modern everyday world. However, they are sufficiently abstract that adapting them to an alternative setting is trivial, because they draw upon the human condition.
- Psychodrama scenarios are easy to organise logistically. In broad terms this generally means: a small number of players (typically 3-6), short (generally playable in 1-3 hours), playable in one room, and do not require any complex props or costume. They may make use of simple items such as a pen, index cards, playing cards or timer.

Scenario Design Process

This section is a first attempt to codify the artistic craft of designing and writing a psychodrama scenario. Like any summary of a creative process, it simplifies the chaos for ease of presentation.

Step 1. Inspiration

The initial seed of the scenario usually comes from:

- A particular psychological model (e.g. the five stages of grief) or perspective (e.g. social constructionism)
- A particular meta-technique (e.g. catform, hidden loyalty cards)
- The writer's own life experience working through a psychologically challenging experience (e.g. bereavement, depression)

This step also includes reflecting on your motivation for writing a scenario on this topic, rather than something else. This may be a response to another larp or other game you have experienced, or it may be a comment on a social issue. This will eventually be included in the motivation paragraph in the finished scenario.

Step 2. Determine Characters

Decide what characters and by extension how many players the scenario is for. Generally this will involve defining a small list of key points (no more than five, usually) that players should define about the characters which are relevant to the scenario. Role in society (for many characters, occupation) is often included as one of those points as an efficient way to establish details about them and provide a starting stereotype to play on or against.

Decide whether to have one player per character or to pass characters between players in different scenes, and whether to have players playing secondary characters in some scenes or roles other than characters such as phantom players.

Decide what pre-play exercises to include as part of character creation, such as guided visualisation or meditation techniques.

Step 3. Determine Scene Structure.

Each scene needs to be defined with a premise – where the characters are and what they are going to interact about. The limits on the range of possible outcomes may also need to be defined. For example, if the whole scenario is about the characters gradually making a decision, it may be necessary to design that they cannot make their final decision in the first scene.

Most scenarios will be based on multiple scenes so a structure will also be needed to be determined to control how the scenes fit together. This might be a linear, branching or random structure. Concepts of narrative pacing or a model that already has phases/stages can be a useful basis for this. A

complex or innovative scene structure is often considered a meta-technique in its own right.

Consider also whether to have discrete scene breaks (which is more common) between scenes or a more organic structure where scenes flow into each other with more fluid notions of time. Consider whether to design in “mini-scenes,” such as monologue opportunities or reflections between the main scenes.

Consider the expected length of each scene, and so estimate the total expected playtime of the scenario.

Step 4. Determine Meta-Techniques.

Psychodrama scenarios usually include meta-techniques. Some of these may have been defined already, if they relate to character creation or scene structure. Consider what other tailored meta-techniques can be usefully added.

It is considered helpful to not overload a scenario with many of the more common meta-techniques in the text, as this slows the pace for less experienced players and more experienced player groups can add them in themselves. Focus on including in the design what is most fitting and needed for this particular scenario.

This form generally does not include techniques that interrupt play within a scene as the flow of play within a scene is valued.

Step 5. Variants

Sometimes the process of design will produce an interesting idea that adds a higher level of complexity than can be easily explained, sometimes a scenario may need a major reworking to handle different numbers of players, and sometimes different playtest groups or expert readers will offer contrary opinions. In cases like these, a variant can be included at the end. It is generally considered good to include a variant to increase the replayability, but adding too many variants is a refusal to make design choices.

Step 6. Presentation

By convention, psychodrama scenarios usually have a short metaphorical name, in the pattern <adjective> <noun>. Text normally opens with a few poetic lines to convey the dramatic tension of the scenario, followed by the motivation for writing it. This is followed by the character creation process and other pre-game exercises and then the scene structure and any variants. The text is closed with a selection of classic quotes on the core topic or themes of the scenario, which serve to provide further inspiration when playing. The general writing style is tight and minimalistic, with each sentence justifying its inclusion.

It's beyond the scope of this article to discuss the practical issues of getting feedback from expert readers and playtest groups, both of which are strongly recommended. My experience has given me a lot of faith in the value of having an expert scenario writer or two read it to identify design weaknesses or suggest areas for improvement.

Summary

Based on this five-year experience of developing the psychodrama scenario larpform and scenario writing, I would offer the following advice to new writers:

- Inspiration can come from a variety of sources, so reflect widely. Some of the best scenarios come from the emotive power of your own lived experience. Like poetry, your scenario is a device to impart your emotional experience to others.
- Play a wide range of different scenarios, to get first first-hand experience of different structures and techniques. Personally for me the best place to do this has been Fastaval, where it is possible to play 8-10 scenarios in a single convention. This also has the side benefit of observing good and bad practices in presenting and facilitating a scenario, which is a useful skill in its own right. Scenarios can be formed as a response to another scenario or a particular experience in one. It's also possible to find inspiration from other kinds of games entirely.
- Read scenarios by a range of writers, to see the different styles. Reading five scenarios by five different writers (and ideally from five different styles) is much more valuable than reading five scenarios by one good writer.
- Remember the text you are creating is a tool to help people play your scenario. It needs to be easy to consult during play as needed.
- Many people within the larp scene are very supportive of new scenario writers and happy to give feedback or mentor you in writing. Some conventions will have arrangements to help you find a writing partner. Accept their help gladly, but remember that no position is objective. If you strongly disagree with them on an artistic point, get a second opinion (from another expert or a playtest group). It may simply be your style or interests are different to theirs. In due course when you have time and experience, “pay it forward” and mentor another writer yourself in turn.
- As the jeep say, “limits foster creativity.” Try imposing restrictions and then working around them. Challenge yourself to write scenarios using techniques you are not fond of.
- Remember the strength of larp is its interactive nature, player agency and immediate identification between player and character. Play to the strength of the medium you are writing for.

In summary, the article has:

- Documented the influences on the development of the psychodrama scenario larp form and the literary scenario larp form
- Defined the characteristic traits of the psychodrama scenarios
- Discussed the process of scenario design and writing.
- Offered advice for a new scenario writer.

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■ José Castillo Meseguer

Larp as an Inspirational Tool

“Sanity... how you want it now! You asked for madness before and, when you found it, you did not have more instinct than to step back.”

This article intends to describe, using the larp *la sirena varada* (the stranded mermaid) as an example, ways to awaken our creativity endangered by our daily life. Using larp to stimulate the participants to carry an acquired desire to create. All content here is described from the subjective viewpoint of the writer.

Introduction

“I don't foresee anything good in this haunted house where there are ghosts inside chests, men who live blind to create colours, and mermaids that enter during the night through windows.”

In the current stressful high technology life, it is hard to find time or attitude for creative activities.

All those tools that allow the access to global knowledge distract us. I am not just talking about time, but also about the priorities in our minds, when constructive activities seem like a tiresome burden, and we end up in absurd pastimes that do not give us rest, fun or anything in return.

With creativity it is even harder. Our mind blocks, everything we try seems dull, and only after long sessions of decontamination from our current reality we are able to recover our muse. During the years, I have developed different tools to deprogram my mind for a while in order to create. But none

of them had such results as larping.

Larps allow us to let go of the world for hours or days. So what will happen when one of the primal interests in a larp is to inspire, to free the participant's mind, and to set art and freedom as one of the primary elements?

This was the case for the international larp *la sirena varada*. The result was a creative wave for most of the participants (and even the organizers) that followed them to their daily life. Throughout this article I will describe the creative goals of *la sirena varada*, the tools used to this end, and the observed results (from the subjective viewpoint of one of its organizers).

About the Larp

"She has found in you an enemy to freedom and fantasy. In this case, you are her personal enemy because Mermaid is freedom and fantasy itself."

la sirena varada was an international larp that took place in the south of Spain, at the astonishing house-caves of Al Jatib. It lasted three days of full immersion. During this time the participants embraced the lives of contemporary characters disappointed by the everyday world, people who rejected reality in exchange of a life of freedom and craziness, where only their desires and imagination mattered. Accelerated time and characters' evolution allowed to simulate the rise and decay of this beautiful illusion destined to perish devoured by madness.

This project broke down a theatrical work and built with its essence a chaotic larp with almost absolute freedom. A larp possessed by emotion and artistic intent, oriented to end in tragedy with a colourful clash of excessive beauty.

Goals:

"He says just foolish things. What else do you expect from a sane person?"

la sirena varada was inspired by a theatrical play from the Spanish *pre-guerra* (pre-war), in which a group of individuals abandons daily life in exchange of their fantasies. But their past follows them as a shadow they cannot escape, leading to a destructive clash between dreams and reality. While considering the design of *la sirena varada*, the points of the theatrical play were very strong, and gave us more than enough inspiration.

But we felt indebted to this piece of everlasting art, which leads to a different, more risky approach with a so called "higher" goal. It forced us to give something in return, and the goal was clear: art.

Therefore *la sirena varada* was going to be a larp with the essence of art always present, leaving time for reflection, contemplation and co-creation. Art not only due to the writings of its organizers but by the will and inspiration of its participants.

Techniques:

"When I return to the sea, we will go together. It is a different life, more blue and better than the one on the hills."

To this end, a thorough thinking was necessary with every element related to our aim. The following techniques were set to achieve this goal:

- Almost complete freedom

Only freedom can allow creativity in a larp. When pre-set elements (plots, goals, decisions, scenes, organizer control, etc.) of excessive importance are present, players feel obligated to follow them. Even if they can find time or inspiration, it will be broken when a decisive situation arises. Therefore, creation oriented larps must leave all directive elements in a secondary place.

- Design and plot that encourages art

Every detail in the design was intended to generate inspiration and creativity.

Accelerated time and childish reactions to speed up the development of conflicts and emotions.

A shadow place where the characters could inspire dreams and memories in the minds of others.

Symbolic and void caves where primal emotions were discovered.

Death as an everlasting remembrance which leads to a confrontation. A clash between us and the person that was. A vivid monologue with the essence that lingers into our memories.

- Invitation to players to carry instruments, painting tools, poetry books, etc.

Using a questionnaire and private interviews, the participants were encouraged to show their talents and passions and to carry them to the larp.

This way poetry books, instruments, painting tools and empty notebooks were one of the many contributions from the participants to the larp.

- No schedule – absolute free time

The lack of schedule allowed the participants to manage their time leading to a laconic, social and at times creative atmosphere.

This way the participants could have long talks below the stars or lying in a hammock under the sun without pressure, to better recover their creativity.

- An appropriate and inspirational location.

The caves Al-Jatib as an astonishing background provided the perfect frame to this collective story.

With almost no artificial lights to darken the sky at night, the virtually barren landscape, the beauty of the restored caves and the rawness of the abandoned ones, the Ibiza-like swimming pool, and of course the hammam that clouded and at the same time awakened our senses.

Few places could raise our creativity as this oasis of beauty.

- Use of media

Media is becoming more crucial for larping. While they require additional knowledge and preparation, their results are crucial. In *la sirena varada* they were used mainly for inspirational and leisure purposes:

- Short films of oneiric content followed by erratic and inspired discussions.

- Music chosen to show different emotions with lyrics often related to the characters background.

- Lack of technological distractions.

As said before, technology numbs our senses in an always connected dependency. Only when free of it, our minds can awaken and discover the deep reflexive beauty of our deaf thoughts, drowned in a sea of internet interruptions and unimportant daily duties.

- Characters with rich backgrounds and creative tendencies

The characters created using the participants' conscious and unconscious desires were conceived as protagonists of their own history. A tragedy of words destined to inspire each of them towards this collective craziness that was the republic of the free, a place where common sense had forbidden

the entrance. The characters were creators themselves, forcing the participants to believe in their capabilities, as only those who win against the fear of failure can be free to create.

Much of the success of finishing a task depends on believing in oneself. For those that lack the required self-esteem, the incarnation of a character can be a therapeutic solution, as it is the character, not the participant, who takes the risk of showing their inner self. The character acts as a shield, being the one who can fail, thus protecting the participant who feels free to risk trying abilities they had never before possessed. The sweet lie of placing one's trust outside, while in reality the character is the true self.

Future additions:

"I gave you all the flesh and soul I had."

In retrospect, there were two missing elements in *la sirena varada*:

- Character relations oriented to co-inspiration between participants. This happened in a natural way, but it could be enhanced if the characters were correctly pointed to inspire. Using relations to encourage others towards creation.
- The workshops were long but still insufficient. They were focused in interpretation, relations, technics, and mechanics, and left little to the expression of art. They will be enhanced in the second run to include it.

Results:

"I am afraid of the sea, it attracts you too much. I am afraid that one day you will want to go back and leave me alone."

During *la sirena varada*, songs were composed and sang, poems written and recited, paintings painted and contemplated, philosophy of life rediscovered, and the borders of society put to question. This wave of creativity affected also those participants that had stopped artistic behaviour after their adolescence. Unexpectedly, this creative desire persisted after the larp, both for the players and the organizers, leading to the conclusion that daily inspiration and creativity can be enhanced, and larp can be a suitable tool for it.

Regarding artistic larps being entertaining, the participants have assured they had a wonderful experience. The artistic approach was not against enjoying the larp, and it gave an additional element to its mixed set of elements. Of course, this required art to be adequately incorporated into the larp.

Writer's experience/opinion:

"Mermaid is a delicious lie I am not ready to change for any truth."

The experience of an artistic/contemplative larp has been game changing for me, even with the drawback of being one of the organizers (which leads to distracting responsibilities present during the larp).

I am referring not only to the rich experience of *la sirena varada*, but also the weeks that followed, as literary books, poetry readings, and reflexive films became a pleasure I sought again. Even if that did not last more than a few weeks before being devoured by the simplicity of an empty routine, taking up that part of myself again was well worth the risk of designing and playing such larp.

We consider larp a form of art. If so, why not give art higher relevance inside larp? Not as a simple excuse or a secondary theme or just character backgrounds, but as a goal included from the first stage of design.

In short:

Larp can be art.

Larp can create art.

Larp can inspire art.

■ Info

la sirena varada

Inception, design and execution:	Juan Ignacio Ros Perez José Castillo Meseguer
Collaborators:	Enrique Peregrín Pitto David Pérez Vallejo Irina Boltova Jesus Pérez Zamora
Dates:	17th to 20th September 2015
Location:	Cuevas Al Jatib, Baza, Granada, Spain http://www.aljatib.com/en/
Length:	3 days
Players:	20
Participation fee:	95€
Webpages:	http://somnia-larp.wix.com/lasirenavarada http://www.somnia.org/en/
Game mechanics:	Play to Flow, Symbolic Spaces, Ars Amandi, Ars Marte, Fluid Time, Child-like Eyes, Death Play.

■ Laksmi Irigoyen Regueiro

Genre, Context, and Characters as Elements of Narrativity in the Larp *Filhos do Trono*

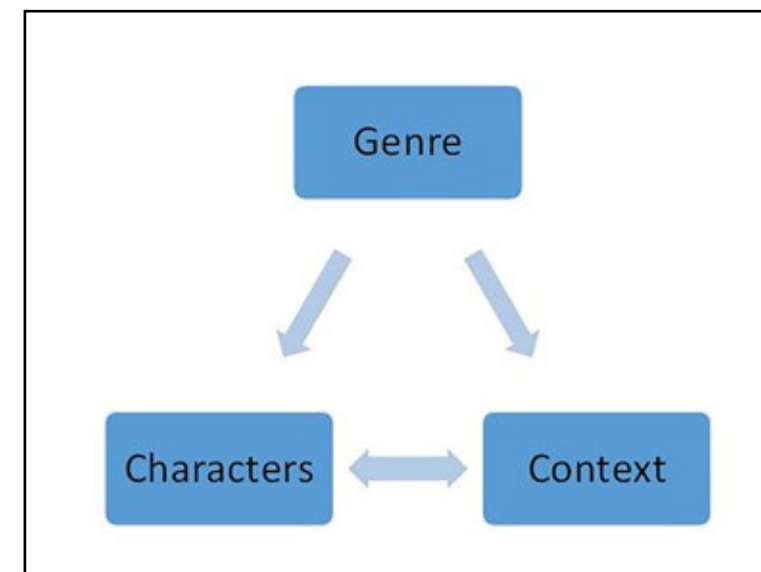
This article seeks to determine the elements which contribute to the emergence of narrativity in a game. These elements, which are interconnected and influence one another, I define as genre, context, and characters. Their interplay with one another and the agency of players results in the building of a diegesis. The genre determines both context and characters, and through the interaction of players, new sub-contexts emerge and create story. These new sub-contexts will themselves affect the characters embodied by the players, making them evolve and modifying their points of view in the diegesis of the fictional world.

Once these three elements have been determined and explained, they will be applied to the larp *Filhos do Trono* (Children of the Throne) to observe the ways they articulate with each other through a concrete example.

Theoretical Framework

There are certain elements in larp – genre, context, and characters – which create narrativity through their interaction with the players. The influence of genre on the other two is fundamental, as through context and character it determines things like archetypes. Additionally, characters affect context and vice versa, as characters react to events in the larp and the situation evolves.

The concept of genre applied to games is not straightforward and takes some defining. Based on Jaakko Stenros's definition (Stenros 2004, 168), we can say that genre comprises the themes, motives and stereotypes by which the fictional world is created and organized. However, there are other applications of the term, determined by the consideration of games as such. If we consider



only the game frame to define a game, we can define genre as a mechanical entity (Costikyan 2005). Nevertheless, besides taking into account the mechanics of the game, we should consider the fantasy frame, through which we can determine the genre in terms of constituent thematic unity. Thus, according to the genre of larp, the players will have certain expectations about the fictional world. A larp creates a complex world that changes through the actions of the players. In this way, genre has a nuclear importance, and players need to know it to constitute the shared diegesis. This is what I consider the concept of genre, a whole of themes and conventions, while the type of game is defined by mechanics and aesthetics.

The knowledge of genre conventions is fundamental for the correct development of the larp, as they will determine much of the environment, the objects within it, and the interactions between the characters and the fictional universe. Genre determines context and character, and forms one of the main elements of diegesis (Montola 2004, 84), as it allows the construction of a shared world through player-held knowledge of its conventions. Thus, even though genre affects the fantasy frame, it must be established by a previous social contract between participants. This contract is usually not explicit, since it arises from a shared understanding of genre elements and determines what is – and is not – possible in a concrete world.

When we speak about context we are referring to specific fictional worlds as well as the circumstances that determine events and situations during the game. These circumstances will be influenced by the social contract established through genre, where players create and modify a joint transitional reality through the use of agreed-upon tools (Harviainen 2008, 68). Thus, if genre determines what is possible in a concrete world, context generates situations through the interaction of characters with their environment. It should also take into account the possible existence of subcontexts, which are very common in larp. The presence of subplots, sometimes hidden from some or all of the players, causes a construction of context similar to a matryoshka.

Context appears in all non-abstract games, but works in a very different way in larp. Here are a few examples to help understand the importance of context as a narrativity-generating element in larp, as opposed to other types of games.

A game like *Tetris* (Pajitnov et al. 1984) is defined as abstract because it has no context. The mean-

ingful play of the game is found in the interaction of players with the game state and ultimately, the aesthetics dependent on such interaction.

In a game like the board game *Battlestar Galactica* (Fantasy Flight Games 2008), context defines fiction and the concrete universe of the game, based on the war between Cylons and humans. However, in this game, unlike what happens in a larp, the context cannot be modified, and simply has the function of framing the game in a fictional world. Progress in this game is conducted by changes in game state – resolving a Crisis Card, etc. – and not in context, just as in the case of abstract games. Context and game state must not be confused, because not only do they have different functions, but they are also located in different frames. In *Battlestar Galactica*, context remains unchanged, the state of war is maintained throughout the game and can at no point be subverted. Thus, we can say that context is located in the fantasy frame, and it, if present, only works as a framing device in most board and card games. In larp, context is fundamental, because it determines the events that may occur during the game. Context can be modified for unforeseen situations if the game master permits it. In this regard, Berger (2010, 49) explains the predominant methods used by game master to keep control of the context. These control methods suppose a certain balance of power between the organizers and participants, i.e. they mark the authority of the game master over context. The initial context of a larp will be modified as the players act upon it. It can also be said that the number of potential contexts in a larp is unknown. As players act upon the context, situations and events arise and resolve, and some of these potential contexts become actual while others are closed off. Unlike other types of games, in larps the changes of context are fundamental to the construction of the text of the game, because the meaningful play is built in the fantasy frame to put in diegesis the endogenous activity of the players.

When we speak about narrativity in larp and say that it emerges through genre, context, and characters, we consider this to be so because of the agency of players performing their characters, as events happen for them to interact with. Apart from this, we must remember the importance of the power structure and the game master's mechanisms of control, since these offer the tools for making changes in the context in addition to those resulting from the players' actions. Regarding this, it is necessary to speak about incentives (Fatland 2005, 155). These are methods used by the game master to construct one determined context or to ensure that it is modified in a specific way. The adventure is built through a web of incentives. This may be more or less directed toward a particular end. Sometimes, these tools are only used as a way to provide certain structure to the adventure, allowing the players freedom to change the events of the game. The master can also, however, steer the entire game through these incentives, preventing any modification of the creative agenda. Harviainen (2008, 69) indicates that "role-playing games consist of the intentional evocation of artificial experiences through the use of fictional characters as masks/identities/personas". He also states that:

"Role-playing is a form of heuristic fiction. It is a metamorphosis that creates simultaneously a selection of characters/figures and a transformation into a new state of temporary "true" being. In that new state, everything follows an internal (diegetic, i.e. "true within the context of the story") system where everything works directly upon indexical and symbolic concepts (as per Laponen & Montola 2004), transforming basic representations into a fantasy reality."

These new states indicated by Harviainen – context in my nomenclature – are possible due to the interaction between characters and the previous context. Each player shares in the events through the performance of her character and, it follows, in the new common diegesis. As has been said, genre is fundamental in this, since for the players to achieve a common diegesis, a knowledge of genre conventions is essential.

In the case of larp, depending on how we play, we can focus on exploring this fictional world, on dramatic construction of the story, or on immersion into character, giving priority to relationships with other characters and the environment as our character would. For the relationships between characters, it is essential that players create identities, which are more than a function. These are autonomous individuals in complex fictional worlds, and they not only transform that world through their actions, but building a fictional identity from a particular context will change the player's prior assumptions about the character. Further, during play, their adventures develop how the characters understand and experience the world. One of the principal differences between larp and other games with characters is that in larp the characters interact in complex ways not only with the environment but also one another. This is one of the main features of larp, and the coherent performance of this identity by players generates narrativity.

One of the most common ways to guide player activity to change context is establishing diegetic goals, which can be personal – secret or not – or group goals. These can even coexist and conflict. The objectives of the characters are also the way that players achieve meaningful play. If a goal determined by game master before play is not understood correctly by the player, she can ignore that objective, and the initial intentions of the game master in stipulating that specific objective will not take place and the master should find another mechanism to advance the game (Lankoski 2004, 140-141).

When the player creates a character, she should take into account the genre that fits the game and the fictional world to give the character appropriate characteristics. The character's activity must be motivated by certain traits, such as their cause for entering the adventure, relationships with other characters, character features, etc. Each character has a unique relationship with their environment, and as changes occur in the context of the game, the character's point of view changes accordingly. The player will make decisions based on the meaning of those changes for her character. Everyone creates their own story, from her particular point of view and at the same time, participates in the story of the other players (Kim 2004, 37).

The modification of context by the actions of characters – through the agency of players – is fundamental in larp and strengthens the co-creation. Nilsson (2012, 157-158) indicates this fact, arguing that the actions of characters tend to be reactions, thus forming a dependency between a particular character and the others around her.

Fillos do Trono

Fillos do Trono was first played on March 28th 2015 in Santiago de Compostela. It is a historical fantasy larp set in medieval Galicia, created by María Teresa Pérez, Jesús Magaña and Daniel Herrero, and can be defined as an immersive/exploratory game in which the narrative interpretation of characters is essential. Actions are realized narratively, except for combat, which was resolved with foam rubber swords. For representing certain actions, the players used special action cards.

The larp had a total of 130 players and 20 organizers responsible for playing non-player characters and resolving conflicts. The players had chosen their power group, or House, and their character class at sign-up. Due to the large number of participants, the story goals in the game were not personal but collective. Each power group had their own goals, unknown to the others, and the members of each House would fight to achieve them. In addition, there was a common goal: solving the murder of the royal tax collector and locating the stolen money. To reach these goals, the players used the skills their class granted them and worked together.

The class skills were represented by cards that were played by showing them to the player affected. Some cards could only be used once, and were ripped after use. For example, the card Assassinate meant instant death to the character it was shown. However, the assassin could only use this ability as

many times as she had cards. Cards were not transferable, since they represented individual, intrinsic skills and abilities and could not be considered objects. The larp's handbook says: "each class has an associated set of skill cards that their player shall receive. However, it is important to note that everything allowed by the cards can be attempted in the game, and the skill cards merely give certainty of success" (Pérez, Magaña, and Herrero 2015, 12)¹. This is important to note because some players used the interpretation to perform actions not included in the game, and were validated by the rest of the players.

Narrativity in Fillos do Trono

In *Fillos do Trono*, genre defined both context and characters. As it was a historical larp, the players expected a realistic context throughout the game and played accordingly. However, there were also fantastical components, represented by the Witch and her Brothers – or spirits who served the Witch. The organizers kept the participants ignorant about them, desiring to create a certain conflict with contextual developments unconcerned with the existence of necromancy or other fantastical elements. The organizers encouraged suspicion towards the Witch in one group of players and support for her in another, but the players at no time expected supernatural elements to actually exist in the game. Here we see how the conventions of the fictional world are governed by genre, which marks what is and is not possible. Although it is customary that the players know the genre in advance, this being what determines what knowledge the characters possess about the world and what predisposes their interactions, sometimes the organizers may decide to keep the genre hidden to provoke a specific reaction from the players, and to build conflict that is initially concealed to avoid metagaming. Thus, genre defines initial context, potential context, and characters. It is essential for the construction of fiction.

As usual in larp, *Fillos do Trono* was created through a net of contexts and subcontexts. These allowed the exploration of different themes and game modes, according to the wishes of different types of players. As previously mentioned, the organizers tried to create a larp that primarily emphasized immersion and performance, but because they wanted to create an inclusive larp where every player could find her place, they did not restrict the possibility of exploring other game modes. This is complicated and meant the need to create subcontexts dependent on certain incentives.

The game builds off the preliminary context of the death of king Eustaquio V and the visit of Galician nobility to Santiago de Compostela to attend the new monarch's coronation and to present homage. However, the night before the new king's arrival, the tax collector is murdered and the tax money stolen. This murder justified the premature arrival of the monarch into town. Further, the leaders of the Houses feared they might be falsely accused of the crime and considered discovering the murderer and recovering the money a good way to strengthen their position and curry favour with the new king. From this initial setup, various subcontexts could be derived. These would be explored and developed through incentives of various kinds. The murder of the tax collector became the engine driving the plot and influences all goals in the game. It constituted a centre to the story, and the goals of each House complemented this central challenge. Though not contradictory, these goals were countered by a lack of trust among members of the different Houses. One of the incentives, created for contextual advancement and the construction of subcontexts, was the conflict of interests between the Houses. Each had a different purpose: gain power, riches, get justice, uphold the balance, modernize the society, etc. There was also the individual goal of collecting sufficient

¹ Translation my own.

funds to found a new House – one not achieved by any of the players² – a task that overlapped the conflict, helped it develop and gave the characters the motivation needed to influence the context.

