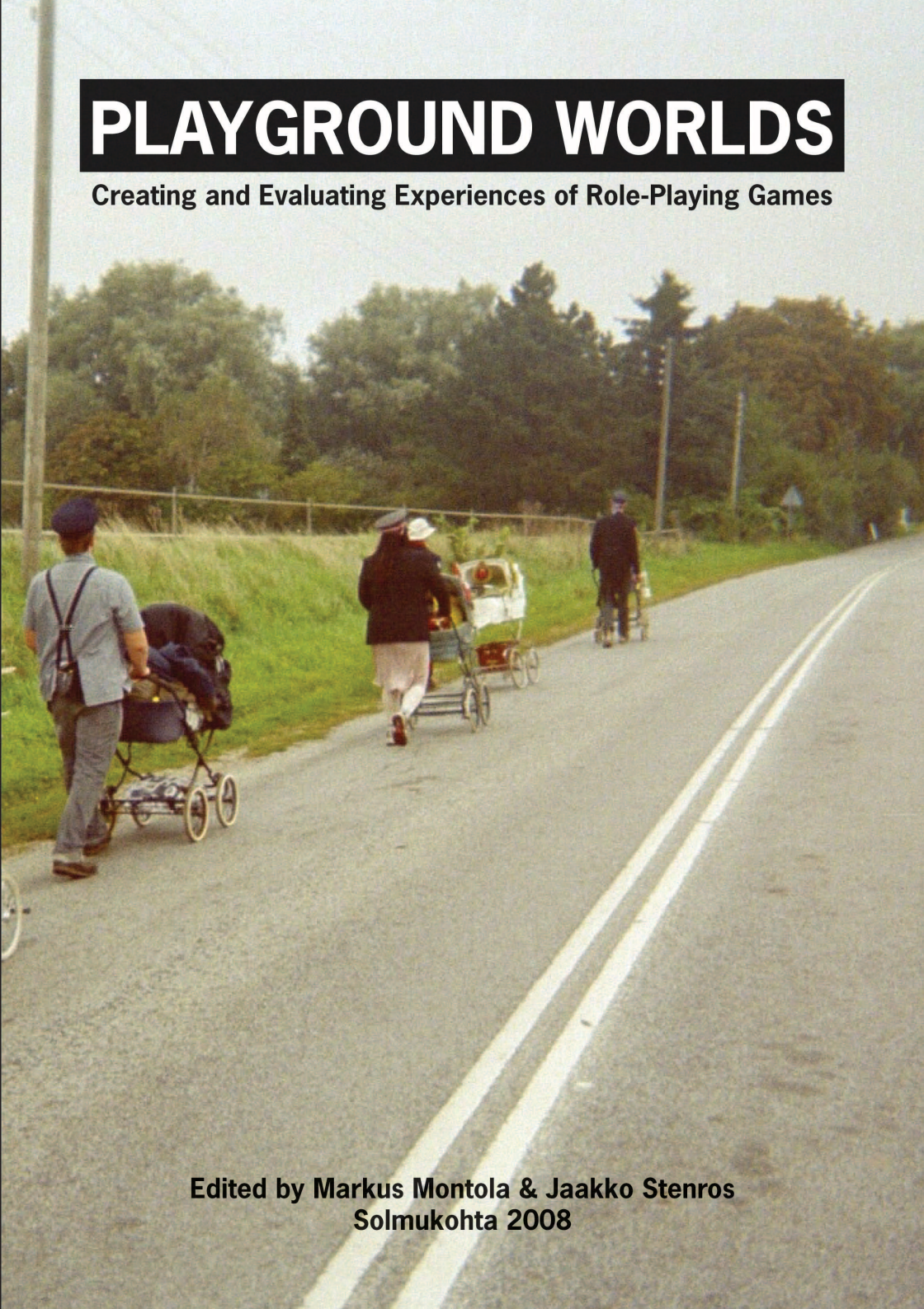
PLAYGROUND WORLDS

Creating and Evaluating Experiences of Role-Playing Games



Edited by Markus Montola & Jaakko Stenros

Solmukohta 2008

Playground Worlds
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Editing: Markus Montola, Jaakko Stenros

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Introduction

Markus Montola & Jaakko Stenros

The role of the character in a role-playing game has long been debated. Yet no character can exist without the context of a game world. The character always has a relationship to its surroundings; the easiest way of creating a character is often through providing a context. Even if one supposedly plays oneself in a fictional world, a character – a variation on the ordinary persona – will soon emerge.

This book is very much about *creating worlds to serve as playgrounds*: An enchanted village protecting its dragon god, a future where tribes fight for survival in the concrete jungle, families huddled in a bomb shelter trying to survive a nuclear war. This book is also about *using our ordinary world as a playground*: drifters walking the road in Denmark, alternate reality activists tracking missing people in Sweden and occult philosophers changing their world views in Norway.

Who "you" are matters little when a nuclear detonation shakes the bomb shelter, or when you visit a gas station dressed in rags and smelling like cheap wine. What matters then is your position within that context: *Ground Zero* made you a witness of nuclear war, *Dragonbane* had you live through the death of your god, and *The White Road* made you experience the daily life of a hobo drifter. These are not necessarily powerful experiences of character immersion, but inevitably powerful experiences of special places and times.

Though game worlds can be amusement parks that one leisurely visits for entertainment, larp is no longer merely a tool for *escape* from ordinary reality. Role-playing games are also a tool for *exposing*, to make visible a nuclear war or the lowest rung of society. They can be used to study the subject or to experience things at first hand. In recent years larp has also evolved into a tool for *imposing*, for actively engaging the outside world. The games can have dialogue not just amongst the players and game organizers, but engaging society too as play spills into the streets.

Whether role-playing games are fairgrounds, test laboratories or attempts to subvert the ordinary, they employ and deploy alternative realities to serve as tools and toys, for fun and profit. This is the idea of *playground worlds*.

Towards Playground Worlds

Four years ago we edited *Beyond Role and Play* for Solmukohta 2004. On the finishing lines of the task, we looked at the collection we had in our hands, and were quite impressed. In a short time, Solmukohta larp discussion had evolved from inebriated opinion, photocopied fanzines and random presentations to an actual discourse, with referenced arguments, and a strong motivation to further the understanding of role-playing. Looking at the manuscript of this present volume, saying that we are *proud* only begins to describe our feelings regarding the development of the Nordic role-playing community since then.

In these four years, we have not only created countless innovative larps, ranging from massive *Dragonbane* to tiny *The White Road*, but we have seen several community members turn in professionals. Many have become commercial larp organisers. Others, like ourselves, have became academic game researchers. Denmark has founded one larping school and is about to found another.

Four years ago these jobs simply did not exist. Larp is, indeed, growing up.

In hindsight the problem with *Beyond Role and Play* was that we forced most texts into a pseudo-academic format, or at least assessed them with such criteria. In *Playground Worlds* we wish to celebrate both the Solmukohta larp community and role-playing as creative work. In this spirit, we have organised the book into three sections with separate editorial principles.

Community and Journalism collects together articles on the role-playing community. This section is meant to be the easiest to approach, requiring no prior reading. *Art and Design* covers role-play as a creative product, exposing philosophies and intentions behind role-playing games, and providing advice and guidance for designers. *Research and Theory* focuses on analytic and academic thought. In addition to these sections, a few central themes emerged from the submitted papers.

Firstly, the staging of larps has previously been discussed mostly as an artistic activity. This year a number of authors have decided to approach the more practical side of project management. Marie Denward, Matthijs Holter, Kåre Murmann Kjær, Johanna Koljonen, Justin Parsler, Annika Waern and Anna Westerling touch upon issues of *larp production*. Secondly, while the one belief that most role-playing cultures around the globe subscribe to is that role-playing games are not children's play, most are willing to concede that there are important similarities. Andreas Lieberoth and Erling Rognli swim against the tide of popular opinion in their discussion of the connection between *larp and child's play*, offering yet another way to interpret the title of the book. Finally, Jussi Ahlroth and Johanna Koljonen attempt to find ways to capture lightning in a bottle: they discuss *criticism and documentation of larp*.

Telling Stories about Games

Role-playing games cease to exist the moment they end. Revisiting old games is not possible without restaging them, and even if this is done, the game is always different. Documenting the games we have played is imperative if we wish to render our rich history visible: if we wish to both build a history and to build *on* that history.

Four years ago in *Beyond Role and Play* we attempted to jump-start a tradition of writing about specific games on a Nordic level, commissioning documentation of *Hamlet*, *Panopticorp* and *Mellan himmel och hav*. But as the past four years have shown, no culture of game documentation has been established. Past games are often discussed over long periods of time, but are rarely documented, described or dissected in writing. In this volume we try again. We have managed to solicit papers on *Agabadan*, *Agerbørn*, *Dragonbane*, *Ground Zero*, *Frail Realities*, *A Nice Evening with the Family*, *Totem*, *Sanningen om Marika* and *The White Road*, in addition to writing on various larping styles. We hope that these works inspire our readers to similar documents in the future,[1] even if such texts are always taxed with the kinds of challenges described by Ahlroth and Koljonen later in this book. Disseminating our work is a critical to the role-playing community as a whole.

The strength of Solmukohta, "The Nodal Point", has always been in bringing people from various

1 We would especially like to see articles on larps such as 1942, AmerikA, Carolus Rex, Europa, Executive Game, Ghost Express, Knappnålshuvudet, System Danmarc, U-359 and Vreden. Some entire larp traditions remain undocumented, like the 700% games, the Finnish Harry Potter tradition, the various vampire chronicles and the Finnish history enactment larps by Harmaasudet. And these are just samples of the games we have heard of.

game cultures together.[2] We understand ourselves and our own playing culture better by finding out how differently people play in other cultures. For this reason we believe that non-Nordic contributions in the Solmukohta book are of special value. In this volume John H. Kim gives a primer on American parlor larps, Nathan Hook provides a brief history of the action style larp played in the United Kingdom, and Justin Parsler adds depth to that by describing one game series in this tradition, *Frail Realities*. Emily Care Boss introduces us to normative role-playing game theory developed at the mostly Anglo-American web community *The Forge*. We look forward to future contributions from the younger Solmukohta countries, to finding out what kind of role-playing cultures exist, for example, in Germany, Israel and Russia.

Looking at the larps produced and played in recent years, it seems that there are currently three strong design ideals guiding larpmakers. Two of them were common when Solmukohta last visited Finland, but one of them is recently emerged.

The first and oldest of these ideals is *powerful drama*. Such games strive for a complete, beautiful dramatic arc for the whole game. They usually attempt to construct character arcs that mirror that of the game to help players focus on certain themes or emotions. Games in this aesthetic include *A Nice Evening with the Family*, *Agerbørn* and the adventurous romanticist games. These larps often utilise techniques such as fate play, scripted events, thematic rules and an act structure.

The second design ideal, the physically immersive *360° illusion*, strives for physical indexicality where the game environment is perfectly crafted.[3] Every object represents itself, and disbelief needs not be suspended: the mood and the atmosphere of the setting, the solidity of it all, is paramount. The goal is to create a feeling of truly *being there*. The setting doesn't need to be realistic, but it must be complete and follow its own logic to the letter. Games striving towards this ideal include *Dragonbane, Ground Zero* and *Totem*.

The third and youngest design ideal is *pervasive larp*[4]. These games blur the line between larp and life as the game spills into the streets. The whole world becomes a playground, something to be enjoyed through a ludic gaze – which markedly limits the choice of available genres and settings. Pervasive larps often attempt either to enhance the feeling of realness by opening up the world, or to engage in an active dialogue with society. By subjecting bystanders to the game and making them unaware participants these games actively confront the ordinary. Example games include the *Agabadan*, *Sanningen om Marika* and *The White Road*.

It is possible, up to a point, to combine these design ideals. For example *Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum* was a pervasive larp (played around the city of Stockholm) that strived for a perfect, flawless world (everything was exactly as it seemed) and it had a clear dramatic structure divided in three acts (see Jonsson et al 2007). Yet most of the time one of these is seen as the primary ideal. Note also, that such design ideals do not stipulate how a game should be played; for example an immersionist approach can be married with all of them.

Not all Nordic role-playing games fit this structure, but most of the big ones developed, marketed

2 This year the event brings together people representing 17 countries: Czech, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Latvia, The Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Slovakia, Sweden, UK and USA. For historical comparison, Knudepunkt 2007 had "more than 12 nationalities" and Solmukohta 2004 had a representation from 10 countries.

3 See Koljonen 2007.

4 See Montola 2007.

and reported in conjunction with the Solmukohta events can be understood in this context. While *gamist larps* are still played in the Nordic countries, like everywhere else, the Solmukohta community has largely dismissed them, steering towards experimential expression instead of more competitive forms of role-playing.

Nordic Role-Play Tradition

Playground Worlds is the sixth volume published in conjunction with the Solmukohta[5] events. It is starting to make sense to refer to the conventions, the books and the games developed and discussed in this community as the *Nordic role-play tradition*.

The first Solmukohta event, Knudepunkt, was organized in Oslo in 1997. It brought together larpers from Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark. As one of the first observations was that we all played in completely different ways, the first few years were spent building a common vocabulary – finding out that a larp of 50 participants is a small one according to Danish standards, and that only Finnish larpwrights had the megalomania to write up every single character description for every game. Translating every term and comparing their meanings we gradually built not just a language, but an understanding of the various different role-playing cultures that existed in our countries.

Yet it was soon understood that it was not enough just to talk about these issues; they needed to be written down so that we wouldn't have to start from the beginning every year or every time new people joined in the discussion. Mostly this documentation work was carried out in national magazines, but an international forum was also needed. The photocopied larp fanzine *Panclou*[6] emerged to fill that need. Edited by Johanna Koljonen, *Panclou* was "glued to the forehead of Nordic larpdom" from 1998 to 2003. During these years there were other self-published texts as well, the most important being the various manifestos, and later the Stockholm-based *Interacting Arts Magazine* that has published issues in Swedish and in English. In Knutepunkt 2001 the documentation of the discussions took another step forward as a book (named simply *The Book*) was given to all convention participants. The book offered a number of essays and articles on larp, mostly describing local gaming scenes and the larp design. While difficult to obtain and seldom referenced nowadays, *The Book* remains an important milestone in the development of the Solmukohta community.

The current tradition of books on Nordic role-playing stems from Denmark. Knudepunkt 2003 published *As Larp Grows Up*, and since then a volume has been compiled for each annual event. The first book collected together a number of older texts, so called classics of the tradition, as well as some new openings on larp. A year later we edited *Beyond Role and Play*. In that volume we aimed for a more academic style which stuck. Since then *Dissecting Larp*, *Role, Play, Art* and *Lifelike* have joined the collection. All of these books are available on the web.

In addition to the tradition of the event and the tradition of the book, the various tribes that frequent Solmukohta events have evolved into a community. These people meet once a year, compare notes, present what they have done, discuss theoretical and artistic issues, invite each other to the next big thing, and – most importantly – transform the talk into action and organise games. This community

5 In Norway Solmukohta is called Knutepunkt, in Sweden Knutpunkt and in Denmark Knudepunkt.

6 We were both heavily involved with Panclou, editing it in secret on hijacked university computers the night before we had to xerox it for delivery.

is not based in any one country, and neither is it a combination of individual national role-playing cultures. No, it is its own beast, and can only be described as Nordic, even international. Neither is it limited to just larpers; while the first Solmukohta events mainly brought larpers together, the scope has since then grown to include traditional tabletop and Swedish-Danish freeform as well.

Solmukohta has evolved into a unique forum for the discussion of the art, craft, theory and practice of role-playing, a nodal point for the Nordic Role-Play Tradition. Even though it has never gathered a wide participation of mainstream larpers, the think tank does not exist in isolation. The impact of the Solmukohta discussion is felt mostly through played games. Yet even the most utopian and theoretical works can sometimes bear unexpected fruit. In this book, the stories by Malik Hyltoft, Marie Denward and Annika Waern show how that can happen.

Welcome to *Playground Worlds*.

March the 5th, 2008, Helsinki,

Markus Montola

Jaakko Stenros

Acknowledgements

We would wish to extend our thanks to the organisers of Solmukohta 2008 and the board of Ropecon ry for entrusting us with this project. We would also like to thank the editors of previous books in our tradition; it is easy to follow in your footsteps. Thanks go also to Professor Frans Mäyrä and the Hypermedia Laboratory at the University of Tampere for recognizing this book as a worthwhile project. We wouldn't have been able to pull this book together without the support of Satu Heliö and Kalle Partanen.

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Section A
Journalism & Community

The Role-Players' School: Østerskov Efterskole

Malik Hyltoft

Østerskov Efterskole is the first school in Denmark to base its teaching primarily on role-playing. The pedagogy of the school changes both the role of teacher and pupil and presents a very different view of teaching. This article describes the methods used at Østerskov Efterskole as well as the school life experienced by the pupils. It gives preliminary assessments of the feasibility of the applied methods, both based on observations from school life and on the few statistical facts obtainable. Finally, it compares the empirical experience of the school with previous articles on role-playing based teaching.

Østerskov Efterskole was founded by Mads Lunau and Malik Hyltoft as an alternative approach to the persistent pedagogical restrictions they encountered in the school systems they both worked in. Three years prior to the formal opening of the school, the founders worked closely with the school board to secure an adequate building, obtain funds, and formulate a flexible pedagogical framework to scaffold the vision for their innovative role-playing school, the first of its kind.