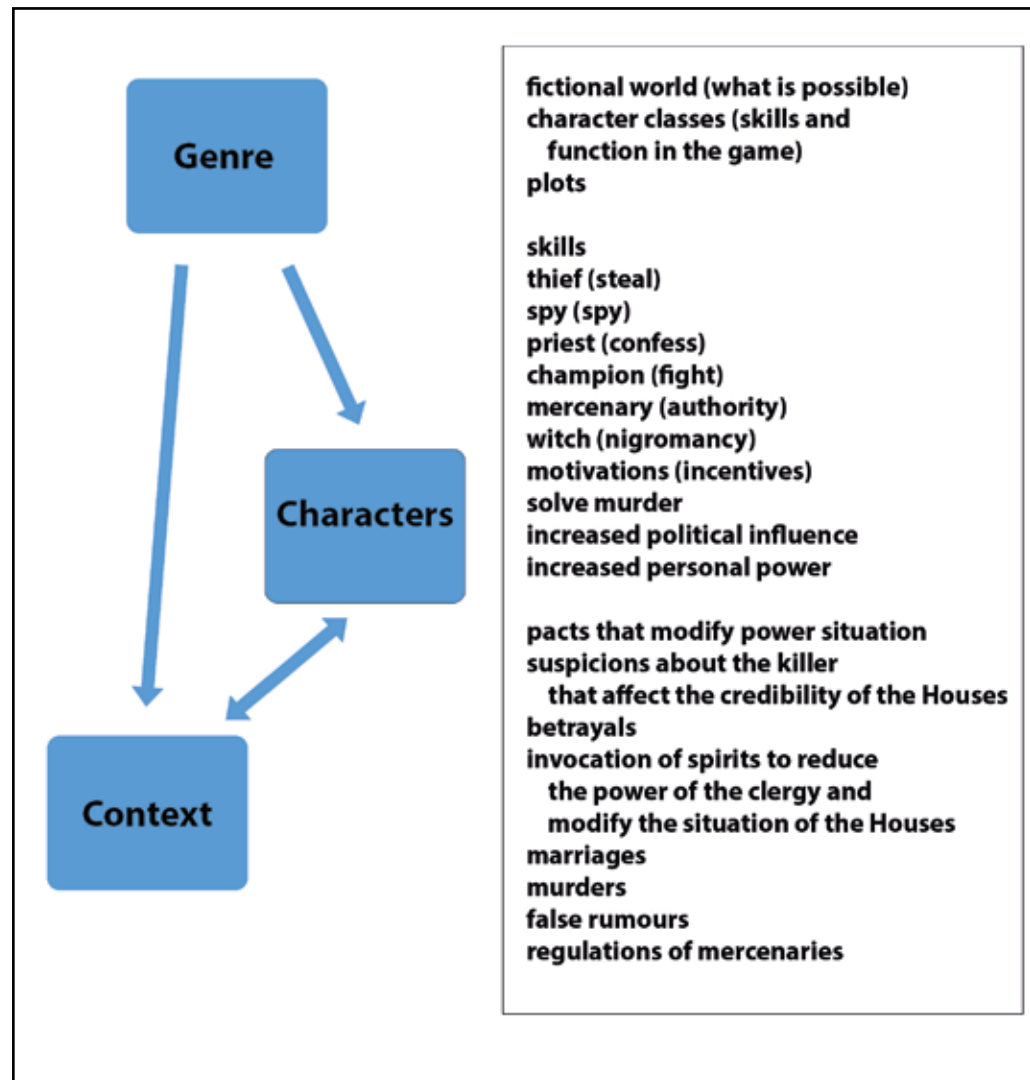
The incentive conflict between Houses was used as a way to explore different themes in diegesis and to construct context. Through that, new situations arose – marriages, murders, pacts, betrayals, etc. – to promote the creation of subcontexts and the emergence of narrativity through its construction by interaction between participants. The game was developed with a selection of the incentives outlined by Fatland (2005, 155): *conflict* (between the Houses and characters), *schedules* (winning contests, getting coins), and *puzzles* (solving the murder through clues). However, the incentive *fate* was not present. This was because of the open nature of the larp and handing over the power over the fictional world to the participants. The organizers only ensured that the game developed and interpreted non-player characters. The creators insisted that the organizers should let the players decide what to do and were urged not to change those decisions. The only limitations to the power of the participants were the cards *Diplomatic Immunity*, preventing the use of skill cards on certain non-player characters, and *Game Master*, which represented a change of frame. It was used when it was necessary to solve a dispute beyond the fictional world. It should be noted that none of the game masters needed to use this. The net of incentives built by the writers gave the game a certain structure and urged the participants to interact with each other with their goals in mind, to influence the fictional world. New contexts were generated and branched through the interactions between the characters and the world. The characters in the game were archetypes of the fantasy genre³. The classes in the handbook (Pérez, Magaña and Herrero 2015, 10) come from the tradition of medieval fantasy and are equipped with typical skills. The classes were chosen in consideration of the genre, as well as the initial context and the net of incentives that could generate possible subcontexts. They were picked for their ability to make potential changes in the context, and thought was given to potential subcontexts to determine the skills necessary to influence and actualize them.

In this manner, we can see how the feedback between genre, context and characters works, and how contextual change emerges through their interaction and the narrativity of the game appears. In larp, characters are essential, and perform diegetic actions considering their motivations. Thus, any contextual modification effected by interaction between characters will be caused by how the player understands her character. In *Fillos do Trono*, characters had no background. The players' actions and use of skills were motivated by the net of incentives and not the personality traits of the character, as tends to happen in tabletop role-playing games. Despite a lack of developed background, the characters behaved independently and in many cases the players themselves filled in the gaps through improvisation. This implies a basic difference between larp and other types of games, where the development of characters is immaterial. Here, however, embodying an identity within a fictional, open world causes the need to expand on the character's background information as a way to maintain realism and the playful mindset. This is because interactions result from improvised acts that are

² This incentive was introduced to the game to increase the agency of the players as individuals. An individual objective, understood as a task – scheduling if we follow Fatland's nomenclature (2005, 155) – was written to increase immersion. The goal was to collect 500 coins and become the leader of a new House in the next edition of the larp. This incentive also had the function of creating new subcontexts in the game: new alliances under promises of benefits as members of a new House, betrayals to the current House, search of the murderer to reach monetary agreements in exchange of silence, etc. Notably, most players didn't try to get the money, but tried to achieve the common goals. Still, there were exceptions, such as the group of mercenaries.

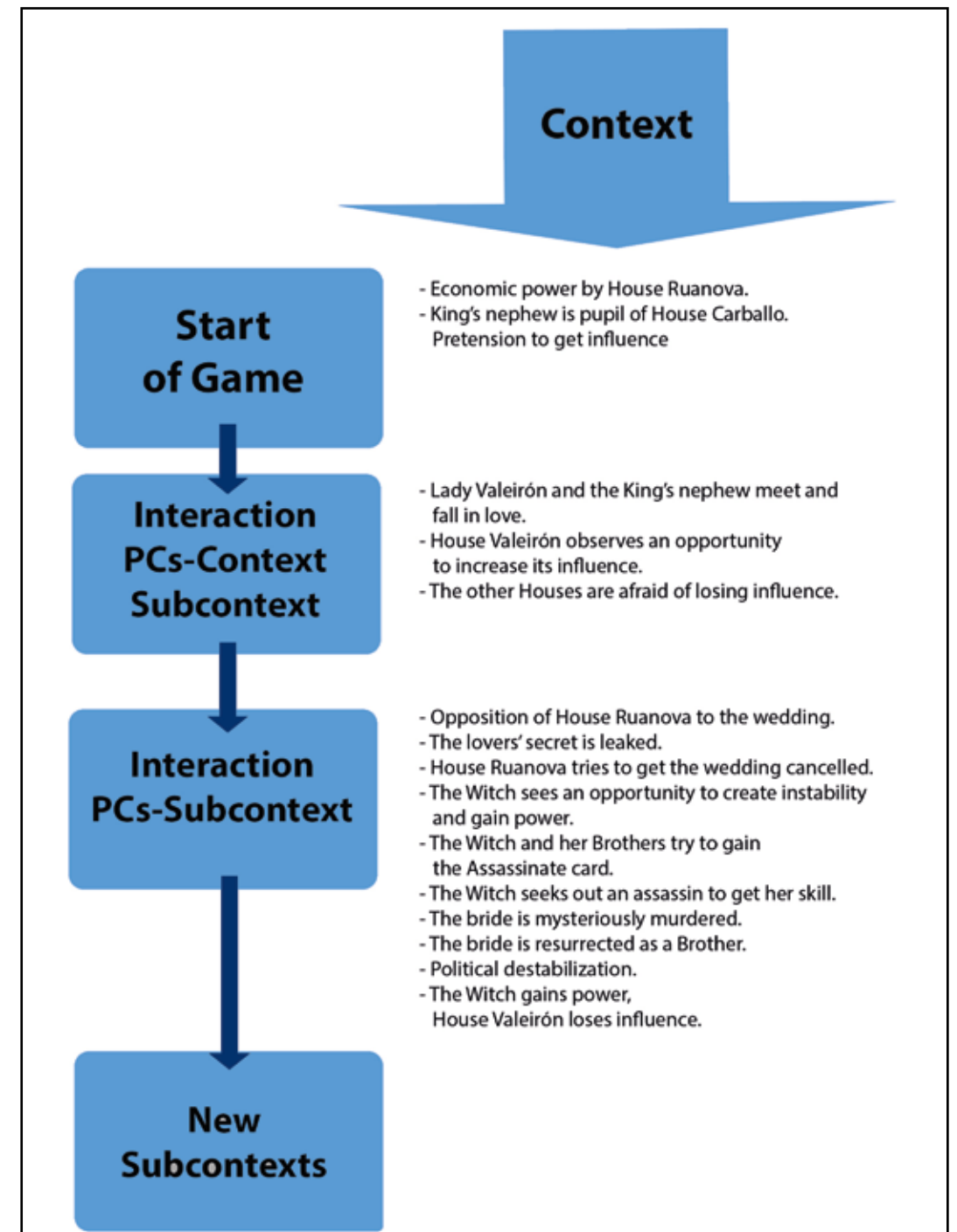
³ The larp was based on Galician history. The classes available to players were champion, assassin, priest, diplomat, spy, mercenary, and thief. Some classes were only available to non-player characters, such as the Witch, merchant, or clergy. Clergy and the Witch were antagonists, a dynamic that showcased the historical hostility of the Church towards pre-Christian pantheistic thought, which was strong in Galicia. These classic fantasy archetypes were adapted to the historical reality of Galicia.

based on the complex relationships between these characters and the environment. The interplay of different elements that create narrativity can be expressed like this:



This scheme is an example of the influence of genre conventions, context, and characters, and how their interaction generates pieces of narrativity. Over the initial context – the Houses’ economic situations, confidence among certain power groups, initial alliances, etc. – the players act, each action modifying this initial context, advancing it in a particular direction, closing off certain subcontexts and generating others. For example, Lady Valeirón falls in love with the King’s nephew and they decide to marry. This situation was not thought up by the writers, and arose from the interaction between two players and the given context. This creates a new subcontext: the balance of power shifts, House Valeirón gains influence and power while other lose it. The situation causes the players’ actions to change. The leader of House Ruanova sees a danger to her position and tries to stop the wedding, supported by House Carballo. The secret of the impending marriage is leaked, and

the actions of the Witch and her Brothers lead to the bride’s death. This causes suspicion between Houses, since the opposition of Houses Ruanova and Carballo was well known. Thus, they generated instability to cause more deaths. With this, the Witch won power and influence. An illustration of the contextual changes through the characters’ actions and how they generate these subcontexts:



Thus, every interaction is a modification of context and a breakthrough in plot, which creates a shared story between players. For this to happen, it is essential that there is a consensus between the players and that the rules are accepted, especially considering the absence of a master responsible for validating the changes in the fictional world. In this game, every action and every change of context required the acceptance of all participants to validate it. The function was carried out first by the participants of the specific scene, who initially accepted the change of context as true, and then by the leaders of the Houses, who as organizer characters had to communicate the resolutions and decisions of the players to the writers in order for everything that happened be summarized in a final scene that ended the game.

Conclusion

Narrativity emerges in games through the three elements of genre, context, and characters. The more they are developed, the greater the narrativity in the game. Because of this, we can appreciate greater narrativity in larp than in other games. These elements are interconnected. Genre marks everything related to the fictional world and the characters, and their construction – the clothing, the sociolect used, the knowledge of their reality, tools, weapons, or food all depend on genre, and the fiction is created over this. This is why it is essential that players understand the genre. It also determines the character classes and their function in the game.

The establishment of initial conflicts, defined by preliminary contextual events, are constructed according the genre of larp. This allowed the creation of shared diegesis between the players. Thus, changes in context are constructed through incentives. They give goals to characters, so that they can cause those changes.

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Design

how organizers can use the characters and their motivations to steer the meeting. *Meeting Form Design* focuses on the rules of the meeting – who should speak and how, where and when? *Physical Design* involve how the physical space of the meeting can best be organized for good larp discussions. The article wraps up with some short final notes. All of the larps referenced in the examples are Swedish.

Agenda Design

Determine the points and solutions to be discussed in advance. An unclear agenda is a nightmare both in real life and larp meetings. A group of arguing characters can very well create dozens of agenda items that they feel must be discussed, and in the end there might be as many suggestions for solutions as there are players. The process of faction building and compromise that follows might be fun for a few players, but mostly it creates a confusing environment offgame, and organizers should be aware that it often leads to more gamistic power gaming. One way of counteracting this is to pre-determine the points to be discussed and be very restrictive of letting players add new ones. Similarly, consider pre-determining several possible outcomes, and have the characters choose between set options. As an example, it was used in the larp *Gudars skymning* (Dusk of the Gods, urban fantasy, 2015) focused on old gods meeting to determine what to do about the fact that most of them were dying. The larp had two set outcomes that the characters got to vote for in the end (start *ragnarök* or adapt to the modern world). Players could suggest other alternative options (e.g. do nothing and die with honor), but most of these disappeared when they failed to get the required number of votes in a pre-vote a few hours before the final vote.

Limit discussion time depending on relevance. This is a tactic used in large real life meetings. Have players, off game or in game, vote on how much time different agenda items should get – or which should get discussed at all. A common tactic real life is to give each person the same number (say three) “dots”, and write the agenda items on pieces of paper. If an agenda item gets 40% of all dots, it gets 40% of the available discussion time. *Gudars skymning* is an example of a larp that used this tactic: various suggestions for how to deal with humanity were proposed, but only the ones that got the most votes in a pre-vote in the middle of the larp were allowed on the agenda during the last phase. This focused the larping into fewer topics, and this made it easier for players to find play with others.

Add non-verbal components. Standing around talking is typical of discussion heavy larps, and giving players something more physical to do gives them more tools to use to steer the game. Maybe arguing and moving furniture around to get the best setup for the Peace Proclamation (who gets to sit where!?), or designing a new heraldic banner, or writing a joint song to celebrate the new queen (whichever side gets its candidate elected as such). The larp *Suffragett!* (Suffragette!, historical, 2014), let players try to agree on how to draw on a big map of a city, to map out a demonstration route, where different city blocks had different characteristics.

Determine: must a conclusion be reached? It may be important for the characters that the discussion ends in some kind of a decision. But is it important for the players’ enjoyment of the game? Maybe not. Consider this, and determine whether this is important, and communicate this to the players.

In-game Resources

Determine the resources that characters can use in advance. Does a company of knights trump two companies of archers when it comes to the threat of violence? Is my fake company more influential than yours? If an organizer let players use non-obvious resources, like armies somewhere outside the game, a discussion larp quickly gets stuck. Therefore:

■ Theo Axner and Susanne Vejdemo

Design Strategies for Discussion-Heavy Larps

Introduction

Who should be the new leader? Which is the lesser of the two evils? What will the peace terms be? Many larps are centered around meetings and discussion, and most larpers have bad memories of overlong, boring meetings – but also of electrifyingly good, intense discussions. This article will discuss how larp organizers can minimize the risks of the former and maximize the potential for the latter.

This text contains many concrete suggestions for how larp discussions and meetings can be organized for maximum enjoyment and playability. We have chosen to talk about constraints and rules, but, naturally, it is more a question of guidelines and there are always exceptions. Each rule is therefore a point that we invite our fellow organizers to consider, and then use or discard as fits the larp in question.

What makes a good real life meeting is not the same as what makes a good larp meeting. In a good real life meeting, all good input is brought up and the group reaches the optimum decisions. This has very little to do with the goals of a good larp meeting, which typically give the participants a cool experience, lots of emotional upheavals and intense interaction with other players.

In general, it is our opinion that players will always add complexity to the discussions, so you rarely need to focus on that. As organizers, it is our job to set up the constraints. In the following, we have organized these constraints into several sections. *Agenda Design* touches upon how a good larp meeting agenda is structured. *In-game Resources* addresses questions of power balance. meeting happens - who can speak when, how decisions are made, how votes happen. *Character Design* is about

Make sure that people know (off-game) the various in-game power resources of the respective characters or groups. Political meetings where no one has a clear idea on power relationships – or even, at worst, what their own resources are – easily degenerate into unsatisfactory, vague longueurs as the players slowly fumble their way to a consensus (at best) on what the in-game situation is like. Usually there’s no point in keeping players ignorant of the resources and strengths of other faction either, unless someone having a hidden ace up their sleeve is a plot point. The characters, unlike the players, have been living their whole life in the game world and should have a reasonably good idea of the relative resources and strengths of the various factions.

Example. For *Jägarna och bytet* (Hunters and Prey, fantasy, Thule campaign, 2015) the writers put together a small compendium on the five main power factions of the larp and the resources they had at their disposal, split into castles, armed forces, (social) influence/status, and land and economic assets. Printouts of this were available for reference in the designated off-game building.

Balance power resources for playability. The more concrete and hands-on, the better. Even though there might not be an actual voting situation in-game, it can be a very useful device to quantify influence as “votes” – and in some cases even use them for voting – to visualize whose word carries the most weight.

Examples:

- At *Inom cirkeln av stål* (Within the Steel Circle, fantasy, Kastaria campaign, 2007), set at a church council, the influence of the various dignitaries was quantified so that a cardinal’s vote carried twice the weight of a bishop’s, whose vote in turn was worth two of priests’ votes.
- At *Serbian Christmas* (contemporary, 2014), older characters could always get the final say in any argument by giving younger characters food and insisting that they eat something.

Character Design

The following suggestions are written from the perspective of a larp tradition where players commonly write their own characters in dialogue with the larp writers. The following points are advisable to see to regardless of who writes the actual character, either as leading questions to ask before the writing or details the larpwriter adds to the character afterward. If you can get the characters created with player input at an early stage – or, of course, if you write the characters yourself – you can construct part of the meeting play around the characters rather than vice versa.

Be very clear that characters may change their opinion. And encourage this. For instance, it can be useful for a character instruction to provide examples of what might make the character change their mind – if only to make the possibility visible. On the other hand: if it’s important to the game that a character will not change their position on a certain matter, this must of course also be communicated clearly and explicitly, especially if this is for out-of-game reasons.

Be very clear what opinions and attitudes the characters begin with. This clarity is important both to players, so they know where to proceed from, but at least as much to you as larpwriter, giving you the chance to calculate and balance the strengths of various factions and attitudes at the larp.

Balance the motivations, strengths and weaknesses of characters. There should be a balance between what choices would be politically smart for the character to make and emotional and personal motivation that might make them act differently. Too optimized characters easily get unbalanced and boring. It’s also a good idea to give the player an explicit choice in taking play in different directions depending on the character’s various motivations.

Balance who has power over whom. This is both a question of play balance and of clarity for writers/organizers as well as players. The dynamic of power could be as simple as a clear hierarchical pyramid where everyone higher up has power over everyone below, but it might also involve a much more complex relation with relationships of power and influence criss-crossing between various

characters and factions. For the sake of play balance, it’s important to 1) make the balance of power itself interesting and playable – it’s vital that even those at the bottom of the hierarchy have interesting openings for play and choices – and to 2) have a clear idea of it in order to avoid unpleasant surprises. Also, make power relationships as clear as possible to the players (unless, again, someone’s secret influence on someone else is a plot point). This, like resources as mentioned above, is something the characters can be expected to have a much better idea of than the players, and it should thus be made as easy as possible to understand and play.

Meeting Form Design

No plenum discussions, i.e. discussions where everyone is gathered to discuss the same point and only one person speaking at a time. These tie up the whole larp (or group) while also keeping everyone but the current speaker passive, and if they go on for long – as often happens – they very easily drag. Dominant or space-hogging players easily seize center stage forever at everyone else’s cost. If you’re going to gather everyone together at once, the best occasion is to announce the results of discussions held otherwise.

No discussions involving more than five people. Pretty much for the same reason as the above. If you’re more than five it’s hard to let everyone get a say – try to make any group discussions small.

Work in committees empowered to make decisions. Split the issues into a suitable number of “pieces” – on a peace conference, for instance, one group could be making decisions on monetary war compensation, another on land regions, a third on who will be sitting where during the peace ceremony, a fourth on who will be the new leader. This is usually not a good recipe for getting things done in real life but excellent for a larp, since it distributes agency to a greater number of players. Let the different factions split their representatives between various committees.

Example: at *Suffragett!* the activists had various decisions to make for a demonstration; one group argued about the route of the demonstration, another about what should be written on the signs, one wrote the speech and another one wrote a press release.

Decide and communicate how to break in-game rules. It’s very rude to interrupt a speaker IRL - this might keep larpers from doing this even to their arch-nemesis. Is this desirable? Do you as an organizer want a stiff, formal meeting? Or a rowdy argument only kept in check by a moderator. What game style do you envision as an organizer? What meeting style would the in-game meeting authorities want? This is not necessarily the same.

Delegate real power in the field. Even when “realistically” speaking this would be a bad idea, giving subgroups and committees the opportunities to actually make decisions and choices with consequences makes for a more dynamic and open game. This, by the way, is a good principle for power hierarchies in larps in general.

Make sure people can leave a meeting if they’re not having fun and find other play elsewhere. Try to think about both in game obstacles (will not attending the meeting mean the character is executed for treason? Not so good, it limits the player’s possibilities) and off game obstacles (there are no other play areas than the meeting room).

Prepare a scene to clearly mark the end of the meeting, for instance a general vote. Do not allow lengthy closing speeches – these can drag on forever and can turn into plenum-like situations that we want to avoid.

Examples:

At *Livsgäld* (Weregild, fantasy, 2014), the final vote was taken by choosing to stand at either side of a line.

At *Gudars skymning*, everyone was allowed a closing statement of only a sentence or two, and no more.

Physical Space Design

Remove all tables. We have found that tables passivize players and make them less engaged with the discussion. Getting up from a table to leave a discussion also means drawing more attention to yourself, which makes it harder for players to seek out and spread play and to disseminate information. Tables also makes physical interaction with other players (like hugging them, shaking them, shoving threatening fists under their noses) more difficult. The larp *Suffragett!* had two runs in two different spaces, and the organizers partly credit the tables in the second run for making it less intense.

Remove most chairs. Like tables, chairs passivize players. A sitting person has a harder time interacting with other players, though a ring of chairs is preferable to a ring of chairs with a table in the middle.

Discourage closed doors. Closed doors make it harder for new people to enter, and for bored players to exit, a discussion. Ban them.

Encourage eavesdropping. Encourage all meetings to be as accessible for eavesdroppers as possible. For outdoors larps, have important meetings held in the open so that information quickly can be disseminated through the group of larpers. Rumors are your friend.

Examples:

Krigshjärta 5: Stålets väg (“Heart of War 5: The Road of Steel”, fantasy war campaign larp, 2011) had its main headquarters table outside under a big tarp, and any curious soldier or spy could sit in the grass a few meters away and observe all the discussions. This led to information getting out quickly to the rest of the larp.

During *Clockbottom* (steampunk, American Civil War, 2014), the corporate bosses likewise had all their meetings about how to best oppress the workers outside at a long table, next to a house with convenient corners for eavesdroppers to hide behind.

Final Notes

Discussion heavy larps can be incredibly good – when the discussions and meetings turn out to be good tools that players can use to jointly create an awesome experience. Not all design possibilities discussed in this article work for all larps – but having considered them actively is something the authors feel enhances the larps that they organize. Adding constraints to the organization of larp meetings enhance larps in the same way that adding geographical restraints do. Rather than having players wander aimlessly around a large metaphorical forest of topics and possibilities where they might not find one another, well-designed constraints of larp discussions focus the play’s focus.

Over and beyond the constraints discussed so far, there is a final, general note that we would like to share with you. **Tell players that having fun is up to them.** After all, the meeting is only a tool, not a goal in itself. Give players a clear alibi to put their own larp enjoyment above their character’s need to participate in the meeting. Make sure that players are aware that it is up to them to leave discussions if they are boring, and lose arguments if it will give them better play. Of all the constraints and design choices we’ve seen, this is the one that we believe will improve your larp the most.

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■ Ludography

Clockbottom (2014): Niklas Torstensson, Christer Edvardsson, Erik Pihl, Sara Salkvist, Jacob Pihl, Marcus Adell, Siri Arvidsson, Jean-Pierre Salkvist, Fredrik Palmqvist, Henrik Hörlin, Robin William-Olsson. Bruk i Baljan.

Gudars Skymning (2015): Siri Sandquist, Erland Nylund, Thor Forsell, Linnea Björklund. Stockholm, Sweden.

Inom Cirkeln av Stål (2007): Carl Ryrberg, Lars-Åke Johansson, Anders Söderström, Elin Jibbefors Kastaria campaign.

Jägarna och Bytet (2015): Theo Axner, Henrik Hoffström. Stockholm, Sweden. The Thule Campaign.

Krigshjärta 5: Stålets Väg (2011): Robin Berglund, Sara Zackrisson, Kalle Burbeck, Maria Rodén, Robin Schlyter, Frida Jacobsson, Tindra Englund, Peter Edgar, Ola Johnson, Jesper Pedersen Notander, Christer Edvardson. The Krigshjärta Campaign.

Livsgäld (2014): Kajsa Scinegård, Simon Lindman Svensson, Carl Nordblom, Jennie Nyberg. Xaos.

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■ Kamil Bartczak

Introducing Physical Violence to Larps

From snatching pieces of adhesive tape to full-contact fights in an arena full of spectators, this article is a case study of the projects *Fight Club* and *Fight Night*, describing the idea, execution and the conclusions the projects brought. Previous observations and experiences from older larps have contributed to adopting the rather radical notions behind these events. I included the history of the games conducted, in order to draw the image of the project clearly. As a final stage of the project, this article is mentioning application of these experiences in 360-degree larps with no rules for representing violence.

Good and Bad Emotions

Recalling the observations and conclusions which led to the creation of the *Fight Club* we need to go back to the 90's and the beginning of the XXI century, to the fights in *Orkon*, *Fantazjada* and *Flamberg*. They were conducted by means of tape stripes, which the participants were ripping off each other's chests – that was even before safe PVC swords. This was the way most games rolled – both the main games and mini-games, often dedicated to fighting only.

2009 – Metal Warriors

While searching for a battle game which would give the participants the most fun and positive emotions a larp festival game about violence was created. It differed quite a bit from others in the genre. *Metal Warriors*, a *Fantazjada* event was (or should I say “is” since it is being run to this day) a series of

safe-weapon duels of groups of warriors. Its characteristic points were the style and communication about the game:

humor – the game was a parody of the heavy metal style. The pompous music, grotesque fashion and fiery speeches before the battle. One of the most memorable features were the fancy safe weapons, developed in the “PVC pipe and foam” technique. A safe chainsaw, a road sign, and a toilet seat, to name a few.

no pressure on winning – contrary to most battle games, in *Metal Warriors* there was no pressure to win at all. In the game-related communication the stress was on bravery, spectacular fights, dying and rising to fight once more. The game consisted of a series of battles between two factions. Even though the victorious team could be distinguished (the one where not everyone was dead at the end) no points were counted, no victors announced. Playing it safe was frowned upon, as was playing with victory in mind. It wasn't a “play to lose” game, but failing wasn't a painful experience for the player.

laying off complex written rules in favor of mutual trust – there was no method to judge the battles of *Metal Warriors*. Instead of that we introduced the simplest of rules – “a hit means you're dead”. The amount of cheating was surprisingly low. What is more, there were no conflicts over this. A social stigma – often alongside the nickname “backfucker” – instead of a judge's verdict was the disciplining tool for players looking to play dirty. The pressure of other warriors' opinion turned out to be a more efficient and less negative way of enforcing rules. The role of trust was important to the integrational aspect of the event, which resulted in (including but not limited to) a spontaneous pogo dance after the battle.

high levels of visual violence – players were encouraged not only to score hits with safe weapons, but also to convincingly portray “finishing off” their opponents. These brutal scenes, visually appealing to the spectators required the improvised cooperation of both participants in order to play the scene out safely. Mock smashing the opponent's head on the wall, gutting them and slitting his/her throat – was deeply satisfying for both of the sides involved. At night, in the spotlights, accompanied by heavy metal music the emotions roared.

Metal Warriors turned out to be a spectacular, attractive and safe game. From the angle of this article, *Metal Warriors* gave the answer to a very important question: “If you equip the players with foam swords, turn on heavy metal and make them fight in the dark, will they get hurt?”

The answer is no.

2012-2013 Larp Sparring

DKWDDK gained popularity in these years and acting things out instead of fighting was favored. “You have been hit with a latex sword – act as if you were hit with a real one.” As a side effect of sorts a couple of larps incorporated improvised combat displays (the *Witcher* larp in Byczyna, “New Age” larps). They were executed with little physical contact, players attempted not to hurt each other, they faked the combat. Observation and participation led me to the following conclusions:

- allowing players to take responsibility for their safety during a staged fight doesn't increase the amount of injuries
- the elimination of precise rules lowers the stress and fights over the score
- the need to establish a winner and win-oriented-mindset makes the game less attractive. This was true for both the participants and the onlookers – the first due to the conflicts, the latter due to the more reserved and less spectacular fights.
- the fights not aimed at winning constituted a very attractive part of every larp they occurred at. The *Metal Warrior* effect of building spectacle by mock brutality was also present.

2013-2014 Fight Club

The aforementioned cases led me to solidify in my opinions.

- the safety of larp combat relies solely on the participants, regardless of the organization's intentions
- restrictive rules aiming to improve safety (restricting the hit area, using protective equipment, diminishing the contact level) are counter-productive.

They have a negative effect on the overall safety of the players – the illusion of safety induces the increase of the force of the blows. They also diminish the attractiveness of the game – even if you put aside the issue with less visual appeal, the result is conflicts, stress and sometimes aggression. On most occasions such reactions were observed on the larps using the tape stripes mechanic, slightly less so at events with safe sword fights, and the least in improvised hand-to-hand fights.

- stressing the importance of trust between the players integrates them and increases the appeal of the event.