The school narrowly made the 30 pupil enrolment requirement by the May 1st deadline to secure bank funding in its first year, but has since grown steadily to 50 pupils in September 2006 and 90 pupils in August 2007. Pupils are enrolled after a family interview with trained pedagogical staff. During the enrolment process, the staff is instructed not to prioritize pupils but simply inform candidates about school life and become acquainted with the family to determine those few who are unable to cope with the dynamic life of the school.

The two founders are currently sharing the position of principal, providing a more substantial foundation to guide the school with than one person could offer independently. Legal responsibility cannot be shared, but in all other respects the two principals have equal authority. This style of cooperation in school management creates a model for cooperation among the teaching staff.

The school insists on basing its teaching on role-playing and other forms of game play. Teaching is organized in narrative units in which the students participate in various levels of role-playing. The school concentrates on the students' learning rather than the teachers' teaching, supporting a holistic and multidisciplinary approach to education.

The change in teaching methods in general influences many aspects of school life. Both the social and the physical appearance of the school are different from most other Danish schools. The teaching system shows the ability to cover a broad range of curricula in fewer lessons, dispensing with homework and allowing the school to focus on other aspects of education. The following insights described by a staff member's public address (by the author) in November 2007 compares teaching to navigating a river:

> Most teachers insist on *fighting the current* every day of their teaching lives. They brave every kind of resistance from the less-than-motivated pupils, the poorly contextualized subject, and the sterile physical environment of the classroom in their attempt to force learning onto their wards.
>
> We, on the other hand, insist on *turning the current* before we even attempt to teach. We direct our preparation into constructing a situation through role-playing and narration, where we can

teach downstream, only occasionally turning the boat against the current utilising its momentum to reach an otherwise unobtainable fact.[1]

Narrative Units and Role-Play

Teaching in Østerskov Efterskole is based on *narrative units*. A narrative unit is a themed story, where the pupils enter into an imaginary universe, usually through the adaptation of character roles. Through these characters the pupils encounter the curriculum of the unit: They have to solve problems in order to overcome challenges, understand briefings in order to function in the setting, or create their own questions and take the initiative in the learning process. Such units last from one to three weeks, and usually combine all or most school subjects.

The narrative unit centres around role-playing experiences, but the intensity and frequency of role-playing situations and the time the pupil stays in-character may vary greatly. When the pupils are not expected to act as their characters, we say that they engage in *meta-play*. Some narrative units utilize lots of meta-play and motivate the pupils with preparation for short intense playing sequences. Other units are almost exclusively in character, but often with considerably less intense playing.

Role-Play and Games

Østerskov Efterskole uses a rather open definition of role-playing. This is not because of an inability to make more discerning definition, but rather it indicates the realization that people gain role-playing experiences from a wide range of gaming activities.

A traditional definition of games would run more or less like the following: "A game is an activity for two or more participants or teams trying to win in accordance with a

Name: Østerskov Efterskole

Type: Boarding school
Website: www.osterskov.dk
Students: 90
Age group: 14-17

Curriculum: Standard for all 9th & 10th grade, as decided by Ministry of Education

School year: 41 weeks

School week: 30-32 lessons of 45 minutes

Teachers: 10
Technical staff: 6
Pedagogical support: 2
Managerial: 2

Østerskov Efterskole solely operates with standard Danish school funding. The school is one among approximately 270 Danish boarding schools for the 14-17 year olds. State grants are provided based on the number of pupils attending the school. Parent tuition fees are average for the Danish efterskole school system. All staff members are paid and have working hours according to union agreements.

1 In this paper indented paragraphs are used to convey statements from the school, as in this situation or examples from the teaching situations. Narratives illustrating the text are italicised, while quotes are not.

predefined set of rules."[2] For a typical pupil at the school and probably many other role-players and board-gamers, the following definition would be more accurate:

> A game is an activity arranged for one or more participants either through personal mediation, printed or electronic medium. The activity centres on the process of finding a winner or a winning solution in accordance with common sense and written or unwritten rules.

In view of such an approach to games, it is clear that a full scale live-action role-play is not needed to engage the pupil's active association with the subject matter. Something that might look like an ordinary board-game becomes an excuse for dressing up and engaging each other across the table, thus engaging the imagination and the participation of the participants.

We divide the role-playing teaching into five main categories. A narrative unit usually focuses on the top three approaches to role-play, with occasional shifts to the last two methods:

Full scale larp is very demanding both for the pupil and for the teacher as it requires much preparation and concentration from the pupils. However, many learning goals can be achieved in the preparation of the larp and the evaluation afterwards.

Functionality play is less demanding, especially for the pupils. Groups of pupils are given distinct functions to play in the larp. They are not required to develop individual identity, though this may occur naturally. Usually pupils define themselves as a group and act collectively. This comparatively allows the teachers to relate to a limited number of groups rather than a large number of individuals.

Teacher role-play resembles the pedagogical drama method where the teacher assumes a character role in which pupils can ask questions and interact with the role-playing teacher. The pupils however, are also expected to assume a function role and react through that role rather than as normal pupils.

Wear-a-hat –teaching is a unique method where the pupil behaves according to the social conventions of a normal classroom setting with the only notable exception being that both the pupil and the teacher are wearing costumes. By any rational definition, wearing a hat hardly counts as role-playing: It is simply practicing ordinary teaching, be it classroom or group work in the role-playing gear. Nevertheless, engagement and concentration are usually higher than without the gear.

Learning games can be acquired from outside sources or produced by the teachers for the purpose. Because the pupils can be expected to concentrate on the process rather than just the rewards of winning, many important lessons can be gained from the game flow. Pupils are encouraged to engage actively in the games and take on roles rather than just play them.

Teacher and the Design of Learning

The teachers are organized in two teams, with one team being more specialized in science and

2 The Danish language has two words "leg" and "spil" (Swedish: "lek" and "spel", Finnish: "leikki" ja "peli") that cover the semantic areas of the English words "play" and "game". The semantic distinctions in these languages do not follow the same lines. When the word "game" is used in the following passages it is used in the sense of the word "spil" which would be used for the regulated activities of board games, role-playing games and ball-game matches.

the other in language arts. The teams teach in alternating weeks that follow a schedule designed with one week of preparation proceeded by one week of intense teaching.

Theoretically, no one person is solely responsible for a class. A team is made up of one of the principals and five teachers, with at least two teachers who are qualified to teach each covered subject. Often a teacher will run the same educational block several times for different groups of students – at other times all teachers repeat the same lesson for multiple groups to ensure that all students progress in line with each other.

The teacher teams spend about half of their preparation time in conferences spread out over the preparation week, with the other half spent on individual tasks in between the workshops and modification of their assignments. Quite often a teacher will prepare a lesson that another teacher will eventually present to the students.

Teacher and one of the principals of Østerskov Efterskole, Malik Hyltoft. (Photograph by Mads Lunau)

Production on Demand

The school does not use ready-made teaching material for extended periods of time. Students are supplied with reference books, but all assignments, training materials and literature are supplied by the teachers. This policy lowers the expense for bulk acquisition of books, which in turn allows the teachers to order almost any book they need to refer to.

The foundation of the school's teaching programme begins with a planning session of a teaching week, where each teacher specifies the types of activities they feel need to be covered with the pupils. The teachers actually design and produce teaching materials suited for the learning objectives they have just put forth. During the course of this process, they often realise that different lessons pertaining to other subjects can be covered when the teaching material is used, as the following example from April 2007 illustrates:

> In setting up a narrative unit about the end of the world, the science teacher wanted the students to read a number of popular scientific articles about subjects like pollution, global warming, volcanoes, asteroids and a number of other scary things. In cooperation with the teacher of the Danish language, he found out that the pupils might as well learn how an article for a periodical was put together and cover that part of their Danish language curriculum as well.

Not all objectives that the teachers initially proposed in the planning session would actually turn into teaching goals in the following week. But if a particular area of teaching is skipped once or even several times it simply earns priority. In theory this would mean that a particularly, elusive subject could have a whole narrative unit constructed to suit it at the end of the year if no other

solution had been found. This has however not been necessary yet.

It is worth noting that a sizeable portion of the week will be set aside for activities that support the narrative flow of the unit. This can include costume design, finding furniture and ornaments for group work bases, filling out character sheets or showing films (although films are usually screened in the evening as extra activities). These activities will often have some, but not as much academic merit, but are vital to maintaining the motivation of the students, providing a persistent learning environment with a lively social atmosphere.

On the Friday of the preparatory week, the teachers will have completed a general plan, a schedule for everyone, and they will have produced the necessary teaching materials. These materials are partly reused from one year to the next, but since the school is only a year old, this reservoir is still budding.[3]

Multidisciplinary Teaching

The amount of knowledge that an average pupil in the Western World is expected to acquire is huge. When this expectation is specified, quantified, cut up and divided into subjects by the Ministry of Education, schools are presented with a curriculum for a teacher to reach in a set amount of lessons. In this process the task becomes more clear – easier to grasp, but none less daunting. It is now the responsibility of the teacher of one subject to meet the target set before her. A task which can only be performed in the limited time allotted by banning all irrelevant activities from the teaching – thus relegating all other subjects to *their* lessons and *their* teachers. In this unfortunate process, pupils lose the flow of how different subjects are relevant to each other, and are often dissuaded from initiating activities which are possibly quite conducive to learning, but do not pertain to the subject being taught.

Østerskov Efterskole practices multidisciplinary teaching almost exclusively in an effort to make up for this loss. When the teacher is not afraid to waste time covering another teacher's subject, s/he can cover whatever relevant learning matter expands naturally from the activities of the day in the secure knowledge that another teacher will later cover what may have been lost due to time restrictions. The process covers complex learning matters very effectively pertaining to time and effort, since the subjects are taken up when they feel relevant to the students and within a contextual framework that often makes them easier to remember. On the other hand, the process is totally dependent upon strong teacher collaboration, with the ability to relate to the accumulated curriculum of the year by each team of teachers.

A curious vindication of the above claim is that when the school work is tallied up, many teachers discover that they have additionally covered more material than expected. For instance when we tallied up the Danish curriculum for 2006-07, the responsible teacher Torben Glavind discovered that 236 pages of text examples had been read, rather than the 80 pages called for by the ministry. Another example of overachievement was made in September 2007 by Harald Müller, a recent arrival from Germany, unaware of what Danish pupils can usually be expected to overcome:

"Danish school regulations call for 9th-graders to read two novels or plays in Danish and for 10th-

3 In order to comply with Danish copyright laws, all teachers are instructed about the extent to which copying of material is allowed, and are expected to strictly adhere to the rules.

graders to read three. There should ideally be a good dispersion over genres and time periods. In order to cover one of these demands, a Danish science fiction novel was dutifully included in a space journey narration. Everything went as planned and the students read their novel. Next time the teacher group was teaching, the narrative subject was placed in France in the 18th century. In a spot of inspiration, a comedy by Ludwig Holberg, Danish-Norwegian playwright from that century, about a young man who returns from Paris his head full of French airs, was taken up. The students went through the five acts and performed condensed versions in groups. The play will not be included in the final curriculum because other planned books supersede it. But it is an example of how the students take "difficult" assignments in stride because it comes up naturally and in the correct context.

The most serious weakness of multidisciplinary teaching lies at the personal level. The teacher team has to cover the curriculum in unison, even though sometimes only one teacher is experienced with a particular area of learning. In such a case, absence of that teacher leaves gaping holes in the study plans. This weakness, although very real, is only relative. In comparison to ordinary teaching, where a teacher has sole jurisdiction over a full subject behind closed doors – sometimes for years on end – the multidisciplinary teacher team system is still comparatively flexible and resilient.

Holistic Approach

There is an opportunity for learning in any activity. The real challenge is to recognise the learning process and emphasize the aspects that you want the students to hold on to. The following example from a workshop with Anna Lotta Viertola in September 2007 shows observations made by students after 4 weeks at the school:

> In an extracurricular weekend sewing session, a group of pupils had been developing patterns for fantasy clothes and had sewn the costumes under the direction of a Finnish teacher. At the end of the weekend, they started adding up the subjects they had touched upon – just for the fun of it. Their conclusion was: *Sewing* (naturally), *history* (especially related to attire and fashion, but also in general), *English* (the teacher only spoke a little Danish), *arithmetic* (calculating material prices and enlarging patterns), *chemistry and biology* (discussing synthetic and natural fibres), *German* and *Latin* (result of spare time discussion, singing and communicating while working).

By empowering each pupil within their own learning experience, they actively concentrate on what they gain from the teaching. They are turned into active learners in that respect also and skills may be more effectively stored since they are also consciously recognized. Pupils thus empowered are also more able to formulate relevant criticism, both positive and negative in relation to the teaching method used.

The holistic approach of the learning process also facilitates the conscious effort to vary lessons as much as possible. Repetitive teaching leads to reinforcement through recognition. This familiarity builds the security pupils need to concentrate properly in class. But boredom is only a step away from such security, and thus shuts down the whole learning process. Security therefore must be achieved in another way. It seems by ensuring that every activity makes sense combined with a balance of being fun and creating a closeness between a teacher and the class can also create the desired security.

24/7 Learning

The boarding school setting and use of narrative structures affords teaching to occur beyond the boundaries of ordinary lessons – and not just through the obvious possibilities of extra teaching, study groups and educational film shows. The teachers may throw in a larp at any time or place as the following example from August 2006 shows:

> *It is three o'clock at night. Suddenly the captain of MS Ostwald storms into the cabin and wakes the sleeping crew. For a short while the pupils are confused and some of them protest vigorously, then they realise that the game is on and fall into their roles – no less grumpy, but now grumpy in game.*
>
> *The captain leads the crew to the radio room, complaining that the person in the radio only speaks German – and as everybody on board have already experienced the hard way, the captain speaks only English. The groggy crew members try to communicate in German and English at the same time. It is not easy, but there will be no rest before the problem is solved...*

The expanded learning process can also arise from the teachers' increased overview of and influence over the pupils' spare time activities. Pupils participate in the school workshops both during and outside of the planned lessons. Daily chores and the running of a school institution become important learning experiences. The pupils also represent the school when participating in a host of events and role-playing activities with teachers, accumulating important experience in organisation and presentation – subjects that are not part of the traditional Danish school curriculum, but can improve school performance and professional achievement later on in life.

In an admission of the importance of extracurricular learning, the teachers have also taken up some of the most prominent spare time activities of the pupils as learning themes in cooperation with groups of pupils. Themes so far have been online role-playing, *Magic the Gathering* and re-enactment.

War on Homework

There is no homework, nor individual assignments outside the teaching/learning forum at Østerskov Efterskole. It is the contention of the school that homework deepens the gap between the well and the poorly performing pupil – even in a boarding school where teacher assistance is at hand in the assignment hour. Instead, all assignments traditionally set as homework are completed during school time, usually as part of one of the narrative settings.

At the end of each school day, the pupils have a reflective hour for evaluation and contemplation on the day that has passed. In this hour they maintain their individual log book and portfolio. Everything the student works with during the day is documented in the portfolio in digital form. Such artefacts can be scanned notes, recordings of exercises in oral proficiency, video clippings of presentations and documents of more conventional school work.[4] All products relate to particular exams, and the pupils are expected to mark them accordingly.

Creating the portfolio gives structure to otherwise chaotic schooldays: This is the time when the students in the sewing workshop made the connections between all the subjects they actually

4 Scanners, digital and video cameras and microphones are supplied to capture the more evasive productions

worked with throughout the activity covered by their teacher.

A common outcry against eliminating homework is the seeming impossibility of cramming lessons and assignments into an already tight school schedule. Such a problem has not emerged at Østerskov Efterskole.

New Rules of Engagement

When Østerskov Efterskole was in the making, Thomas Duus Henriksen who contributed his insights as a consultant insisted that we have a classroom for each 25 pupils with a black board and all other ephemeral conventions of traditional teaching. He did not insist that we teach in the classroom setting, but he was not convinced that we could sufficiently redefine teaching to dispense with the classroom model altogether.[5]

He was right. We had to resort to a "one teacher, one class" approach in many different instances. The security measures, however, were unnecessary. The pupils have been willing to be taught in almost any surrounding, making the physical form of the classical classroom unnecessary.

> *I walk down the hallway. A pupil comes towards me. He raises his right hand. We clasp hands – street style. We walk on.*

The focus on narrative structures combined with the presence of the teacher in the role-playing situation and the common spare time activities eased the barrier between teacher and learner. There are still minor daily conflicts between teachers and pupils, while teenagers may lose concentration at any diversion, but the learning process is not dependant upon the power structure reinforced by the culture a traditional classroom often creates. It is always challenging to define how such a change of circumstances is reached, but I believe the following factors are contributory:

Clear statement of intent. We cannot expect pupils and teachers to fully appreciate that something has changed unless this is explicitly defined for them. The clear definition of the school as an institution for alternative teaching practices proscribes that no one enters blindly into the dynamics of the school's unique, forward moving environment.

The statement of intent also implores parents and pupils to recognize that things are not always as they expect them to be. In the case of the parents, this mostly helps provide some leeway that allows the method time to work before they demand results. In the case of the students, the statement is followed by the imperative that they do their best to actively relate to the fact that they are learning and how they are learning.