Continuing along this train of thought I decided to perform a larp-related experiment, which was the project *Fight Club*, ran at the convention Hardkon 2013 and 2014. It consisted of a series of meetings, each following a very simple scenario. A single meeting was a series of hand-to-hand fights among the participants, it was finished when there was no one else willing to fight. The following rules were observed:

Fight Club had no rules concerning the fights. There was no hard rule stating what could and what couldn't be done. The event also followed the eight organizational rules inspired by its literary original:

- The first rule of Fight Club is: you do not talk about Fight Club.
- The second rule of Fight Club is: you do not talk about Fight Club.
- Third rule of Fight Club: someone yells stop, goes limp, taps out, the fight is over.
- Fourth rule: only two guys to a fight.
- Fifth rule: one fight at a time.
- Sixth rule: no shirts, no shoes.
- Seventh rule: Fights will go on as long as they have to.
- If this is your first night at Fight Club, you have to fight.

The fights themselves weren't moderated in any way. We turned to the players' common sense and trust. Instead of establishing rules, in the communication about the game we focused on mutual trust. Every participant was aware that his safety lies in his and his partners' hands. Soon it turned out that there is an unwritten rule: don't do anything you wouldn't be willing to handle. The amount of acceptable physical contact was soon established at a fairly safe level, but on the other hand, the blows, levers and chokes were really painful. Protective equipment was omitted on purpose.

- **self-organization** – the players could communicate on their own and discuss their limits. Even though there were no rules, we observed e.g. a gentleman's agreement to avoid directly hitting the facial part of the skull.
- **no pressure to win** – *Fight Club* was about the fight not about winning. Even though a win was very satisfying, losing wasn't a bad experience (in emotional terms) for the players. Physical pain was present.
- **no bystanders** – the eight rule meant that there were no spectators, who didn't fight at all. This protected the fighters from external pressure.
- **secretiveness** – the event wasn't marketed or even listed in the convention's program. The information was spread by word of mouth, its popularity growing with time. This created the impression of exclusiveness and secrecy.

There were nine meetings in total (5 in 2013, 4 in 2014), and 40 fights took place during these

meetings. The most important observation made was a complete (as far as we could notice) elimination of negative emotions and conflicts. Participating in the Club's meetings resulted in physical pain, but despite the physical violence there was no psychological aggression between the contestants. On the contrary, the event had a great integrational potential, induced excitement and the development of bonds between the participants, the need to exchange experiences. Bruises have been deemed an acceptable price.

The most important conclusion: swapping rules for trust between players results not only in increasing safety, but also in positive experiences from the fight.

2014 Fight Night

The previous *Fight Club* wasn't a larp, it was an experimental workshop, which was supposed to provide the answer to the question if including full-fledged violence in larps is possible, and will it affect the player's impressions from the game in a positive way. The results of this experiment were satisfactory, and required a stress test – adding elements commonly present in larps, but avoided in the previous editions of *Fight Club*: the pressure to win, the audience and its influence. Such an experiment was the *Fight Night*, which took place in Hardkon 2014.

Fight Club was a MMA fight gala, in which the participants were both spectators and fighters. The viewers participated by rooting on the fighters and making bets. Entering the larp required spending some real money, which would be used to bet on the fighters during the larp. A system of bets allowed the players to bet on the results and win or lose money. 10% of the bets on a given fight were shared between the fighters partaking in the fight. Players had been told that both the players and judges can be bribed. Thanks to this, the event gained a new layer of complexity – the backstage bribes, changing the outcome of the fights. Using real money, even though the sums were small, provided additional stimulus for the viewers and players both.

The fighters played a key role, of course. Participating in the previous *Fight Club* meetings was a prerequisite to entering, thanks to which the group knew and liked each other, and had previous experiences in fighting one with another. I also observed the same effect as during *Metal Warriors*: a sense of belonging to an extraordinary, particularly brave group – in this case more intensely and justly so. At the start the exceptionality and fair play aspect were stressed in place of direct rules in the same way as they were in the Club.

The duration of the fights has been altered from the original "as long as it has to" to three three-minute rounds, with pauses in-between. In case the fight didn't end before the time ran out, three point judges decided on the winner based on the notes taken. There were some formal rules introduced, forbidding hitting the back of the head, biting, etc. I will assume that these rules had no real impact on the fights, since none of them appeared at the club fights – the bans served to convey a MMA gala style. On the ring there was also a judge present, overseeing the fights and stopping the potential clinches.

The players chose appropriate nicknames and music to frame their entrance to the ring. The game was spiced up with appropriate comments from the gala's host.

The result was a very attractive game. We had moments when the cheers from the viewers were crazily intense. During the nine fights there was a single contusion – one of the fighters hit his head on the ring border. The rest of the contusions were non-hazardous bruises. The amount of brutality was lower than the one we know from MMA transmissions, but the same cannot be said about the emotions the players and viewers felt. If the contestants ever dreamt about hearing their name being shouted by a crowd that's stepping away to give them a passage to the ring, all this accompanied by their favorite song – then this was a dream come true.

Even though the victories were rewarded with money (both fighters received an equal amount of

cash, but the winner got to fight another round, for which they also got money), we didn't observe an increase in the intensity of the fights. Introducing rounds and spectators resulted in more resilience in the fighters, though. We received the feedback that "in the Club I'd give up, but here I had the chance to wait out till the end of the round, so I did whatever I could to hold on".

The Summary of the Project

The aforementioned examples are extreme ones, but the conclusions drawn seem to be of use to more conservative larps. The most important observations are:

- the safety of the participants of a larp fight is more dependent on their awareness of the dangers and the developed culture of play rather than set rules.
- limited pain and physical violence are not factors decreasing the pleasure derived from a larp fight. Such factors are conflicts, aggression and not being certain if the opponent will stick to the rules.
- limiting formal rules in exchange for pressuring mutual trust is important to the safety of the players and the attractiveness of the fight scenes.
- skipping the (false) safety measures, such as restrictive formal rules, protectors, rules for constructing safe weapons increases the caution and responsibility in the participants.
- when increasing the amount of physical contact it is important to make sure that the main motivation in the players is to participate in an interesting scene, or possibly transgressive experience – not winning.

The game *Fight Night* as described above is an experiment, in my opinion its safety depends very heavily on the workshops before the game. It is crucial to integrate the participants and allow them to exclude people with whom there is no sense of trust during a fight.

Nevertheless *Fight Club* seems to be a mature project, and I would encourage you to try it – while keeping the aforementioned foundations. In a short time you will find it in a "print and play" scenario.

2014 Geas: Pilgrimage

The above examples pertained to games in which violence was the central element. We have conducted and experiment with the "full touch" rule when it came to larps focusing on different topics and more concerned with immersion and stories. *Geas: Pilgrimage* and the larp preceding it, *Who Is You?*, were set in a medieval fantasy world. Their main goal was shaping and acting out interpersonal and social relationships. In both games we had the motif of founding and developing a tribal society, in the Pilgrimage there also was a faction of castaways, who were focusing on a spiritual journey and trying to understand the cause of their situation. To summarize: violence was a tertiary motif for both of these larps, but we wanted to ensure a literal depiction of the world. Introducing the full touch rule was supposed to limit the players for interacting in a "make-believe" way with other players, we wanted the characters to have the same moral limits as the players.

In both larps violence has occurred, each time being initiated in some way by the organizers – through playing a character in a larp or through using the technique of "fate play" – instructing someone to play out a scene of violence in a pre-larp briefing. Their spectacle and intensity were limited and the rest of the players quickly skipped to being the pacemakers.

Nevertheless the "full touch" rule did impact the game. The presence of violence in the game was limited, but the possibility was constantly present. The potential of turning a quarrel into a fight resulted in a more careful, realistic acting. This was particularly visible in *Who Is You?*, where this solution was a novelty for the players. We had the chance to observe. It rarely happens that the

players interact with each other with such politeness as they did during *Who is You?*. This had a positive impact on the quality of the larp. Consciously presenting yourself in a certain way, including taking into consideration how this affects the group led to the development of a deep bond, vivid in the player's memories. The same situation had place at the *Pilgrimage*, but it was less prominent. Most probably the players felt safer, after seeing the effects of *Who is You?*, which essentially meant that the vision of a larp transforming into a fistfight between all the players turned out to be just a boogeyman, not an actual threat.

In the context of this paper the conclusion from *Geas* is as follows: introducing full touch to a larp not focused on violence will most probably not incline the players to use it, but it will introduce the possibility of violence, and the hovering threat will affect how players act, increasing the realism of the players' acting. It is definitely not a rule to be used in action larps, where we want to have spectacularity – these should stay in the "no pain" formula. But if we want to provide a most realistic depiction of the real world, it's worth to consider "full touch" as one of the methods.

■ Ludography

Fight Club (2013, 2014): Kamil Bartczak.

Fight Night (2014): Kamil Bartczak, Bartosz Łoboda, Przemysław Szymczak, Maciej Wanicki.

Metal Warriors (2009): Kamil Bartczak.

Wiedźmin (2012): Mateusz Bartosik, Aleksandra Sokalska, Dominik Dembiński, Aleksander Tukaj, Marta Szmigiel.

New Age: Krwawi Rekruci (2012): Dominik Dembiński, Aleksandra Lubańska, Mikołaj Wicher, Marta Szmigiel, Aleksander Tukaj, Szymon Boruta, Agnieszka Hawryluk.

New Age: Honor of the North (2013): Dominik Dembiński, Aleksandra Lubańska, Mikołaj Wicher, Marta Szmigiel, Aleksander Tukaj, Monika Gautier, Szymon Boruta, Agnieszka Hawryluk.

Who Is You? (2014): Katarzyna Kehl, Kamil Bartczak, Laura Jankowska, Przemysław Szymczak.

Geas: The Pilgrimage (2014): Katarzyna Górka, Katarzyna Kehl, Kamil Bartczak, Laura Jankowska, Przemysław Szymczak, Anna Śliwa.

■ Anders Gredal Berner, Cécile Othon, Charles Bo Nielsen, and Claus Raasted Herløvsen

The Seven Steps Model

Creating characters for huge productions can be a tough job, and we often forget to structure our work and just start out writing a bunch of characters and then try to work out a connection and structure from there. What we call the Seven Steps Model provides the organizer with a clear overview and structure for character production from the beginning of the creative process up until the actual start of the larp.

We were inspired by a talk Martin Nielsen gave about working process at the Larp Exchange Academy about “The Painter’s Analogy”: when a painter works on a picture, she could either start by focusing on one eye and work out from one detail until the whole picture is done or she could make a rough sketch first and add layers upon layers to the whole sketch until the picture is done. The strength of the sketching process is that even before the work is done it is easy to understand what the intention is.

We wanted to approach character creation in the same way, making rough sketches with the most relevant information first to ensure that each character got the fairly same amount of care and attention.

The Seven Steps

1. Design of the larp
2. Guide for the process
3. Make the grid and frame
4. The Seven Phases
5. Sharing the characters with the players
6. Co-created character development and relation making
7. Onsite workshop

First step: Design of the larp

Before one can create a character, one needs to have an idea of what kind of larp one wants to make. This might seem obvious, but we often experience situations where characters have already been partly written before the whole design has even been agreed on, and then major changes happen, invalidating already written characters and leading to rewrites.

Second step: Guide for the process

This part becomes more important if the larp is international, or just has people from very different playing styles meeting up both during the creation and during the actual larp. One will have to agree on a guide on how to write the characters and what parts of the characters’ information is important, what is relevant, what is playable and so on, so that it fits within the overall design vision of the larp.

Third step: Make the grid and frame

This is where someone, such as the person responsible for character design, creates the frame for the characters to exist in. This is really important in bigger larps and the clearer and more developed a frame is, the easier it is to write the characters and keep consistency. First, one should expand upon the story and figure out which groups are needed to fit into the story of the larp, i.e. political groups, houses for a college, families, work-defined groups and such. This varies very much depending on what kind of setting and story one wants to explore. Second, one needs to figure out the relationships between the groups, which are in power and which are struggling. Some groups may be counter-weighting specific power groups? In the writing and description themselves, we recommend focusing on what the characters will actually get to encounter during the larp, instead of going off describing too much of the outside world which the characters will never get to interact with. This should not be a novel for the player to enjoy, but rather a way to provide them with tools for interaction with other players at the larp.

One needs to make at least some indication of individual relations between characters. If time is sparse, making links and relationships at random can be an option, though the results will be hit and miss. In our experience, it is more important that each character has a good amount of relationships than one or two meaningful ones, since in the case a player doesn’t show up or offgame conflict arises between set players, having a different set of relationships to fall back on is recommended.

The last part of the frame is also about opinions, political views, and the key themes of the larp. At *Fairweather Manor* we had great success with creating a lot of overarching themes that each character could take a stance on, these being religion, colonialism or traditional family values. It worked wonders to create some new reasons for players to find new relationships with other players, with their characters being either in agreement or disagreement on a given theme.

Fourth step: The Seven Phases

With a strong frame for the characters, this part should become a lot easier to approach. Instead of getting blindsided by the thought of 150 four-page characters, amounting to a total of 600 pages, one can use the Seven Phases model, which is a frame and a guide from where organizers can involve and coordinate more people to help with the writing.

The article following this one, “Seven Phases for Character Creation” explains each phase in more detail, but the basic idea is to start with phase one for each character and work on some basic information and then add on, making sure one does not end up using the whole time writing 30 perfect characters and then having 100 more with no content at all.

Fifth step: Sharing the characters with the players

We recommend putting all characters out on one website, Google Drive or something similar accessible with a link. Trust the players to only read what is relevant for them or at least to use the information they can find with the best of intentions. When organizers show that they trust their players, they usually perform better.

An alternative is sending out 150 individual mails but it can be time consuming and mistakes can easily be overlooked. By releasing all characters at once, one levels the playing field and ensures everyone has the opportunity to deepen their characters and develop their relationships at the same time.

This part is also where character writers will get a lot of feedback, modifications, ideas, and people wanting to make amendments. It is essential that the characters are not released before the writers/organizers have rested enough after the writing is finished. The immediate thought is to just put them out there, but just resting up and then releasing them ensures that the organizers are ready to work with all the feedback in a good and constructive way. This way, the organizers have the energy to engage the feedback and answer the players in a way that makes them feel safe and empowered to play the character or, if needed, give the players the opportunity to swap characters quickly between one another.

We prefer giving players a lot of freedom to change their character in the direction they want. This has the advantage of avoiding players getting really stuck in a part they would find difficult to play. The issue that can arise is that character design needs to be a more open-ended, so that characters are not too dependent on other characters reacting to them in the right way. It is also important to be extremely clear about this so the players know that they can be relatively flexible about their characters.

Sixth step: Co-created character development and relationship-making

After people have received their characters, it is important to create a good environment for players to feel engaged and safe to contact each other about relationships and plans for events to play out. This requires a good structure for people to work together.

If it is an international larp, organizing meetups is a lot harder, so instead we recommend using the internet with social media platforms like Facebook groups to gather people around different things for the larp. Make a platform for each of the theme of the larp, each of the in-game groups and so on. It can be hard to know which groups the players will really use and invest themselves in, but creating a place to facilitate interactions when players are ready for it is important for that initial relationship building to actually happen.

The ideal is obviously to plan meet-ups before the larp or ask the players to do it themselves. Having just met some co-players at a bar and talked about characters is much better than not having met at all.

Seventh step: On-site workshop

As soon as players arrive on location, the last part of character development is settled, as they are able to picture themselves on the location, put on their costumes and are briefed about the larp. It is the final, vital step in calibrating their expectations to fit with the vision of the larp and the expectations of the other players.

Here we recommend you give people some time for some structured workshops to expand on relationships and group dynamics, and to agree on what was put out and prepared on the internet before the larp. We recommend to also take a look at the workshop handbook for inspiration: <https://workshophandbook.wordpress.com/>

■ Anders Gredal Berner, Charles Bo Nielsen and Claus Raasted Herløvsen

Seven Phases for Character Creation

This article is an in-depth cutout focusing on the Seven Phase model which we put our characters through during the writing process. Read “The Seven Step Model” for understanding the frame.

For bigger larp productions with organizer-written characters like *College of Wizardry*, the structure and process for the character creation is extremely important to insure a higher quality, easier walk process and more consistency.

We try to attract a lot of character writers to help us out and lighten the load for the character creation process, because of the high amount of characters we aim to create (we have in collaboration been writing over 1000 pages of characters just in the first half of 2015). Working with a huge group of volunteers made facilitation really important.

Having experienced it the hard way in the past, it was clear that we needed a solid plan to make sure we did not end up writing 25 great characters, 50 okay characters and then running out of creative drive for the last 50 characters. Before we started writing, we agreed on a phase system. The idea was to make sure all characters had gone through phase one before starting on characters at phase two. This way we also knew, that even if we didn't make it through all the phases with our characters, we got sure that all character was worked upon equally and all of them had enough basic information to work for the player.

With *Fairweather Manor* we tried to raise our own bar and expanded upon our phases, and we have ended up with the following seven phases for character creation.

The Seven Phases

Phase One: The basics from the grid and frame

First some basic information that is relevant for the setting and play of the larp. As explained in the Seven Step model, you need to work out the whole frame for the characters. With the frame for everyone you should be able to fill out the following :- name, age or age group, work status, short keywords, public opinions and maybe a list of ideas for relationships.

Phase Two: Description

The description is the traditional character text, an informative, coherent piece that tells you who the character is. This text should be expanded upon in the later phases, as usable ideas surface. The description is supposed to be the bare minimum that the player needs. It should contain the basics and a description of how the character works. There are many different ways to write the description, but we recommend that you focus on what is playable and useful in the larp. Importantly, you should not mention other characters in the description. That comes later on.

Phase Three: Light/Dark

This next step adds some directions for the character to pursue and some darker stuff to add depth to the character. The idea is to describe the character's light side – something that's positive about the character that drives the character in some way, giving a positive direction. It could add some triggers for the sides and even divide them into external and internal light/dark. Example: A character had childhood experiences with alcoholism, and watching people drink can trigger destructive behaviour for the character – on the outside this makes the character stiff and withheld, but on the inside it wakes a boiling rage.

Phase Four: Questions

Questions for the character are meant as open questions for the player to ask themselves about the character, such as: “Does the character have any kids?” This question is not answered in the description, but it might be an interesting thing to consider for the player. The questions part is for the player to reflect upon the character, take a stand on their opinions or their situation, and expand on their perception of others in a more general sense. Example: “Do you have any alcoholic friends? Do you generally avoid them?” – While this seems to be about relationships, it is much more about the character's principles, if they walk a strict path of totally avoiding or looking down on alcoholism, or if they are trying to confront the past in their friends? Or maybe the character is still stuck with them? – This expands upon the characters general relationship with alcoholism.

Phase Five: Ideas for what to do

Often in larps we experience a lack of sense of what to do, a lack of clear activity for your character. Instead of having an army of zombies charging in every half an hour to entertain the players, add activities for the player, give them an alibi for something to do.

This needs to fit within the frame of the larp, and should not be an excuse to ruin the experience of others. “You want to throw the birthday cake unto the ground” is something that might be very dramatic at a children's birthday larp, but it also ruins the cake and messing with the food is rarely a great idea. Also, we want to emphasize that this is meant as inspiration for when the player has run out of ideas by themselves, not as a strict script they need to carry out.

Example: “Confront someone about their alcohol problem.” This would be a clear one for the alcoholism theme we have going and gives a reason to interact with others. It is a good idea to balance

the ‘to dos’ so that some of them are nice things to do and others are more sinister or confrontational.

Phase Six: Relationships

Often the most important part, most treasure by players, is relationships. It is also the hardest part, which is why we recommend saving it to the end. For this to work in phases, it is critical that this part has not been written into some character descriptions already since this will make it much harder to fit in. Personally, we like to keep the relationships more open-ended and vague, so that the players can fill in the holes themselves, and ensure that the relationships are mutual and consensual.

We recommend also writing the same text for each character involved in the relationship, and maybe pre-planning all the relationships between characters before starting work on the details. If the larp involves sex, marriage, love and such things, we recommend again sticking to more vague descriptions so the players can sort out the details themselves. Instead of writing “you had a two-week sex marathon going on last summer”, write: “you had an intimate romantic relationship in the past”.

Phase Seven: Quality control

The last of the phases is quality control. Have at least one new person look through the character for flaws or stuff that doesn't fit the larp. In our experience often the “ideas on what to do” part often ends up with some ideas that contradict the possibilities within the larp. Also check that all relationships are mentioned in the character texts of everyone involved.

Important: Before writing the individual characters

These are our seven phases that we use. Before involving volunteers in writing, you should make sure that they are clear on each phase and what it involves. You should also first construct the frame for the work.

Here is a list of stuff you should have ready before starting:

- The story of the larp. It is hard to create characters without knowing anything about the story.
- Groups in the larp. Some description about them and which character is in which.
- Relationships between the groups, the power structure and politics for the system the characters are in during the larp.
- Some one page meta texts explaining things you think are important for the playstyle:
 - Examples
 - Playability – what does it mean that something is playable?
 - Relevance – what kind of information is relevant for this larp?
 - What do to – some examples of ‘to dos’ that fit within the frame, and maybe some classic bad examples.
 - Important themes of the larp. These themes could also be put into oppositions within the characters in the basic description.
 - Is the character progressive or conservative?
 - Is the character religious or atheist?

These oppositions can scale, but it is important to figure out this information before writing the characters, since it is easier to balance out beforehand. Also it creates basic info to use for writing the characters – how they view the world within the setting of the larp. Finally, if you have the time and energy, consider writing a short concept for a character arc for each character, for use as a guideline and tool in writing them up.

■ Mikko Heimola & Minna Heimola

Chronological Act Structure in Finnish Historical Larps



Homefront: nursing staff of the convalescence home. Tuomas Puikkonen, in-game.

Introduction

A vast majority of Finnish larp events are set to happen in a single point of game world time. The day or two you spend in the larp event correspond to a day or two in the game world. Even in campaign games this changes little. This is a straightforward and as such a good approach to larp design. But

what one usually sees is that in order to make things interesting, developments are sped up, sometimes beyond the point of believability. Human relations take soap-opera-like turns, and complex societal processes are cut short. And some things that cannot be compressed just take place before or after the larp.

What we cover here is a different approach: instead of compressing events and relations, the larp can be stretched out so that it covers multiple points in time. We have produced two historical larps which were split in four chronological acts played in quick succession during one game day: *Projektori* (2013) set in Germany 1918-1929 and *Homefront* (2015) set in Britain 1939-1945. During the larp event, at set points, the game world took a step forward in time (a year, two years, more). Even though there have been other larps which have split the game into acts or leaped forward in time between campaign games, the approach employed here was essentially novel and quite experimental in the Finnish larp scene. Also, when comparing this approach to similar developments in other countries, one should take into account the fact that Finnish larps are built around long (4-10 pages), non-transparent character briefs pre-written by the organisers, with limited player interaction in creating and casting them.

The chronological act approach opened a host of possibilities for both character and group level developments, and enabled us to discuss a slightly larger swath of real-world history within the larp. But also had a profound impact on 1) how the game had to be written and designed, 2) the kinds of themes and storylines that could be explored, and 3) how the players navigated the larp event. In practice this meant writing for each player material covering four points in the character's life, producing varying props and dramatic material for the four acts, and managing the pacing of the game in real time. While the example cases are historical larps, this approach can be relevant also to those interested in producing non-historical larps.

The two larps presented in this paper were conceived within the larp tradition of Greywolves (Harmaasudet), an association for both historical re-enactment and live-action roleplaying (for more details see Sahramaa 2010). Larps that feature historical re-enactment form a prolific subscene within the Finnish larp scene. They focus (to a varying degree) on material culture, history of ideas, and social aspects, with the aim of recreating the experience of living in a bygone age. As such, they can be considered educational larps, but their didactic features are usually implicit and individual players can approach them as entertainment, education, or both. In our approach, much emphasis is based on historical accuracy and believability of the larp design and writing. This usually involves extensive background research and handicraft projects, and to an extent similar demands are placed also on players.

It is important to note that these larps were produced by the effort of many more people, as acknowledged below. The view we express in this paper on these larps and larping in general is, however, our own, and the other people involved in these projects may have different ideas on the matter.

The Larps

Projektori: Epic Theatre About Social Democracy

"The Germans were living as though they were at a railway station, no one knowing what would happen the next day... Shopkeepers changed their price-tickets every day: the mark was falling... It seemed as though everything was bound to collapse, but factory chimneys went on smoking, bank-clerks neatly wrote out astronomical figures, prostitutes painstakingly made up their faces... Jazzy blared. I remember two popular songs: 'Yes, we have no bananas' and 'Tomorrow's the end of the world'. However, the end of the world was postponed from one day to the next." (Ilja Ehbrenburg 1921, quoted in Friedrich 1995)



Projektori: Pre-game briefing for the first run. Photo by Tuomas Tammisto

Projektori: marraskuusta lokakuuhun (Projector: from November till October) was set in the Weimar Republic (Germany) in the years 1918-29. These years stand between the Great War and the Wall Street Crash and mark a politically and culturally tumultuous time for Germans. It was played in 2013 in two rooms of a small manor house in Helsinki (see infobox for full credits and details). For a longer description of the larp, see Heimola (2013, in Finnish).

A brief recap on German history: With the end of imperial rule and advent of parliamentary democracy, the social democratic party came to power. But within the system there remained a strong Right-wing opposition of high-ranking officials and army officers who were hostile to the idea of liberal society. On the other end, the Left-wing radicals of the Spartacist movement fought for a government based on workers' councils. The art and cinema of the period developed to express both the unromantic harshness of post-war life (the New Objectivity movement) and the subjective experience of internal tumult (German expressionism). In Bertolt Brecht's "epic theatre" the audience was deliberately reminded that they are watching a play. The game themes included also psychoanalysis, inflation, vegetarianism, and naturism, all elements in the fast-paced cultural change of the Weimar period.

The larp consisted of four acts, each set in a different year. In 1918, the day the war ended and the Kaiser abdicated; in 1920, at the Kapp Putsch (a failed Right-wing coup); and in 1923, during the hyperinflation. The last act was less naturalistic, covering the years 1926-29 in a Brechtian epic theatre, with players acting as an audience invited to participate. Between acts, the players were invited (in character) to watch scenes from the Fritz Lang movie *Metropolis*, chosen to suit the mood of the upcoming act.

The above description may make the larp sound chaotic and disjointed. However, several features contributed to a feeling of continuity within the game. All the acts were different meetings of a vegetarian society, of which the characters were members. In-game, the feature shows were arranged by two characters who owned a movie theatre. Players could comment on the movie in character, although they were discouraged from drawing attention to the fact that it was a new part of the same movie every time (or that the movie premiered in 1927). There was also action, drama, and humour, such as two right-wing officers holding communists hostage during the coup, and later the political assassination of absent founding members.

■ Info

Projektori: marraskuusta lokakuuhun

Credits: Mikko Heimola (main organiser), Olli Hakkarainen, Maarit Neuvonen, Ilana Rimón & Tuomas Tammisto.

Date: March 16-17, 2013 (two runs)

Location: Pukinmäen kartano, Helsinki, Finland

Length: Noon to evening

Players: 20 in each run, 5 assisting players

Budget: 600€, non-monetary support from Greywolves

Participation fee: 15€

Other material: <http://iki.fi/mhei/projektori/>

Homefront: Trauma, Sexual Liberation, and Patriotism

"We send a special message of remembrance to the wounded and the sick in the hospitals wherever they may be, and to the prisoners of war, who are enduring their long exile with dignity and fortitude... We are thankful for the splendid addition to our food supplies made by those who work on the land, and who have made it fertile as it has never been before... On the sea, on land, and in the air, and in civil life at home, a pattern of effort and mutual service is being traced which may guide those who design the picture of our future society." (George VI 1942, Christmas message radioed in-game)

Homefront: kotirintaman sota neljässä näytöksessä ("The Homefront War in Four Acts") was set in Britain during World War II (1940-45), in a country estate turned convalescence home for recovering servicemen/-women and hostel for Women's Land Army (WLA) girls. It was played in 2015 in a villa in Helsinki (see infobox for full credits and details).

The four acts of the game were set in February 1940, during Phoney War (a period of little active warfare on the western front); in April 1941, during The Blitz (sustained bombing of England by the



Homefront: WLA girl Grace Millais-Scott is shocked to hear that her brother, a convalescing RAF pilot, has attempted suicide by hanging. Tuomas Puikkonen, in-game

Germans); in Christmas 1942, after Allied victories; and in June 1945, when the war had ended and Britain was preparing for post-war elections. The game included a black box room which was employed to create the frontline experience for those in service at various points of the game: a sinking submarine, tank war in Africa, or the military airport.

The main focus of the larp was not, however, active warfare. Rather, play revolved around the demands the war placed on life on the homefront, and on the interaction between civilians and those in service. We were not so much interested in the actual events in the front as the social and psychological effects the war had on the lives of individuals and societies. One main theme was the liberation of social mores brought about by the war. This included great changes in women's roles: new job opportunities and new independence became possible when men were absent. The game cast included Land girls (women who were called to work the fields and other agricultural jobs instead of men) and female pilots of the Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA).