Markedly different form. By clearly moving away from the recognizable form of the school, we do not inherit negative feelings relating to the roles of a pupil or a teacher. This is certainly not true for all pupils, but the more attuned the pupil is to role-playing, the more s/he also realises that Østerskov Efterskole is not like the schools s/he previously attended.

Different mindset of the teaching staff. The teacher must enter the distinctive format of the school as a person, rather than as an institution. The close cooperation between the teachers and the production on-demand system requires teachers to be receptive toward each other's individual strengths and

5 During the foundation of the school, Thomas Duus Henriksen was a highly valuable sparring partner, delivering both theoretical insights and practical advice, and the will to listen to our half-baked ideas.

weaknesses. This challenges the teachers to work as a team in a way that is complementary to each other's individual set of skills and knowledge base. It also means that they continually witness each other's actions in a variety of teaching situations. The teachers have to – or are allowed to – draw on their actual personality rather than a projected image of how a teacher *ought* to be.

This openness also extends to the pupils. It is easier for teachers to recognize their shortcomings when they are part of a group than if they were alone in front of a class. Very often the solution to a given shortcoming can also be referred to as one of the other teachers in the group.

Finally, the fact that teachers and pupils play together on equal footing during role-playing situations (both during lessons and in their spare time) also helps transform both parties into individuals. When you role-play together, you deliberately present aspects and contortions of your own personality. This becomes much less baffling for pupils if the teacher they play with is already clearly defined as a person for them in advance. Thus most of the teachers see an advantage in presenting themselves to the pupils as people with a realistic history including mistakes, passions and prominent persuasions.

Common ownership. There are very few locked doors on the school. Facilities for teaching during the day are roaming ground for role-players in the evening. Most storerooms and even petty cash are kept publicly accessible. The intended effect is for everyone to feel that they are trusted. All losses or property destruction are dubbed a common loss instead of an attack on school property, whether they happen by accident, thoughtlessness or in a few cases, malice,.

Common ownership is also displayed in public behaviour. Official guests and exam censors dine in the common room along with pupils and staff instead of closed quarters. Teachers often bring their guests to play among or hang out with the pupils.

Motivation

Motivation for learning and other activities is strong at the school. Pupils participate vigorously in role-playing activities, exploring the narrative and pedagogical structures of the game. The few cases of self-exclusion usually spring forth from conflicts within a work group. Even in project work and situations with teacher-to-class communication, where the role-playing aspect is not highly active, pupils remark that concentration and participation are generally higher than what they have been previously accustomed to.

It seems that the goodwill that stems from role-playing based learning extends to other teaching situations too, but the actual ability to maintain concentration generally hinges on form rather than interest in a given subject. As a consequence, a teacher can easily get away with a conservative or boring lesson from time to time because the pupils are playing along, waiting for the goodies, but the learning curve drops steeply after 20 minutes of concentration, just as it would in any other classroom. Motivation, however, can be kept up even in repetitive work when correctly supported by a narrative structure or game play.

Learning mathematics is one example of less than motivating repetitive school work. In order to pass the written exam in arithmetic, the pupils must be familiar with the way problems are presented and the type of problems usually put forth by the Ministry of Education. If the sole goal was to nurture the pupil to do well later in education and life, the comprehension of mathematics might be seen as more important than simply understanding how to solve certain kinds of problems, and

might also be achieved in several unique and quite entertaining ways, yet preparation for a given exam to some extent has to be repetitive:

> *In the third week of the World War II theme, the pupils were engaged in the East Front. For most of the week, they were not playing individual soldiers but rather taking charge of whole military units. They were fighting the battle for Stalingrad – one half played Germans and the other half played Russians. But instead of deciding every battle with a die roll as you would do in a board game, the result was dependant on the solving of arithmetic problems.*
>
> *Obviously some officers were doing better than others, but instead of continually facing a vdispiriting experience, the high command would shift less successful officers to less threatened parts of the front actually pairing up pupils of relatively equal ability, so that they maintain the hope of their efforts bearing fruit even though they were initially unsuccessful.*

Special Needs

In Denmark, schools are expected to take extra measures to care for the so-called 5%. This is the term for the group of pupils who cannot follow classes without extra help. Østerskov Efterskole tries to meet this challenge through special measures for three groups of pupils.

- Pupils with *social problems*, coming from homes with severe economic problems, alcohol abuse or other kinds of significant neglect.
- Pupils with less severe symptoms of *Asperger's syndrome*, mental disability in the autistic spectrum.
- Pupils with *learning disabilities* – mostly dyslexia.

In all three cases, additional staff is hired to support pupils with special needs both in their school life here and social life, in accordance with funds released from public grants. A number of technological solutions have also been introduced to mitigate learning disabilities. In all three cases, the love the pupils have for role-playing motivates them to make their stay in Østerskov successful. This generally helps them through the first hard times, allowing the general teaching and the special measures to kick in and help the pupils with specific problems. The school has a high success rate with this group of pupils, measured in course completion and absence of disciplinary problems.

In addition to the three groups mentioned, the school also accounts for students on an individual evaluation basis, considering from case to case whether the institution seems capable of meeting the learning needs and social well-being of a specific individual.

At the moment, the school houses twice the normal number of pupils with special needs making up 30% of the student body. One may conclude that this method works best for problem pupils, but this is not necessarily true. It is much easier to see a positive development on the background of former failures, but the pupils who have formerly functioned well in school also have a chance for a new perspective on learning when they attend the school.

Another group of pupils, who are not usually recognised as being entitled to special support also

benefit greatly from attending Østerskov. More than 50% of the pupils label themselves as victims of bullying. Because of the large proportion, the school can work actively and openly with bullying issues and give this group of pupils a respite to concentrate on academic matters rather than their personal safety.

Effect on Target Groups

With the completion of the first year of teaching, the effect of the pedagogical method can be tentatively gauged.

An attempt to compare the grades that the students earned at Østerskov Efterskole with the grades from their former year at school failed because very few families submitted the grades in spite of repeated requests.[6] The grade average of all pupils at the school was 7.9. This can be compared to an intended national average of 8.0, where ordinary schools vary greatly depending on demographics and schools from the efterskole system are usually rated a little under 8.0. All in all, the result did not stand out in a negative nor positive way.

Fluctuation is measured in the ratio between the number of pupils enrolled through the year irrespective of how many weeks they stay in the school and the number of full tuition years taught by the school. The higher the value, the larger the fluctuation in the student body and consequently the proportion of pupils who have had their school year disrupted. The ratio for Østerskov Efterskole in the school year of 2006-07 was 1.38, which signifies quite little fluctuation. The national average is 1.65. Extrapolations of the data for the first part of the current school year indicate a ratio as low as 1.25 this year – the uncertainty of the prognosis is quite high, but does not contradict the data from the first year.

The low fluctuation is a very positive indication of the school's ability to engage the pupils in school life and make them feel like they belong. Though it cannot be said whether this supports evidence of Østerskov's teaching method or the strong common interest background in role-playing and other games of the pupils, one would expect a relatively high fluctuation if there was widespread dissatisfaction with the methods applied.

Staff stability is not a safe indicator of the methods used either, but again a failure to work with the methods satisfactorily could result in resignations, especially from the teaching staff. The Danish organisation for the school form, Efterskoleforeningen, advises informally that a newly started school can expect to lose up to half its teaching staff, resulting from disenchantment with the school's methods, work pressures, or inability to work weekends and night shifts. This loss of staff can occur even if the school is performing well. Furthermore, the average time on the job for the initial principal is two years. In its first year of operation Østerskov Efterskole did not lose any teaching or managerial staff, and the only resignation among the technical staff was due to a career advancement offer from a rival school that could not be matched by a vacancy at Østerskov.

In all, one can conclude that the statistics of the first year of teaching indicate but in no way prove that the teaching method can be applied satisfactorily. A reading of the minutes of the pedagogical

6 Cooperation between school and home can be quite difficult in the Danish Efterskole. Many pupils see their stay as emancipating and wish to include their family in as little as possible. Most homes are located a good stretch from the school, requiring the parents to take time off from work or skip spare time activities to show up. Furthermore, a sizeable part of the pupil body is from homes with social or psychological problems.

Students at Østerskov Efterskole. (Photograph by Mads Lunau)

meetings will reveal many heated discussions about pedagogical measures and methodology, but this does not seem to indicate inapplicability of the method as much as an ongoing attempt to find the right way to organise and express it.

Do the Theories Hold?

People with a scientific mindset will notice that there are no references to pedagogical theories in this article. This is not because we are oblivious to the fact that as an institution we benefit from the practical and theoretical work of many who came before us. It is simply because we are not particularly preoccupied with whom they are.

Solmukohta conventions have been *the* venue for role-players putting forth observations on the use of role-playing in education. Most of these points have centred on role-playing as a teaching medium among many. Thomas Duus Henriksen (2004) has many reservations regarding a widespread use of the medium, which generally hinge on the participant's inability to interpret the educational subject matter: The problems of having to coax learners into the process, problems of situated learning, oversimplification and not least the danger of losing the learning process through gratuitous entertainment. Elge Larsson (2004) on the other hand welcomes role-playing as an educational tool that can save tormented youths from the traditional school system. Sanne Harder (2007), an experienced teacher using role-playing as a medium finds a kind of middle ground seeing *"role-playing as a means of organising teaching, rather than a way of making your lessons more entertaining."* At the same time, Harder has reservations regarding the possibility of teaching harder

subjects like grammar through role-playing.

Drawing on our empirical work with role-playing based teaching, I find it hard to disagree with any of the above positions. They are, however, all specific. Henriksen works on the assumption that role-playing based teaching should be integrated with the existing educational world as we know it without any further amendments. Subsequently he points to a row of difficulties that we've also experienced when asked to work with pupils from ordinary schools. However, if the educational environment is transformed, as it is at Østerskov Efterskole, which is not impossible, the problems can generally be overcome. Even to the extent where it can be entertaining to be frustrated in your learning attempts.

Larsson makes a very poignant criticism of current educational systems and the traditional, and sadly still often current, teacher role. His position that participatory education can be achieved through role-playing with great results for personal development seems vindicated. The challenge of encouraging pupils to spend enough time evaluating their learning outcomes is not addressed.

Harder, among other illuminating examples, touches on the Achilles' heel of role-playing based teaching as she cites her students for stating *"We didn't learn anything, but it was fun."* She further concludes that already in third grade the pupils are thoroughly imprinted with the stamp of traditional schooling. This anecdotal evidence compliments our discovery that the very best and the most problematic students equally have more challenges grasping the methodology of Østerskov Efterskole. Our thesis is that they are dependant upon the traditional school structure, albeit for very different reasons. It is also supported by observations that students whose marks improve and make great strides academically may very well tell their parents or teachers that they have not learned anything at school.

Conclusion

Although it is hard to say exactly to what extent, it can safely be said that it is possible to teach through role-playing. It must however also be admitted that a broad definition of the term role-play is called for when the medium is used for education.

The method used at Østerskov Efterskole has demonstrated the capability to convey the curriculum called for by the Ministry of Education. It was discovered that teaching through role-playing may allow some groups of underperforming students who were formerly challenging to engage through the traditional educational system a new chance for learning and obtaining an education.

It can also be claimed that the experience set forth by Østerskov Efterskole challenges many traditional preconceptions about what a school is and what teachers need in order to perform their teaching function, having done away with the indispensability of discipline-boundaries, home work, traditional class rooms and bulk acquisition of books. The methods used at Østerskov may not be the solutions for other schools, but they indicate along with the findings of other progressive schools that there are many valid alternatives to traditional teaching.

Østerskov Efterskole is an open house, excepting examination days and excursions. Anyone who wants to visit the school and observe can come when they like.

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Leave the Cat in the Box: Some Remarks on the Possibilities of Role-Playing Game Criticism

Jussi Ahlroth

Robin D. Laws wrote in 1995 an article titled "The Hidden Art: Slouching Towards A Critical Framework for RPGs". In the article, Laws claims that "Criticism of the actual role-playing game experience is the Schrödinger's Cat of art criticism", referring to the critic's participation in the artwork she is to criticise. This essay addresses that conundrum by looking at the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity in criticism. A twofold division between text and-performance is proposed to see what the conditions under which a critic can criticise a role-playing game are. The conclusion is that in terms of criticism, the major problem is not the role of the critic, but of the other players. Finally, it is pointed out that the critique as a genre of writing might expand to other forms of writing when it comes to role-playing game criticism.

Looking ahead into the future of role-playing, we should find a place for role-playing game criticism, as ultimately, no art exists without art criticism in the modern world. In 1995 Robin D. Laws wrote an article called *The Hidden Art: Slouching Towards A Critical Framework for RPGs*. It is still most likely the most serious take on the problems of role-playing game criticism[1]. Laws wrote the article at a point in time when it was important to bring role-playing games out of the ghetto of "gaming", and to give them the value of art. Part of this project was to make them acceptable as objects of art criticism. I suppose this project is still going on. The conventions of role-playing criticism are still to be established and role-playing games are still marginal in the field of the arts.

Laws encapsulates the problem of role-playing game criticism by a metaphor: "*Criticism of the actual role-playing game experience is the Schrödinger's Cat of art criticism. Lift the lid to look at the cat, and you may well destroy it.*" There is a peculiar viewpoint behind the use of this metaphor. Laws does not even consider the option that the critic could actually *play* the game she is writing a critique of. For Laws, the Schrödinger's cat is a metaphor for the situation in which a critic would be *observing* a gaming event taking place and writing a critique based on her second-hand experience. The danger expressed by the metaphor is that her presence, as an outside observer, would alter the event.

Laws never discusses the possibility of the critic actually playing the game. Therefore, I think it is ironic that he writes:

> So perhaps this entire survey of possible critical approaches is premature. The interactive art of RPGs is an elusive one, hidden from the observing eye of the critic. Perhaps before we figure out which criteria to apply to it, we should attempt to figure out how to observe it at all. (Laws 1995)

He does not, evidently, "figure out" the answer that is in front of him. The only way to write a critique about the hidden art is to participate in it, to reveal that which is hidden. But this solution

1 Laws makes in his article the distinction between review and critique, a distinction used in the English-speaking world. A review is a basically a recommendation on whether to buy the work or not, whereas criticism puts the work into its relevant context. In Laws's words, criticism addresses the work's ultimate worth, a review merely its immediate worth. In the practice of criticism in Finland, this distinction is not made.

does not rid us of Schrödinger's cat. On the contrary. The critic participating in the game makes the problem more severe. Participatory art, by definition, makes the audience a co-creator. Thus, also the critic-as-player is implicated in the substance of the work itself in a manner unlike any other art-form. We are in danger of contradicting the most basic principle of criticism – the critic and the artist should be two separate people.

So, we are in a gridlock. I will look into this gridlock from two directions. First, there is the fear of the critic's involvement. I will address it by trying to show that the question of objectivity and subjectivity is not simple in criticism of any art. Thus, this problem should not hamper us from engaging in criticism. Secondly, a line needs to be drawn between the artist and the critic. I will try to sketch some distinctions to this purpose and by which to engage in role-playing game criticism.

Subjectivity and Objectivity in Art Criticism

The paradox of objectivity and subjectivity is particular to all art criticism. While the advent of participatory arts brought the paradox closer to surface, issues of subjectivity have always been problematic in art criticism. The role of the critic has never been unproblematic, participatory art merely emphasized this paradox which is always there.

I like to essentialise the combination of subjectivity and objectivity in criticism as "a well argued opinion". A critic has only her opinion and it is that she voices. But, it is expected of her to know where the work is coming from. She also has to "read" the work well. All in all, the critic has to take her personal experience of the work and make it public. In some sense, to reverse the process made by the artist, who finds a personal expression for something that is public and generally recognised.

Subjective impressions are given different values in criticism among the arts. Instead of looking at criticism in terms of the analytically quite unhelpful gridlock of subjectivity and objectivity, we would be better off looking at a sliding scale. Critiques of *art music*, or so called *classical music*, are the most internalised, linguistically most figurative and more than other styles of criticism based on emotionally loaded impressions. Next on the scale are the *visual arts*. The critic walks into the gallery, and often we are invited along with her, as if inside her head, seeing what kind of narrative and emotional landscapes of conceptuality the critic constructs from the works in question. *Drama* criticism looks at the performance, also calibrating the relationship between the script and performance in the event of the particular show. There is a wide range of choices, on different levels of expression involved. *Literature* criticism rests its claim to authority on the written words of the work in question. They do not change. This is evidenced, for example, by the usual device of writing a summary of a book's plot. It is not possible to extract something like a plot that everyone would generally agree on from music or painting.[2]

I feel that the problem, the poor cat in the box, is the superstition that in participatory art the sphere of external perceptions and the internal associations and impressions these perceived objects generate in the mind are somehow fundamentally different. Yet there is only one point of difference. It is that some of the external perceptions are affected, sometimes quite dynamically, by the actions of the participating critic herself. The poor wretched cat in the box is – leaving aside theoretical

2 The validity of this division could be argued from a semiotic point of view, by postulating a scale of increasingly fixed relations between the signifier and the signified and an increasingly more recognisable set of signifiers.

ruminations – the doubt as to how much the critic can rely on her internal impressions, if she herself has actively affected the external perceptions which serve as the objective foundation for these impressions. It is, in effect, a loop.[3]

Text and Performance

The seductive metaphor of the Schrödinger's cat employed by Laws arises from a misunderstanding of participation. I wrote earlier that the artist and the critic should be two different people. But what if everyone participating has a creative input? Even if there is participation, there is always the possibility of drawing the line between organiser and participant, those who have orchestrated the event and those who participate in it. Although in role-playing games some people might belong to both groups, I think the critic should not. No one should write a critique of their own work. It is my personal view, and I believe it is shared by all practising critics, that the critic must not have taken part in the process of the production of the work. Let's think of an orchestra. Would we accept it that a violinist wrote a review[4] of a concert she played in? I think everyone would say no. It would have to be someone in the audience. But what if there was no audience? What if the concert was performed only for the orchestra itself? Then the question would shift. What could the violinist write about? The composition, yes. The conductor, certainly. But not her own playing.