The game events also highlighted new possibilities for breaking sexual mores at front and at home. For many homosexual and bisexual men and women, wartime offered new options for sexual encounters and self-expression. The separation of men and women to different service and workforce units created possibilities (and needs) for same-sex romantic and erotic encounters. For some men and women, cross-dressing was a part of expressing one's gender identity or sexual preferences. This became more acceptable in wartime. In armed service units, variety show performances in which soldiers dressed up as women and played female roles were common and usually socially accepted. In many women's auxiliary and workforce units, rather masculine uniform (often including trousers) was part of the deal.

Another main theme was war psychiatry. World War I had made shell shock a central issue. During WW2, a number of solutions were attempted, from more careful selection of servicemen to therapeutic interventions, but in the end, the function of military medicine was to provide the frontline with men. During the game, several servicemen, women, and also civilians were confronted by both the traumatising effects of the war and the pressure to fulfill their duties. This was aided (or hindered) by psychiatrists and nurses with interviews, physical therapy, and group psychodrama.



Homefront: "My dear major, if you'd take just a few steps backward, I would kiss you under that mistletoe..." Tuomas Puikkonen, in-game

Implementation

The idea of fitting multiple time points in a single larp came to us during the writing of *Projektor*. We were struggling with the problem of expressing the volatility of German society in the 1920s and fitting in all our pet themes that did not historically coincide. Even after coming up with the solution, we were quite uncertain of how it would work out in practice, and how players would respond. A number of issues had to be handled differently from what is customary in Finnish larps and communicated to players. We would not have needed to worry. In the end, players responded enthusiastically (if a little confusedly) to our proposition. After the success of *Projektor*, *Homefront* was conceived to elaborate these ideas and techniques in a more deliberate and planned manner. While *Projektor* had been deliberately experimental and thematically "artsy", in *Homefront* our approach was somewhat more naturalistic and more in vein of our earlier historical re-enactment larps (for a description of these, see Heimola and Heimola 2016).

One big issue was plot design and character briefings. Vast majority of Finnish larps are plot-driven and non-transparent, and feature character briefings pre-written by the organisers. A typical plot could be "for some time now you have had mixed romantic feelings for this person and consider doing something about it" and in the larp this could turn out either way depending on the players – or nothing might happen. With the act structure, we structured also the character briefings so that they had separate briefings for each act, covering the events in between the in-game years but leaving blank what would happen during the act (that was still up to the players). But the briefings included some hints of what could or should be played so that the character histories unfold properly.

Some examples from the ubiquitous romantic plot stock: In *Projektor*, character briefing texts of Frau Finkel, Colonel von Schlachtfeld, and Lieutenant Janz all described that in the year 1920 Frau Finkel and the Colonel are going steady. But in the written briefings leading to year 1923, Frau Finkel had dumped the Colonel and was now with the Lieutenant. What the briefings did not cover was how this change came about. The players were instructed to play so that they anticipated such future events and if possible, played out scenes that would lead to these.

But this approach does not preclude surprising (non-transparent) plot twists. In *Homefront*, the 1940 written briefings for Mrs. Nancy Mitford (the historical persona) and Lieutenant Nigel Trick-

■ Info

Homefront

Credits: Minna Heimola (main organiser), Iida Heikkari, Mikko Heimola, Anniina Kero, Maarit Neuvonen, Hannu Niemi, Jukka Oksanen, Jenni Sahramaa, Tiuku Talvela & Anu Varjo.

Date: March 28, 2015

Location: Bokvillan, Helsinki, Finland

Length: Noon to late evening

Players: 38 players and 15 assistant players

Budget: 1150€, non-monetary support from Greywolves

Participation fee: 35€ (Greywolves members 30€)

Other material: <http://homefront.harmaasudet.fi>, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/darkismus/sets/72157651188895897/>

elbank, both visiting the manor, described a mutual romantic interest and in this case included also an explicit metagame instruction: next night (not in-game time) your characters are going to have sex together; play this act towards this end. In the 1941 brief, Mrs. Mitford was described to have been pregnant and miscarried, and was desperate to contact Nigel, who had been sent to the front in Africa (played in the black box, so the player was removed from the main game scene). In 1942, unwitting Nigel was back at the manor, convalescing from war trauma. Nancy, having been informed of this, had also returned to confront him with the news.

With the act structure, the plotting issue turned out to be more complex than we had anticipated. In a conventional larp there is little hurry and the players can mostly take their time with their tasks, motivations, and other plot hooks. With the act structure, it was more of a now or never situation: plot twists were tied into a particular time period, and once the game had moved forward, there was no going back in time to play what had been missed. This made designing plotlines quite challenging a task, as we had to check that for every character there was something of interest happening in every act, and that all the other characters relevant to these interests occupied positions which enabled playing them out. Certainly it made cross-checking everything even more tedious!

In order to enhance the experience of time passing, we had created a number of props and other effects that could be changed in-between acts. In *Projektor*, the main game room wall was lined with black-and-white contemporary art (from Otto Dix, George Grosz, and Käthe Kollwitz) that was altered to reflect the changing mood and themes relevant to each act. A newspaper scrapbook was supplemented with new items to offer more information on relevant events. In *Homefront*, every act began with a topical radio broadcast, and especially the Christmas act was elaborately decorated. These props were moved in and out of the in-game area by organisers in the intervals between the acts.

In both larps, we had specific ideas on what kinds of moods and themes we wanted each act to reflect. In *Projektor*, our original aim was for them to reflect different genres of drama such as farce (the military coup) or formalism (the epic theatre). In *Homefront*, we tried to manipulate the general mood, from the nervousness of Phoney War through fear and hope to the anxiety of post-war future. But we did not explicitly inform the players of these thematic emphases. This decision was made partly in order to preserve the subtlety of these changes, partly so as not to overburden the players who already had quite a lot to keep their minds busy.

In *Projektor*, all the characters were present in all the acts. In *Homefront* we decided to use black box for playing out things happening “meanwhile, in the front...”. It would have felt unrealistic that all these people would spend the whole war in a convalescence home. More importantly, because war trauma was one of the central themes of the game, playing out the traumatic events in the black box made those experiences and the feelings attached to them a lot stronger and gave the players involved a much clearer common framework than just handing out a text brief would have. This also contributed to the game of those players who remained home and did not visit the black box: that the game manor was not isolated, but there were events happening outside it, which forced those at homefront to consider how their lives would be affected.

For example, a tank crew spent the 1941 act in black box, playing out a sequence of events related to British advances and setbacks in the North Africa campaign. These were enlivened by the use of sounds effects, lighting, and a data projector showing documentary material. They included a traumatising experience of getting stuck inside a flaming tank, being abandoned by their tank commander, and recuperating by partaking in a cross-dressing variety show before being sent home for Christmas 1942. The latter did little to vent the frustrations over betrayal and sexual tensions inside the crew, and led to the most memorable breakdown and forcible pacification of tank driver Luckinbill at Countess Gladstone’s Christmas dinner table.



Projektor: Frau Martha Schultz and Frau Sophie Finkel.
Tuomas Tammisto, pre-game

Assessment

In general, both *Projektor* and *Homefront* were very successful larps. The visions of the game designers were realized, and the players gave mostly very favourable feedback. It is also clear that what we did with *Projektor* was essentially novel in Finnish larp: to the question “have you ever been in a larp like this”, the rather experienced cast responded with a definite “no”. *Homefront* was a much fuller realization of the potential in this approach.

At the outset, we were worried that the non-continuous game structure and the need to juggle with information on future events and relations would interfere with the immersive and naturalistic style of play many of our players prefer, by forcing the players to plan their playing on a meta-game level. To our surprise, something of the opposite seemed to happen. What we witnessed during the acts was a quick escalation of dramatic tensions, emotional outbursts and fast-paced play with little feeling of being forced or deliberately planned. What seemed to happen was that many players took a head-first approach to their characters in order to make the most out of what was on the table at a given moment. Our hunch is that compared to a more conventional larp, the act structure eliminated from the game the long pauses during which nothing seems to happen and the players loiter around, pondering on what to do next. Now almost every moment of the in-game time was used to fulfill some aspect of the larp. For several of players of *Homefront*, the larp was a strongly emotional experience: some quite experienced players were so immersed in their characters’ war traumas that they had to deliberately withdraw from the game for a short while to recover. Of course, a number of factors contributed to this, but based on post-game discussions the lack of respite resulting from the act structure definitely played a role in this.

After the larp, several players have commented on how the possibility to live with their character for a bit longer span of his/her life than is usual deepened the experience and made for a more immersive playing experience. Several players had the option of portraying their character in different roles. For example, one character started *Homefront* as a WLA woman, but after the first act became a voluntary nurse in the convalescence home instead. In *Projektor*, a movie theatre owner started the larp as a politically neutral business owner, but after witnessing the gruesome murder of already surrendered Spartacist rebels in her theatre (this happened between the acts) became sympathetic towards the socialist movement and offered her projector to be used for political propaganda.

Many players commented on how the act structure allowed for a deeper exploration of historical processes which are difficult to capture in a synchronic setting. In *Projektor*, the game highlighted the subversive role of the right-wing figures in the nascent parliamentary democracy and how the relations between social democrats and more the radical left soured. In *Homefront*, the social changes brought about the war were seen for example in the changing behaviour of the gentry. In the last act, the wartime cohesion was already fading and the issues brought up by the upcoming elections were pointing to a future in which everything would not be as it was before the war.

There were some semi-arbitrary design choices whose impact on the game is difficult to assess. In *Projektor*, players received all briefings well before the game. In *Homefront*, we gave players the option to receive their briefings for later acts during the game, to read between the acts. As only few players chose this option, its impact on the game is difficult to assess. There was some debate within the GM team on whether allowing this was viable at all, as it made more difficult for players to contact their contacts before game to discuss relationships, playing style issues, etc., and added to the danger that players inadvertently make in-game decisions which make plots planned for later acts impossible to play. In the end, player reaction was mixed, with some wishing they had instead chosen to receive everything beforehand and vice versa.

Another issue was whether to break the game between acts. In *Projektor*, we made the decision to keep the larp in-game from start to finish. There were no off-game respites. When an act was being finished, the players were ushered into an adjoining projector room where they were seated to watch parts of *Metropolis* and some silent movie styled intertitles which described the situation at the beginning of the next act. In *Homefront*, we tried the opposite approach. When a gong sounded the end of an act, everyone was allowed to break out of character for ten minutes, which allowed changing clothes, briefly consulting a GM or a contact player, etc. Then the game started again; all acts started with a radio broadcast offering war news and other pieces setting the mood for the act. Again, after the larp, opinion on these breaks was somewhat divided. In the end, we do not consider this decision to have had much effect on the larp as a whole.

Conclusion

We have described here how dividing a larp into several acts that happen in different in-game years is not only a viable option but can actually enhance the drama and immersion in a larp. This can be

particularly effective in a larp that is set in a tumultuous historical period in which there is a marked change in sociopolitical atmosphere from one year to another. However, in our opinion, it is the interaction between these large-scale developments and the natural fluctuation of interpersonal relations that most stands out as something that is difficult to achieve in a synchronic larp setting.

What remains untested is whether this approach could be expanded to cover even longer time-spans (decades). We are somewhat sceptical of this as in our larps it seemed easiest to keep track of the changes in character network when events proceeded with one-year intervals. Another question is could the flow of events be reversed, so that the players would go back in time to play the events leading up to what has already been seen (something worth trying, although we anticipate a number of continuity conflicts here).

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Homefront: The game is over for Elsa Ashford, a nurse who spied for the Germans. Tuomas Puikkonen, in-game

■ Bartek Zioło

Create Your Own Larp Adventure

You've probably heard of the video game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. You know, the one with shouting at dragons. But did you know that at the time that I'm writing down these words it's still in the top ten most played games on the Steam platform? And that's more than four years after release. Is it because the epic story, challenging combat mechanics and a vast world to explore? Or maybe because it's just an overall great game? Probably so, but I think that there's one more thing to it. And that thing is the possibility of creating your own adventures.

Wait a second, isn't this supposed to be a publication about larps? Why is this Pole with a weird name talking about a video game? The answer is simple – *Skyrim* and other open-world, do-what-you-want kind of video games could teach us a thing or two in designing our larps. This is a very broad topic, so let's keep it simple. What would a *Skyrim* larp look like? Of course not in theme (no surprise here for the average reader of this text – you know snow, mountains, Vikings and dragons all too well in Scandinavia), but in terms of game mechanics and world building. Let's give some well deserved credit to an epic fantasy adventure. For clarity, let's just keep this article as an on-point answer to one simple question – what makes *Skyrim* tick? In this article I'll concentrate on the lessons that we could learn applicable to the 100+-participant fantasy boffer games, a popular genre which deserves a lot more theory focus that it receives.

It's player-focused, not character-focused

In *Skyrim*, your character does not have a backstory that's weighing on her. She can be a cat person, a dark elf or just a mundane human being. Nothing is written outside of the story that you're making

on your own. Of course there's all this “descendant of dragons, savior of the world” thing going on, but you can just ignore it and still have a good time.

This is probably the biggest challenge that the *Skyrim* larp would have to accomplish. Plots and stories given out to the specific characters by the organizers should be avoided at all costs. Madness? Maybe, but this time it works. Just think about it – in a world that is convincing in its principles (so no Dragonborn among the players, period – this must be clearly explained before the game) and the players themselves are being taken seriously (so we trust them not to make said Dragonborn characters). There are a lot of ways to give out the plot to the game – more on that later – but the characters themselves should be fully and only controlled by the players. It's a matter of bleed – we want the player to live out this adventure, not some concept that she's only portraying. And who would know better what is good for the player than the player herself?

That would also mean that we'll be giving a lot of responsibility to the player. If there are no preset roles, how can we create a realistic society? The answer is simple – let the players decide. Let them sign up in groups or just be a “wanderer from nowhere”. As long as all the players have something to do there are no worries about their satisfaction. This mentality would also mean that the game creators need to be reactive. If a group of players want to create a working monastery, you should provide them with the details of their faith and include the religion itself in the game for other players. Nothing should be missed out, but of course you always have the option of turning some ideas down.

You may think that this kind of reasoning would result in each player portraying a king, nobleman or a powerful wizard. Practice shows that there's nothing to worry about in that matter. Let's get back to *Skyrim*.

It doesn't push anything on the player

You want to leave this dragonslaying nonsense behind you? No problem, just explore the vast world given. Get married. Plunder some crypts. Refurbish a piece of furniture for your house. Become an agent of an ancient death cult and murder some folks. Collect a ton of cheese wheels. Learn ancient magic. Heck, just grow cabbage on the outskirts of Whiterun and spend the nights listening to music and drinking ale in the tavern (there's a series of let's play videos on Youtube in which a guy does just that and nothing more¹). Do whatever you like.

A *Skyrim* larp scenario should enable players to do whatever they want to in their time. There's a great battle for the fate of the world going on? Whatever, I have a stew boiling over the campfire. I can either go and slay some orcs or just stay put and write a journal. You'd be surprised to see how many players see fun in such mundane things. These things should be possible for the players if they want to do it.

That said, there should be a reason for not fighting those orcs. If there are no other elements in the game to justify the boredom of the characters then you don't have a *Skyrim* scenario on your hands. To make this possible you'll have to create a living environment with a working economy. But portraying, let's say, a simple blacksmith's apprentice must be very dull, right? Ain't nobody got time for that. Maybe, but not if you actually do some real blacksmithing and bring something useful with you back home.

And it doesn't stop there. Make sure you have players playing ballads in the tavern. A royalty to set up feasts and banquets. Some bandits to worry the travelers on the road. This amount of work may

¹ The whole thing is called „Skyrim – rags to riches” and has 20 episodes spanning into two seasons, a two-part Christmas special and a follow-up from the perspective of 25 in-game years later. You can watch it all at <https://www.youtube.com/show/skyrimragstoriches>

seem unnecessary when the only thing that you would like to do is a game about slaying orcs. Gladly this is not the case this time. But remember – you’re not alone in this. Look back to the first point of this article. You can set all of those details in motion using your player’s hands. This is the world that they will bring to life. They will probably do better than you expect if you just let them.

It provides an opportunity to do some really epic things

But you really dig that dragon-killing thing? No problem, the epicness is here for the taking. You can start as a lowly criminal, but by the end of the journey your name will be well known by every inhabitant of the northern province.

You should give as much freedom to the players as possible, but never forget that there needs to be something to do. Make points of interests, notice boards, quests and places to explore. Populate the world with NPCs that will give out errands and provide backstory. But most of all – create a conflict between the players themselves.

The war between the Stormcloak rebels and the Empire in *Skyrim* weren’t only a plot mechanism. It served well in terms of explaining the actions of warriors on each side. And make no mistake – in our *Skyrim* larp scenario most of the players will be warriors. Or at least they will want to fight a lot. You could (and should) send out some monsters into the game area, but it would be not only hard to have enough of them, but also it would not give as big an impact as a player vs. player conflict. When building a world for the players include two (or more) sides the the conflict. Make them different, but believable. Make the conflict itself interesting and reasonable. Maybe there’s an old grudge between powerful families? Or a dispute over a piece of land between two races? Or a religious conflict? Or... The possibilities are vast – the important thing here is to create a world in which any player will know who’s a friend and who’s an enemy. Of course, a perfect setting should not be just black and white. There’s a place for doubt and even questioning the chain of command, but it should come from the players themselves, not pushed by the organizers.

But combat is not everything that could create greatness for the players. There should be a place for exploration, rituals and ancient lore. Pay attention to the details – prepare locations and props beforehand and just leave them there for the players to take. Do not concentrate on events only after they’ve been “fired off” by a questgiver. If someone in town is looking for a lost artifact, it should be attainable even by someone who never heard of that person. Give the players a motive to explore. To leave the known taverns and marketplaces. They won’t live out their own adventure if they know that there’s nothing waiting for them in the wilds. All this requires a lot of preparation, but it’s worth it.

It makes for stunning visuals

When I first heard that one quest requires me to climb 7,000 steps I thought: “Ok, I’m done with this game”. But the prize and the voyage itself were so rewarding that I was not even mad. The great view from the top of the mountains, the detailed ruins and nature gradually giving way to the snowy slopes. It would probably be equally stunning now as it was back then.

It may be hard to come up with a great larp location. Not everyone has access to a castle or a cave complex. But it doesn’t mean that you should not care. Even if all that you have is a piece of a forest – make that forest count. Maybe there’s a particular tree or rock formation that could work as a great point of interest? Maybe the trail from point A to point B could be rewarding for the players?

The sense of exploration and location visuals are often overlooked by larp creators. When you concentrate only on the plot and action it’s hard to stop and think “whoa, that place really does look neat”. Let the players explore, make all that you can of the game terrain. Don’t concentrate all the action in one place, even if it seems easy and convenient. And especially – don’t make any place more

special that it actually is. *Skyrim* may be an epic journey, that’s true. But in your game the journey itself could be epic enough for the players, if prepared right.

But when you have an opportunity – use it. A secluded ruined hut at the edge of the game zone may be interesting by itself. But if you add just a hint of someone’s presence – a misplaced fireplace, broken pots an old blanket and a noose swinging from the ceiling –that will make the scene for the players who arrive there. Especially at night. And wait a second, if there’s a rope where’s the body? You see where this is going, don’t you?

It’s immersive and never breaks the atmosphere

One of the most important parts of *Skyrim* for me is often overlooked by some. It’s the control input mapping. You have your character’s left hand under the left trigger and the right hand under the right trigger of the controller. What is put into those hands is decided only by you. That creates a natural reasoning to all of your actions as a player. Moreover, the skill trees are in form of the in-game star constellations. The inventory screen lets you take a close and detailed look at all of your items. Hell, did you know that when you burn a dragon’s body the fire can be seen on the world map?

To make a *Skyrim* larp scenario you’ll have to get rid of all the items that break the immersion. No modern items such as polyester tents or cars parked in the middle of the game area. No hard in-game moderation by the organizers. No pauses in the game, nighttime is as good as any time for playing our characters. Sometimes even better. But above all – close to no game mechanics. How would you feel if picking a lock in *Skyrim* would require you to break down an Excel spreadsheet? No, you just take a lockpick and pick the damn lock. Same goes for combat – no checking for a right skill on the list while pausing the game. You just take a swing with your greataxe, and if you’re good enough you win. Maybe you know some kind of powerful move, or can sneak up to the enemy, but if he sees you he sees you. You don’t go for a rulebook saying he couldn’t see you and should just carry on his guard duty as if nothing happened.

What about magic, monsters and other high-level fantasy things like that, you ask? The answer is simple: do them if they are realistic or don’t do them at all. Want some battle magic? No problem – use firecrackers and smoke bombs with different colors for different effects. Want to have a dragon as a central part of the scenario? If you don’t have millions of dollars, make the beast dead with some bones lying around and a reasonable goblin crew guarding the treasure. Think big, but think realistic.

This is the second most challenging rule to impose in a *Skyrim*-based larp scenario. How can we convince the players to not cheat in a system where nothing is definitely written and decided before the game? “Play to lose” is not a new concept to the larp world and many people before me explained it better than I ever could. But to put that into place in a larp based on all of the above principles we have to refer to the last thing that *Skyrim* has done well.

It places you as the only hero

No one else can get access to the power and mysteries but you. The quests start only when you (and no one else!) arrive at the scene. You cannot miss anything even if you spent months on growing cabbage outside Whiterun. The world is for the taking. But only for you.

This is the only rule that must be broken in a *Skyrim* larp scenario. You will have not one but many people to live out their own larp adventure. And each and every one of them should have the same possibility to achieve what they want. If you look back at all the ideas I’ve presented before you may see that they complement each other. Together they build a living world focused on the players, with a lot of opportunities and a realistic, immersive atmosphere. Achieving that is not easy, but done correctly should create a game in which there’s no need for the one true hero, a world where everyone

can live out their own adventure, no matter how epic or bland it might be.

This text could easily be ten times as long. But I think that it gives a clear picture on what a Skyrim larp scenario should and shouldn't be. Probably someone somewhere has already done something like this and all this gabble is useless. But even so, it doesn't mean I should not write this down. What for? Is it even worth to doing a game like this? I don't know yet. But I intend to try with the right team back here in Poland. Give us a year or two. If you hear about Battle Quest (silly name, but it sells) by then it means that we succeeded. If not know this – at least we tried.

■ Ludography

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■ Simo Järvelä

Designing Against Experiential Uncertainty

Intro

Fundamentally all larp design is experience design. Every larp tool, traditional and experimental, is a way to impact the players' experience in a certain manner. Characters, plots, genre definitions, meta-techniques, props, and special effects: all are there only to guide the subjective experiences of participants to chosen directions.

Emotions and feelings are a large part of that experience, and many would say the primary reason why they larp in the first place. Larp can be exciting, fun, touching, and hilarious, but also sad, scary, boring, or disgusting. All these **feelings are contextualized within the fictive framework** during and after the game and can be building blocks of what we call a good larp experience. However, there is one feeling that is detrimental to all other feelings and nearly impossible to contextualize as fiction: uncertainty.

Uncertainty is like hitting the brakes; you come to a screeching halt. You might be able to keep your cool so others will not notice, but the magic is gone. It hits you when you do not know how you should act in a certain situation or how interpret things around you within the fictive framework – or you just do not have enough information to go forward. People constantly predict what is going to happen next and what are the consequences if they do this or that, and then they act accordingly. If they do not have the necessary information or social scripts to predict and to act, they stop and start searching for that information. This is a fundamental biological process, and we cannot help it. In essence, **uncertainty turns attention from the fictive frame to the meta-level**. It drops you out of your character and makes you increasingly self-aware, which is something we mostly want to avoid when larping.

There are **three primary types of experiential uncertainty in larps: information, interpretation, and action uncertainty**. They all can be battled with a selection of traditional larp design tools that are familiar to most organizers. The trick is more in asking the right questions, analyzing your design from a certain perspective, and making design choices accordingly.

Information Uncertainty

Information uncertainty arises when a player does not know everything she needs to know in order to play properly. This is simply about a **piece of crucial information missing at the wrong moment**. It could be due to insufficient briefing, lazy cross-checking, too shallow world material, or information that is inconsistent or contradictory. Or it could be that it is available, but it has not been read, heard, understood, or memorized by the players. Information uncertainty is caused by lack of information that *could* be communicated to the players.

Examples: The etiquette system for the setting is not briefed properly, the fictive religion does not have any teachings, the limits and metaphysics of magic are unclear, or the titles and power hierarchy of the company are not defined.

On a general level, the solution for information uncertainty is simple and well known: efficiently briefing everything that needs to be briefed. This takes many forms such as written character descriptions, world material, vision statements, rules, genre descriptions, practical issues, code of conduct, and naturally all verbal briefing, workshopping, and other game materials as well. However, it is all too easy to cause information overflow and still not communicate everything that is relevant. It is essential to focus on information that is necessary and minimize everything else. Part of the challenge is that different players have very different capabilities to take in information, and a suitable level for everyone is a hard balance to find. Some players are also capable of making decisions with a tiny amount of information while others feel they are unable to decide unless much more information is provided. This is an individual cognitive trait, and in many cases those players who feel comfortable with small amounts of information tend to dominate the game. Ultimately, some important pieces of information will be missing, and it is advisable to brief the players on what to do when that moment comes (e.g. improvise, ask the organizers, ignore, agree with other players).

Interpretation Uncertainty

Interpretation uncertainty arises when the interpretation of game events within the fictive frame fails for some reason. The player is uncertain on how to interpret something or is unable to trust her interpretation. It could be that some critical piece of information is missing, or that the meaning structures are so unclear that interpretation becomes impossible. If a decision or action should be made based on that interpretation, it emphasizes the uncertainty. If it affects only the player's own internal mindscape, it hinders immersion, emotional reactions, the consistency of the internal simulation of the fiction, and raises questions such as "does any of it matter?", "so what?", or "who cares?". Conflicting interpretations between players create confusion, break the flow of the game and at worst shatter the illusion that all are within the same magic circle.

Examples: Is the poisoning of the Baroness an insolent attack towards the Empire, something very shocking and traumatizing to everyone present who have never witnessed anyone dying, or just a regular and boring day at the Duke's castle? Or is that other character flirting with you supposed to be unbearably charming and witty or annoying and creepy?

Creating and communicating solid meaning structures for a larp is exceedingly difficult. Genre definitions are probably the most widely used method, and using well-known IP's or settings is an extension of that. From this perspective, realism is the most efficient genre as most meaning struc-

tures are by default useful, whereas very strange and unfamiliar genres need to be fully briefed on all important aspects. **It is essential that the meaning structure is grounded** to something, so that everything is not just floating around. For example, if designing moments of important decision-making to a larp, having them have a concrete outcomes and effects in the larp helps making them meaningful – everybody knows what is at stake and what happens if B is chosen instead of A. The same applies to all negotiations. It is not enough that the results of a negotiation are defined vital to the future of the kingdom within the fiction, but there should be a concrete effect during the larp. In practice this might require limiting the amount of outcomes as not every imaginable option can be taken into account and some concrete impact ensured for them. However, even choosing or negotiating over just two proper options is better than total freedom and battling with interpretation uncertainty. Without solid meaning structures, big negotiations in the larp just blindly follow the social script without any actual point.

Shared genre visions, written briefs on relevant background information, prepared concrete outcomes, narrowed down decision trees, and workshopping and practicing the most important interactions all help in communicating, solidifying, and grounding the meaning structures so that all players know how to interpret the game events within the fictive frame. If we want to be able to play social interactions with high resolution, interpretation uncertainty must be avoided, or players will operate only on such a general safe level on which things make sense and interpretative conflicts can be avoided. Well-grounded meaning structures enable high resolution play.

Action Uncertainty

Action uncertainty occurs when a player does not have a clear idea what she can or should do in a given situation. There are five primary causes of action uncertainty: 1) the event is highly uncommon in larps and the social script is missing, 2) something unexpected happens, 3) the affordances (action possibilities) are missing from the environment, 4) it is unclear what actions are allowed or suitable, and 5) the player is uncertain on how safety rules (or the lack of them) of the larp apply to the particular situation at hand.

The typical outcome of action uncertainty is a player who does nothing; either completely freezing in a sudden situation or just vaguely hanging around and waiting. Other instances of action uncertainty lead to half-hearted playing when players do not want to invest themselves into something they are not certain of. It is also surprisingly common that players completely steer away and avoid unclear situations if they predict action uncertainty would prevail in them. This of course leads to whole parts of the larp being possibly bypassed, which might be detrimental to the whole design and flow of the game, or at minimum, be more or less waste of time and effort.

Examples: When encountering a dead body and starting the investigation, are you supposed to search for actual clues or should you expect meta-instructions with the information? What are the proper places to search for clues; e.g. is it necessary and allowed to search them under the clothes? Can you start dragging the body across the room to hide it? Are you supposed to be quick about it so the player acting the corpse gets a break soon enough?

Action uncertainty can be avoided by a variety of design methods. When writing characters for a larp, design concrete actions the characters can do during the game that incarnate their character concepts – and conversely, avoid character concepts that do not manifest themselves as concrete action in the larp. By workshopping and practicing suitable procedures and actions beforehand, conducting them is considerably more certain when the time comes. Precise genre definitions are once again a very efficient tool in communicating what courses of action are suitable for the larp and what are not; e.g. it is not sufficient to define the larp as western, as players need to know whether it is a John

Wayne or Sergio Leone western, *Deadwood*, or *Bonanza*. Explicit safety rules that are practiced before the larp help acting in sync with them without hesitation and uncertainty.