This is relevant because somehow, we have to admit the fact that when it comes to role-playing games, the violinist will always be writing the review. Then we have to ask the correct question of what exactly about the game she can write about. Where is the line drawn?

The line fluctuates depending on what kind of a game is in question. Is it a tabletop game or a live action role-playing game? What is the division of responsibility between the participants, meaning how is the player - game master division articulated? What is the role of prewritten texts? Is a gamesystem employed? If so, is it a system which can be employed more universally, or is it specific to this event?

Robin D. Laws touches on this when he makes the point that it is useless to evaluate game books to evaluate the experience of role-playing:

> To return to the 'game mechanics as cameras and lighting equipment' analogy (to film), studying a game book to evaluate the role-playing game experience as art is rather like using a technical manual of cinematography to write about Rashomon instead of actually watching Rashomon itself. Rules mechanics are the virtual equipment for the story creation process, but are not the process itself. (Laws 1995)

3 This is a point of difference between videogames on the one hand and role-playing games on the other hand. Videogames are a field in which criticism has almost completely fallen under the weight of the demand for objectivity. This is most obvious in the fact that videogame critiques often read like reviews of technological devices, with strong emphasis on technical performance. In videogames, everything is pre-programmed. The player cannot dynamically affect the game beyond the parameters set for it. The doubt as to how much the critic-player affects the game in a videogame is limited to whether the player-critic plays the game well enough, making full use of the game's potential, and consequently being able to write a well argued critique.

4 I intentionally used here the word review to make it clear that what ever title we use, criticism or review, it includes comment on the artistic merit of the work.

But this is a naive analogy. It is based on an artificial polarisation which is impossible to breach. Laws then makes a point of the fact that this cannot be done. Why would anyone wish to study "a game book to evaluate the role-playing game experience as art?" The book and the experience arising from the application of that book are two separate things. There is no reason why we could not find criteria to evaluate both. It would be close-minded to say that we cannot write reviews of game books, simply because they do not equate to the experience. It is merely important to acknowledge what we are doing in each particular critique. To clarify exactly that, what the critic is doing, I would like to make a distinction between text and performance.

Text is the central classification when the object of criticism is a role-playing game book – be it a rulebook, background material or a series of scenarios. In addition to actual physical texts, I would place role-playing game-systems in this category. Laws equates game systems with narration, treating the systems as a grammar, which can be looked at separately from their individual application – the speech acts, so to say. This is a useful distinction, because it narrows the object of criticism to either evaluating a grammar as one among many grammars, or to evaluating a particular application of a single grammar. A system of rules, independent of its actualisation in a session of gameplay, would be subsumed under this category. Let's call it a *grammar text*. This category is also relevant when we look at role-playing games as narrative constructs. The game as a narrative, or the narrative level of the game is read as *narrative text*. This also includes the characters as written entities.

Performance is the practical actualisation of a game. In a larp, this covers every artistic choice the organisers do, excluding writing, and everything the players actually do during the game. In a tabletop game, performance is everything the game master does, and everything the players do as well. It is also the application of the rule system, the performance of the text.

Looking now at Laws's example of *Rashomon*, he is conflating together text and the subjective experience of a game event. The experience can never be reduced to the grammar-text. But we can observe the process between the two. We can critically evaluate the performance of the text in a particular performance of the game, by having a subjective experience of it.

Text and performance cannot be totally separated from each other. For example, characters or a diegetic culture as written only exist until they are performed by the players, or outside the performance of the game. But this distinction is an instrument which can be applied to see what is actually being done when a critic is engaged with a game. These two denote different stratas within a whole, and each can be the dominant one in determining the point of view of the critique. To tie this in with the previous discussion of subjectivity and objectivity, these categories negotiate the relationship between subjective experience and external perceptions. In other words, they are coordinates which guide the course and conditions for a role-playing game critique.

Thus, the tools we have are the line of demarcation between the organisers and the participants, and the categories of text and performance. Let's test this with a game in which the rules prefigure much of the gameplay (*My Life with Master*), a tabletop game with a rule-system and campaign material (*Dungeons & Dragons*), a live-action game with no rule-system (*Pelargirin ympyrä*) and a live-action game with rules (*Dragonbane*).

In *My Life with Master*, either the grammar-text or the narrative-text has to be the primary target of evaluation. This is because the division of roles and responsibilities are so equally balanced, that it would be difficult to extricate anyone into a position from which to write a critique of the of the performance. In this case, the performance only serves to bring alive the text, the actual target of

criticism. Here, the line of demarcation would tell us that the critic cannot be the person who wrote the narrative-text around the grammar-text.

In the case of the classic tabletop game, exemplified by *D&D*, the critic must be a player, if she is to write a critique of the game performance. This is because the game master is in charge of orchestrating the performance. The player can also write a critique of the narrative-text. If the game system is to be evaluated as grammar-text, it should be looked at in more detail than what the player's position allows. So ideally, if the game is looked at on the level of the grammar-text, the critic is the game master. The game master can write in-depth about the system, but on the other hand he can not write about the performance, due to his role in orchestrating it.

In a larp, the critic must be a player, who does not participate in textual or material organisation, more than is minimally required of players in this particular game. The fact of meeting the minimal requirements for example in co-writing one's character should not preclude one from writing a critique. Just prior to entering the larp *Dragonbane,* I was helping Timo Multamäki to unload a whole truck full of trash to the local garbage dump. At one point, while carrying some vile piece of refuse, I did actually think whether I was crossing a line, becoming one of the organisers. But that one afternoon of work did not eventually take away the sense that I was entering Timo Multamäki's game, which he and Christopher Sandberg and everybody else in the organising team had worked hard to make it a reality.

What I had done was the minimal input that any participant was expected to do. I think there is something here, in the point of the minimal level of participation, which could serve as a guiding line for the level of participation suitable for the critic. Then again, this is not a water-tight definition. I had an assistive role in the larp *Pelargirin ympyrä*, a role which was clearly smaller than that of the players. I did play a character in the game, but the character had just a very brief background text, was not involved in the prewritten plotlines, and was expected to not affect their resolution. I would still hesitate to deny a player in that game the opportunity to write a critique of the game.

From the player's position, the critic can critically address the performance of the larp. If the text is not meant to be used outside the particular game event, the text, whether narrative or grammar, is addressed only in terms of its role in the particular game event. In the case of a game such as *Pelargirin ympyrä,* which did not have any rules, there was no grammar-text to address. The critique would only concern itself with the performance or the narrative-text. In my opinion, the performance in *Pelargirin ympyrä* was less than perfect, but the narrative text written prior to the game was excellent. A natural point of view for the critique would be to look at this discrepancy and analyse what went wrong. In *Dragonbane* there were rules, for example concerning magic. In addition to addressing the performance and the narrative-text, both which had several strengths and weaknesses, the rules could have been made an object of critique, as a grammar-text.

Larp also demands unique considerations for criticism. The most immediate is the singularity of the event. In other words, will the game ever be repeated? If not, this singularity must guide the critique from the very beginning. In light of the distinction between a review and critique - if a live action game is a singular event, the dimension of review is not useful. No one needs to know whether it is worth attending, because there is no opportunity to do that.

The Real Problem – Other People

Larp critique, with its emphasis on performance, highlights a problem hitherto untouched. Unlike Robin D. Laws would have us believe, the critic herself is not the main problem. That cat can stay in the box. The critic, like the violinist, is never evaluating her own playing. This is crucial. She may doubt and mistrust her impressions, but this uncertainty is the same for all critics, regardless of the form of art they cover. Each critic must overcome this doubt and learn to trust her own judgment. Here, the cat is finally laid to rest. The doubt has a slightly different origin, but the doubt can be psychologically overcome.

The actual problem is that besides the critic and the game, there are also the other players. Is it acceptable for the critic to write about the other players? She has to, since in many ways, they are the game. But how does the critic write about them and their "performance?" This is the difficult question, and here the line is drawn between role-playing games and other forms of art. It is ethically problematic to write about the other players precisely because they are not, at least not primarily, there to perform.

If role-playing game criticism is to be established, this question has to be resolved, on a very practical level. I imagine this could be an individual choice for each game organiser. The organiser must decide how much preparation to ask of their players. Should the players be informed of the presence of a critic? If there is a critic in the game, it requires pretty good role-playing from the other players to not let this affect them. I imagine this is even more complicated than the all too familiar scenario of all the players of a scenario being all too familiar with each other. In many role-playing cultures, it is almost a taboo to critically evaluate the "performance" of other players in public. Yet private criticism is commonplace, as every player does that after the game. Players' performances should never be evaluated during the game. Afterwards, it should be possible to make a thorough evaluation of the game-as-performance, the main core of which is the other players.

Yet the question of intimacy remains. Role-playing games demand a high level of trust between the participants. A public criticism might compromise that. We might not be happy to consider that our game experience will be referred to in a critique in the morning newspaper. Or if we were especially happy to consider it, we might be playing for the wrong reasons.

Critique – Or Some Other Genre of Writing?

Thus far, the problem of "peer critique" has been avoided by writing about larps more in the manner of a reportage, or maybe a feature story, than a critique. This is what I have actually done; I have written about larps that I have participated in, larps which I have talked about after the event with the organiser, and larps that I have observed.[5] But none of these have been, in terms of writing practice, critiques. Much of this is due to the medium. A national daily newspaper is not, at least not yet, the avenue for larp criticism. This is an open question, and an open field. It concerns all kinds of immersive gaming, including video games. How much should game criticism open to

5 I have covered larps in the culture pages of the largest newspaper in the Nordic countries, Helsingin Sanomat, for years. These articles have been, for example, about Dragonbane (reportage of the game I participated in), Mellan Himmel och Hav (interview with the main organiser after the game) and the culminating evening of Sanningen om Marika (feature based on observation of game events and interviews). Pelargirin Ympyrä was a hybrid case, as I participated in the role of an assistive character and wrote a reportage of the game. The reportage became part of a larger feature describing the process of one player's preparation for the game and views on the game after the event.

other forms of writing – to reportage, feature story, travel journal, diary, or actually fiction?

In the earlier example of the violinist, I referred to a game-organiser writing about a game. The result could be very interesting writing – and we are used to reading this, for example in these annual anthologies – but they are not critiques in the sense that I understand it.

Maybe criticism is a limited paradigm altogether, when we move from role-playing game rulebooks to larps and other kinds of game events. Maybe criticism will become just a single current among several vital streams which all inform the role-playing game critic of the future. Looking ahead, one observation seems clear to me. As soon as we let the crippling doubts and fears regarding the soiling effect of our own participation relax, great horizons open for new kinds of critique, written about new kinds of art.

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The Dragon Was the Least of It: Dragonbane and Larp as Ephemera and Ruin

Johanna Koljonen

The international fantasy larp Dragonbane (July 27th – August 4th, 2006) was unprecedented in ambition, the promises of the organisers including a functional village, working magic and a life-size fire-breathing animatronic dragon. In this essay, Johanna Koljonen describes some of the production's challenges and successes, in the context of a wider discussion on how and why larps should be documented.

Imagine a fantasy live action role-playing game completely free from the usual pseudo-Tolkien feudal clichés. An international game, where larpers from all over the world could play in their own languages; six days in character around the clock; exciting and challenging to adults, yet equally appropriate for young children; focused on human relations and conflict resolution rather than fighting and conflict creation. A fictional religion with real complexities. A magical world that is physically present – real houses, sheep, a bakery, forest camps in a stunning wilderness setting. Real, functional props to fill the village with every-day life and memories of its past. Good-looking latex weapons provided by the organisers for characters likely to carry them. And most importantly: magic that works. Supernatural lights! Real firebolts! A life-size animatronic dragon!

This was the promise of the makers of the 2006 fantasy game *Dragonbane*[1]. And bar one game day being cut to finish building the village, and bar the fact that not all players of all backgrounds managed to stay in character for the duration, this is what the makers of *Dragonbane* delivered[2].

I admit. I am cheating a little. I am not being specific. The game was intended to accommodate a larger number than 325 players. The dragon was meant to be able to raise its eyebrows and breathe fire. And there was another promise too: that during the game we players would not have to see anything that did not belong to the fiction. That ambition was not realised.

The players saw plastic buckets in the loos, electrical wires running in the grass along the road, special effects crew in orange coveralls, even the occasional car. And the dragon, with most of its animatronic nerves and muscles malfunctioning, very obviously moved on visible wheels. These modern elements were incredibly frustrating, given the efforts of most players to comply fully with the very strict rules on equipment brought to the game. But they were hardly unique in fantasy larps. And it was possible, with only a little effort, to manoeuvre around most of them.

1 Dragonbane (2006) Timo Multamäki (producer, corporate partners), Maija Nevala (content), Niki Bergman (communications, press), Heiko Romu (dragon, set), Timo Leipold (offgame), Janne Särkelä (audio & dance), Ester Lautumio (trasnlation), Morgan Jarl (characters), Jeremy Naus (webmaster), Eero Alasalmi (dragon mechanics), Pauli Sundberg (dragonware), Henri Sareskivi (dragon electrical systems), Tiinaliisa Turunen (public funding), Mikko Kekäläinen (enviroenment), Sören Parbeck (boot camp), Kalle Kivimaa (finance), Teemu Hukkanen (IT-admin), Mikko Mähönen (documentary), Simon Farel (graphics), Esa Arbelius (props), Arno Hahma (SFX team), Antti Oksanen (gizmo), Mikko Eskelinen (architecture), Anna Nummi (costume design), Mike Pohjola (original world), Christopher Sandberg (original game design), Janne Björklund (photography) and many, many others. Älvdalen, Sweden.

2 I was not a Dragonbane organiser, but several months after the end of the game, I volunteered to help with the project's own evaluation process. That work has clarified my thinking on larp documentation and on Dragonbane itself. The report, forthcoming in 2008, will have a very practical focus. In the following I will share personal reflections provoked by the process and the game itself.

Building the temple. (Photograph by Janne Björklund / Kuvateko.com)

Yes, the fact that they were there was testament to the chaotic state of the organisation on the arrival of the players. And yes, many players were understandably upset at the amount of work they themselves needed to contribute in the last pre-game days for the village to be ready to play in. Having to drop one day of game-play for the purpose – the experimental "if-game" day, when we were meant to play our way into our characters, and develop common memories for them – was a sacrifice that at the time felt very heavy indeed.

Read that first paragraph again, though. Just consider for a moment the insanity of the enterprise and the vastness of what was achieved. I mean, really. The dragon was the least of it.

Saying that the dragon was broken, the organisation exhausted and the game's aesthetic premise compromised is easy. Explaining how the game was also a success is difficult. Even just defining what, exactly, we mean by "the game" or "success" is a very complicated matter.

Immediate Aftermaths

Imagine a book club based on the premise that all participants read a handful of chapters from the same novel, dividing it up between them, so that most or all participants read the key moments, but the rest of the chapters are randomly assigned. The book club would then meet to discuss the book, reconstructing a sort of ghost-text in the process: an uncanny fiction of a novel that has never existed and will never be read. Imagine that even the partial texts are burnt before the meeting, so that it is not possible to go back and check against one's memory.

Then imagine members of the book club reconvening a week later, a year later, to talk about the book again. How long would their personal impressions of the story remain vivid? At what point

would the collective reading subsume the individual experience? Would it be meaningful to ask them whether the book they read was any good? Would the outcome of this process be different if the participants were encouraged immediately upon burning their copy to make notes about their reading experience, or about the content and style of the novel?

This is the challenge that faces the role-playing community, and especially larpmakers: we are writing novels which dissolve upon completion. Issues of documentation are so complex that most larpmakers do not even attempt it. Another reason, of course, is that they typically have little time, energy or money left after an ambitious event.

Players, a potentially enormous resource in documentation, are difficult to re-involve after they have left the game area. And catching them at the end of the game has its own problems. In the liminal space between fiction and fact, players are typically busy either enjoying the lingering atmosphere of the fiction, or turning their fragmented game experience into a containable narrative. I suspect this nigh-universal need serves a very real function in reconstructing the player's private identity after a bout in a fictional role[3].

What happens in the moment or hours after a game is difficult to explain to someone who has not experienced it. We say goodbye to our characters, change into our real-world clothes, pack up, and give the organisers a hand in cleaning up – carrying something somewhere, wrapping things up. Some game-makers include a ritual act or goodbye at the end, either just inside the (temporal and/or geographical) border of the fiction or just outside it. Productions designed to be emotionally very affecting or to make a political point tend to add post-game discussion of a more formal kind.

The after-larp party, traditional in many role-playing cultures, is a chance for players to get acquainted or re-acquainted as themselves (or as their new selves to the degree that the game experience has changed them). Other role-playing communities have no such formal traditions, and they are not strictly necessary precisely because of the players' innate ability to sort the game experience into the grander schemes of their lives.

We just need a moment to sort ourselves out, to pass judgement on our chapters and place them in the context of the collective experience. All larpers know the frustration of this: that listening to the subjective stories of other players is in fact almost never helpful or particularly interesting. We may want to hear some technical plot point to satisfy our, but intense scenes seldom translate into captivating stories.

So even though the need to linger has very much to do with our own story-experience, the element of evaluation almost invariably ends up being one of critical impressions. Did the physical reality of the game conform to expectations? Were we satisfyingly surprised by events as they unfolded? Did the atmosphere that emerged support our personal narratives?

We can usually tell even as the game unfolds whether it is more or less than we hoped for. But the personal game-narrative and the ghost ideal of the game as a whole are two completely different texts. To some degree, perhaps because of the collective nature of the form, we always attempt a collation of them after the fact. In some ways, the process of comparing experiences starts before the game has even started. Participants compare expectations before the event, in off-game moments during the game period, and in what can only be described as *off-game glances* – out-of-character

3 It would perhaps be possible for the interested researcher to at least document that process – the "debriefing" or offloading narrative can arguably be told just as efficiently with a tape recorder present.

reactions that are (willingly or unwittingly) communicated to other players while the game is in action.

Yes, a larp is always played with a first-person audience. But like any audience, the typical first person participant looks for context as guidance. We adjust our interpretations to clues from our co-players during the game – this is why it can be very jarring to meet another group of players mid-game, whose experiences of other larps and glancing decisions in this one have led them into another style of playing. Or into an entirely different genre of fiction.

It is worth reiterating that larpers of different cultures will share very few basic assumptions about what a larp is. Whether, for instance, alluding to off-game knowledge is acceptable. Whether we should use or camouflage the accents of our real-world voices. Whether it is the player or the character who engages with the plot, or makes a joke, or laughs at it. Multicultural gaming is a constant negotiation, and when the game has ended, our respective pieces of the puzzle do not necessarily fit together smoothly, or at all.

When the last participant leaves, the organisers are left in ruins: sometimes personally and financially, always in the physical, textual and critical debris of their original vision and the game that resulted. Few games are complete successes in every way. But what most players ultimately care most about is their personal experience of the over-all game narrative. Yet that is exactly the element of the game which in most difficult to lock down, let alone document. *Dragonbane* is a case in point. Regardless of its unique features, and the fact that a great part of the participants had a great time, it is widely considered to have been a failure.

Well, I was there as a player. My experience was appalling for a great while, mildly satisfying for the last few days and, at moments, absolutely amazing. I do understand those who felt cheated of their investments of time and effort. Players who were cold and wet and miserable for reasons that could have been avoided certainly have real cause for complaint. But the majority were none of those things.

I suspect that the dismissal of the game ultimately stems from the inability, outlined above, of the player collective to organise strongly differing narratives into a coherent whole. I suspect the players who really enjoyed the game felt hurt, or felt their experience threatened, by the negative voices. After the game, they preferred to talk to players who shared their own views, and although they posted positively on the game's web forums after the event, they largely refrained from entering into arguments with the loudly negative voices.

The ironic thing is this: many of the organizational failures of *Dragonbane* could have been avoided, if larpmakers were better at learning from each other. And the tragic thing is this: because of how the game has been dismissed, its successes too risk being lost to the tradition.

Shambles

Aside from a handful of volunteers, the players started arriving at the *Dragonbane* headquarters and check-in zone (know as the Boot Camp) in the week before the game. The last arrival dates were staggered to allow for preparation time with the organisers, but participants were encouraged to arrive early. Those that did were immediately roped into physical labour, since the village was far from finished. Organisers operating on very little sleep, drowning in work, were curt of tone, and there was a fair bit of grumbling amongst the players at what was perceived as a lack of gratitude for

the work they were now putting in. There was also a very real sense that there was simply too much left to do before the beginning of the game. Finishing several buildings? Building an entire temple? Setting up an 80-person camp for the dragontamers and many small ones for the witches? How could that possibly be achieved in two days?

The participants put shoulder to the wheel, and a satisfying communality did emerge in the process. Even if it often took the form of collective griping, there was also solidarity with the common goal. Many individuals who had been only loosely connected with the game organisation stepped into leadership roles and mediated between the practical needs of the project and the needs of the players. The first, semi-official game day was, in practice, sacrificed to finish setting up the camps, but all in all, tackling the immense practical challenges together involved quite a lot of fun.

My group, the witches, was the smallest in numbers and thus the lowest priority, and ended up losing almost another day of playing time to practical problems. Communication gaffes as to the equipment we would need exacerbated the situation, and when we finally got in-game, it was to a day and half of solid rain in poorly waterproofed tents.

At that point some players had given up and left, and a few others left during the game, effectively sabotaging the plots of the remaining players. Yet here too, player solidarity saved the day, and the organisers did their utmost to compensate for our unfortunate situation. Witch players that did not despair and decided to bottle their frustration away until later generally had a reasonably good game. With a fair amount of justification, some of the same people were among the loudest critics of *Dragonbane* after the event.

It would have been bittersweet for the organisers (had their zombie-like exhaustion allowed for any reflection) to discern that it was the volunteer spirit of the player community that ultimately swung their way and made the game possible. A dearth of volunteers was what had originally created the desperate situation. As larp in the Nordic countries is a non-profit activity, the hundreds of *Dragonbane* team members had all worked for free, in some cases also choosing to work shorter hours in their professional careers to free time for the project. Many though they were, there would have been work for as many again.

Mentioning one name above the others in such a committed group is almost inappropriate. But *Dragonbane* was indisputably a product of the personality and passions of its originator and main organizer Timo Multamäki [4]. *Impossible* is not a concept he holds in high regard, and he is sometimes accused of megalomania. If that is what Multamäki suffers from, it is a particularly infectious strand: in all of his larp projects, most of which have been admired for their ambition and criticized for their artistic content, he has demonstrated an ability to convince large numbers of people to work toward the realization of his unlikely visions.

He demands the unwavering loyalty of people sharing his passions – a quality that is both positive and negative – and works with a recurring core group of skilled collaborators on special effects, technology and game design. They typically share his ability to work very hard for long periods of time on very little sleep. Yet an alarming number of *Dragonbane* team members broke down physically or mentally from the sheer workload of the project.

Of those that decided to quit before it got that bad, many did so through quietly dropping off the

4 Full disclosure: I have known Timo Multamäki for over a decade. We have disagreed in the past over my criticisms of his work, and will in all likelihood disagree again in the future.

radar rather than stepping down and handing over their tasks in an orderly fashion. A small larp is typically organized through a series of in-person meetings, but the *Dragonbane* team was spread out over Europe and much of the interaction was web-based.

Very soon identifying and reassigning dropped tasks, and okaying completed ones, should have been a full-time job in itself. But as often happens in overstretched organizations, practical management especially on the middle levels was simply overlooked. As the dwindling number of remaining volunteers agreed to take on even more work to keep the project afloat, scant resources remained for the day-to day running of this complex, multinational project.

Especially after the original plans to host the game in Estonia were scrapped, it became evident that delivering the larp as on the planned date (summer of 2005) was impossible. A decision to move the game one year ahead was made, and although this was generally met with understanding from the players, it stretched the organization further.

It is certainly fair to say that Multamäki's authoritative and demanding managerial style generates conflict as well as loyalty. (It is equally fair to say that a great part of his bluntness, perceived by some as rude or shocking, is a cultural trait – a reflection of traditional Finnish communication styles).

It would seem that a dire lack of manpower would have been reasonable cause to cancel the production at this point. But here too, Multamäki's personality shone through. To him and the team around him, stopping was impossible – not because of the work already put into the project, nor indeed for the sake of any private ambitions, but because of loyalty and pride.

Dragonbane had applied for money as an international youth project, which of course it was, and for sponsorship as a unique cultural project, which it was too. Funding the half-million euro project[5] through volunteer work, external grants and sponsorship was an immense feat in itself. In the probably correct opinion of the *Dragonbane* team, cancelling at a point when those resources had already been committed to the production would have harmed the image and status of the larp hobby as a whole.

A more complex question is why the ambitions of the project were not scaled down when the problems became apparent. The organisers' reply would be that they were: the number of participants planned for was dropped, the building schemes in the game village Cinderhill rendered less ambitious, and many small plans that players had not even been told about abandoned.

The other, obvious reason was the game's continuing need to attract players and retain the ones already signed up. The vision the makers had touted was very specific and abandoning any central part of it would in all likelihood have led to player cancellations. Most importantly, the game had promised a dragon. In Finland, its design and construction continued at break-neck pace, with the dedicated team of builders and programmers running into a number of hurdles of their own.

As for the game site in Älvdalen, Sweden, the organisers had also had high hopes for players from the Swedish larp communities to spend time on building work in 2005 and 2006 against a substantive game discount. When such local help did not materialize to the expected degree, the majority of

5 On top of actual costs, this figure includes the value of goods and services donated to the project. It includes the transportation cost of the dragon, but not the six-figure sum Multamäki scrounged up privately for its construction.

the building was undertaken by Finnish core organisers and, randomly, Spanish volunteers. Seeing how time-consuming this ultimately became, Multamäki has later observed that it would probably have been more efficient to use that time to raise even more money and just invest in professional builders to finish the work.

For the players arriving at the check-in area that last week in July, it seemed bizarre that the organization could provide, say, decorated lanterns for the witches, carved statues for the temple, and some wooden skis to hang on the walls of a Cinderhill longhouse (because surely Cinderhillians would ski in winter) – but not enough cars to transport the players to the game area on schedule. The players did not realize how much of the props had been produced in collaboration with Finnish and local arts-and-crafts schools, another admittedly ingenious example of the organisation's way of identifying untapped resources. But such resources could not at any point have been transformed into middle management, transport or money.

In retrospect it is easy to see, that the addition of as few as three people working full-time on management, internal communication and coordination – *and nothing else* – could have made all the difference to the project at large. Having them on site as the players arrived, to coax instead of desperately demand their help, would certainly have affected the pre-game atmosphere constructively.

"In retrospect it is easy to see" – but we live our lives prospectively. Had those three people been available, they would almost certainly have spent the summer building the village, because that task seemed most vital at the time. It would have made a difference, of course, but not a real change. The problem was not one of naivety: many of the key *Dragonbane* operatives work with project management professionally, and know full well the importance of planning and overview.

I actually suspect that they brought the nightmare of the last frantic weeks upon themselves willingly. I suspect that they refused the bird's eye view because it might have told them the one thing they refused to accept – that, step by step, their goal, even in its reduced form, was impossible to reach. And because they did not accept that, they turned out to be right. The help they would have needed along the way materialised only at the last possible moment: the moment the players could see – and touch – what the game really had the potential of becoming.

A Thousand Words

The creative writing tasks involved in creating a Nordic Style larp can be summarized under the headings "world", "plot" and "character". Writing the world includes defining the fiction's physical reality, history, cultures and metaphysics. Writing plot involves setting up the conflicts and interactions projected to occur between character groups and individuals during the game. And writing "characters" involves specifying as much detail about the fictional roles as the game design requires. Typically this involves deciding the relationship of the individual to the culture to which he belongs, specifying some biographical background and the events that have led the character to moment at which the game begins, and defining the character's personal ambitions and relations to other characters.

In the Nordic scene, the world is typically written by the larpmakers, as is the plot, if it is relevant to the game's design and structure (it usually is). How character is handled reflects great differences between game cultures and even individual games. Sometimes the larpmakers will define only the

The website had an abundance of instructions and reference photos. Here an example picture of the witches' costumes. (Photograph from Dragonbane project)

characters necessary for the plot (such as "the king" or "the murderer") and allow the players to create characters within indicated culture groups as they please. At other times, when the characters are written by the larpmakers, the player is encouraged to fill in additional biographical and psychological information, as long as it is not in conflict with what has been previously written.

For *Dragonbane*, the world and some plot was provided by the larpwrights. Players were encouraged to create their own characters in collaboration with a "character coach" who would monitor and edit or approve the players' character entries in the game's online system, NEST. The system guided the player to answer a number of questions about the character, ranging from age and gender to, for instance, the main events in the character's life between ages 10 and 15. The material was then reviewed by the character coach, whose insight in the general game design ideally enabled him to make suggestions for changes likely to resonate with the themes of the game as a whole.

Such a system of character creation forces the player to think about his expectations for the game, and consider what types of situations he would want to explore through the narrative. It also encourages him to draw on private experience, to see the character as a complex biographical entity rather than just a symbolic subject. In some games, it is of course highly appropriate for player characters to be little more than shells or costumes. In others, emphasising psychological realism is very helpful indeed, but players can find it challenging to elaborate individualised life-narratives in completely generic environments.

Dragonbane's character creation process encouraged the players to engage actively with the idea of every-day life in Valenor, and enabled them to create intra-character relations and collaborate on common fictional memories regardless of geographical distance.

More Than Fantasy

The action of the larp was centred on the village of Cinderhill in the far north of the fantasy world of Valenor, created by Mike Pohjola for his roleplaying game *Myrskyn aika* and appropriated for game use in collaboration with the author. The three cultures represented in the game – the villagers, the dragontamers and the witches – were created afresh, with the game design in mind. The cultures' real differences in lifestyles, beliefs, social codes, dress and behaviours were geared specifically towards setting up social conflicts in which violence would not be the immediate solution.

The game events start a few days after a vast battle, in which the dragontamers have succeeded in killing one of the village's two dragon deities. The part played by the witches in this tragedy is unclear, as are indeed all the details of the conflict, since the magical energy released by the dragon's death has confused the memories and senses of everyone in this very magical environment.

The "you cannot remember the details" topos is a common and rather crude fix to a typical larp problem – that players purporting to have grown up together in an isolated village do not remember all their neighbours' names, let alone age-old customs – but it worked reasonably well here. The player's process of finding one's feet within the fiction paralleled the process of the magical befuddlement lifting from the character's minds.

Over the course of the game, the goal of the villagers was to convince the stronger and better-armed dragontamers that they had no need to be rescued from the remaining dragon. The dragontamers' goal was to decide whether their honour code about not harming humans should be interpreted in support of or in opposition to the villagers' wishes. And the witches needed to decide whether to trust an offer from an oppressive far-away emperor to stop anti-witch apartheid within his realm in exchange for the remaining dragon's heart, a powerful magical object.

Characters within the groups agreed with the collective goals to differing degrees, making many individual narratives reflect the positive effects of multiculturalism – that being confronted with alien values can make us challenge what we have previously accepted without question.

The dragontamers' culture was perhaps closest to traditional ideas of fantasy fighter-adventurers, except that the collective was gender blind (like all the cultures in the game). The witches, knit together in close units of two nigh-siamese magical collaborators, were conceptualised as very far from human in their priorities, habits and values. And Cinderhill operated as a sort of theocratic utopia, in which a peaceful collective was organised around service to an ideal – the dragon – that only upon consideration could be construed as a sort of implicit dictator.

A number of high-profile creatives from the Nordic larp scene were associated with *Dragonbane* in the project's early days. Whether because of creative or personal conflicts, or real-world demands on their time, keeping them on board proved difficult, relegating the status of writing tasks from a key creative element to a mere necessity. The work was moved around a great deal within the organization, which led to some confusion especially about who, exactly, had the final say about the specifics of the different in-game cultures. This proved problematic since one of *Dragonbane*'s experimental approaches included moving all design responsibility away from the players.

Architecture and design of each culture's abodes, clothes and equipment systematically reflected its belief system. They were distinct enough from each other to make it possible even at long distances to identify a person's group affiliation at first glance; up close it was immediately possible to deduce

a whole deal about the stranger's lifestyle from his dress and equipment.

This coherence between the visual and the thematic was a major game design point: one of the challenges of the fantasy genre that the organisers had identified was the predictable manner in which players given free rein will always revert to the Tolkien/Warhammer/Dragonlance aesthetic.

To make a fictional culture truly plausible, they argued, it should evoke only that culture, instead of activating the players' memories of popular culture texts or other larps. This included not just architecture and set design, but also costume design personal props ranging from sleeping equipment to cutlery. All artefacts were to reflect underlying traditions and values and become part of the game's conceptual, rather than just visual, design.

The approach proved very powerful, but the motivation is also a post facto rationalisation. The practical reason for centralising all design was the variation in standards of historical accuracy and attention to detail within the players' game cultures. In many places, for instance, pseudo-mediaeval outfits are worn with modern shoes; in others character costumes are signified through symbolic attributes rather than naturalistic representation. Keeping the players on a short leash was a way to avoid off-game conflicts as well as to serve the design of the in-game milieu.

Cinderhill 360°

Detailed culture guides were produced for the players, but version control of the documents proved challenging, as responsibility for them moved around within the organisation. As the guides could not cover everything, a great number of questions were debated in the game's online forums, where players felt organisers sometimes gave them conflicting information. The closer the game drew, the more it seems decisions on design issues became divorced from the underlying game design principles. But the organisers offered no flexibility on the core issue of design ideology: that everything in the game should be constructed so that modern production elements (ranging from double seams to rubber soles) were completely invisible.