Summary

By thinking ahead how these three types of experiential uncertainty might occur in a larp and designing the game so that they can be avoided, the organizers can prevent one of the most common and yet destructive experiences for the player. The tools how to solve these issues are familiar to most larp organizers, but so far the conceptual framework has been missing. Taking the perspective of experience design, and having a solid grasp how the experiences are formed and what elements of it are unwanted in the larp context, organizers can create a smooth engaging experience. Uncertainty is by its nature one of the hardest experiences to contextualize within the fictive frame, and therefore one of the most important elements that should be designed against.

■ Mo Holkar

Larp and Prejudice: Expressing, Erasing, Exploring, and the Fun Tax

Larp designers who choose a real world setting – historical or contemporary – are faced, whether they realize it or not, with a set of decisions about how to portray the social prejudices (based on gender, race, sexuality, class, age, etc) of that setting. Exploring prejudices in larp can be an interesting and enlightening experience, but there is a question of whether the players whose characters are discriminated against will have enough interesting game content. Moreover, there is potential for bleed in and out, especially if players are encountering the same prejudice in their real lives.

In this article, I'll identify different approaches that may be taken to these decisions, and discuss their advantages and disadvantages. Approaches may be divided broadly into *expressing* (playing the prejudice 'realistically'); *erasing* (aiming to represent the game setting without the existence of prejudice); or *exploring* (approaching the prejudice by playing a parallel or sideways version). Moreover, I will describe and discuss some *techniques* for playing prejudice, in the context of player safety.

Prejudice and Larp

Oxford Dictionaries define "prejudice" as follows:

Preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience: dislike, hostility, or unjust behaviour deriving from preconceived and unfounded opinions. (Oxford Dictionaries 2015)

The world is full of prejudice and its consequences: discrimination, microaggression, violence, and societal friction. It makes some people's lives miserable, while endowing others with (perhaps

unnoticed) privilege. Some political groups work to reduce or destroy it: others try to intensify it. A non-exhaustive list might include prejudice on the basis of: sex, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, religion, disability/impairment, neurodiversity, body shape/size, etc.

Some larp are designed specifically to investigate a particular prejudice or group of prejudices. However, prejudice can also be presented as a realism-supporting factor in a larp whose subject is something else, or which is a sandbox in which players find their own subjects.

Broadly speaking, these are the escalating intensity levels of prejudice that you can work with in a larp:

- Prejudice is described as existing, in the larp background materials;
- Character is described as being a victim of prejudice in the past;
- Character is described as feeling and/or expressing prejudice in the past;
- Character is expected to be a victim of prejudice during the larp itself;
- Character is expected to feel/express prejudice during the larp itself.

So for example you might be portraying a world in which sexism exists, but (perhaps because the characters are all of the same sex, or are morally enlightened) it's not going to be actually apparent during the larp itself, other than maybe by reference. Of course, that will be less intense as an emotional experience than if you're expecting characters to be sexist towards each other during play.

It's quite common to use non-real larp settings as a lens to examine aspects of human society. So, for example, a larp set in space might have prejudice against aliens as a kind of metaphor for human racial prejudice. Or in a fantasy world, prejudice against a third gender might take the place of male–female sexism.

Any real world setting, and most larp settings will include at least some aspect of prejudice. After all, irrational dislikes and hostilities seem like an integral part of human societies. So, whether you realize it or not, you have to make a choice on how to portray prejudice in your larp.

Paying the Fun Tax

Players who have to face prejudice in their daily lives might find it tolling to have to encounter similar prejudices ingame. This can be exemplified by the notion of Fun Tax.

In video games, *Fun Tax* refers to the practice of being urged to make payments to speed up, or otherwise improve, a free-to-play game (see eg. Ralph 2013).

It was later adapted to the context of tabletop role-playing, but there it has become a rather different concept:

“I use [Fun Tax] to describe a passage in [a] gaming book that typically reads something like this: Yes, you technically CAN play a person of color, a woman or a queer person in our game but you'll have to put up with that character being harassed, discriminated against or ignored because of it. What you are doing, with that passage and the infinite variations upon it, is saying 'If you are a gamer who isn't a cis-gendered, heterosexual, white, middle class or higher male, you have to pay a toll of unfun to have fun playing a person like you'.” (Thompson 2014)

So Curt Thompson here is proposing a positive virtue of erasing prejudice in a game setting – that failing to do so may make the game miserable for players who are themselves among the real-world group that would be suffering the prejudice.

A 2015 discussion around the tabletop role-playing game *Lovecraftesque* (2015) develops the idea a little:

“[F]or some people, the historical impact of bigotry is too unpleasant to be fun. For those people and their

group, it would be better to play in a historic setting that carefully avoids those issues or excises them altogether, or to choose a different setting.” (Fox 2015)

Player sensitivities are important, of course, but it might be that tailoring your game design to the players' wishes (rather than designing the game and then seeing who wants to play it) is more common practice in tabletop role-playing than in larp.

If you're setting a larp at an advertising agency in the 1960s, in the world of the TV show *Mad Men*, sexism in the office is likely to be prevalent. Suppose you've decided that you do want to explore it thoroughly, and your players have been briefed accordingly. Female characters can expect to be constantly sexualized and diminished.

You will need to consider how this is going to feel for players who themselves are experiencing sexism at work in their real lives. Is it going to be unfun for women who experience lecherous microaggressions and dismissive comments in their daily routine, to have to experience even more of the same in this larp?

The Fun Tax argument suggests that you should at least have tools and techniques available to help players deal with these bleeding-in feelings, and to allow opt-outs.

Socio-political Duty

Perhaps you feel that sexism in the setting is so important that you actually want to make it the focus of your design. Rather than being “about a 1960s advertising agency” it's going to be explicitly “about sexism in a 1960s advertising agency”. This description will repel some players, but will encourage others.

And there are some settings where you'd be unlikely to be designing a larp unless you actively wanted to explore the prejudice manifest there. *St. Croix* (2015), set in the Danish-Norwegian slave colony in the Caribbean in 1792, with some players in the roles of slaves and others as owners or overseers, is a good example. The tension between slave and slave-owner is predicated upon the latter's view of the former as a lesser form of human being. To run a larp set in such a colony without focusing on the racist nature of the establishment would be distorting history. And once you take that as the basis, you can explore variations in prejudicial thoughts, feelings and experiences across the range of characters available.

Larp is a fantastic medium for investigating social and political themes, and prejudice is an interesting and significant aspect of society. A suitable larp design can be the right tool to give your players a really thorough and thoughtful experience into which they can take their own thoughts and feelings about prejudice, and from which they can hope to emerge having learnt and felt more and more deeply.

What can go wrong with this approach? One pitfall is that the larp may end up being too grim and difficult for many players to enjoy. The other is that you may find that you've sacrificed other things that you found interesting about the setting, by focusing on the prejudice. Your vision of characters breezily drafting clever ads may have been swept away and replaced by anxious and tearful workplace-sexism discussions.

Ways of Designing: Expressing

Perhaps the simplest approach to prejudice in your larp design is to play it realistically: allocating feelings and experiences of prejudice to your characters in the same sort of way that would be expected in real life, and encouraging the players to express them in the same range of ways that real people do.

Sexism will be prevalent in the 1960's ad agency game. Some male characters may express it in a

‘gentlemanly’ or ‘chivalrous’ way, like Roger in *Mad Men*; others may be cruder and more exploitative, like Pete. Some female characters may suffer it in silence, like Joan; others may complain, like Peggy; others may not see anything wrong with it, like Betty.

This approach may of course require research. We’re not always as aware as we may assume of the extent and shape of prejudices in other societies, historical or elsewhere in the world. Some historical forms of prejudice are now obsolete, or weakened: some were unremarkable at the time but are highlighted in today’s society. If you aim to give a realistic picture of prejudice at work within your depicted society, make sure that it actually is realistic.

In *Just a Little Lovin’* (2011), which is set mostly among the gay community of New York in the early 1980s, the characters are in a largely homosexual bubble during the game. But prejudice that they may experience in the outside world plays an important part in the backdrop. As does straight-on-gay, male-on-female, homo-on-bi and cis-on-trans prejudice between individual characters during play: it’s there and acknowledged, and players can pick it up and use it as much as they feel will be valuable to their own play experience. In the 2015 run, the hetero male leader of the Saratoga cancer survivors’ group, Kohana, was initially ignorant and mistrustful of the homosexual male lifestyle. And Nick, a trans man, had to demonstrate by deeds and self-sacrifice that he deserved to be respected as a gay man rather than a straight female “tourist”.

What can go wrong with this approach? If you find that, to express the prejudices realistically, you end up overwhelming your other material – because these prejudices were such an important part of that society that they end up influencing every interaction – then this may not be the best way to go. And furthermore, the players themselves may be overwhelmed – because as modern people, they are likely to be more aware of and sensitive to expression of prejudice than their characters would have been. This can make players feel that the prejudice you’re representing in your design is a more important theme, colouring their experiences of the game, than you had intended it to be.

But of course you have to set that against the considerable advantages of using a realistic portrayal: accessibility to players via their real-world experiences and those of others; availability of research materials that players can immediately apply to their expectations without having to apply some sort of filter; the chance to learn directly about an authentic part of history; relative ease of simulation and creating immersion; and so on. For these reasons, departing from realism has to be a positive decision from which you feel your design has much to gain.

Ways of Designing: Erasing

A common approach to real world prejudice in a larp setting is to not represent it at all – either because of lack of awareness or thought about its existence, or because of a wish to make the players’ lives easier by not forcing the task upon them. Examples include (2014, set in Sweden in 1951) and *Tonnin stiftat* (Thousand Mark Shoes, 2014, set in Finland in 1927), both of which gave characters full gender equality.

If you’ve taken the conscious decision to ignore prejudice, you needn’t feel guilty about it being a cop-out. It may be necessary in order to keep attention on the parts of the setting that are important to your design ideal.

However, you might want to think about whether by erasing the effects of prejudice from your larp, you’re maybe doing a disservice to its victims by misrepresenting their situation. Take those female staff in the 1960s advertising agency: their real-life counterparts suffered abhorrent discrimination and sexual microaggression. And many women in modern-day offices still do suffer those effects of prejudice. Is it right to present the agency as a sexism-free utopia, and ignore that historical and contemporary suffering? (The answer to that will depend on your view of a larp designer’s socio-political responsibilities.)

The experience of prejudice may have been important in shaping a person’s identity, and when you erase prejudices, there is a danger of erasing experiences and identities. Prejudice is often based on the idea of seeing someone as the ‘other’: out of the norm, and unlike oneself. However, some aspects of the ‘other’ identity were actively embraced by some of the people you’re portraying – and may be so too today, including potentially among your players. For example, if you remove prejudice against queerness from your setting, you remove part of the rationale for queer pride – and this may make queer characters less interesting to play.

It’s very tempting to be drawn to the glamorous and fun parts of a setting but to neglect the less pleasant aspects of what it was actually like. If you’re making that decision, make sure that you’re doing so consciously and with awareness of the implications – not just by not thinking about it.

Perhaps instead you might think about moving the larp to a modern setting – like the trendy ultra-21st-century advertising/PR corporation depicted in *PanoptiCorp* (2003) – where you can still have the advertising-agency fun, but sexism isn’t such a dominant part of the setting, and so can be more readily left in the background for the players to express and portray as they see fit.

Ways of Designing: Exploring

A rather different way of approaching prejudice in your larp design without making your players feel too uncomfortable is to explore it via a parallel of some sort. If you’re concerned that the prejudice you want to investigate is likely to have a high Fun Tax component – or if there’s some other reason that you prefer not to address it directly, perhaps because you’d like players to approach it fresh rather than with preconceptions – abstraction can be a useful tool in presenting your players with the thoughts and feelings that you seek to inspire, while detaching the associated emotions somewhat from those that they might be all too familiar with in real life.

Suppose that having researched your 1960s ad agency setting, you realize that sexism is such an important part of the milieu that you can’t leave it out. But you don’t want the intensity of bleed that players are likely to feel when playing sexism of the period, which might cause this play thread to dominate their game experience at the expense of other aspects of your design.

A suitable parallel might be eye colour¹, or hair colour, or the colour of arbitrary scarves that you hand out to the players. Instruct characters of one colour to be casually discriminatory and microaggressive towards characters of the other colour, in ways analogous to sexist behaviour, but regardless of the characters’ gender. That way “scarfism” can colour the in-game interactions in the same ways that sexism would, but without the unhappy associations of playing actual sexism.

Note that this not the same as using coloured scarves or similar as a representation of in-game race, as seen in *Hell on Wheels* (2013), the Czech Old-West-set larp. There, in the first run, some players playing African-American characters used dark face make-up: in the subsequent 2015 run, to avoid the unfortunate associations of “blackface”, instead coloured scarves were used non-indexically to indicate the characters’ race. In the situation we’re now discussing, though, the coloured scarf is the actual indexical property that causes its possessors to suffer or inflict prejudice.

The classic example of this technique in practice is *Mellan himmel och hav* (2003). In this larp inspired by the science fiction writings of Ursula K. le Guin, conventional gender was replaced by the notion of “morning” and “evening” people, denoted by different-coloured clothing that was intended to replace visible gender signifiers². In this way players were empowered to explore the social effects

¹ See Jane Elliott’s ‘Blue eyes / Brown eyes’ experiment: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Elliott

² In addition to “morning” and “evening” people, there was a third gender, the sunnivas, who wore white robes.

of a structure similar to gender but without all the bleed-in baggage that working with actual gender would bring.

Playing Prejudice

So let's look at playing prejudice from the player's point of view. This is potentially troublesome material, with a lot of opportunity for bleed in and out. As well as the normal things that any emotionally intense larp should include for player safety, there are some techniques specific to prejudice, which are worth looking at.

Escalation

If you want to address real prejudicial traits directly in your larp, a possible safety approach is to taper in their effects, either intensifying over time to a planned schedule, or intensifying when the players choose to do so. So, in the sexist ad agency setting, you would start with the male characters only allowed to make mild sexist remarks to the female characters ("Nice work taking the minutes of that meeting, hon-cycakes!"). Once people are comfortable with that level, a signal (or player agreement) allows them to intensify the sexist behaviour, with discriminatory practice ("A pay rise? When you'll most likely be getting pregnant and leaving?") and microaggressions ("Let me stand behind you so I can see down your blouse, gorgeous...") Next, add in coarse and disparaging speech and physically-exploitative touch. And so on until the prejudice is in full exercise, as far as you or the players are willing to go.

An escalation technique of this type was used in *Inside Hamlet* (2015). In this larp set at a decadent and vice-filled court, players were given scope for quite extreme acts, so it was necessary to be able to establish levels of comfort interactively. The word "rotten" was used, included naturalistically in a spoken sentence, when a player wished to increase the intensity of an interaction; and "pure" was the spoken signal that the right level had been reached. Another common system uses traffic-light colours – "red", "orange" and "green" – as spoken signals for "stop", "slow down", and "that's OK".

This sort of technique will need workshoping first, and opt-outs must be clear and available. And you'll need to ensure that your larp has an overall safety culture – an embedded mutual awareness and care-taking (Pedersen 2015) – that empowers players to opt out of the technique at any point without anxiety or fear of condemnation. But, given those provisos, it's a workable system which in safety terms perhaps has an analogy with the combat-replacement meta-technique *Ars marte*³: each participant has the freedom to raise the intensity to their own level of comfort, and then to stop the escalation cleanly.

Larping the Other

Finally we need to look at one of the most important tools in the play of prejudice – playing the Other. The assumption underlying the discussion around the Fun Tax is that players will identify with the experience of playing "people like them". But what if they are playing people who are explicitly "not like them"?

In many larp traditions it's customary for players to play characters who physically resemble themselves (with suitable costume, makeup, etc), for the sake of immersive verisimilitude. So for example the default assumption may be that the character will be the same gender as the player, the same broad ethnicity, and so on.

But there's great expressive and exploratory power to be found in playing the Other – playing the trait which is unlike oneself, and which is consciously or unconsciously seen as "Other" in one's

own society. In European societies, "othered" traits include: female; ethnic minority; queer; trans*; disabled/impaired; fat; mentally ill; poor; etc. The default social identity is none of these things; and it requires an effort of imagination and empathy for a person who has none of these traits to put themselves into the position of someone who is seen as "Other".

So, for example, as discussed, exploring male-on-female sexism in a 1960s ad agency might have Fun-Tax-associated issues if the female characters are played by female players. But if the female characters are played by *male* players, then those players will get an unusual and perhaps valuable insight into the life of the female Other.

Whether you also choose to inverse-Other by casting female players in the male roles is a design question. The effect is likely to be more powerful if the males in female roles feel themselves the victims of prejudice from other male players, rather than from female players: because experiencing sexist anti-female prejudice delivered by a male should feel more real than if it's delivered by a female, which would have a stronger alibi of "we're just playing at this". You'll need to think about how intense a lesson you wish your male players to be learning; and what you want your female players to get out of it (or if you want to have female players at all).

A larp example of playing the Other can be found in *Halat bisar* (State of Siege, 2013), in whose setting Northern Europe is in turmoil and the Arab League is a wealthy, stable bloc similar to the real-world EU. Finnish and Nordic players took on characters who were othered in the larp setting in the same way that Arabs are othered in our own world, while Palestinian players played first-world citizens.

In Fine

Prejudice is such a significant and interesting aspect of human society, and larp is such a potent and mind-expanding creative tool for examining life, the two seem a natural fit. It's understandable that many designers are wary of addressing prejudice in their larps: the pitfalls are many and the requirement for safety is great. But with sufficient thought, imagination, and communication of your design goals, you can give your players a valuable and powerful experience which has the potential to make a real impact on their lives.

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■ Janou Brouwer/One Odd Orange

Happy Accidents in Space

Event: Waterplaats ('water place', watering hole)

Often when we come up with ideas, we then have to find a physical space to fit them in. Despite being fairly new organizers, we have some experience with the reverse: first picking a space and then deciding what stories would work there. We managed to secure a beautiful industrial location for a tribal post-post-apocalyptic larp. It quickly became obvious to us how the spaces would be used, but when our event was done, an entirely different picture had emerged. So what happened? Various factors contributed to the use of the space. The weather played a huge part and so did the way we communicated our expectations and how much we left up to player initiative. Our players also brought their own experiences and expectations to the mix. Thankfully, our story worked, although not in the way we thought it would. In this article, I will try to explain how it unfolded in the space we had. I hope to share our experiences and hopefully bring a little bit of insight and maybe inspiration to other event organisers.

The Bones of Our Building

We were lucky to be able to rent a disused water pumping station, including the empty cistern. The building itself was built as a split level on an artificial slope over and around the reservoir. Outside, it showed its original early 20th-century style. It remained in occasional use well into the rest of the century, leaving the interior looking decidedly more industrial. Giant switch panels covered a whole wall and the slightly crumbling roof space held a vintage gallery crane system. The ground level



Outside: player foto, J. Theuns

included a concrete and patchy tilework floor and one remaining dolphin mosaic on a side wall. Stepped wooden bleachers in a corner, a mock-flight case on wheels and some oil drums made up the furnishings. Steep industrial stairs led up to the upper level and garden and down to the reservoir. The upper level held more industrial pipes and machinery, but also allowed you to look out over the lower level. Some ancient furniture made a landing seating area of a sort next to the door to the garden.

The small overgrown garden was home to some wooden pallet seats and tables plus an oil drum barbecue. There was a fence that coincided with the edge of our in game area and a covered shaft down to the reservoir, but otherwise little else of interest.

The underground area was labyrinth-like, with a small ante-chamber leading to a passage winding around a central room. The main features here were part of the architecture: the cavernous corridor a long ledge that may have been a walkway for maintenance and arches that once let the water enter the central chamber.

Expectations

We briefed players that in game, they would be gathering for ritual, stories and dance in a sacred building of the Ancients. They were playing members of the Boar, Magpie and Otter clans of the low countries, living many generations after the Ancients' Dream Time (our modern civilisation) had suddenly ended. Their tribal society fared reasonably well, but had retained very little knowledge of modern technology. This fit in well with our historical location sprinkled with disused machinery, dusty switches and mystery gauges.

Since the ground level had the most seating and decent acoustics, we were expecting to see most of

the group action here: music, storytelling and gaming. The gathering was hosted in game by the Otter clan, who maintained the building as well as they could to honour the water spirits they believed lived underneath.

The reservoir had a clear echo and the curved passages limited how far ahead you could see. We felt it was the most unique part of the building and wanted everyone to have a reason to come and see it. We asked everyone in the weeks leading up to the event to think of their purpose in seeking out the water spirits. Including the garden was a bit of an afterthought. It was overgrown and had some rubble and random debris in it. The weather had been unseasonably wet, making us reluctant to lean too heavily on the use of the outside space. We did decide to include it in the game area as the food would be cooked on the barbecue and we also wanted people to have some space away from the crowd.

Welcoming

After welcoming the players outside, we gathered them inside, on the ground level. Following a briefing, we split them up into three groups by clan for some workshop exercises. Since the Otter clan players were supposed to be closest to the spirits of the place, we asked them to use the labyrinth antechamber. The Magpie players were in the garden, as the weather was unexpectedly warm and sunny. The Boar group used the main building, making the whole building ring with their group exercises. If the weather had been worse, we would have used a canopy for one of the groups. We went in game with the Otterfolk in the pumping station to welcome the guests. Both organisers were present throughout the half-day game as low status, clanless water carriers. We had set up a setting-appropriate spread of fruits, dry nuts and drinks to welcome the guests and would continue to serve the players. The room was filled with the smell of fresh strawberries and well-established mildew. The air, colder than you would expect, felt a bit clammy.

The underground area was what drew us in the first place. It seemed to invite walking the maze as part of a ritual or other use of space as a ritual component. There was no daylight, but some bulbs in jars cast long shadows. We also strategically placed some LED block candles to light a trip hazard area. Well before the event, we asked an experienced player to play the Otter shaman in charge of the inner sanctum, so any player ritual initiative could be welcomed appropriately. She marked her ritual space in the inner chamber with chalk, beads and feathers. Oddly, the air almost felt drier here than upstairs, if not warmer. We did not do much about the garden, except for checking it for obviously hazardous debris. We even did not find the old wooden pallet furniture objectionable enough to brave moving it out of the way.

Shifting Patterns

A very wise person once told me "Players *happen*"; there is only so much you can do to control players. We purposefully chose to let go of most control. We handed people outlines of a role and some ways to connect, some things to do. Then we stepped back and let the players run the game. The players ran to the garden.

Soaking up the abundant sunshine and enjoying the food and drink was just too tempting. Blankets and pillows emerged from baskets and bags and other sat on their coats or cloaks. The atmosphere was light and happy, even the characters with difficult choices to make put them out of their minds for a while. There was a lot of talking and social play, but until the last part, very few people went inside and most of them went inside to see the shaman or to take food out into the garden. The main building barely saw any use.

The reservoir accommodated some play by the shaman, although she mostly used the inner chamber. The players were mostly used to longer events, so after some consideration, we decided to

remind them when the time out hour came uncomfortably close. Most players had barely begun to resolve their problems or ask their questions and we were worried they would feel cheated otherwise. People later told me they were happy of the reminder. There were some intense rituals then, but they were generally small and intimate in that huge space. They did make good use of the acoustics: especially the Boar stomping was very effective with all the echoes.

I had warned people in the briefing that I would start literally sweeping the area, to indicate we were about to stop. We had very little leeway, as there was a group after us, but I did not want a 'hard' time out. I put broom to floor at the beginning of the tunnel, going through the whole maze. The sound carried pretty well and things were mostly wrapping up by the time I came to the middle.

Serendipity and Design

Most of the things we took away from this would seem obvious. For instance, if we had been very attached to one particular outcome, we would have had to call this a failure. But we reached our goals of playing at the location, playing in the post-Dream Time setting and players having a good time. We would call that a success, even if the road to it was slightly more scenic and more of a detour than expected.

If we had wanted to carry out a more specific vision, we would have needed more control. We could have taken more active and more authoritative roles to make players listen to us, or used more out of game information and prodding. We had mostly experienced players though and we trusted them to make their play. We did not want to railroad them into a certain experience. It might be interesting to take elements into a more closely controlled short game though, like a guided walking of the labyrinth.

I think though that another lesson should be that all-round sensory experience matters. The food and food smells were mentioned in much of the feedback as helpful to immersion. The temperature ended up having the largest effect: inside it was cold, outside it was warm, so everyone was drawn to the garden. We had no way to control the temperature inside, but if we had, we would have been able to use that to influence play.

We are often tempted to use mostly set dressing for the eyes. Hangings and blankets and pretty bowls have a tendency to accumulate in a lot of larger households I know. But we don't consciously think of sound, taste, touch or temperature much. The spaces we play in can also be a room to move in, a place to echo our sounds rather than just set dressing. Maybe we can welcome and use happy little accidents a bit more often. Or we could design for more happy accidents...

Ongoing discussion

Introduction

In a work of fiction, every character in the piece is the author's to lose control of, but in larp we only have control over our "own narrative" (Stenros 2010, 301). Burns argues "much of the play happens in the inner space between player and character, between conscious and unconscious parts of the self." (2014, 33) When character X belongs to player Y, the two can become confused after a while. In the extramethetic² space we may conclude *Because of the actions of Character X I hate Player Y*, or, perhaps more powerfully, *Because my Character loves Character X, I am in love with Player Y*. This is a form of bleed, certainly, where emotions from one side of the narrative divide spill across to the other.

As larpers we have no easy release until the game: online role-play is not larp. It is little more than almost instant play-by-mail. The emotions are contained by our keyboards and webcams. Typing in capitals is not the same as being able to stand in front of another character and stare into their eyes. The subtlety, the physical cues are missing; the emotional feedback – the thing that allows these things to actually come out in play – is (sometimes deliberately) absent.

In the run up to CoW5, players were invited to develop their characters online by building character relations, shared memories and plot for the game. Two months before the start of the game, these players started to notice bleed. Some had already begun roleplaying their characters, but others had done little more than form tentative relations and writing backstory. This paper documents instances of what we called *pre-bleed*³ and considers to what extent intense emotional role-play without a means of releasing stress can be traumatic for players.

Pohjola tells us "The longer the player pretends to believe, the more she starts to really believe. The more she pretends to remember, the more she starts to really remember." (Pohjola, 2004) But for pre-bleed to exist as a distinct from bleed, there needs to be a distinction in the relationship between *play* and *belief*; if play has started then the only distinction between pre-bleed and bleed is that no larp has taken place.

We argue that the continuous connection between a player and a character they have yet to play can cause a particular form of bleed. The juxtaposition of connection and distance is interesting. Much like Todorov's (1975) concept of hesitation where, at "the frontier between the uncanny and the marvellous," a reader asks herself the question "can this be real?" here the player asks "is this the character or is it me?"

Most important though is the word *remember*. In the pre-game before CoW5, players were not only pretending to remember, they were creating memories in connection with other players in real time. And yet, typing a story is not the same as playing it out. The pre-bleed experience is closer to what a writer feels when they see a character on the page come to life. It is powerful because of the distance between the player and the character they are creating because they are not playing it yet.

Approach

"When asked what the people of the unseen look like, Kaluli will point to a reflection in a pool or mirror and say, 'They are not like you or me. They are like that.'" (Schieffelin 1989)

In his foreword to Boellstorff, Marcus (2012) reminds us that there is an tradition of ethnography as a means to grasp and descriptively report on shamanistic beliefs and ritual systems such as the Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime; this is a parallel unseen world that is not directly accessible to the

■ Martine Svanevik and Simon Brind

"Pre-Bleed is totally a thing"

Abstract

Pre-bleed is the experience of emotional bleed – usually but not exclusively from character to player-- – *prior* to ever playing the character in a larp setting. This paper considers multiple instances of pre-bleed experienced by players of *College of Wizardry 5* ("CoW5").

In the months running up to CoW5 a number of players used a mixture of prolonged online role-playing, Google Hangouts, co-authored documents, and an in-game Facebook-inspired social media platform to build their characters and create a shared backstory. This allowed players to stay continuously in-game for a prolonged period, which led to a heightened level of character engagement and deeper player and character relations. However, the intensity of emotions experienced was unexpected, particularly for larpers who were yet to play their characters in a physical setting.

The paper is a mixture of interviews with experienced larpers and first time players, with autoethnographic analysis of player-generated pre-game documentation. The paper presents initial conclusions regarding causes of pre-bleed and identifies similarities between preparation for larp and method acting. It concludes that intense emotional role-play without a means of releasing stress can be traumatic¹ for players.

¹ By traumatic, we mean causing emotional responses that exceed the player's ability to cope.

² If methexis is where the audience participates in and creates the action then these thoughts are outside of the collaboration, hence extramethetic.

³ As referenced by the Facebook hashtag #prebleedistotallyathing

researcher. While we may like to describe our virtual game worlds as a “sacred space”, they are directly observable and remain accessible to the researcher. So if ethnographic methods are valid for the study of invisible worlds, they are equally valid for the study of virtual worlds. Therefore, we’ve chosen a mixture of methods to research this paper: a survey, semi-structured ethnographic interviews with a cross-section of respondents and autoethnographic pieces, one by each author.