In the fundamentalist reading proposed by the organisers, all shoes, likely to suffer wear and tear, should include no modern elements that might be exposed over time, all fabrics should be at least 95% natural fibres and everything brought onto the game site itself, including spectacles and underwear, should be of a pseudo-medieval type and conform to the design standards provided by the organisers. A small off-game pouch was deemed acceptable, to be used primarily for medications.

Some players predictably grumbled, but the strict rules also became a selling point: *Dragonbane* would become the epitome of the larp aesthetic I have referred to as the 360° illusion (Koljonen 2007). In this aesthetic, the larp text is not produced in the minds of the players (or at least not primarily). It is experienced in their bodies and in the physical space of the game location, its geographical distances, the solidity of the set and props, and in the real-time logic of the game's temporal dimension (because time is central in producing physical effects, such as boredom or hunger).

Since simulation is dispensed with where practically possible, this aesthetic had not traditionally been applied to high-fantasy narratives. Arguably, the *Dragonbane* organisers entered an implicit contract with the players. In exchange for putting an uncommon effort into their props and

The dragontamers arrive in Cinderhill. (Photograph by Janne Björklund / Kuvateko.com)

costumes, the players would be rewarded not only with a hands-on, three-dimensional gaming environment, but also with the holy grail of 360° fantasy escapism: (seemingly) unsimulated magic, and a "real" dragon to interact with.

This effort, and this promise, were what made the breaches of the illusion especially jarring in this specific game. The problem was not that the larpers were not *able* to transform the disturbing elements to something else in the diegesis. At many other games the scarcity of these moments would have been an achievement. (But at many other games, the players would not have spent €100 on boots, or a week on some elaborate ritual garment they would only wear once). Regardless, the degree to which the illusion was maintained overall was astounding.

First, there is the matter of location. Älvdalen is a forested valley in Swedish Dalecarlia, with fairy book landscapes of the wild and rugged kind. Rather than sunny glades and lush hills, moss and pine-trees predominate, and players needed to be instructed to keep an eye out for bear and wolf. Mysterious ponds and cold forest lakes lay within the game area, as did a swamp that, to the witches' chagrin, was inevitably infested with mosquitoes.

Most impressively, the area was one plagued by forest fires, including one earlier that same summer. The terrifying grandeur of a newly burned forest is difficult to describe to one who has not seen it: the coal-black surfaces, the scorched stumps, the insistent patches of vibrant green were vegetation is starting the slow reconstruction process, the unreal nuances of night and blood that moss takes on when the earth it grows on is fried dry. What it looks like, most specifically, is like a place where a dragon was recently fought and killed.

The dry spell that had caused the blaze was also a problem for the production: exceeding care had

to be taken with fire until the rains finally started. Unfortunately, this left an eyesore in the village, where the shell of one small building had been erected only for the express purpose of being burned down before the start of the game. On this assumption, building debris had been stocked in its exposed belly. When weather conditions made the burning impossible (and illegal), it had to be left intact.

The drought also provided organisers with opportunities to demonstrate their commitment to the illusion ideal. When the village well ran dry, a less ambitious team would have called a break in the game to solve the problem. At *Dragonbane*, it was arranged for the entire village to be performing a water ritual at a site further into the forest at the very moment a water truck drove in to refill the well – a spectacular way of generating functional magic through sheer logistics.

The villagers lived in longhouses, one of which was prioritised for families with young children. The children had dedicated minders creating age-appropriate game experiences for them, although they had to be trusted to be able to handle some intense moments such as the appearance of the dragon and interactions with threatening non-villager characters. One player, whose character was a masked blood witch, reported after the game that he had exposed his face at one point in an attempt to calm down a hysterical nine-year old, only to be rewarded with an eyeroll and the scathing remark that she was *in character*. Playing resumed without incident. Even to those who had no interaction with them, the children and animals of the village added immensely to atmosphere and realism. Especially when the sheep escaped and the overjoyed children chased after them, followed by a trail of growups scolding them for spooking the animals further.

Fantasy villages for larp purposes are often simple constructions with earth floors. That these buildings were designed to stand for 10-15 years added to the solidity of the illusion. It was possible to crawl in under them to listen to conversations inside; it was possible to hang things on the walls and to climb up onto the roofs. The village had a bakery in which bread was baked all day; cooking happened at the fire-pits in the longhouses. There was a working smithy, and craftsmen such as carpenters were working on practically useful items for in-game use with period tools.

The village had two washhouses with big heated outdoor tubs, and two outhouses with rows of earth toilets facing each other in fine rural Nordic tradition. (One toilet was cordoned off with curtains for players who could not handle the communality, and for the privacy of women who had defied the instruction to make sure sanitary protection was historically appropriate). For legal reasons, it had not been possible to construct actual earth toilets. Instead, the plastic buckets beneath were emptied nightly by the temple adept players (or perhaps by their characters). This was in the interest of fairness, since temple adepts were exempt from the very real village chores that kept the other villagers busy all day.

The effect of the solid realism of physical props was at times stunning. One subplot centred on a big treasure chest. What sounds like a fantasy cliché was rendered enormously impressive by the sheer mass of the object, which required six men to lug around. Four great wrought-iron keys were required to open it, a literal fact, which incidentally demonstrated the need for flexible dramaturgy in a hyper-realistic setting.

In what could have become a big reveal, the Dragon demanded that the chest be opened as part of his ceremony in the village. Unfortunately, one of the keys was at that moment in a tent in the witches' camp, fifteen minutes' trek away under optimal conditions and rather more in the middle of the night. The witch ran, but the wait became intolerable, and the restless dragon yielded – the

thought did cross at least my mind that at a larp with a less solid props with less functional locks, someone would have stepped up at that moment and opened the chest "by magic".

As typically happens in multi-day village games, a feeling of community developed in Cinderhill. The depth and nature of such communal feeling is obviously impossible to measure. My guess is that it emerges as another instance of life-size psychological simulation – the player choosing to interpret his increasing trust in the co-players as the character's trust in his community. If that is the case, shared experiences are likely to contribute strongly to the feeling's emergence.

The culture of Cinderhill involved many kinds of collaborative doing, ranging from morning tai chi, over music, dance and religious ritual, to physical labour. Even when they happened just once during the game these events were understood to represent recurring activities. They probably made it easier to project a shared feeling of common history than if the villagers had been – as otherwise often happens in the genre – sitting around in an inn, stiltedly reminiscing about unshared pasts, waiting for something to happen.

In *Dragonbane* this feeling of community was also necessary from a game design perspective. The village had to turn into an almost cultishly committed utopia, since the cathartic twist at the end was the dragon setting his followers free – telling them that though they had been his children, it was now time to grow up. But almost all village narratives, in any games, no matter how trivial, involve interaction as a collective against a perceived threat of some kind (symbolic or actual, internal or external).

Acting truly collectively (rather than as a group of strongly individuated characters in physical proximity to each other) is likely to slightly lower the relative importance of the single player's choices in any given situation. Collective actions also deflect focus from the individual, and most players – not only those with a pathological need for attention – do have a need to be seen and validated as they are playing.

Since the character is not as fully actualised a subject as most of our every-day roles, its limits and nature need to be confirmed through action and interaction. Sneaking off on a private adventure is an easy way to enhance the player's feeling of immersion. Of course, players can make collective scenes more intense by working at keeping part of their focus on each other and not only on whatever the collective is opposing.

But it should be just as possible to systematically help define the borders of the character subject through a strong identification with an institution, a collective or indeed a physical environment.[6] That is how I believe the physical environment and culture of Cinderhill helped create a game environment in which staying still was just as satisfying as showing off.

Working Magic

One of the key challenges to creating larp magic that does not feel simulated is that of how to communicate extra-textual information between two players – basically the cause and effect of magic – without either of them needing to step out of character to process it. (This, I would

6 In the real world, ironically, such over-identification tends to be viewed as pathological; in larps it is arguably the opposite, since leaving the fictional group or environment at the end of the game is likely to automatically unravel the fictional personality, aiding the process of return to one's every-day roles.

argue, is required by all kinds of statistical systems). In *Dragonbane*, this challenge was beautifully solved by making all magic a speech act, identifiable by a code word – in this case veritas, latin for truth.

For all characters that could work magic, a much greater part of the game experience was focused on the working part than the magic part. Valenor was understood to be a world in which magical energy was available to anyone with the talent and diligence to use it, but exactly how to channel it was determined by culture, not any kind of natural law. Witches could only work magic in pairs highly attuned to each other and the highly specialised element with which they were most in resonance ("moss and lichen", for instance). Creating, designing and preparing a simple potion or spell was a painstaking process, but it was left to the players to decide exactly what that would entail. In Cinderhill, magic was religious and controlled by an institution, but the process of making the scrolls in which spells were encased was at least as complex as that of the witches

The game rules only set two limits on magic. One was the rule of its effect and duration, defined at 1:1. A magic user working for six hours in game-time on a spell (an eternity to be mumbling over a cauldron, no matter how deep your immersion into character) could create six hours of magic – for instance a mind control spell of that duration. But if the effect was shared among many, the time would be proportionately shorter, so that controlling six people would only be possible for one hour. The other was a function of how the magic was communicated – verbally – which limited the range of a spell to targets within hearing distance.

Players were allowed to design their characters' magic-doing freely, but were also encouraged to be fairly dramatic – to involve gestures, props, and special effects. The only instruction was, that just before the exact moment of the spell being attempted – the moment when the scroll was torn or the potion poured into the circle or the talisman placed on a person – the channelling speech act would be performed. It should start with the codeword "veritas" and include a concise description of the effect and the duration of the spell. A simple example could be "veritas – truly you will not speak of seeing us here until the sun rises". Crucially, this utterance *contains* a player instruction, but it is not a player instruction. It is an act of fictional magic because the words are only uttered when the player *and* the character have loaded them with meaning. According to the rules, every veritas-spell should be obeyed without question.

If it seems unrealistic that a word could have such power even in a fictional world, consider the effect of suddenly yelling "look out!" at a stranger in ours. The words will have a physical effect almost completely independent from normal strategies of interpretation, and we have a very strong cultural taboo against uttering them when no danger threatens. This could be conceptualised as social magic: we have culturally agreed, for our own safety, to allow other people a certain amount of "mind control" over us in very specific situations.

In Valenor, "veritas" functioned much like that – except for the fact that it channelled supernatural powers in addition to social ones.

Since the words of the instruction sentence are what literally effect the magic, they also become the key to the spell's success. If the other player does not understand the instruction, he cannot obey it; if it is unclear, the effect will be unpredictable. Formulating and memorising the veritas phrase for each spell thus became a key part in its creation. A magic system like this is obviously primarily based on trust; only adults could play magic users and in the Nordic larp scene there is no overall tradition of policing players. Besides, the effort involved and the difficulty of forming a complex

task into a simple instruction makes this magic very difficult to exploit. A very specific spell is most useful in a very specific situation, and predicting the exact situation in which the spell was to be used proved maddeningly difficult.

Social magic obviously has very little effect on inanimate objects, and does not look very impressive. The special effects team equipped magic users with things like glow-in-the-dark potions, powders that burned with flames in a range of colours, and liquids that, when mixed together and agitated, would dramatically change colour between black and white, or between the different colours of the spectrum – effects, when demonstrated at the boot camp, frankly felt like magic to the players too.

Among the chemical effects were also strong scents, an easy and underused resource in game design. Witches could lace their potions and ritual spaces with seductive or repulsive odours, creating an immediate physical response in nearby players. The swamp witches heroically acclimatised themselves to a retch-inducing stink by dripping it on their clothes, making their presence distinctly unpleasant to all other players – generating a non-stop cavalcade of dramatic and entertaining scenes.

Players use special effects both to enhance their own playing experience as they created magic, and to make the performance of the magic itself more dramatic. Unfortunately, the most impressive effects required perfectly clean mixing bowls and ingredients that needed to be stored in plastic bottles. Because of a communications breakdown almost all witch players arrived at the game without mediaeval-looking vials, bowls or gloves. This made it impractical to make use of some of the chemical magic. Some players also chose to forgo all special effects that involved off-game tools, on the principle that they were in conflict with the aesthetic premise of the game.

Special effects were also provided by the organisers during the game. Terrifying sounds were heard in the night, fireworks and explosions simulating the dragon's pain. Waters started to fume and bubble. Ritual was punctuated by lights and thunder. Had the dragon itself been available during the game, it would have been possible to call it by performing a ritual at a specific place. And at the moment of the dragon's death, an astounding pyrotechnical extravaganza erupted – including two pillars of fire rising to twice the height of the temple. The moment was hugely impressive, but some players were startled or scared out of character; they did not know, or remember, that most of the flames employed by the f/x team were not hot enough to burn a person through her clothes.

Impressive though they were, many non-player effects suffered from the players' inability to decode them. Unlike the magic users' effects, it was not immediately obvious what they were meant to symbolise. A mystical burbling at the pond could at least be interpreted as a general ill omen, but explosions in the night prompted further investigation. If a player sneaking up to spy on the ruckus only sees pyrotechnicians in orange coveralls, the visual information prompts an off-game conundrum. Do they represent the dragon? Fire demons perhaps? Or are they completely invisible? But if so, does the fire shoot up from the earth for no apparent cause?[7]

Sometimes the organisers' commitment to deliver the coolest possible game turned against itself, as when the dragontamers, having performed a moving ceremony for their fallen, were discreetly

7 The special effects team could have moved through the forest invisibly in camouflage with night vision equipment. The choice to clearly signal the off-game nature of their presence was assumed to reassure the players. Unfortunately this further dissuaded players intent on staying within the fiction from asking them how to interpret the effects.

The dragon transport. (Photograph by Janne Björklund / Kuvateko.com)

instructed to repeat it the following day to be able to experience it with the proper effects. The organisers simply had no time to stop and realise what a powerful thing the environment was in and of itself: the players, sucked into the fiction, had certainly not felt anything lacking in the first ritual.

The Least of It

The last evening of the game would be the culmination of dragontide, with the creature expected to appear to its followers. I can hardly have been the only player to feel curious and a little bit excited at the spectacle. As a game nears its end, players often start to pay attention to the temporal limitation on their narratives, because the time they have to conclude their personal plot in a satisfying manner is running out.

Many fantasy larps end with a great battle; this one had started just after one, and the main action centred on avoiding another one. Adding to the tension, the dragontamers, still not convinced, had spent quite some time building a giant ballista and dragging it close to the village. The characters – all of whom had seen dragons before – had visions in their minds of what to expect. The players, on the other hand, had to construct this vision for them, and the sources ran as much to technical specifications as to mythical beasts.

This is what we knew about the dragon called Red. Red was constructed by an international team of volunteers at building locations in Loimaa and Turku, Finland. Its body was built around a Ponsse S 15 harvesting machine – this was a dragon with off road capabilities – sculpted, given a latex skin and painted. It moved on wheels, which should not be very visible, given the movement of the front and back paws before them. Its pneumatic and hydraulic muscles allowed it mobility not only in

the limbs but also the head, allowing facial expressions.

It would speak with an unearthly voice and "hear" speakers through microphones on its front. To simulate the sense of touch, 14 tiny cameras would be fitted on the body, allowing the operator to see in all directions, respond to threats and attacks, and make sure nobody got run over. Inside the torso, there was a control room with space for a driver and an actor. The dragon was not expected to spread its wings, but it was expected to breathe flames.

From reports and rumours at the beginning of the game we also knew there was now some kind of problem: the dragon was late. The witches, having the most up-to-date information on account of joining the game last, already knew the dragon would not have full capabilities. The dragon's neck had broken at the first transport attempt. Later a hydraulic pipe had burst, and there was no time to fix the problem. Before the last day of the game, witches and dragontamers were discreetly told that we would not be able to attack the dragon physically – it would just not be safe.

We were all gathered in the village at dusk, in tense expectation, and could hear the dragon approaching up the road long before it was in view. Its sound system certainly worked – crucially, since the engine sound was also audible. The thing was enormous, 26 meters long, its weight several tonnes. But it didn't have wings at all, which made its torso look comically bald and elongated. Its feet were hiked up and immobile, and saddest of all, its head was still too, stuck at the end of the stiff neck at an unnatural angle. The face had no mobility. When the dragon spoke, the eyes did not move – nothing did – and there was no fire in its mouth. Not even the tiniest whiff of smoke.

Nobody laughed, or reacted in any obvious manner, but it was like everyone's shoulders slumped at once. The scenes with the dragon signified the culmination of almost every plot in the game, and making the most of them was in everyone's interest. After a collective breath, we all just went on with it, interacting with the dragon as though it was not obviously a machine, but a living being, a deity, and a co-player. And at certain angles, especially as the sun went down, it was not too bad. With the light of bonfires playing on its skin, it sometimes seemed to shift or squirm. And there was a reason it looked pained, after all: it soon told us it was dying.

Then the dragon gave out a heartrending shriek, and the sky exploded, and the pillars of fire shot up behind the temple, and it died. And curiously, at that moment Red became real. When it was not expected to move, its clunky motion could not distract us. The odd angle of the head looked like the twisted position of one who has died in pain. And its skin, when we rushed in wailing towards it, felt slightly warm to the touch – although this might have been my imagination.

A life-size dragon that can see, move and speak is not an achievement to be scoffed at. Building it cost a fortune, and involved specialist knowledge in fields as diverse as creature design, welding, hydraulics, and programming. It also required the persuasive powers of Timo Multamäki, who may well be the only person in the world to be able to talk an industrial company into sponsoring an arts project with a timber harvesting machine.

The *Dragonbane* team delivered something completely astounding, and it is typical of their perseverance that not even the dragon's neck buckling and brakes giving up at a point where most of the builders had been up working for far more than 24 hours straight could stop them from getting the thing back together, across an ocean and into a far-away forested valley on time.

The Cinderhillians dance around Red near the end of the game. (Photograph by Janne Björklund / Kuvateko.com)

Criticism and Documentation

A larp does not exist until it is over, but at the moment it ends, it dissolves. The readers are left with fragments, and start working them into a narrative, but that narrative is corrupted and complicated by other intruding questions, not to mention the intruding answers of others. Was it any good? What was it about? Did we get what we wished for? What did we learn about larps?

The last question is perhaps the easiest to answer. As even this relatively limited essay has demonstrated, documenting what was attempted, how the organisers went about it, and how some players read those attempts is not impossible. Because of the complexities of the central tasks, and the enormous amount of external financing, the *Dragonbane* team needed early on to record, transmit and share detailed plans both within and without the organisation.

To guarantee a record of the event for non-participant collaborators, a team of photographers were working the area. They were in camouflage, and moved discreetly, but in the stillness of the forest they were inevitably a distraction. The material is obviously a closer record of in-game events than larp photos from games in which representation is symbolic could ever be. But the question of where the events really unfold remains. Is the text of the larp in the players' minds or in the physical space between then? My in-game memories look more "real" than the actual pictures – would that still have been the case if the 360° illusion had been achieved and maintained?

Consider for a moment that book club again. What if the members go to their meeting without realising that some of them have read chapters from a completely different novel, that just happens to have the same title? The ghost text emerges skewed and broken. Some players have hated the game, others have loved it, and none of them can be objectively wrong. The irreconcilable nature of their in-character and game-participation narratives makes the game appear flawed in its design. (Sometimes this happens because it is).

And if we can agree on the primacy of a text – whether constructed from many subjective narratives, reconciled or not, or somehow read in the collective – would there be a point in archiving it? I would argue yes. In fact I think we should attempt it even if a text cannot be localised. We do not yet know what we will later need – theatre and dance historians have grappled with this issue since their disciplines were founded. Most of them do agree that a film of a performance is not a record of the experience of a performance, but they would also sacrifice a limb for a film of a Nijinsky choreography.

You could argue that this is completely different. A powerful dance performance could still be recreated, while a larp, played again, will end up a completely different text. On the other hand that is interesting too: a comparable variant text could be explored if all the elements leading up to the beginning of the game can be recreated. For instance, all the *Dragonbane* character descriptions exist in the NEST database. But they were created by and for specific players because that was deemed to serve the purpose of the game, and it is questionable whether another player's interpretation would be interesting or just derivative. But someday we might want to try.

So far, the process of multiplying performances of single larps has primarily been of interest to those who would conceive of them as products or education. But artistically oriented larpmakers are also awaking to the realisation that influential works from the beginnings of their careers are disappearing. We may already have lost canonical Nordic games like *Kybergenesis*, *Knappnålshuvudet*, and *Carolus Rex* – and that is a loss to a global larp community, because works like those are part of

the foundation of how we think about role-playing today.

What exists of *Dragonbane* in February 2008? A village in Älvdalen, an almost functional dragon, a big batch of news clippings, over 3000 photos, ten hours of video, over 2000 props, 3GB of text, data and other material. A school in Åsen – the Boot Camp – that some dream of converting into a national centre for excellence in roleplaying. €75000 debt, of which €60000 are to Multamäki or his company[8]. The fast-fading memories, experiences and insights of over three hundred players, who also have, somewhere, costumes and equipment of which some may find new use in other larps later on. A digital trace of discussion and criticism in role-playing forums on the internet, which will survive for a long time, but not indefinitely.

What should be retained from *Dragonbane*? I can only answer to what impressed me. The focus on the body, the solidity of the fiction, the huge potential of both simple and complex special effects to create atmosphere and realise the supernatural. The fact that large-scale fantasy larps for grown-ups can work. Family larping. The enormous impact of centralised visual design on the game design as a whole. The challenges of gaming with players from differing cultures. The charm of feeling an absolute trust for co-players from all over Europe.[9]

And at last, at least: that it is possible for a bunch of dedicated enthusiasts to build a dragon. Red very nearly worked, and it still exists. Even if it never used in a game again, it stands as a symbol for the dreams that we reach for.

Ludography

Carolus Rex (1999): Martin Eriksson, Thomas Walch et al. A larp played in Sweden.

Dragonbane (2006): Timo Multamäki and others. A larp played in Älvdalen, Sweden.

Knappnålshuvudet (1998): Daniel Krauklis, Susanne Gräslund et al. A larp played in Sweden. Eng. "The Head of a Pin".

Kybergenesis (1997): Eirik Fatland et al. A larp played in Norway.

Myrskyn aika (2003): Mike Pohjola. Juva, Johnny Kniga. Eng. "The Age of the Storm".

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8 According to his estimate.

9 The game was played primarily in English. However, it was decreed that in Valenor, language (because of its magical connections) is an individual property just like eye colour or height. "Characters" that happened to be born with for instance German would sometimes speak it amongst themselves.

Producing A Nice Evening

Anna Westerling

This is an account of how A Nice Evening with a Family was created. When you create a larp, you build not only a game, but also a large organisation . You need to think about how that organisation can be optimal in order to foster a creative environment. I'll touch on different aspects of this process in this article, such as creating a vision, recruiting an organisation and planning the financing and marketing of a game. It is my opinion that once we start to debate the managerial side of organising larps, the quality of our games will improve as we develop methods of organizing that enable us to look after the creative forces in the organisation . This article is also a documentation of my journey, the story of one larp. I share it hoping that it will broaden your views on larp organisation.

When we talk about organizing larps, the discussion tends to centre on story creation and the interaction between players and characters. It's rarely about how a larp is actually *produced*. Since a lot of larps never actually come to pass because the organisations behind them fail, it's a topic that needs to be addressed. How do we deal with the creative process? How do we deal with people? How do we turn our visions into reality?

In the August of 2007, a theatrical larp took place in Sweden, called *A Nice Evening with the Family*[1]. The purpose of this article is to give you the organisational background to how *A Nice Evening* came to pass. This is a mixture of a historical document on what we did and a management lesson on how to organise a larp.

In *A Nice Evening with the Family,* each player played a character from one of seven different plays. The player met her group and read her allotted play the first night, during the pre-game period with a director who would coach the group. On the second day, the player started playing the character. Each character had been invited to a birthday party, which was the centre of the larp.

Creating an Exhaustive Vision

The story of *A Nice Evening* began when I saw the Danish movie *Festen*[2] (1998) in 2001, and thought that it would make a great larp. The film features a large party, and my original plan was to adapt the film and just write all the guests not properly introduced by the film as normal larp

1 A Nice Evening with the Family / En stilla middag med familjen was played four times in August 2007. The first three games were played in Swedish (17th to 19th, 19th to 21st and 21st to 23rd of August) and the final was played in English (23rd to 25th of August). The game was created by Anna Westerling (project management, game design, directing, literary compendium) Anders Hultman (project management, game design, directing, economy), Elsa Helin (game design, directing), Anna-Karin Linder (game design, directing, music), Tobias Wrigstad (game design, directing, web), Patrik Balint (game design, logistics) with the help of a team including Caroline Andersson (logistics), Fredrik Axelzon (directing), Martin Brodén (directing, literary compendium), Torgeir Husby (graphic design), Caroline Holgersson (directing), Olle Jonsson (web), Johanna Koljonen (translation, proofreading), Alex Kjell (logistics), Daniel Krauklis (directing), Malin Neuman (logistics), Sofia Nordin (proofreading), Fredrik von Post (logistics), Natalie Sjölund (graphical design), Erik Stormark (logistics), Karin Tidbeck (translation), Frida Åhlvik (logistics), Emma Öhrström (directing) and Joel Östlund (directing). The game was produced by Sec and it received financial support from Allmäna arvsfonden, Nordic Culture Fund, Stockholms läns landsting, Sverok Stockholm, Sverok Svealand and Gunvor and Josef Aners Foundation.

2 Eng. "The Celebration".

A Nice Evening with the Family was played at a Follörna, a mansion close to Flen in Södermanland, Sweden. (Photograph by Natalie Sjölund)

characters. This changed when I acted a part in Henrik Ibsen's play *Et dukkehjem*[3], and realised it dealt with the exact same theme. This was also right after the Swedish larp *Hamlet, in which* people very successfully played the characters from the play. I decided that all all of the characters present at the party would originate from different plays.

This planning phase took about five years before I actually involved anyone else in the project. I was not thinking about the larp all the time, but it was there, in the back of my head. During this time I attended other larps, tabletop role-playing games and theatrical plays, which helped define, identify and analyse certain problems our games tend to manifest. Among others, I found that I sometimes *performed* a character rather than *immersed* myself in one. As I asked myself which larps were the most successful ones, I came to the conclusion that they were the games in which the organizers directed and controlled the story. This included, for example, free-form games and larps like *Hamlet*.

I also identified a problem in the uncontrolled games – all classical larps, basically – where characters with high status acted as unspoken game masters. They were responsible for everyone's experience, since they where the ones with all the information about the story. I wanted to lift

3 Eng. "A Doll's House".

that responsibility from them and distribute it to every player – and, ultimately, the directors.[4] By making all the information known to everybody, all players could strive together to play these stories to the best of their ability. The directors' function was to make everybody feel safe and free to act out.

This would also solve the problem of status larpers with high status often ending up playing the high status characters. We also counteracted this by assigning the characters by random method. We wanted every character to be equally important.

This gave me the overall background for game mechanics and the point of view of the story.

Piecing in Public Relations, Financing and Vision

The trick is to have an *exhaustive* vision. When you create the guiding vision of a game, it is not enough to have just a vision for the story. You need to think about all the other aspects of the organisational process as well. If you want to have numerous participants, how are you going to advertise and sell the larp? If you want financial support, how are you going to convince the correct institutions that your larp is special?

I wanted *A Nice Evening* to allow for a lot of participants, because I think it problematic that our scene is so small and large games are very rare. I wanted to expand the scene, and employed several tactics to that end. For example, we ran the game four times; three times in Swedish and once in English. We also deliberately associated larp with theatre in the hope of reaching new player groups and to communicate that larp was a form of art equal to theatre. The Nordic dimension – all the plays that inspired the game were written by Nordic authors – provided a nice frame of reference for the game, appealed to Nordic players, and was useful when applying for financial support from different Nordic culture funds.

Piecing the vision together is a puzzle, really. You need to find the solutions that will fit all your different ideas. After *A Nice Evening* someone said that we should do it again, just pick different plays. Though I'm convinced that it *could* be done again, I think that one of the reasons it became so good was that we took the time to find all these different connections. All the pieces of the puzzle were in place, from attracting co-organisers and participants to obtaining financial support and telling a story with a single theme.

Time is your ally in putting the puzzle together. Ideas grow in the back of your head and marinate; you will find new angles, temper them with other experiences, and generally learn. With time and patience you will find the different pieces of the puzzle in your vision.

Building an Organization

Once you have an idea, there is no excuse to wait. For the longest time, I waited for a group of organisers to just fall in my lap. Since all larps are organised by groups of friends, shouldn't my organiser friends naturally find me and my vision? Yet, for some reason this never happened. Finally, I came to a point in my life at which I thought, "what the hell – what's the meaning of this

4 A Nice Evening employed directors, who coached the players during pre-play and then steered the game while it was in progress. Their role was a combination of a theatre director, a stagehand, a whisperer, a guardian angel and a free-form game master.

life if you don't get to fulfil your dreams?" I decided to take the bull by the horns and create my dream larp. In hindsight, I have realized that this is how things happen. You must decide that the project is worth taking the risk.

Still, just making the decision wasn't enough; organisers still weren't falling from the sky. I had to *take initiative*. I listed the people I wanted to work with and then asked them to meet with me so I could sell them the concept. Some said yes, some said no – but most people said yes. Certainly, no one would have said anything had I not asked.

At around the same time I booked the location for the game. I had checked it out some years earlier by attending a larp there. I knew exactly when I wanted to stage the larp, and I wasn't going the let anybody else take the venue from me. As long as there is no venue, there is no game. I had learnt as much from organizing Knutpunkt 2006; once you specify the time and the place, the project becomes much more concrete. It also has a positive effect on everyone's motivation; you are not just working on something that might be great if you find the right venue, you are working on something that will be great. This was also a way to show how serious I was about this. Still, if you do book a location at an early phase of the production – which I absolutely think you should – remember to read the terms of cancellation very carefully.

Best People, Not Best Friends

Choosing the right people is tricky. I put a lot of time in the process and played around with different lists, thinking about who I could work with, and whether they would work together. It is important to stay honest: there are a lot of wonderful people out there, but you can't get along with all of them. If, in the beginning, you are uneasy about working with someone, imagine how you might feel in a couple of months, if that feeling were to grow.

When I started to build the organisation, I first identified the positions and competences I needed. Then I simply thought about the best person I knew who could do that. It helped that I had just recently organised Knutpunkt and already had some key people in mind. I also took advantage of the various connections I had to other organisations and groups, recruiting people I had witnessed to be capable. This meant that I didn't know everyone from the beginning. For example, I didn't really know Anders Hultman before the project, but I asked him anyway, and in the end he wound up the other main organizer.

It was important that I chose other than my best friends for the project, because the objective wasn't to hang out and have fun. Instead, I chose the people I thought would create the best possible larp. The end result was a team with a very diverse experiences and knowledge. This proved to be a great asset when we started work, as people contributed their knowledge about theatre, freeform role-play, and managing group dynamics.

Despite the size of the larp scene, not everybody knew each other at the beginning. I think this was a good thing, as we were united by a shared goal instead of a shared history. I also found that I could trust everyone, because the people I had chosen were experts in their field. At times I even felt that everyone was much better at their jobs than I was, but that self-doubt passed as I reminded myself that I had instigated the whole thing. Had I manned the project with people I could feel superior to, I would have done it all backwards. The professional approach to recruiting people had a good effect on the event in a number of ways: people were challenged in a positive way, they wanted to

give their best, and naturally the event benefited from each element being handled by a pro. That's the type of an organisation you want to be a part of.

It's also noteworthy that I recruited individuals, not groups. This not only diversified the knowledge base, but also helped with group dynamics, because now there were no predefined groups from the beginning. In the past I have recruited packs of people to solve tasks. Sometimes it works, but the vision can get muddled as it makes its way through the group to the individuals. You get much better control if you recruit people who share your vision personally.

When I was building the organisation, I paid just as much respect to the directors who handle the game and the logistics people who handled the practicalities. In some games I have noticed that the logistics people are just random people the organisers happened to ask to show up and do some cooking. I don't like that view of logistics. In the programme booklet of *A Nice Evening* I made sure to include all the logistics people in the credits – and realized just how rare it is to recognise the work of such an important part of the organising team. It is not "just cooking" – logistics take a lot of planning, especially in an event like *A Nice Evening,* where the food plays an important part in the story. During the game, we worked according to a very tight schedule, and had the logistics failed, the whole game would have been bad, regardless of how great our story was. It's a big responsibility, providing 60 people with food for ten days.

Finally, remember that no matter what you do, if you have a large organisation, some people will drop out before the finishing line. When this happens, let them go. Don't guilt-trip them into working for you. Guilt is never a good motivational force. What you should have is *reserves*. Be prepared.

Recruiting

Some people like to recruit people through public announcements, but in my experience that does not work, for two reasons: You seldom find anyone this way, let alone the people you want to work with. You have also created an aura of desperation around your event, and that's never good PR. No one will attend an event if the first impression they get of it is that it's in need of saving.

I tried this with Knutpunkt 2006. We told a hundred people that if they wanted to work with us – if, indeed, they wanted to have a Knutpunkt in Sweden – they should come to an organiser meeting. Only one person showed up. *A Nice Evening* was handled differently: Instead of begging people to help us, we had people contacting us, offering their help. I did background checks by calling people I trust when people I didn't know wanted to join. It felt quite strange, but I feel it was necessary, since it is impossible to work with people you can't trust. That would endanger the event and create more work instead of lightening the load.

Another aspect of recruiting that should be kept in mind is gender. I think it's important to try to create groups with an equal distribution in terms of sex, as mixed groups work better. In this project, gender balance was even more important, since *A Nice Evening* dealt with questions posed by gender. I am also tired of the unfortunate trend in the Swedish larp community, in which a bunch of guys do something together and their girlfriends help – without getting any of the credit. I wanted to work against that and have both talented men and women take part in all the different groups of the organization. Again, all the groups, from logistics to directing were equally important.