Autoethnography is a style of autobiographical writing and qualitative research that explores an individual’s unique life experiences in relationship to social and cultural institutions, systematically analysing said experience in order to make sense of epiphanic moments (Ellis 2011); it is made possible by being a part of the culture being studied. It is particularly relevant to the study of larp.

Simon Brind (45, cis male) is a larper, writer, academic, and larp organiser from the UK. He describes himself as an immersionist with narrativist tendencies; or in UK terms “an angsty-ballgowner with a tendency towards catharsis.”

Martine Svanevik (31, cis female) is a fiction and games writer. A lapsed Nordic larper, she still enjoys the occasional hardcore, deep immersion emotional roller coaster.

College of Wizardry

“Imagine our world, just as it is today. Except that magic is real.” (Raasted Herløvsen et al, 2014)

College of Wizardry (CoW) is a four-day Wizard School Nordic-style larp event made by Rollespilsfabrikken (Denmark) and Liveform (Poland). The game is played in a castle in Poland. Participants play students and teachers at the college.

The original *CoW* has been run five times so far. The first runs were set in the Harry Potter universe. Due to copyright issues, it has been reimagined as a generic wizarding larp. In this paper, we focus on the fourth installment of the game, *CoW5*.⁴

CoW is structured as a sandbox game. There are a lot of plotlines and potential for play but these are all opt-in rather than opt-out. The focus of the game is on immersion and character drama. Players are encouraged to create their own stories. They have access to the NPC team whom they can ask to help with scenes. This approach can make for a very intense game experience.

Characters

CoW5 had pre-written characters. Some aspects of the characters were fixed (year, path, house). Players were told they could change any other part of their character.

This freedom was key because it effectively put character creation in the hands of the players. Very few pre-written character relations were provided. Players were encouraged to connect to other players and create shared memories and backgrounds together.

During the time leading up to *CoW5*, we (the authors of this paper) began experiencing emotional spillover from our characters, and we were not the only ones. On October 7th, three months after players received their characters, we released an online Google Docs survey via Facebook about the process of character building and emotional spillover between characters and players prior to the game.

Data Analysis

The survey was offered to all players of *CoW4*, *5*, and *6*. We decided to concentrate our study on players from *CoW5* as that was the run we both attended.

⁴ *College of Wizardry 2* was technically not the same game but a sequel to the first one.

Out of the 51 respondents to the survey who attended *CoW5*, 33 respondents stated that they had experienced pre-bleed by the time they answered, while 18 had not.

Pre	Hours	#
No	0-2	3
No	2-8	10
Yes	8-40	8
No	8-40	5
Yes	40+	25

The instances of pre-bleed reported were higher than we predicted.⁵ Most respondents had prepared in the same way: sending emails, connecting with players and planning relations over Facebook, roleplaying on the in-game online forum Czochabook and co-writing scenes. The respondents who reported experiencing pre-bleed had, however, spent considerably more time preparing than the ones who did not.

The players reported a wide range of emotional responses quite evenly split as follows:

Emotion	Incidence
Affection	10
Anger	17
Excitement	14
Fear	11
Frustration	19
Grief	12
Happiness	16
Hatred	5
Jealousy	4
Love	14

⁵ We are unable to state whether this percentage is statistically significant as there are no figures available for the wider larp population.

Sadness	16
Other	3

(“Other” responses were “hunger for power,” “nervousness,” and “shock.”)

Interviews

After the game we interviewed 8 players including ourselves. 6 of these had experienced pre-bleed, 2 had not. Out of the players who did not experience pre-bleed, one had spent several hours on Czochabook but had done no other preparations, the other started preparing for the larp later. The ones who reported pre-bleed all spent over 40 hours preparing for the larp.

We have anonymised the interviewees, giving their reported gender, age and larp experience. In some instances we have removed character names in order to preserve this anonymity. We have used samples from the interviews throughout this paper to illustrate a number of points; we have tried to select single examples rather than repeating similar statements from interviewees.

Our own, autoethnographic observations are indented and begin with the author’s name.

The process of character creation

The players used a Facebook group set up by the organisers to build relationships. Players could give a brief description of their character and what sorts of relations they were looking for.

Brind: *Thomas was the youngest of seven dysfunctional siblings. He was a young man with no moral compass from a highly privileged background. One of the first things I wanted for him was one or more ex-partners to represent his failure to form any kind of meaningful relationship.*

Ksenia and Thomas’ original relationship was as a couple who had recently split up. Somewhere along the line we decided they still had feelings for one another and this formed the basis of much of the larp for me.

Svanevik: *Ksenia started as a pretty rough concept. A Russian fighter from an old family with no money or inherited status, someone whose merits were based on their fists rather than their blood or bank account. As we prepared for the game, a lot of her identity ended up being shaped by her relationship with Simon’s character. I think this was because we spent time describing the same scenes from different perspectives. In these shared documents, Simon and I figured out who our characters were together.*

For example, here is the same scene from different character viewpoints:⁶

“Thomas was talking to one of the society girls. They went on and on about things that didn’t matter; something to do with a favour owed. Favours are important; you pay your debts, you repay your gifts. That is the way of things. She wanted him to let her friend off? Ain’t gonna happen.

Thomas was whispering with some girl at the back. Their conversation seeped into her ears, distracting her from the teacher’s long-winded rant about the soul of magic.

The words didn’t make much sense to her, but Ksenia didn’t have time for distractions. She marched over to their desks and slammed her book down.

“Shut your fuck mouth!” she exclaimed, calmly.

⁶ The pieces were written in separate documents. The scene has been edited together for this article. Different view point shown in *italics*.

It was one of the angry ones. Russian? Eastern European? Whatever. Grey eyes, vodka, barely suppressed rage. Thomas raised an eyebrow and put one finger on his lips as if to say ‘shhh.’”

Brind: *I am not a pen and paper role-player. I steer clear of online roleplaying, downtimes⁷ and am intrinsically uncomfortable with larp over instant messenger. I need the feedback of real world interactions to be able to feel my character. My pre-game preparation was almost exclusively limited to the creation of shared documents. I made some posts on Czochabook, but these were more like blog updates. I was writing fiction in the past tense, rather than role-playing in the here and now.*

Between August 5th and November 17th 2015 we co-wrote around 20,000 words of fiction which covered how the characters first interacted, their romance, and their break-up. We also described many of the events that took place after this traumatic event.

Svanevik: *My approach to the Ksenia and Thomas story was the same one I have used for romantic relations in other larps; imagine the powerful moments and shared memories that will make the characters and their interactions feel real. This took a couple of weeks of emails, chats and a few shared documents. Once that was done, Simon wanted to keep building the relation continuously towards the larp. I think that continuous connection between the characters and the players is one of the key reasons for the emotional spillover effect I had between my character’s feelings and my own.*

Setting some narrative rules

Pre-game, we decided that we would not let the characters speak to each other between the moment of their breakup and the start of the larp. This decision had a significant impact on our pre-bleed experience.

Svanevik: *We did not want the plot to finish before the game. The result was a surprisingly powerful dramatic and emotional tension where my character so desperately wanted to see Simon’s that I felt guilty for keeping him from her.*

Instead we wrote scenes happening to the characters at the same time in different places. This shaped the characters in relation to each other. Where are you now? What are you doing? How are you feeling?

“Ksenia stood, watching the world burn, knowing there was only one thing she should be doing and only one person in the world she wanted to be next to.”

“Finn had gone, and Thomas sat alone in front of his teacher’s tomb, and listened to the wind howl around the tower like a wolf in a storm.”

Brind: *Reading the two stories side-by-side surfaced the tragic romance of the two characters. Despite their differences their emotional responses were almost the same.*

As a writer of long form fiction I often fall in love with my characters. The surprise, for me at least, was that Ksenia and Martine started to conflate in my mind. I was feeling Thomas’ love for Ksenia, but this was projected on to Martine.

Pre-Game Experiences

Waern states “the bleed concept thus capitalizes on the (table-top and role playing) design ideal of a fictional character in a fictional context, as this creates an alibi – a safe zone – for exploring emotionally complex or difficult subjects.” (28) We were able to apply this to a romance plot; here the player and the character became confused, but before play had begun. This was pre-bleed in its most intense form.

⁷ UK LRP systems often provide a formal process for characters to take actions between events.

Svanevik: *As we got closer to the game, I found myself contacting Simon more and more to ask how Thomas was, where he was, if he was OK. Somehow, letting me know how he was doing soothed some of the tension I was feeling from my character, despite the fact that she would not be allowed to know the answers I got from Simon.*

We were not alone in creating this type of shared continuous build leading up to this larp. A relatively large group of participants for the game played out their character's life from the moment the online forum opened till the larp started. Several of the players interviewed reported moments when the pre-bleed became too much.

"I felt the hurt that [my character] felt. I just felt it even though I knew it was coming. When it was actual reality, it became crushing." (Cis male, 23, experienced larper)

When co-writing fiction, each writer only controls their part of the narrative. The act of creating a story together adds tension and excitement. Waiting for the response of someone else can be a cause for pre-bleed. Several players felt the need to take breaks from the pre-game; this was a clear indicator that the emotional stress was intense.

Brind: *The most intensity of pre-bleed I had come through the co-writing of fiction rather than roleplaying the character. There is a distance between writer and character and that is where the bleed comes from.*

Svanevik: *Most of the pre-game felt distinctly different from larping to me. The divide between player and character was much more pronounced when roleplaying or writing before the larp. There was always a part of me that guided the interactions and managed the dramatic tension of each scene. As time progressed and the word count mounted, however, I started feeling like this character lived inside my head. I was constantly aware of how she was feeling.*

"Well, I certainly found myself, like, writing things that I wouldn't, well I, like getting, feeling like I got input from my character when I was writing things on Facebook and on Czochoabook [...] so it influenced my actions." (Cis male, 18, experienced roleplayer)

Foucault (1977) states that "Writing unfolds like a game that inevitably moves beyond its own rules and finally leaves them behind." When we are writing fiction, we may not be playing characters but we are – by necessity of creating a cogent and meaningful fiction – getting right inside their head. The semantic position may be different, but the outcome is the same. But is it role-playing?

"I would say the Google Docs were not role-playing, at least not for me because most of the time I had a parallel Facebook chat with the other people on it and we talked about how the scene could go on at some points or reflected on what we had just written – even if it was just "oh my God, oh my God what is happening now," – but there was still some distance between what is happening and me." (Cis female, 29, experienced roleplayer.)

Harviainen writes that it is not until "the moment when a game begins, [that] the play-space becomes a temporary pseudo-autonomous reality that is isolated by three factors: authority, language and the larp sign-interpretation state" (2006, 37) Before that moment, still in the pre-game, information flows differently; characters are in a different state, not in costume, not in person, not fully immersed in the ritual space of the game. The rules of the pre-game are different – it is possible to talk in-game and off-game at once, the scenes are played out remotely, not in person nor in real time.

In the game, most players navigated between a narrativist approach and immersion, weighing whether something is better for the story against how it fits with the character's state of mind and

traits. We would argue that the pre-game was more narrativist than the larp event precisely because of the in-game/off-game simultaneous talk. It allowed for the time to craft the reactions right, and may have led to different or perhaps even truer character interpretations.

"We met, planned the scene, keynotes and then wrote it out together. This meant that I 'played my character' better than I managed at the larp." (Cis male, 23, experienced larper.)

"I wasn't really roleplaying. I was me. [My character] was talking through me." (Cis female, 29, experienced larper.)

Whether it was pre-play or play, for those players who reported bleed prior to the larp the intensity of the experience was striking.

"I was chatting to another player and she shared part of a co-authored scene between her character and the character playing my brother. I was overcome with a feeling of betrayal and jealousy when I saw what he had told her. I tried to step back from the fiction, and I could, but the feeling persisted." (Cis female, 31, experienced larper)

Lieberoth talks about immersion as "an aspect of decoupling ability, where players try to ignore the scope-syntactical tags placed on the remembered present, that tell us 'this isn't real!'" (Lieberoth, 2006). This is interesting; it is hard to immerse whilst sitting in front of a computer keyboard unless you are in a diegesis that involves a character who is creating a character. To what extent can an immersionist experience any kind of bleed pre-game?

The answer to that question lies in the distance between player and character, and in the act of creating something together. The player may be sitting behind their screen, but they are not alone. They are sharing the experience of telling stories with others. Although it is not larping, it is a shared experience between players which elicits an emotional response, and that emotional response makes the memory feel real and vice versa.⁸

Before the larp *Dragonbane*,⁹ the players spent a day workshoping their characters together through what they called *if-games*. We understand the term *if-game* to mean when players have an opportunity to play their way into their characters and develop common memories for them. This is important because as we can learn from 19th and 20th century drama theory, memory is very powerful.

Affective Memory

One of the pervasive myths about the early incarnations of Stanislavsky's affective memory was that memories needed to derive from the actor's real life experiences. "He never advances the actor's personal memories as the sole source of emotions. Beyond the actor's lived experience, Stanislavsky asserts the validity of whetting the emotion memory through empathy with the character's situation, observation of other's experiences, imagination, and immersion in the actual onstage experience." (McFarren, 2003, 11)

Lee Strasberg's development of Stanislavsky's work, which formed the basis for the American Method, invited the actor to explore the physical space of a memory. To put themselves into the time and place they wanted to (re)experience and to consider what they could see, hear, smell, taste, and

⁸ Hamann (2001) states "that emotional stimuli engage specific cognitive and neural mechanisms that enhance explicit memory."

⁹ *Dragonbane* was a large international LARP project. The game itself took place from July 27th to August 4th, 2006 in Sweden.

feel, their balance and their relationship to the world around them.

Brind: *This is very close to my approach to the writing of fiction; for example a lot of scenes in the shared Google Docs started or ended with sensory descriptions.*

"If he closed my eyes he could remember the taste of blood and the sensation of swallowing one of his own teeth, of the loving embrace of oblivion as the cold ground came up to meet him; Avalon taught him his first lesson; he learned it the hard way."

Several players spent considerable time describing body language and physical reactions in their co-written scenes. We suggest this was an attempt to mitigate the lack of physical cues that they use to communicate during a larp, but it had the added effect of the author writing themselves into the time and space of the memory they were creating.

Using affective memory and intense pre-larp preparations to create characters that draw on our own memories and traits can be particularly powerful.

Swanevik: *About six weeks before the larp, I noticed that I was looking for my ex-fiancee fiancée everywhere. I realized that a lot of the pain I was pouring into my character came from that breakup. I borrowed from my past experiences to create a more believable emotional response. I was reframing and rethinking my own heartache.*

Affective memory, in any form, has risks. Even Stanislavski recognised this when his student, Michael Chekhov, had a nervous breakdown. This led to Stanislavski "focussing on the actor's imagination rather than personal memory" (Walsh 2013) as a means to evoke an emotional response.

"The bleed. It's all about running after someone to whose standards I cannot live up to. About not being loved back. Someone who treats my character/me with a weird mixture of kindness and refusal. Always at risk that there is some girl else who can offer what I cannot. That is the essence of a long relationship I had in my early twenties. I don't know why this found its way into CoW." (Female, 29, experienced larper)

Seton (2006) coins the term post-dramatic stress, he admits this is a deliberate provocation but believes the risks associated with some of the techniques of method acting are "a significant area of neglect and culpability for stakeholders in Western performance contexts." Most tellingly is his belief that "The the enactment and witnessing of trauma in the context of rehearsal and subsequent performance can also leave its imprint on the actors' lives, even if they had never experienced the trauma prior to performing the role."¹⁰ (Seton 2006, 2)

Burgoyne (1991) has similar concerns, "it occurred to me that my theatre training not only had not prepared me to deal with the psychological fallout my actors were experiencing, but that no one had seriously warned me that I might encounter such a phenomenon."

"The intensity of all the scenes in the game also stick with me more than it would if I hadn't been that much into character. Yeah, so I keep like being overwhelmed by memories that feel so real, because they are real, right?" (Cis Femalefemale, 31, experienced larper)

For larpers playing with bleed we would argue that they are operating at the edges of aesthetic distance; "When an individual can return to a troubling, unresolved experience without either becoming overwhelmed by it (too little distance) or disconnecting from it (too much distance), s/he achieves

¹⁰ Emphasis added.

aesthetic distance in the cathartic, intrapsychic sense of the concept." (McFarren, 2003, 206)

"[The] first meeting between [our characters] was really intense. I had this difference between my feelings and [my character]'s. Like you're writing a book and you're experiencing first hand what's happening and it's exciting but you're not the character you're reading about." (Cis female, 29, new larper)

Some forms of dramatic and narrative stress exist because there is no opportunity for catharsis, no opportunity for release. As we described above we had deliberately prevented our characters from talking. This simple in-game action would have started the resolution that allowed the characters to progress, but this could not happen until the larp started. We were not alone.

"I did not want to carry these feeling around day to day and that, especially in the context of a relationship that is known to be doomed but that cannot be played through until play officially starts, there was a very uncomfortable frozen effect of being stuck in the plummeting moment of dawning horror/sense of rejection/denial without the possibility of processing or resolving this moment through play. In fact of actively rejecting the processing of this moment in order to preserve it for live play-through." (Cis female, 36, new larper)

We agree with Bowman (2013): "if-game thinking¹¹ can become detrimental when players have difficulty letting go of character and story motivations." Combined with intense bleed and an inability to resolve the emotion through play, this difficulty becomes traumatic. Glenn (2015) defines "traumatization" as "stress frozen in place – locked into a pattern of neurological distress that doesn't go away by returning to a state of equilibrium."¹² Thus without the ability to relieve the stress, there was no way to return to that point of balance. We believe there is a clear parallel here between the experience of some larpers' pre-play and trauma.

Conclusions

There appears to be some correlation between the methods used by players during the pre-game and some affective memory techniques. We did not investigate whether those players explored real (traumatic) memories or simply used their imagination to get close to their characters,¹³ but overall the cases of bleed were higher than we would have expected and – in the reported cases – more intense. We identified that in some cases the players did not consider they were role-playing during this period.

The pre-game at *CoW5* was powerful and important to create emotional connections and shared memories between characters and between players and their characters. It lessened the time players spent getting into character once the larp started and in several cases led to deeper immersion.

The pre-game is not a larp, however. The creation of shared memories causes a distinct form of bleed that is different because of the distance between the player and their character. In the pre-game, the players are telling stories rather than living them.

For some of the pre-game players, *CoW5* became the finale to a long game where most of the story had already played out. The last chapter in a novel, the last act of a play. For the ones who managed

¹¹ Cited in Koljonen (2008).

¹² Todorov (1969), "The minimal complete plot can be seen as the shift from one equilibrium to another. This term "equilibrium," which I am borrowing from genetic psychology, means the existence of a stable but not static relation between the members of a society; it is a social law, a rule of the game, a particular system of exchange. The two moments of equilibrium, similar and different, are separated by a period of imbalance, which is composed of a process of degeneration and a process of improvement."

¹³ We would suggest that such a study if it took place, should consider the emotional safety of the participants as a priority.

to – deliberately or unconsciously – keep key plot strands from resolving before the game, however, the larp became an emotional rollercoaster of epic proportions.

If we create shared memories and stressful situations, prior to the opening of the magic circle, our options appear to be to disconnect entirely from the character, or to feel emotions over which we have little control. *CoW* is a powerful game. It has been very intense before, during and after. We would argue that we have some tools and techniques to make the space emotionally safer, but to what extent are we re-discovering things that the theatre already knows?

This is not the last *CoW* larp or the last larp with a dedicated player base that will have an intense pre-game. We suggest that larp should look to the theatre to find effective tools for managing the bleed and/or pre-bleed that will occur when players create powerful memories together. The rush of the pre-game and the intensity it brings to a larp is amazing and powerful, and intense experiences are part of the reason we play.

Žižek (2006), when talking about the relationship between (video) games and reality, states “Because I think it’s only a game, it’s only a persona, a self-image I adopt in virtual space, I can be there much more truthful. I can enact there an identity which is much closer to my true self.” But he is wrong. It is not only a game, it is never only a game; as larpers we should remember that.

Interviewer: Did you enjoy the pre-bleed?

Cis male, 45, experienced larper: Yeah. Fuck yeah. I’m not sorry, I’d do it again.

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■ Christopher Amherst

Representation and Social Capital: What the Larp Census reveals about Community

In 2014, the Larp Census was launched by Ryan Paddy and Aaron Vanek. It was a comprehensive survey designed to answer basic questions about the global larping community such as who is playing, what are they playing, and why are they playing it. From October 2014 to January 2015, the census collected 29,000+ responses in 17 languages across 123 countries/territories. Until the census, our understanding of the demographics and social dynamics within any community was limited to anecdotal evidence, personal observations, or the occasional random survey, confining us to making generalizations about said communities, their social dynamics, and their diversity or lack thereof.

As examples – in advocating for the development of larp as a diverse medium, Eirik Fatland and Lars Wingård (Fatland and Wingård 2014) argue for achieving greater diversity by recruiting across all levels of society, especially underserved communities, as a necessary change in the public perception of larp as “a young, slightly geeky, white middle-class activity”.

In contrast, Mark Diaz Truman, in his personal correspondence (as cited in Stark 2014), observing the forces of social capital at play, argues that “the hardest part for dominant groups to grapple with is the fact that homogenous groups tend to stay homogenous.” To understand this argument, let us first define the concept of social capital:

James Coleman (Coleman 1988) states that social capital is a form of capital consisting of some aspect of social structures or networks and facilitating the actions of persons or corporate actors within said social structure or network. It can take three forms: obligations and expectations, information flow, and social norms.

With this definition in hand, we can see the mechanisms that enable a group to maintain its homogeneity – be it by the equity of obligation or prescriptive cultural norms. As such, Lizzie Stark (Stark

2014) proposes a multi-faceted approach to diversity, addressing both the socioeconomic and social capital barriers imposed on marginalized communities, such as the need for enforceable safe spaces, the use of stipends, and involvement at all levels within your community.

Both of these examples offer differing solutions on broadening representation and increasing diversity within larp communities. Yet what does the census actually reveal about the existing representation and social capital within the larp community?

This article is a cohort study, grouping 3,297 out of 6,098 respondents from the US, in order to examine representational trends in the Larp Census.

With the current rhetoric on diversity and inclusivity within the global larp community, the questions we seek to answer about the current US larp scene are:

Which cohorts are more inclusive by ethnicity?

Which cohorts are more inclusive by gender?

Which cohorts are more likely to self-identify using exclusionary language?

In short, which benchmarks define a community as being more representative?

By analyzing the trends in these cohorts, we answer the question of “Who is playing”, allowing us to examine the differences on “Why they play” and reveal the barriers to participation within said community.

To address these questions, I will establish the definition of our baseline population, including exclusions. I will follow-up by addressing the first two questions via insights and analysis of the underlying demographics (age, gender, and ethnicity). Later, these base cohorts will be refined to approximate socio-economic status and address relevant questions raised. Lastly, I will examine questions about the underlying structures of social capital that these cohorts present.

In order to define our baseline population, let me explain the responses excluded at the time of the analysis:

- Non-binary definitions of gender were under review and not separated from “Prefer not to Answer” responses. In the aggregate, these responses represented 2.4% of the population and were excluded from analysis to respect privacy and prevent accidental disclosure.
- Responses to specific games or rulesets played were under review and excluded from analysis.
- Any individuals who identified as “Never participated in a larp” for the question “When did you last participate in a larp?” were excluded from analysis
- Of the 6,098 respondents remaining, only 3,297 completed the detailed portion of the survey and were included in the cohort analysis.

Once, our baseline population was defined, an exploratory data analysis was performed in order to create a cohort model, identifying questions with a high degree of correlation.

In order to differentiate cohorts within the aggregate, we must first understand the “default”, the dominant group with the fewest barriers to participation, within the cohort population.

In the aggregate – the gender ratio is 60.9% male to 39.1% female. 92.0% identify as white and 8% identify as people of color. Hispanic or Latino respondents make up 4.1% of the overall population. By age, 61.9% of the cohort population is between of 20 and 34 years of age.

Further, in terms of style of play – campaign play dominates the cohorts at 79.9% of all respondents, with standalone play at 42.4% and convention play at 30.4%. For rulesets, live combat encompasses 76.2% of all respondents; simulated combat represents a distant second at 37.2%. For roles, 74.3% of all respondents identified as cast/crew.

Therefore, within our cohort population – the “default” is a white male, between the ages of 20 and 34, who participates as cast/crew in live combat fantasy campaigns, where many costumes and props are used.

Understanding this “default” is only part of the story. We are still left with the questions of which cohorts are more inclusive by gender and by ethnicity.

Using age groups as a differentiator in our cohorts, we see that:

- Baby Boomers (age 50 to 69, as of 2014) is 3.6% of the cohort population, with a gender breakdown of 66.1% male to 33.9% female. 94.9% identify as white, 5.1% as people of color. Less than 2% identify as Hispanic or Latino.
- Generation X (age 30 to 49, as of 2014) is 48.6% of the cohort population, with a gender breakdown of 64.1% male to 35.9% female. 92.3% identify as white, 7.7% as people of color. 3.2% identify as Hispanic or Latino.
- Millennials (age 10 to 29, as of 2014) is 47.8% of the cohort population, with a gender breakdown of 57.3% male to 43.7% female. 91.6% identify as white, 8.4% as people of color. 4.9% identify as Hispanic or Latino.

In terms of gender inclusivity, Millennials are the closest to achieving gender diversity and parity and being representative of the general population for their age group. Yet in terms of ethnic and racial diversity, while each generation within the US larp community is increasingly more inclusive of people of color, the “default” is still overwhelmingly white.

To achieve a better understanding of the socioeconomic status of respondents, we refined our cohorts by analyzing two questions asked in the Larp Census:

“In the last 12 months, how far have you traveled for larp events?”

“What were the durations of the larp events you have gone to in the last 12 months?”

From those questions, we derived an approximation to socioeconomic status via “average event duration (in days)” by “average travel distance (in miles)”.

Cohort A (black) represents all individuals who attended events (on average) that lasted 1.6 days or less and were less than 401 miles from their hometown.

Cohort B (dark gray) represents all individuals who attended events (on average) that either lasted 1.6 to 2.6 days or were between 402 and 801 miles from their hometown.

Cohort C (light gray) represents all individuals who attended events (on average) that either lasted greater than 2.6 days or were more than 801 miles from their hometown.

Applying these cohorts to our existing demographic cohorts (age, gender, and ethnicity), questions can be benchmarked to identify nuanced patterns based on gender, age, ethnicity (white/people of color), and socioeconomic status.

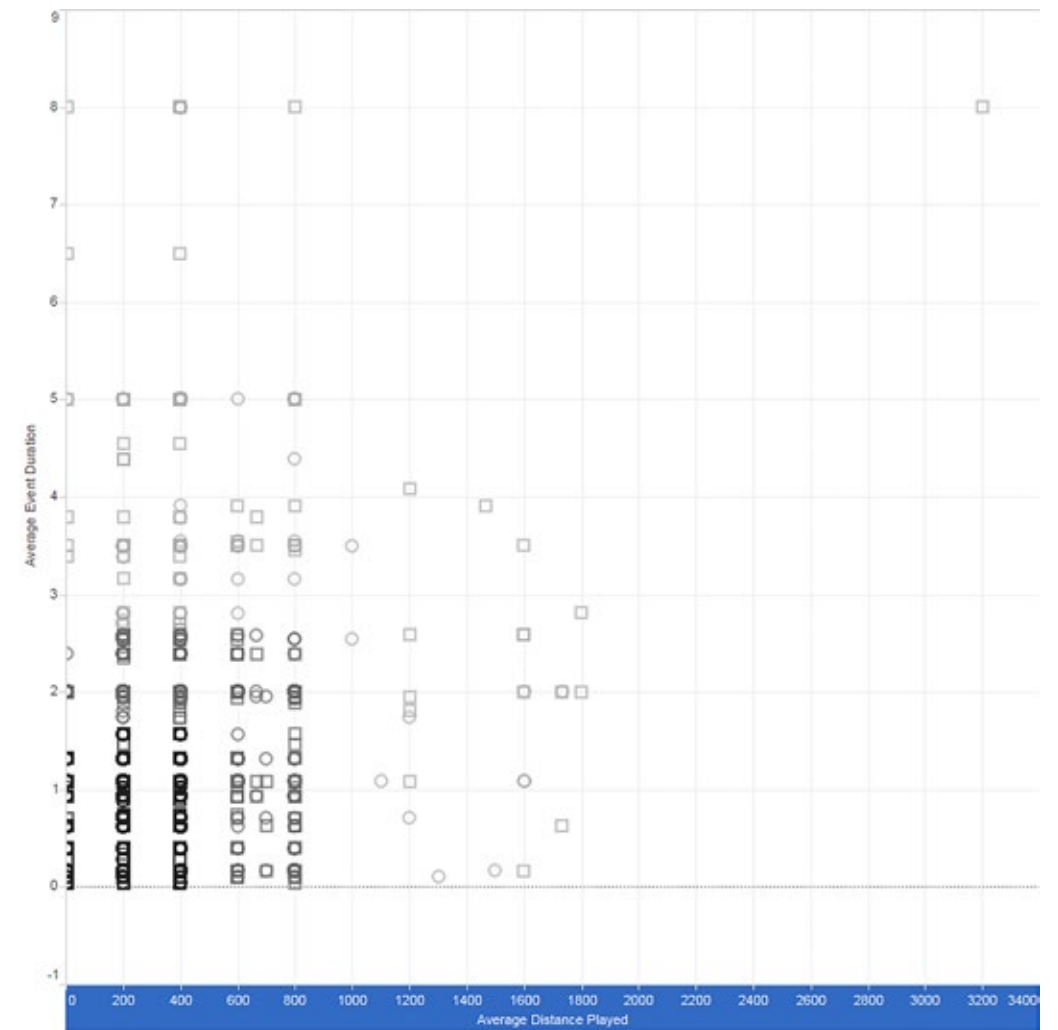
This cohort model correlates the respondent’s progressive expenditures of personal resources and subsequent investment in an event. This model confirms the notions of political economy previously described by Evan Torner (Torner 2013) – in short, the more time spent either at an event or in traveling to an event is directly related to the attendee’s labor-power liquidity.

This liquidity correlates proportionally to event expectations about event size, venue, or production values/quality.

In asking “How many people participated in the larp events that you attended in the last 12 months”, we typically see that members of Cohort A attend smaller events (11 to 20 or 21 to 50 attendees) while members of Cohort C attend larger events (51 to 100 attendees or higher) with members of Cohort B, falling between Cohorts A and C, attending events with a sizes ranging from of 21 to 50 and 51 to 100 attendees.

For production values/quality, while all cohorts participated in events where “Many costumes, props and sets were used, however not all of them were of excellent quality”, members of Cohort A typically participated in events where “A few simple props, costumes, or sets were used” as well. One notable observation about Millennials in Cohort C is that they are increasingly attending larger events with better production values.

Regarding venue, we see correlations between cohorts and age groups. Typically, members in all cohorts play in events held in public parks. For all ages, gender, and ethnicities – members of Cohort A participates in events at hotels, while members of Cohorts B & C are often at youth camps. Fur-



ther, Millennials are more likely to attend events held in private homes or at schools/universities while. Women (all ages) are more likely to attend events in private homes.

As our proxy for socioeconomic status elucidates the obvious barriers to participation within larp, these observations can be explained in context to social capital.

For our purposes, we will look at these barriers through two forms of social capital: information channels and social norms within a community – social norms can facilitate action A, but constrain action B (Coleman 1988). This behavior can be beneficial in some ways, but may be detrimental or restrictive in others. Here we find, that women across cohorts (age and ethnicity) engage their social capital by participating in events within private homes in order to innovate and challenge the “default”. This trend becomes more pronounced when examining motivations for play – women (across most cohorts (age, socioeconomic, or ethnicity)) are more likely to be motivated by larps that are self-reflective (“teach me about myself”), emotionally open (“participating in dramatic moments in which characters are very emotional”), emotionally intimate (“enjoy private, personal interactions with just a few, other characters”) or involve image (“creating costuming or props”) in contrast to motivations for play among men, which orient toward advancement within their respective game.

Analyzing the motivations of people of color, we find that respondents strongly identify with the “overcome challenges” motivator, ranking it no lower than 6th (across all cohorts), when compared to their respective white peers in age, gender, or socioeconomic status. While there is an affinity with this motivator in some cohorts, this motivator highlights the difference of playing as a “default” versus playing as an “other”.

Both trends highlight how social norms can constrain action and inhibit social capital, as both women and people of color are more likely to participate as a cast/crew when compared to the white male peers within a cohort.

Additionally, one of the paradoxes to this enforcement of social norms is the increased tendency of using racially charged language in acknowledging one’s ethnicity. For Generation X, this represented 4.1% of the male population and 3.8% of the female population. For Millennials, this represented 5.8% of the male population and 4.9% of the female population. In both age cohorts, there is no definitive answer as it crosses socioeconomic status and the type of events attended. We can only speculate as to whether this is pushback to the increasing diversity in the US larp community or the underlying socioeconomic challenges affecting respondents within those age cohorts.

As for Millennials and their choice of venues, we can view their increased tendencies to participate in events at schools/universities or private homes as both reinforcing information channels and establishing a social network of trust within their cohorts, particularly when two of the strongest motivators for participation in a larp is “Creating a good story” and “spend time with friends”.

Additionally, we can see this reinforcement of information channels when re-examining the question of the types of events that an individual attended within the last 12 months. Members of Cohort A are more likely to cross between event types, such as Campaigns and Conventions, while members of Cohorts B and C are significantly more likely to play a specific event type only. These trends may be a reflection of the proportion of personal resources and social capital expended to participate in these events or that these communities are a closed social structure, for which the participant is a member. In essence, members of Cohorts B and C are strongly influenced by who they know in terms of what they choose to play.

If we are to draw conclusions, it would be this: while the US larp community is becoming increasingly diverse by virtue of generational demographics – this diversity can be enhanced by moving away from the “default” and addressing issues of recruitment, access to social capital, and the inequities of socioeconomic status. Universally, we all are all drawn to good stories told with friends and characters that we can personally identify with (whether that is overcoming challenges or being emotionally open or achieving success), be it at a freeform convention in a hotel, a weekend-long Nordic larp at a youth camp, or in a live combat fantasy campaign in a public park.

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■ Sonja Karlsson

Larp and Law

In the 2014, a group called Larp Women Unite (LWU) was created on Facebook. Its members wrote about crimes that had occurred during Swedish larps. The news spread to several Swedish newspapers as well as to Swedish radio. A weekend seminar was arranged to discuss the issue of better security and safer arrangement of larps, organized by the Medieval Week on Gotland, the gaming organization Sverok, as well as the Swedish educational association Studieförbundet.

My bachelor’s thesis, Sweden’s first legal essay about larp, was written to judicially investigate the question of abuse during larp. It focuses on the main issues mentioned in LWU, sexual molestation and assault. The essay investigates how the law should be applied to incidents that have happened during larp, and the special circumstances involved. With no Swedish case law on larp, the essay instead compares participation in larp to participation in sports and BDSM practice. The focus is on Nordic larp, which is a deliberately broad delimitation to make the investigation as useful as possible.

The essay begins with comparing the amount of regulation in sports, BDSM and larp. While sports have clear rules and regulations that everybody is supposed to know and expected to follow, BDSM practice often uses contracts between the parties regarding what they will and will not do during the session. When it comes to larp, the rules are generally found under a tab on the website and it is not usually expected that all participants have read and understood them. Even though some larps have started using participant contracts that are to be signed in advance, these usually focus more on practical rules than liability towards fellow participants. With some larps having hundreds of participants, writing separate contracts between all players is impossible.

The next comparison is audience and time span. While sports often have a clearly limited time span and during competition have an audience, BDSM and larp have more focus on private interaction

and often no audience at all. Since larp usually has many participants it is however likely that there will be a witness to any abuse. Since sports competitions have judges present, ready to stop the game, more violence might be tolerated. Even if the judge would miss something, there is usually an audience and sometimes media that can bear witness to what happened. Sports are generally extremely well-documented compared to BDSM and larp.

The role of the larp organizer can in some aspects be compared to the role of the sports judge, as part of their duty is to keep the game going. However, the conditions of the two cannot be compared. While a judge has oversight of if not the whole then most of the playing field, a few organizers cannot be expected to keep track of everything that happens in a vast larp area.

While BDSM session and sports competitions usually last for shorter periods of time, a larp can go on day and night for several days. Another issue is that a sports game usually has the same kind of intensity, while a larp can have both quiet times and very intensive times. Therefore it is hard to generally say that violence might be expected during a war larp, since the incident could have happened during a day with no war scene.

The next comparison is about stopping the game. In sports such as ice hockey the judge has the final say on when somebody has to stop playing. In BDSM, safety words are often used to stop the session, but the obligation to stop lies with the participants as often there is no outsider to interfere. It is the same situation during larp: the players themselves are the ones that need to stop the game. There is, however, a fear for what will happen if you do. One problem is that in many larps, there is only one way to stop the game, which makes the participant and everyone nearby stop playing their roles. It can be frightening to not know how the people around you will react when the illusion, which they might have prepared for several years, suddenly is broken. There is a fear of not being taken seriously and being shunned by the larp community.

Part of this is another aspect of larp, which is status. In a group where everybody knows each other, you do not want to annoy anybody. There can also be situations where a beginner is not taken as seriously as a larper whom everybody knows and respects. Because of this, players of lower status might avoid stopping the game if somebody with a higher status does not, even if they might have greater insight into what is actually going on. This is double-sided as larpers may also presume that experienced participants can handle more than they are comfortable with. Depending on the situation, it might be hard to stop the game for them as well.

According to statistics from the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, most crimes in Sweden are not reported. The more jointly responsible the person considers him or herself to be, the smaller the chance is that the person will report the crime. Most reports are filed when the victim does not know the culprit at all, the least when they were acquainted but not close. Young people between 16 and 24 years old stand for the smallest amount of reports. Serious crimes generally have a higher reporting rate.

One reason for why the abuse that happens during larps is so seldom reported, could be that during larp it is more unclear if the act was committed in-game by a role or by the participant playing it. That leads to an uncertainty whether one interprets the signals of what is happening correctly, which might lead to more cases where the victim feels jointly responsible and thus does not report the incident.

Most cases that were mentioned in LWU were cases of molestation or sexual molestation, which are not among the most serious crimes. Often the women in question had slept in the same tent as the person who molested them. Sharing a tent means they were probably acquainted and not total strangers, which according to statistics makes the filing of a report less likely. While larpers can be of all ages, generally many young people are involved in the hobby. If the age statistics are applicable to larpers as well, this might reduce the amount of filings for incidents happening during larps.

Another interesting aspect of larp is that one often does not know what the co-player's real name

is. This means that participants that want to file a report need to rely on that the organizers choose to disclose the real name of the participant. This could in theory lead to problems, if the organizer is a close friend to the accused culprit and/or chooses not to believe the victim. As a beginner it might also be frightening to file a report against someone with a higher status, fearing ostracism from the larp community.

In Sweden there is a duty to report certain crimes, among them preparation of murder, aggravated assault, and rape. If someone does not report an ongoing crime but would have been able to report it without risk for him or herself, they could be convicted of failure to report a crime. The act must have progressed so far so that it is a crime, and the act is considered ongoing until it has ended. Swedish case law stipulates that the duty to report is only valid if the crime could have been stopped through reporting it.

A problem with this regulation is that people do not know about it. This is true for larpers as well. While fights during a larp usually follow the rules, there are exceptions where the participants have become angry and talked about fighting "for real". Some of these cases could legally be considered preparation for aggravated assault and impose a duty to report.

During a larp it is unclear whom the participant should report to. The obvious answer is to the police, but as many larps are trying to create as good an illusion as possible, larpers usually do not have easy access to a mobile phone. The next solution that comes to mind is probably to tell the organizers of the larp, since they should have access to a mobile phone as well as emergency transport. Usually there is a site outside of the playing area where one can go to find an organizer, but depending on the amount of organizers and how much they are participating in the larp themselves it might be hard to find one on short notice. That could prevent hindering the crime through the report.

Another issue is the amount of suspicion while role-playing. When two people playing soldier roles sit and discuss attacking the enemies, it is probably a talk between the characters rather than the participants. If an attack comes out of this, it will probably be part of the larp and the weapon rules will probably be followed. However, if something goes wrong and a participant becomes a victim to aggravated assault, can the witness of the conversation claim to not have known anything about it? If participants hear someone shouting for help in the forest, but not the word for stopping the larp, and it then becomes clear that a rape was going on – can the people hearing the cries say that they did not know and avoid punishment? One might expect that the larpers would investigate how serious the situation is when there is a risk of misunderstanding, but that would mean they have to stop the larp.

The question arises whether the organizers have a special responsibility during the larp. While it is a duty to report and reveal crime, is that valid even if an organizer only gets to know about it from a participant? What is for real and not is even harder to judge as a third person. If the organizers are the only people on the larp to have direct access to a telephone and do not make a report to the police, are they guilty of negligence to report a crime? What kind of duty do they have and how should it work in practice? It is probable that the amount of police reports from incidents during larps in Sweden would increase if the participants as well as the organizers knew about their lawful duty to reveal and report crimes.

A problem that appears in sports, BDSM and larp is judging whether the incident was part of the game or not. In some Swedish cases, violence in sports takes into account whether or not the match was ongoing when it happened. Similar to sports competitions, there is usually a clear ending to a larp, where the organizers tell the participants that it is over or when a big last scene is played. Differing from a sports match however, it is not sure that the information reaches all of the participants at the same time. The play area could be very big or someone might not be within hearing distance. Before a larp there is usually information about a formal ending time, so that the participants can plan their trip home. But when has the larp ended in a legal sense? Is it when the larp has officially ended in one part of the area, or when the approximate ending time must have been passed? It is

very hard to prove afterwards when someone knew that the larp ended – especially since watches are not used during many larps.

In Swedish case law, the judge has also deemed it important whether or not the incident has happened “on the field” in sports. This can be hard to apply to larps. In most cases you can judge whether or not it has happened within the larp area as a whole, as participants need to know the outer borders. But during larps with a bigger play area, it might be calm in one place and war in another. It is easier to say that an injury that happened during a war scene was not a crime than one happening in camp. Because of this, it might be hard for a judge to make a correct estimate on what happened as part of the larp and not.

Some of the case law regarding BDSM can become relevant in larp cases as well. In both areas the problem can occur that one participant thinks that the other one is consenting, even if that is not the case. This can be relevant if a character promises to do something in the future, even though the participant does not intend to act it out during the larp, maybe in the belief that it would have happened after the larp’s timeline or without acting it out physically. This might pose a problem in court, as a person can agree that they said that they consented but that they didn’t mean it, and the judge believes that the counterpart had reason to believe it was seriously meant.

Another legal problem that exists in both BDSM and larp is the evidence. If something has happened among other larpers there may be witnesses to the incident, which simplifies the evidence for the victim. But there are many scenes during a larp between only two people, and if something happens then it can be much harder to prove your version of what happened. The Swedish courts seem to often judge these cases through looking at the victim’s behavior after the incident, but then the problem of stopping the larp appears again.

The legal construction of consent is made for being able to be taken back at any time. During larps there is usually an official agreement to stop the larp if something goes wrong, but often it can feel daunting to do so. Not only because you don’t want to ruin the larp for others, but also because it can be hard to know what you as a participant actually want when it is your goal to play someone else.

There are certain things about larp that can pose problems from a legal perspective. For one thing, since larps are often organized by people with no organizational background, the security aspects have not always been thought through. Another kind of safety aspect is not to be able to distinguish between the real world and fiction. It can be hard to judge whether the two people that are fighting are the participants or their roles. It can also be hard to know whether a strong scene is a prepared plot or a real danger.

For consent to be legally binding in Sweden, it must have been seriously meant. This means that lines in a play cannot be interpreted as valid consent. This poses a problem as everything the characters say to each other during a larp is a kind of performance. That a role says “I do” to marriage does not mean that the participants get married, just like the participants do not agree to sexual intercourse even though their characters might strike a deal. Since the characters’ actions might be seen as the participants’, some kind of universal agreement is needed to distinguish between them.

While larpers may be acquainted with what kind of situations might occur during a larp, most judges in courts might not. It can be hard for non-larpers to understand why a participant would lie still and badly injured in a war scene even though they are in need of medical attention, just because they do not wish to ruin the larp for the other participants. Others might refuse to enter an ambulance because they do not wish to leave the larp. Every larp has some kind of ground rules and information about the world that is enacted and the rules therein. But can a judge know what is part of the larp world without investigating the rules and background information of every larp? With sports it is easier, as there are universal rules within every sport that can be applied, and these are widely known. While the court normally does not need to investigate specific rules, larps might demand it.

The essay was meant to investigate how larp differs from other situations in society and reason

about how the law should be applied on incidents that occur during a larp. The conclusion is that larp has some problems in common with BDSM when it comes to witnesses, borders and rules. Both BDSM and larp are also subcultures, which makes it hard for courts to understand the situation where the incident occurred. In that way it might be easier to compare larp to sports. However, not many similarities were found between the two. Just like when assessing BDSM and sports, the courts should see to the society’s rules and then take special rules and regulations into account in situations that demand it, like violence in sports or contracts in BDSM. In the case of larp, the court should look at the eventual regulations for fights, to know what could have happened as part of the game or not, as well as other general rules for the larp and participant contracts, if there are any relevant ones, to know what the larpers agreed to beforehand.

The question was what legal problems might arise because of special larp circumstances. The conclusion is that larp should be treated as any other situation in society, but that consideration should be taken to what has been agreed upon between the participants, whether it is through participant contracts, rules of the larp or individual contracts between players. Through reading the larp rules and considering the eventual contract made before or during the larp, the court can decide if the incident was beyond the agreement on a case-by-case basis. In other words, the court should be expected to delve into the rules of the specific larp to judge the situation, just like it takes specific contracts into account in other situations in society.

The bachelor’s thesis in Swedish is available online at <http://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/record/5431148>

What's Participation Got To Do With It?

The Nordic larp community already has participant agency at its core, so it may be questioned why it is necessary to talk about the agency of players. Arguably, if you're trying to make participatory work (like larp) it is useful to consider why participant agency is worthwhile. It's a question I have encountered many times while making participatory drama projects in the UK. My answer is that the most meaningful experiences we have in life are those in which we actively participate. It's great to listen to beautiful music on the radio, but this is not the same as singing along with the band when they play live. It's great to watch an adventure programme on TV but this is not the same as climbing a tree yourself, and although your blood might boil when you read a newspaper, this is not the same as taking part in a political demonstration with thousands of other people in the streets. In other words, the doing of an activity produces physical, emotional and intellectual responses that the spectatorship of the same activity cannot produce, and when we take action, we do it in the hope and expectation of producing a desired outcome.

In theatre culture, in spite of the conventional model of an audience observing action that is controlled by the artist(s), there is a rich tradition of participatory drama in which the audience are invited to become active protagonists in the action. The Brazilian practitioner Augusto Boal pioneered new forms of art including Forum Theatre, which enabled external spectators to become "spect-actors," crossing the invisible dividing line (much like the 'Magic Circle') separating the observers from the playing space and stepping into the role of an oppressed person with the aim of achieving a better outcome in their imaginary life (Boal 1979). In a slightly more avant-garde setting, the Polish practitioner Jerzy Grotowski rejected "performance" for a conventional audience, initially creating "paratheatre" in which audience members were invited to commune with actors to create long-form improvisations that often approached the territory of shared spiritual ritual (Frost & Yarrow 2007). Eventually, the presence of an "audience" was abandoned entirely in favour of "Art as a Vehicle" (Grotowski 1993), a process through which actors create highly personal rituals involving song and dance as a means of finding deep connections with their familial and cultural histories.

Punchdrunk: The Illusion of Immersive Participation

In the UK, knowledge of practitioners like Boal and Grotowski is fairly extensive (particularly in academia) but in contemporary arts practice, it seems to me that participation in art or "interactivity" is often used, not for artistic purposes, but primarily as a marketing ploy to lure audiences who want to ride the zeitgeist of the next big thing. In the theatre community, the last ten years has seen the rise of "immersive" theatre, an amorphous catch-all term that seeks to describe forms of work in which an audience are purportedly immersed within a story world. Most notably, perhaps, Punchdrunk's productions such as *Masque of the Red Death* and *The Drowned Man* have created elaborate physical worlds that audience members (all wearing masks) can explore, encountering performers and snippets of narrative as they choose their pathway. Although the participants in works like these have agency in the sense that they can define their own physical journey through space, they are told that they must not speak and are made aware that they should not enter into the action that they encounter. In a 2014 interview with the UK's Guardian newspaper, Felix Barrett, Punchdrunk's Director, commented in relation to *The Drowned Man*, that "rather than an audience crafting their

■ Jamie Harper

Notes on Agency and Design: A love letter to larp from the hinterland of UK participatory drama

There are many ways to define politics, but describing it as the exercise of power is a decent place to start. In cultural production, the question of who has the power has always produced different answers, with folk traditions carrying ancient songs and stories from generation to generation through oral sharing, alongside more elitist forms of art in which the opportunity to make and disseminate cultural artifacts is a privilege. The theatre is one such form that has developed a highly stratified power structure. In its most conventional sense, the power hierarchy of the production starts with the producer, who often owns the building in which the drama will be played. The producer then bestows agency upon a writer who is commissioned to produce a story, offering some representation of the world. Then, a director and a design team are invited to interpret this story, and with a team of performers they decide how to present it on stage. Finally, there is the audience, some of whom sit close to the action, some of whom sit far away from it. This group of people are invited to watch the action, but the expectation is that their role in the proceedings will not go beyond spectatorship. Essentially, they are passive recipients of the producer/writer/director's agency. This is not to say that a conventional theatre audience has no power. Individuals can decide whether or not they want to watch the drama in the first place, and if they do choose to attend they can form an opinion of the art that is presented to them. This agency is very limited, though, and many cultural producers in a range of forms have sought to make works that afford greater agency to the people who encounter it, enabling them to become active participants, rather than (relatively) passive recipients.

own narrative, they are peeling back layers of story, almost archeologically”¹ which neatly sums up the extent of participant agency in the work of Punchdrunk. Audiences are free to explore a space and discover pre-prepared narratives that are architecturally embedded in that space, but there is no affordance for them to influence the dramatic action that unfolds. They can reveal stories for themselves, but they cannot make any impact upon these stories. To all intents and purposes, therefore, they are spectators.

This creates a contradiction: as an audience member, you are told that you are going to be “immersed” in a story world, giving the impression that (if you are literally present in the story world) you will be able to have some impact on it; but the reality is that you are there as a spectator of a set of performances that are pre-determined and which you cannot substantially influence. You can choose where you go and what you watch, but that is all. You are physically present within the “magic circle” of the story world but, at the same time, you are outside the “magic circle” of the social action that occurs in this world. The exception is that you may be pulled into a darkened room (which happened to me during *Masque of the Red Death*) by one of the performers and told to remove your mask. At this point, the rules of participant agency are unclear. Are you allowed to kiss this person? Are you allowed to have sex with them? Or are you supposed to remain silent as you were instructed to do when you entered the fictional story world? This uncertainty highlights a problem with many “immersive” or “pervasive” works. Organisers of these types of events often choose not to define the magic circle (either by design or by omission) and often choose not to define the affordances of what participants can and cannot do. Consequently, if you, as a participant, do not know where the edge of the magic circle lies and if you do not know what affordances you have at your disposal, you are dis-empowered. You don’t have a clear idea of how you can take action within the story world. Your agency is elusive, or even illusory.

Coney: Playing Like They Mean It (mostly)

Punchdrunk are probably the most high-profile proponents of immersive theatre in the UK, but there are lots of others trying to do similar things. In my experience, few of them have encountered ideas like the “magic circle” but one company that is bringing greater critical rigour to participatory drama work, with an awareness of larp practice, is Coney. Back in 2007, Coney were challenged by the National Theatre Studio and Battersea Arts Centre to create an interactive drama based on an established story with a set narrative. The company chose to work on the narrative of Clouzot’s film *Le Corbeau* which tells the story of the citizens of a small town, riven by tribalism and petty ambition, set against the background of rising Fascism in Europe in the 1930’s. This project, which became known as *A Small Town Anywhere* was arguably the first participatory drama with many characteristics of a larp to feature in the programme of a mainstream nationally funded theatre in the UK. The piece gave participants a huge degree of agency in forming their characters and developing the cultural history of their town. Before the event, players were invited to write the back story of their character along with a dark secret that might be revealed during play. During the game itself, an internal postal service allowed players to gossip and sow seeds of mischief in their miniature community, all of which contributed to the development of a rich network of alliances and antagonisms.

The problem that the designers encountered was the need to combine this creative freedom for

¹ See ‘The immersed audience: how theatre is taking its cue from video games’ on The Guardian website (May 2014) <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/may/20/how-theatre-is-taking-its-cue-from-vid-eo-games> (accessed 19.01.2016)

participants with the delivery of a fixed, pre-prepared narrative. In the early stages of the project development, the directors used actors within the game play to steer the action along a linear narrative track, but this failed since the pre-prepared embedded narrative events that the actors tried to implement were disconnected from the emergent narratives that players had generated. I played this game in 2007 when it was being developed at the National Theatre Studio and the highly enjoyable flexible play of a group of characters gossiping and forming rivalries with each other was undermined slightly by a manufactured outcome (that the players would have to choose whether to execute a member of their community) at the end of the game. As the piece developed over the next two years, though, the directors found a way to develop a larger scale narrative of outside political forces bearing down on the small town without undermining the play freedom of the players. They did this by using a “town crier” who would deliver political news from outside the town. The town crier was played by an actor speaking into a microphone – so the residents of the town could only hear her voice – but, essentially, this design feature of an invisible news courier allowed the designers to deliver units of pre-prepared narrative content into the game space without substantially disrupting the emergent play. Instead, players received the news, digested the alteration to the contextual circumstances of the game and adapted their activities in response to the new context they had been presented with.

The tension between open-ended emergent narratives produced by player activity and pre-prepared embedded narratives that director/designers wish to deliver remains one of the biggest problems that participatory drama makers in the UK continue to face. Coney’s *Small Town* is still held up as a ground-breaking participatory drama in the UK theatre scene, but it happened in 2009 (a long time ago) and, arguably, no UK theatre makers have made work that substantially builds on its innovations. Even Coney themselves have struggled to make work that facilitates flexibility in play alongside flexibility in narrative development. Their most recent project, *Codename: Remote* involves an audience collectively voting to shape the actions of a character called Sally, and although this clearly gives participants a degree of agency in shaping the narrative development of Sally’s life, this is essentially just a replication of a “twine” style *Choose Your Own Adventure* structure. Not exactly innovative, and not very empowering for audience/participants, I would say.

Games, larp and me: A love triangle

The problem in the theatre world is that many practitioners, myself included, have the urge to tell a story – to express their creative agency in delivering a brilliant narrative, but when the story-teller’s agency takes centre stage, the typical result is that the agency of players is diminished. My interest in participant agency in drama led to curiosity about game design, since games are built upon the participation of players. Following a couple of stints learning about game design at the University of Miami in 2013 and 2014, I made two explicitly political games: *Archipelago*, about a group of islands and their inhabitants trying to recover from a drought; and *People Vs Democracy*, about the citizens of a miniature country seeking power through economic strength and ethical diplomacy. Both of these games were designed as “systems” with complex game mechanics (the levers of power – or affordances – with which players exert influence on the system) and detailed sets of rules as constraints to player action. From my perspective, the good thing about these games was that they were entirely free from any fixed narrative. Instead, the game systems responded to the actions of participants to create emergent player driven narratives that transformed the islands in *Archipelago*, or the miniature country of *People Vs Democracy*, in highly unpredictable ways. The downside of these games, though, was that there wasn’t much human drama. The drama that occurred was political and economic, but it wasn’t personal.

Then I found larp. And I was in love.

I must confess that this love affair is in its early stages. I'm still in the first flush of passion without having sampled the bitter taste of "experience", but so far, so good. The strongest aspect of my experience of larp has been the emphasis on co-creation. The fact that players in many larps are given agency, not only to play freely with their characters, but to co-create them and collaborate with the designer in shaping the broader culture of play, makes for a very democratic experience in which all players are empowered and offered a creative stake in the world that is formed. However, I would like to suggest some aspects of larp that could change, with some ideas from the fields of drama and game design, about why they might change.

The most notable feature of the larps I have played is that unlike conventional games, they have not had a goal. For me, this is one of the really liberating aspects of larp. As a player, you are allowed to discover your own desires and follow your own impulses rather than slavishly pursuing a goal that the designer has given you. Although players are not always required to pursue a goal, however, I would argue that any human action (whether it is within a game or not) is based on the pursuit of some kind of need, even if that need is very small and apparently insignificant. As humans, we take action in pursuit of desired outcomes.

Political Agency and System Design

In my short larping career, the needs of the characters I have played have usually focused on forming connections with people. Standing in the shoes of my characters, I have felt the need for warmth, friendship and love, and the games I have played have been designed to make these things available to me, if I chose to look for them. But in the event that your needs, as a character, have a macro-political dimension rather than a micro-personal dimension, I would say that the designer needs to provide the possibility for you to achieve bigger "systemic" changes rather than simply offering scope to affect small scale personal changes with the people in front of you. My experience of Nordic larp (so far) suggests that designers do an excellent job of facilitating micro-personal play, but don't focus as strongly on designing systems as responsive frames for the drama, and if a designer wants to create a game in which players can individually or collectively create large scale transformations within their story world, I would say that systems thinking is important. At this point, I should probably pause to give a definition of the term "system". Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman state that: "A system is a set of parts that interrelate to form a complex whole" and in *Rules of Play* their seminal book on game design, they go on to describe the process of system analysis which is central to the work of many game designers (Salen and Zimmerman 2003).

All larps could be described as systems, but the larp systems that I have encountered have seemed quite fixed. This is not to say that my experience as a player has been inflexible, it is simply that the components of the design have not been very susceptible to change; the systems that the designers have created, and which the GMs have presided over, have not been very permeable. For example, a game like *Helianthus Land* (which I have played and really liked) has a system that does not alter in response to the actions of players. The main "object" in the system is the voice of a faceless authority figure who encourages the community to continue worshipping their "Sunflower God", but irrespective of whether the players obey or rebel, this voice continues without alteration. There are probably very good reasons for why this is a fantastic design choice, but I would argue that if someone is making a political game about political systems, and if politics is about exercising power to achieve certain aims, and if a player chooses to pursue the aim of systemic change on behalf of their character, the system that has been designed should have the potential to change in response to the actions of that player.

The question of how a game system responds to the actions of players comes to the heart of a

key game design concept: "meaningful play". For Salen and Zimmerman, meaningful play occurs when the actions of players have an immediately discernible impact that is integrated into the overall system of the game (Salen and Zimmerman 2003). For example, if a footballer kicks the ball and sees the ball fly past the despairing goalkeeper, then watches the scoreboard change from 0-0 to 1-0, this is meaningful play. If the same footballer kicks the ball and sees the ball fly past the despairing goalkeeper, then watches the scoreboard as it continues to read 0-0, this is meaningless play, as the player's action has not been allowed to influence the overall system of the game. You could easily make the argument that scoring a beautiful goal is a meaningful form of play even if it doesn't change the score, but if we are thinking about political games in which the exercise of power is geared towards achieving a desired alteration in a political system, designers might consider including system analysis in their design process with a view to creating game systems that are permeable to player action, so that political transformations can occur as a result of player activity rather than through pre-prepared dramaturgical decisions made by designers. From speaking to other practitioners, I have been made aware that there are other larp traditions outside Nordic larp in which designers do include more systems thinking in their game design process. My curiosity is to see whether Nordic larp designers can look again at using system design in political larps without descending into the world of pain which super-complex rule sets often produce and losing the spirit of open playfulness that seems to characterise the Nordic tradition.

"Playing to Lose": A Dramaturgical Critique

Another aspect of larp culture that I find problematic is the concept of 'playing to lose'. My understanding of this term is that participants are encouraged to make player-based decisions that go against the needs and desires of their character, either to create a more interesting story or to facilitate the experience of another player. There are performance practices in theatre such as clowning in which players (the performers) are encouraged to make mistakes or cultivate problems for their characters in order to entertain an audience, but from the late 19th century onwards, when Freudian psychoanalysis merged with Darwinian science and literary Naturalism, the vast majority of modern dramaturgy has centred on the idea that human beings take action to fulfil their desires, to have their needs met and to realise their objectives in life. This concept of "objective driven action" (Stanislavsky 1936) was pioneered in a dramatic context by the Russian theatre practitioner Konstantin Stanislavsky, but the idea of a quest in pursuit of a goal has deeper anthropological roots: the essential structure of almost every human story ever created has involved a context in which a character encounters a problem and seeks to overcome that problem. To be blunt, the larp practice of playing, not to overcome a problem, but to exacerbate the problem and lose, goes against the fundamentals of millenia of storytelling. If that sounds a bit over-dramatic, it probably is.

Back to the serious argument: essentially, playing to lose sees players making non-diegetic decisions about what their characters should do within the diegesis and I have to acknowledge that this also happens constantly in the theatre world. Actors in a rehearsal room frequently make decisions for their character such as moving to the back of the stage to let the star hog the limelight, or speaking louder so that the audience can hear, even though they only need to whisper for the character within their story world to hear what they're saying. Basically, they are making decisions about the behaviour of their character within the world of the story, based on motivating factors that exist outside the world of the story. At this point, you may be thinking that I am about to advocate total immersion of the player in the story world, so that they become one with their character and forget any influences from outside the magic circle, including their own personal identity as a player. Rest assured, however, that I am not seeking to promote immersionism. It has been eloquently pointed out by Montola,

Stenros and Saitta that the “steering” of the character by the player is inevitable (2015), in the same way that an actor makes conscious decisions (outside the diegesis) for her character within a drama. So extra-diegetic “steering” is not the issue, it’s a question of what the player steers for.

Playing to Lose: A dramaturgical critique (continued)...

Theatre directors often see actors “being generous” to each other, failing to pursue the needs of their character in order to make it easier for another actor to “do their thing”. If we see this, we say “Don’t be a generous actor. Get what you want for your character.” If this sounds like a straightforward affirmation of “playing to win,” it is not. Playing to win makes sense in a game context, but in drama, it is a case of playing for your need. Pursuing the needs of your character does not necessarily mean crushing enemies, it just means following your desire, whatever that might be, within the diegesis; and the pursuit of character desires does not mean ignoring the flaws in a character that might cause him or her to fail. Alongside objective driven action, Stanislavsky discusses the importance of an actor encountering “inner obstacles” (the internal emotional circumstances that inhibit a character from pursuing their goals (Stanislavsky 1936)) and, if a player steers their character towards an encounter with their inner obstacles of guilt or fear, for example, this may well result in a losing outcome that is negative for the character, while still keeping the player’s decision making firmly rooted within the circumstances of the diegesis.

In writing this criticism of playing to lose, I am aware that many larp designers and players will counter with the argument that in a culture of shared narrative creation, it can sometimes be good for players to make decisions that undermine their character for the purpose of making a more interesting overall story. Equally, I’m reminded of occasions when I’ve played games with kids and intentionally decided not to annihilate them. For example, think of the jolly Uncle (me) playing goal keeper and wilfully falling over so that my nine year old niece can score a goal. Since my non-diegetic need to be a kind and loving Uncle is greater than my diegetic need (as the goal keeper) to win at football, I play to lose and, in an example like this, playing to lose seems like a perfectly reasonable way for me to express my agency as a player, doesn’t it?

So why is it so important to me to promote that idea that players should pursue the needs of their characters instead of playing to lose? One answer is to say that in practical terms, playing to lose undermines a key ingredient of dramatic narratives: external obstacles. If characters wholeheartedly pursue their needs, this creates external obstacles for other characters to negotiate, but if they play to lose they unilaterally undercut the hurdles which other characters would otherwise be seeking to overcome. A simpler anthropological answer is to say – if the world involves humans overcoming obstacles and pursuing their needs, and if drama aims to give a representation of the world and human life, then the players who ‘steer’ characters in drama should aim to overcome obstacles and pursue their characters’ needs. Going a bit further along this line of thought, if it is logical for humans to act in pursuit of their needs and illogical for them to intentionally undermine the pursuit of their own needs, then players who play to lose in dramatic scenarios that offer some representation of the world are undermining the logical foundations of the story world in which they are playing. In other words, playing to lose creates illogical story worlds in larp.

At this point, I would like you to invite you to take a moment, to imagine that Charles Darwin was a larper and imagine what he would say about playing to lose.

Playing to Lose: A dramaturgical critique (continued)

Leaving aside my dogmatic rhetoric about the dramaturgical integrity of story worlds, I would like to come back to larp politics. With regard to the question of “who has the power” in larp, its attractive

to think that playing to lose empowers players, giving them implicit permission to create a more interesting story and “solve” a boring passage of play - or take on the responsibility for facilitating the experience of another player, who might be less experienced, and “solve” an instance of bashfulness. In my mind, though, this puts too much agency in the hands of players, or to put it another way, puts too much responsibility on their shoulders. When I make improvised drama with actors, I want them to apply their agency to blazing the trail of an emergent narrative that fulfils the desires of their character. I do not expect them to create an exciting or entertaining drama – it is my job as the director/designer to create a play context that will make compelling drama possible. If I was designing a larp, I would think exactly the same thing.

It is entirely understandable that larpers might play to lose to help facilitate a “good game” rather than simply allowing a larp to fail. It is entirely understandable for actors in an improvised drama to play to lose to help facilitate a “good scene” rather than allowing the improvisation to fail. It is entirely understandable for a caring Uncle (me) to facilitate the footballing success of my niece, playing to lose so that she gets to score a goal rather than encountering a sporting “fail”. But, since the world is not made up of people playing to lose and collaborating to facilitate each other’s enjoyment, I argue that sometimes it is good to allow things in games and in drama to FAIL because that is what the world is like. Of course, it must be said that no larp organiser can (or should) force a player to reject the concept of playing to lose but larp designers have considerable agency in defining the culture of play and I would argue that they should take responsibility for designing the functionality of a game without relying on the players to make non-diegetic decisions to artificially manufacture dramatic dynamism or make a larp run smoothly.

My final thought is that there is scope for further integration of the knowledge of larpers, game designers and dramatists. Participatory drama practitioners like myself have a lot to learn from larp design, particularly with regard to shared co-creation agency between designer and player, but equally, larp practitioners can, I believe, employ some game design methods (primarily system analysis) and certain core principles of dramatic action to create game systems and play cultures that reinforce the agency of players, enabling them to pursue the needs of their characters, enabling them to win, enabling them to lose, enabling them to transform the world of their story or, perhaps, allowing them to fail, utterly.

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■ Larson Kasper & Tina Leipoldt

Larp Is Like Hummus – everybody's mom makes it best...

2015-08-17 0445hrs – Frankfurt Airport [FRA], Germany – 50°2'0"N 8°34'14"E

Larson

My coffee tastes awful. Tina seems to enjoy her drink. A quarter to five in the morning ain't no time one should be already up – actually it's no time at all!

We're on our way to Gaziantep in Turkey to host a larp-writing workshop for peace activists from Syria. Everything I know about Gaziantep is the "Zeugma Mosaic Museum" and that it is famous for "The best Baclava in Turkey".

My coffee tastes awful. I should have taken a beer like Tina did.

2015-08-17 0745hrs – somewhere over Croatia – 45°4'44"N 14°36'3"E

We're actually on our way. Less than a month ago we were sitting in Tina's office, trying to transform what we experienced and learned in the last 20 years in larp into four days of lecturing and workshop. On the one hand our roots are in – the more fun orientated – German larp tradition. On the other hand we're also strongly influenced by the Nordic-larp scene and use larp for political education.

Our client calls the training "larp and creative thinking - Training for Syrian activists." And while – from a didactical point of view – it seems to be natural to combine "creative thinking" with "writing larps" we needed a rather technocratic, methodological approach – no artsy fartsy rock star escapades allowed. At least our client's expectations are pretty clear in that matter.

At the end we proofed it anyway: you can fit it into a structured agenda, following the rational and logic of the development world.

2015-08-17 1000hrs – Istanbul Atatürk Airport [IST], Turkey – 40°58'37"N 28°48'53"E

Larson

Transit-time in Atatürk Airport: another bad coffee at this coffee chain that is famous for misspelling your name rather than for quality coffee. I am getting my first cultural prejudice spoiled. At the next table there are two Muslims with hijabs obviously looking over to our table and giggling. Tina needs to use the bathroom, one of the women comes over – and does the Bogart - by looking deep into my eyes. Then she says: “you know, you have really beautiful eyes!?”

She leaves.

I am totally baffled. Not even able to say “Thank you.”

Tina already knows some of the workshop participants – I don't even know a single person from Syria. Who are these people? What do we have to expect? What do they expect from us? While the expectations from our client were clearly communicated in terms of structure and content, we have no idea about expectation from our participants – a very heterogeneous group of a) people who already took part in larps and larp-related workshops and b) another group who got in touch with the term just days before. The latter mostly are replacing participants who did not make it over the border this time.

2015-08-17 1500hrs – Gaziantep Airport [GZT], Turkey – 36°56'50"N 37°28'43"E

Tina

You know these people who always come to the shop when it just closed? Who always try to get a soft drink right after someone pulled the last one from the vending machine?

I'm is such a person when it comes to suitcases and airlines. It hardly ever happens that I get my luggage at the first instance. Maybe just another proof that the airlines loose stuff quite often and tourists usually do not have to deal with that hassle regularly...

After waiting for ages we decide to check the other hall – yes, there are actually two halls in Gaziantep Airport - to find out, if it ended up there.

Larson

For me, who is used to get checked at central European airports every fifteen meters with x-rays, body scans, security cams and having a personal “massage” from airport security check, it was astonishingly easy to get through every door we wanted just by telling them we would like to check if Tina's lost luggage might have ended up behind that door.

While my inner German was getting more and more confused by this totally unordered and chaotic procedures, Tina just put it in one sentence: “You know they have borders to eight countries including hotspots such as Iran, Iraq and Syria - they know how to deal with real security issues...”

Tina

Not all of the original announced participants made it to the workshop. While some made it from Syria to Turkey in adventurous detours over Cyprus and some others live as refugees in Turkey, some just were not able because their journey ended at the closed border just 60km from Gaziantep. A distance some of us regularly drive on an everyday basis to their workplace.

We are all “guests” in Turkey. Us, the trainers as well as the Syrians, the participants. The whole

project had to be announced to and approved by the Turkish officials beforehand. At least one police car with two officers is regularly patrolling the street and an officer is posted permanently in front of the venue during the workshop hours.

2015-08-18 0745hrs – Gaziantep Divan Hotel, Turkey – 37°04'40"N 37°22'05"E

Tina

I used to live in Gaziantep for about two years. The city is in only 75km distance to the – for sad reasons – much more commonly known Kobane. Gaziantep is conservative and a bit boring. So conservative, that I did not find a single graffiti in the two years I lived here.

Gaziantep is quite big, there's almost two million people living here from which are about 250.000 registered refugees from Syria – most likely double as non-registered ones. It feels so silly when I now think of one refugee on every 80 Germans – where is your fuc*** perspective?

In 15 minutes we'll be picked up by a driver and Larson hasn't arrived to breakfast, yet...

Larson

I rush from the elevator back to the room for the third time because I constantly forget something. The driver will be there any time soon and I had no breakfast but a night full of dreams. I still feel totally inhibited by my own thoughts. We not only doing a workshop in a foreign country for people who themselves are foreigners in this country. No, we even do it in English (which is not our native language) just to be translated into Arabic, because some participants do not speak English at all. Are all handouts translated into Arabic? What about Friday? Did we plan enough prayer time? Tina told me to not use swear words or talk to offensive about non-heteronormative topics. Will I remember this? Like always?

2015-08-18 1015hrs – Fortbildungszentrum – 37°06'12"N 37°19'18"E

Tina

Often I am wondering how to keep people away from their cellphones – it is just like a body-extension nowadays anyhow, isn't it? We all know how tempting it is to look from time to time on your mobile and check something really important. What can you do if you do not want to be paternalistic on the one hand but at the other want to limit the options of default/random checking aka “losing attention and hiding in some comfortable digital spot”. The solution is a transparent plastic curtain which has pockets for pictures or postcards on it. All participants are asked to put their cellphones into these pockets and just check them during breaks. While on the first day the participants are suspicious about this “mobile-eating” device, on the second day one can also see keys and purses in the pockets. On the third day people start to forget their stuff over night and on the last day we give the plastic curtain away to them because they liked the idea so much... best invested 9€ in years.

2015-08-19 1345hrs – Fortbildungszentrum – 37°06'12"N 37°19'18"E

Palestinians vs. Germans

Larp is a bit like sports – there is tennis, basketball and even table-kicker. One thing we hear a lot during the training is “But the Palestinians said...”

Most people like structures – especially when they explore a new topic. People want to sort things into “right” and “wrong.” The idea that something might be “right” but something different might be “right,” as well, sometimes is rather difficult to swallow. Larp comes in so many flavours. There are so many “rights.” It is quite a challenge to neither put the Palestinians nor us in the “being-wrong”-cor-

ner. Finally we sum it up by misquoting the Level1ers with “There’s only one way in larp and that’s your own!”

Last but not least “how does one even start to teach creativity anyhow”?

Germans vs. Colombians

The last day we are having visitors at the training. Hector and Mariah are theater-of-the-oppressed trainers who are giving another training for a different group the next week and are really interested in larp as a method. How do you explain that there is no audience and no message you want to transport to the “outside”? No, there is no right or wrong either! Pretty fast we all agree: let’s explore more some new stuff and find out how we can all learn from each other – break some boundaries and borders in theater AND in larp. In South-America, Europe AND in the Middle East...

2015-08-28 2330hrs – Gaziantep Baro Lokali – 37°03’43.2”N 37°21’20.3”E

Larson

On our last night in Turkey we go out for dinner. After tons of delicious mezze and other Arabic/Turkish small wonders, Tina shows me one of the most amazing things in Gaziantep. A Taxi calling device you will find almost every fifty meters spread all over the city. You simply need to find the next device – usually at lamp poles or trees – and press the button. In less than five minutes there is a Taxi coming for you. And as Tina puts it, something that makes you feel a lot safer as a woman roaming the nightly streets of Gaziantep on her own.

My inner woman also feels a lot safer.

For us this trip started as being trainers who bring and spread the word of larp. Hence, from a personal point of view we also had a great opportunity to bring “back” a lot impressions and ideas with us, take a short look into – at least two – different cultures as well as meet fantastic people and getting/being inspired by their fascinating ideas and personal stories, both beautiful and terrific. I’m not quite sure how I’m going to use the term “war stories” in the future.

2015-09-01 0915hrs – Tina’s Office Eschborn, Germany – 50°08’09”N 8°33’00”E

One has a fantastic look on the Taunus range from Tina’s office – one of these looks that let your thoughts and mind travel...

We’re back from an amazing trip and we met beautiful people, got dipped into a different universe for some days. We’re watching the videos we made with the Syrians with messages to European larpers, promising them to hear more about Syrian larpers any time soon.

SYRIAN HUMMUS*

- 1 can chickpeas
- 1/4 c. olive oil
- 1/4 c. lemon juice
- 2 cloves garlic
- 1/2 tsp. salt

Put all ingredients into a food blender mix for about five minutes, pour into a bowl and top with olive oil and paprika powder.

* This, of course, is the only one and right and correct recipe for real Syrian Hummus.

■ Editors

Jukka Särkijärvi is a writer, editor, translator, game designer, conrunner and Pathfinder Society Venture-Captain Emeritus from Espoo, Finland. He is currently working on his master’s thesis in English language and literature at the University of Tampere. His previous work include translations of the Stalker and Whispering Road role-playing games, game design on Vihan lapset, a great deal of role-playing game journalism for a variety of publications both on- and offline, and Roolipelikirja, a nonfiction book about role-playing games.

Mika Loponen is a doctoral post-graduate student at the Department of Modern Languages in the University of Helsinki. He is currently writing his PhD on the semiotic issues of cultural artifacts and irrealia in fantasy and science fiction. His interest in roleplaying games started in the late 80’s and widened to larp in the mid-90’s. Since 1995, he has co-organized or co-written larps and larp campaigns such as the Helsinki Camarilla (1995-2004), Isle of Saints (2000), and Salatieteellinen Tiedekunta (Faculty of Occult Arts, 2015). As a larp theorist, he sees himself as a semiotic post-immersionist.

Kaisa Kangas is a Finnish larp designer who has been playing and making larps for 20 years. She is the fiction lead for the Palestinian-Finnish political larp Halat hisar (State of Siege) that will be run again in June 2016. She is also involved with designing and running educational larps for University of Arts Helsinki. Her other works include Ghost Express (2001-2002, together with Dare Talvitie), a pioneer of pervasive larp. She holds a PhD in mathematics and a BA in Japanese Studies.

■ Writers

Christopher Amherst, 41, is a player and larpwright from Washington, DC – by way of Massachusetts and Minnesota. His adaptation of the Russian freeform The Prison was presented at the Game Play 2015 festival at the Brick Theatre this past summer and he has written and organized scenarios at Intercon, Wyrddcon, Consequences (UK), Dreamation/Dexcon, and Knudepunkt. camherst@gmail.com | <http://cmamherst.com/>

Theo Axner (Sweden) works as a librarian in Stockholm. He has been designing larps more or less continuously since the 1990s, mostly in the long-running fantasy campaign Thule. Although mainly working in traditional genres, his larps tend to involve complex themes and ethical dilemmas.

Kamil Bartczak is a larpwriter and member of the Argos larpwriting society. Author of sometimes controversial larps like Geas, Who Is You?, Fight Night, Rose Tattoo. Co-creator of the Spindle larp-writing software and a company behind it, where he is working as Archangel of Courage. Formerly – e-commerce analyst and project manager.

Anders Berner works professionally with larp through Rollespilsakademiet, and has been active in the volunteer larp scene since the late 90’s. He’s run projects in Palestine, brought children’s larp to Greenland and was the chairman of the Danish national larp organization, Bifrost, for three years. Internationally, Anders is perhaps best known for being part of the team behind KAPO. He’s currently working on The Orcs Are Coming, a three-million-DKK youth project supported by the Nordea Foundation.

Simon Brind is a PhD candidate at the Digital Cultures Research Centre, UWE, UK. He is researching moments of narrative crisis in participatory fiction. He has been playing and writing larps since 1986. He lives in London, England. Contact: simon.brind@gmail.com

Mikko Heimola (b. 1979) started larping in 1999. He has done larp writing and production mostly with friends and associates from the Greywolves, most recently in Homefront (2015), Papukaija-Jussin rosvojahti (Parrot Jussi's Robber Hunt, 2015) and Konna.info (Crook.info, 2015). He focuses on active larping and larp writing and until now has rarely written anything on the topic. He practices historical re-enactment with the Greywolves and the musketeer group GARS. He works as a psychologist and has a PhD. He lives in Helsinki with his wife Minna and two children. He can be contacted at mhei@iki.fi.

Minna Heimola (b. 1976) has larped since 1997. She has written and produced historical larps in the Greywolves historical larp tradition including Homefront (2015) and Viena 1918: Tovereita ja heimoveljiä (Viena 1918: Comrades and Kinsmen, 2014). She has also written other larps, including World of Darkness games, a political larp on the history of socialism and class struggle called LARP: Sosialismi (LARP: Socialism, 2015) and a Harry Potter larp aimed at children. She has a PhD in Early Christian studies, but she is currently studying social work. She lives in Helsinki with her husband Mikko and two kids. She can be contacted at meira@iki.fi.

Mo Holkar is a UK larper of thirty years' standing. As well as designing and organizing larps and freeforms, he has created pervasive games, party games, board and card games, tabletop RPGs, and online strategy games. Mo is a member of the UK-based design and play groups The Game Kitchen, The Seedbox Collective, Playtest UK, and UK-Freeforms. His articles have been published on nordiclarp.org (where he is a contributing editor) and larping.org, in the Knudepunkt 2015 Companion Book, and on his own blog at <http://blog.ukg.co.uk>.

Nathan Hook is a British game designer, civil servant and academic. He is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Tampere, Finland researching identify theory applied to roleplaying in games and has a prior background in psychology. He has also published board/card games and written for mainstream tabletop RPGs. Contact: Hook_nathan@hotmail.com. / www.lulu.com/spotlight/NathHook / www.thegamecrafter.com/games/midsummer

Laksmy Irigoyen lives in Santiago de Compostela. She is writing her PhD about RPGs and Narrativity, and she is part of the research group Theory of Literature and Comparative Literature at the University of Santiago de Compostela, working in the field of Game Studies. Coming soon, her paper "The Magic Circle and the Spatio-Temporal Construction in RPGs" will be published in a book coordinated by Teresa Vilariño. She is one of the organizers of the larp Fillos do Trono (Sons of the Throne).

Simo Järvelä is a cognitive scientist, emotion and game researcher, and organizer of larps Neonhämärä (2008-2012), Tonnin stiflat (2014), and OnnenTehdas (2016). Contact: simo.jarvela@gmail.com.

Sonja Karlsson has a Bachelor's Degree in Legal Science from Lund University, Sweden and is there continuing her studies leading to a Swedish Professional Law Degree. She has been a gamer since childhood, creating her first role-playing game when she was twelve years old. Her bachelor's thesis is Sweden's first legal essay about larp. She can be reached at sonja.m.karlsson@gmail.com

Larson Kasper is a German larper and educator. Whenever possible he combines passion and profession into edularp. He has been part of different teams, writing and producing larps from 3 to 300 players such as the Aelm-Arthosia Series (1999-2002) and the KultUr Series (2004-2006), yksi/üç (2009), Welcome to Wandaland (2010), the crossover-project The Innovation for Liverpool Biennial International Festival of Contemporary Art (2010) and KNB 109 M (2012). He is one of the founders of the larp catering crew KampfKüche, a jack-ass larp photographer. He has done different larp projects for both traumatized kids and those with behavior disorders. He followed Kristina Leipoldt to Gaziantep to find out about the beauty of Syrian larp. Larson likes hummus but won't judge whose mother makes it best. You can reach him via facebook.com/larson.kasper or larson.kasper@gmx.de.

Kristina Leipoldt has been doing larp as long as she has been a professional humanitarian. Combining these two interests became a logical thing once she found more and more prospects for edu-larp. Besides designing and (co-) producing social-critical larps and mini-larps – initially only for the German audience – such as Vergessene Legenden II (2003), Kommissar Schmidt (2005), The living dead (2010), Welcome to Wandaland (2010) and KNB109M (2012), Kristina stuck her nose also into training scenarios. She convinced her employer to use larp as a tool to train Syrian peace activists and social workers. She promotes it as an "in house" technique to train multi-ethnic teams, working in complex humanitarian and crisis settings, on diversity and such. Being pretty focused on the action-part of her creation, she has published so far one article in German in Larp über den Tellerrand (2011) titled Check your reality - larp als mögliche Methode in der Erwachsenenbildung and one in English together with Clara Biermann in Birth of Larp in the Arab World (2015) with the title Make Larp Not War. You can reach her via email kleipoldt@web.de and <https://www.facebook.com/teena.leipoldt>.

Jose Castillo Meseguer is an international larp organizer both through Somnia (the spearhead group for Nordic-style/progressive larp in Spain) and by himself. His larps are highly influenced by the Nordic theories. He is a co-founder of the Spanish larp conference Entrevs and the founder of Larp Spain, a group for the diffusion of Spanish larps. He has organized larps in Spain, Poland and Austria.

Charles Bo Nielsen is a co-founder of Fairweather Manor and College of Wizardry. He has been an active face in the larping community, both with presence at the Larp Writer Summer School as facilitator, set up and run black box larps at Grenselandet, Black Box Horsens and Black box Copenhagen, has been co-editing several larp-related books together with Claus Raasted. Recently just finished his university undergraduate study in Sociology at Copenhagen University a long overdue study time, constantly pushed in the background to focus on larp projects instead.

Cécile Othon is a law student, business graduate and works in charity fundraising in the United Kingdom. Cécile recently got her life turned around by participating in College of Wizardry, which introduced her to larp and hasn't been able to get enough of larping or the community ever since. She has been a great volunteer on writing characters and texts for College of Wizardry. Looking forward to her first time at Solmukohta and hoping to get a spot at the Larp Writer Summer School, so look out for her name on future larp productions!

Mike Pohjola is a Finnish novelist, transmedia developer, game designer and entrepreneur. He has founded two media companies that together have won an International Emmy Award, two Interactive Rockies, and a Prix Europa. He has graduated as a Master of Arts in Screenwriting from Aalto University, where his Master's Thesis dealt with participatory storytelling in Classic Greece. He is

also the designer and author of Age of the Tempest, a tabletop roleplaying game aimed for kids and beginners.

Claus Raasted quit the university in 2002 to do larps for a living, and has never looked back. He has 21 books on larp to his name, and is the project coordinator of the internationally celebrated College of Wizardry larps. He is the chairman of the Danish larp organization Rollespilsfabrikken, and has helped create a multitude of different larps under its umbrella. His recent projects include the Downton Abbey-inspired larp Fairweather Manor, the Larp Design Conference 2016 and this year's edition of the Nordic larp yearbook.

Siri Sandquist is an Archaeologist specializing in gender theory and an active feminist. In both her work and her spare time, her projects often aim towards spreading knowledge and understanding of the feministic debate. She has been organizing larps since 2014 among others Suffragett! A larp about the movement for female vote in Sweden, Our Responsibility, a larp about the peace movement in Sweden during the First World War, and It's a Man's World which this her article in this book discusses. She works as a teacher at LajvVerkstaden, the most prominent creators of Edu larps in Sweden.

Martine Svanevik is a fiction and games writer. Her work has been published in Words With Jam, Black Apples, Redwing Magazine, Argument, Ufink and Dissecting Larp. Her game credits are Lego Minifigures Online, Trolls vs Vikings, Age of Conan: Secrets of the Dragon's Spine and The Secret World. She's been playing and creating larps since 1999. She lives in Oslo, Norway.
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Susanne Vejdemo (Sweden) is finishing up a PhD in linguistics at Stockholm University. The larps she designs are often about feminism and social conflicts and tend to involve a great deal of heated debates. Among other projects, she has produced the 360 degree realist larp Suffragett! (2014), about the Women's Right to Vote campaign in 1914; Frizon (2010) about dealing with inherited ethnic hatred; and several smaller black box larps.

Josefin Westborg is one of the owners and funders of LajvVerkstaden (the Larp workshop). She is specialized in designing for children, beginners and mandatory experiences. When she doesn't larp or work with larp she likes to play board games and travel to different conventions holding lectures about Geek Feminism.

Bartek Ziolo has been a gamer since the age of three. Videogame addict, knows the rules to hundreds of board games, played RPG in elementary school. Designer of numerous games, from little freeforms to blockbusters like The Witcher School. Directed his scenarios countrywide and abroad – in the Czech Republic and Norway. Helped start the first Polish larp conference Kola and many other events across the country. Has his own arcade cabinet in the living room, likes good beer and bad movies.

Realia

Each year, the Knutebooks have been in discussion with their earlier incarnations. New games have sparked new thoughts and theories, and new interpretations of old games have helped us reflect on the development of the scene. Examining and re-examining our theories and interpretations of games have led to a vivid evolution of larp. Larp Realia proudly continues that tradition and joins the discourse of reimagining the scene.

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