Players at the third version of A Nice Evening. (Photograph by Natalie Sjölund)

Working with People

In the beginning I had this great vision about an organisation with separate teams; one for directing and others for public relations, economics and logistics, and finally myself working around all of them, handling the communications. Of course, it didn't work. You might as well ask people to miscommunicate. Groups that aren't in contact will move in different directions, and some tasks will fall through the cracks. Also, since this was early in the process, 10 months to the actual event, we needed to begin by agreeing on what we should do.

We ended up with one managing group of six people, each with skills from a different area. We all wanted to craft the story, but people also had other skills, such as economics and logistics. This created an organisation where everybody worked together to first create and then realise the same vision, completing the end product. We didn't suffer from the problem of one group coming up with something that another group didn't want to do. The decisions where made by the people who would then carry them out.

It's also important to plan your meetings. When you ask people to attend a meeting, be sure of its purpose and plan it well. Respect the fact that the participants of the meeting are giving you their time and make sure you don't waste it.

Human Relations

Having a group of people working together to bring your vision to life is excellent, as all the

necessary work can be divided. But the next challenge with doing anything creative with a group of volunteers is that they want to influence the vision – and of course they will. You need to decide how much of your vision you are willing to let them alter and which parts you must hold on to. You should decide what is negotiable and what is not.

Another important thing to keep in mind is the connection between work and authority. If you do a great deal of the work, you should also have a lot of the authority. This usually comes quite naturally: If you give someone a task, it is up to her to solve it – if you want to solve it *your* way, you need to do it yourself. This might seem harsh, but micromanaging kills motivation. Again, this has to do with having respect for your co-workers and their time. Still, this is not to say that you should accept anything just because somebody else has done it. Saying "Do whatever you want, I don't care" can kill motivation just as easy.

It is difficult to strike a balance between keeping your co-workers motivated and maintaining your vision. One thing you can do is to communicate it as clearly as you can. In a large project you can never control everything; some things will be done in ways you don't think are the best, but as long as they are good enough, you have to live with that. On the other hand, some other things will be done in much better ways than you would ever have thought, had you been on your own.

My view on leadership is based on *human relations*: I assume that everybody wants to do their best and that everyone is motivated. You can read quite a bit about human relations in management literature, but just remember that you can create a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you regard your co-workers as lazy and expect very little of them, they may live up to that, but if you think they can perform wonders, they just might do that instead.

The leader's role is to enable the workers to perform their tasks as well as possible. The leader usually holds all of the information, plans ahead, and distributes tasks. Again, we come back to the respect you have for your co-workers: Their time and energy is valuable, so make sure you use it for the best.

As a leader, you set the standard for how much energy is put into the project. The others will look to you when they determine how much of their energy this project is worth. Most likely they will not put in more than you do. Since it is your vision that is being realised, it's only fair. Also, the power-work relation works the other way around as well – a lot of authority equals a lot of effort.

Financing and Marketing

As main, organisers, I and Anders Hultman started working on the applications for financial support. This happened in December and January, some eight months before the game was played. That is almost too late. Unlike larpers, bigger culture projects first apply for the money, and only decide if they should go ahead with them or not when they know whether they'll actually receive it. We applied for grants from eleven different funds, and were granted support from six. Our ace in the hole was that we had thought about financing from the start. We knew exactly how to pitch our project. This shouldn't be something that one person in the project is just supposed to come up with somehow, but an integral part of the vision.

In our case, it was also helpful that I did not view applying for financial support as a necessary evil, but rather as a fun challenge. I really wanted to learn how the grant world worked and how much money I could squeeze out of the system, and saw this as an important part of the project. Having

two people handling the applications is almost a necessity, as that way you can give feedback to each other.

Targeting Larpers

After the grant applications, it was time to move on to marketing. It's important to understand that larpers are herd animals. Larp is a collective form of art, and people usually want to do it with their friends, and thus tend to check who else is coming. When you arrive to the game site, the first thing you do is find the people you know and see if you can find any extra incentives to interact with them during the game. One of the reasons why we used the first day for pre-game was to counteract this trend. It should be okay to come to a larp without knowing anybody.

If you want more than a hundred participants for this type of a game, you need to create an atmosphere that tells people that your game is the game of the decade, and everybody who's anybody is coming, while those who miss it will be sorry for years. You achieve the hype by identifying the important places for the project to be seen. For us, those places were Knutpunkt 2007 and all the big Swedish gaming magazines. If you are seen everywhere, you create hype. Being seen everywhere also creates the impression that everyone is going to be there – another self-fulfilling prophecy.

Still, the most important PR work you can do is to stick to the schedule, keep all promises, and always be honest about how the project is going. Remember that what you are giving people is a glimpse of what they will experience in the actual game.

Reaching Non-Larpers

Reaching non-larpers was a lot harder. For example, we approached actors, both amateurs and professionals. All of them asked if they were going to get paid. In the end, we had some people who weren't a part of the larp scene participating, and that certainly contributed positively to the atmosphere of the project. It's definitely worth the effort to reach out, if for no other reason but to keep the scene fresh and lively.

I believe that it's possible to reach more people than we did, but it takes a lot more work and planning ahead than scattering e-mails, posters and flyers around. In order to truly draw people in, you need to meet them face to face and explain what the project is about. We had ideas about talking to theatre classes and such, but didn't manage to pull that off. I also felt that since the game was still being written, I was uncertain of what I was selling. Later, a friend who sells games professionally told me that you shouldn't feel like that. Your event has to be the greatest event ever when you are pitching it, whether it's ready or not.

Communicating the Vision to the Players

Working on the PR material and the material we send to the participants before the game, I realised that this was all part of the first act of the actual game. This material should already create an impression of a nice bourgeois family, which would then fall to pieces during the game.

The material we sent out was extensive. It consisted of a printed book with six plays, a small booklet with important information and a letter with the invitation to the birthday celebration. This also had another important function; it let the participants know that the game was serious and

communicated the energy and effort we had put into it. We needed to show them that this was going to be a good one in order to inspire them to commit the same amount of energy as we did.

You always have to remember that your participants might not read the material. We wanted to create a game for people who didn't have a lot of time, so we actually assumed that they wouldn't. All the information they needed to play the game was covered during the preparation day at the game site. We also sought to make the information in the booklet as accessible as possible. Larpers have a bizarre idea that they should hide important information in long-winded atmospheric texts. We kept it short and stuck to the conrete facts, and used images and layout to convey the theme and general feeling.

Again, this is about respect – in this instance, respect for your participants' time. Make things as accessible as possible so they don't need to work through a lot of things to get to what they need to know. Another thing we worked a lot with, both on the spot and in the organizing team, was avoiding poor communication. If one person speaks to a crowd of forty, you use the capacity of these forty people poorly, and you can be sure that some of them are not listening. Instead, we worked in small groups, in which everybody could take part in the conversation and thereby learn and contribute more. This was respect for the time people put into the project and making sure we got the most out of it.

Expanding the Organization

When we were working on the vision, we had only had six people of the management team, which is quite a nice number of people for a meeting. But as April approached, we needed to bring more people into the organization. We had to recruit the twelve directors. Having that many people in a single meeting is chaotic, and thus structure becomes essential.

We decided to have two meetings, and the dates of those meeting were already decided when we started the recruiting process. In the first meeting, the directors tested all of the different game mechanics in the game, seeing how they worked out. After that, the management group had about a month to evaluate the results and then present the finalized mechanics in the next meeting. Since there were so many of us, we couldn't just decide to have an extra meeting if we felt like it. Adhering to this structure gave us concrete deadlines and put pressure on us to deliver – and this was a good thing.

At the second meeting in the beginning of June, the management group cleared things up, for example regarding the schedule of the event. After that, people chose which plays the wanted to direct. We hadn't done it earlier, because we wanted to ensure that everybody would be familiar with every play. We also gave each director their own area of responsibilities, such as ensemble exercises, connecting the plays to the storyline of the entire game, post-game, et cetera. This proved to be a good choice, since now we all knew how the responsibility was divided. It enabled us to concentrate on our own chores.

When the Balancing Act Fails

As summer came along, it became necessary for me to work on the larp full time. Working day and night, just before the game I was exhausted, tired of working so hard, longing to have the other parts of my life back. I felt like a horrible mother who doesn't love her child. It helped immensely

The dessert table. (Photograph by Natalie Sjölund)

to talk with somebody who had also organised a game, but wasn't involved in this one. She told me that she had also been really tired of her larp just before the game, and that it was okay, we all feel like that at times.

This was at the time when we had the final meeting with the directors, and everything should have fallen into place. In this meeting I discovered that I had compromised too much of my own vision, and we had to reverse some decisions we had made earlier. When push came to shove, I just wasn't comfortable with them. It led to an enlightening discussion, but had I been clearer to myself and to others in the first place, we could have dealt with the issues earlier – or avoided them entirely. Sometimes we fail at the balancing act, but time and experience help us manage it better. The funny thing is that in retrospect those issues don't seem important at all – even though they felt central to me at the time.

We also had to decide how the game was going to end. My vision was in conflict with the rest of the managing group. I was holding on to my vision, and I simply couldn't give it up – even though I tried. A week before the game I decided that the first and the second game were going to have different endings, and then we were going to evaluate which one was better. It was one of the very few absolute decisions I made, and it was nice to see that everybody respected it. Still, after the second game it no longer felt that important, and what had once been a major issue became just one matter among others.

The Game

Finally, after months and months of work, the games started. Everything went very well. Players were enjoying themselves, things where rolling along and we were having great fun. We didn't argue amongst ourselves, and everybody in the organising team took care of their responsibilities. All in

all, things went smoothly.

I won't talk too much about the actual game; from where I'm standing now, it seems almost surreal and too good to be true. But I will say these three things:

The mood among the organising team will spread to the participants. If the organisers are at ease and have a good time, the players will ride that wave. But if the vibe is one of panic, stress, and bad blood among the team, this will infect the game just as well. You have to keep your cool. A few players will not show up, the electricity will fail, and your phone will die at the exact same moment, and so forth. Nothing ever gets better by stressing about it. Do your best and trust your co-workers and participants. We all do this to have a good time.

Divide the tasks and responsibilities clearly and in advance between the organisers. This was one of the many reasons we could be so cool. Everybody knew what they where doing, and they could rely on the others doing what they were supposed to do. Holding each director responsible for one player group was a great idea. They did very different things with their player groups, but they could do it the way they wanted to without having to argue with anyone else about a standardised way of doing things.

Sleep and rest from time to time. The schedule that we worked with was just a little too tight. When the fourth and final game started, we were quite tired. The five-hour breaks between games weren't enough, especially as the time couldn't be spent just resting. We needed to have meetings to plan the next game and debrief the one that just ended. A day between the second and third game would have left us saner in the end.

The kinds of games we organise are so complex that they require active management, and the nature of management is such that whoever is in charge will not be able to do just one thing – she needs to have an overview of everything. That is both the challenge and the beauty of it. It is the art of trying to fit all the pieces of the puzzle tougher. This is not a boring task, but a rather fun and challenging one.

I hope that this article has widened the horizon in terms of managing larps. Just as a game needs to be designed, the organisation and everything behind it also need to be carefully planned out and put together. If you have a great game idea, take the initiative and make it happen yourself. No one is going to do it for you. It takes a lot of work, but it will be great fun – most of the time. Everybody attends the larp to enjoy themselves in one way or the other, and that is what this is all about. Just make sure that you can achieve all that you set out to do by planning ahead, organising intelligently and respecting the time and energy everyone involved pours into the game.

Ludography

A Nice Evening with the Family / En stilla middag med familjen (2007) Anna Westerling, Anders Hultman, Tobias Wrigstad and others. Sec, Sweden.

Hamlet (2002) by Martin Ericsson, Anna Ericson, Christopher Sandberg, Martin Brodén et al, Interaktiva Uppsättningar, Sweden.

Design for Work Minimization

Kåre Murmann Kjær

Rarely does a group of organisers start creating a larp with the intention of disappointing the players. However, it happens that a larp is not realised exactly as the organisers intended and led the players to believe, which in turn leads to disappointments. In vthis article I will propose a design philosophy, Design for Work Minimization, which larp organisers can use to realise their larp with less work without compromising their vision or the quality of the larp. By reducing the workload, the chances of successfully organising the larp will increase. I will argue why this design philosophy can be helpful, and I will describe tools that can be used to realise this design philosophy.

In the scientific descriptions of the production industry, you will find terms such as *Design for Quality*, *Design for Maintenance* and *Design for Production*. These terms are broad appellations that do not in themselves imply that any specific tools are used in the design process, but instead describe which primary considerations are taken in the design process, with only a minimum of changes to the functionality of the product. If you, for instance, design a product by *Design for Maintenance*, you take into consideration how the final product should be maintained when designing it. This could for example result in making parts that often need service or replacement easily accessible, or that the product is able to diagnose problems or service needs and inform the user. To use *Design for X* philosophies when designing modern industrial products is common practice, though this is not always explicitly defined as part of the design process.

However, when it comes to designing larps, it is my impression that we have few design philosophies that are explicitly defined or even commonly used. Experienced organisers might do this to some degree, but normally they won't adhere to a specific design philosophy, or have an overarching idea behind it. They will classify their decisions as "based on experience". This makes it hard to formalize and document the knowledge for new generations of organisers.

In this article, I will propose one such method: *Design for Work Minimization*. This design philosophy simply states that the larp should be designed with focus on how to minimize the work the organisers need to do, while still realising the central elements of the larp as intended or, in some situations, changing less important elements.

Other approaches could include *Design for Replayability*, *Design for Player Understanding* and *Design for Rerunning.* The first philosophy vouches for designing to making it possible for the same players to enjoy the same larp over and over several times, much like a good movie can be seen several times. The second focuses on making it easy for the players to get the information and the knowledge needed to participate in the larp. *Design for Rerunning* would entail designing a larp so that it is easy to stage repeatedly.

Yet creating a design philosophy doesn't automatically make it easily accessible, nor does it mean that the design philosophy has any real relevance for the organiser. So in order for a design philosophy to have any real merit, it needs to be both relevant and equipped with some tools or rules that the organisers can apply. I will first describe why I believe *Design for Work Minimization* has relevance,

and then I will suggest some tools that may be applied in accordance with the philosophy.[1]

The Need for Optimisation

In my time as a player and organiser, I have seen both successful and disastrous larps. I have identified three major reasons for failure in the larps that have been less than successful.

First of all, the organisers of a game often fail to grasp the sheer amount of work needed to put together a larp. There is a big difference in the amount of work needed to organise a weekend video marathon for 10 friends, and organising a weekend larp for the same group. Too often I have seen organisers underestimate the work necessary, only to realise it at the last moment. The result is that the larp is not realised as intended.

Secondly, most organisers are amateurs. Though there are some people who have orchestrated a lot of larps or have experience managing big projects from other fields, most organisers have little education or experience in managing projects.

Thirdly, larpers are ambitious. Doing what somebody else has already done is no fun – we want to do something new and original; something that people will remember and talk about. However, this also means that we are constantly dealing with things we do not quite have the skills to manage. Organisers that fail to grasp the size of their project, and thus are unable to realise their larp as intended, then move on to even more ambitious projects instead of trying to master a less ambitious project first. This is the Achilles' heel of larp organising – but also the source of so many interesting (and at times even successful) projects.

The third point is so deeply ingrained in the larp culture that no amount of redesigning or reorganising the work will change the need for doing something ambitious. However, the first two points, our lack of experience and knowledge of how to organise the work, are arguments for doing *Design for Work Minimization*. I will especially focus on the fact that organising larp is a huge effort requiring a large amount of work, and hence the need for work minimization.

Realising Design for Work Minimization

Organising a larp can be viewed as completing a number of tasks. All of these tasks originate from the initial *idea* and definition of the larp in question, in this text called *concepts*[2]. To minimize the work we have to redefine the tasks, and in turn the concepts.[3]

1 The relevance of a design philosophy may vary from one gaming culture to another. This argument is based on my experiences in the Danish larp community. I assume that some of these experiences hold true in other larp cultures as well. However, some of my assumptions are probably not true for all gaming cultures and this might reduce the relevance of the design philosophy.

2 Concepts are, in short, the fingerprint of a larp. The sum of the concepts uniquely defines a given larp, even though each individual concept may have been used in another larp. When you design your larp, you are defining the concepts of the larp. Since the concepts define the larp, they are also the source of all tasks and each task can be said to originate from one or more concepts.

3 To get the full benefit of this design philosophy, the organisers should already have mastered how to organise work in a project organisation. While this is not a mandatory prerequisite to be able to use this design philosophy, the benefits gained from basic principles of work organisation are much larger than those gained from any one design philosophy by itself.

Redesigning is done in the design phase of the larp. Doing redesign after you have started realising the larp is possible, but you will be severely limited in which methods are applicable, and the later you start your redesign, the more difficult it will be. In addition, if you redesign in a later phase, some of the work already done may be wasted, which should be a part of the considerations. In the description of the methods it is assumed that the redesign is done while designing the larp, and the considerations presented here are based on that.

It should also be noted that this design philosophy implies that the designer of the larp is willing to make changes to ease the work of the producer. Actually, that is the core of the philosophy – design is done with focus on production. Hence, it is essential that the redesign is done as a collaboration between designers and producers.

Downgrade. Downgrading is commonly used in a lot of larp design – it is perhaps the most common of the methods suggested here – and it should be a tool for all larp organiser working within the limits of reality. The method implies reducing the scope of the task at hand, while still retaining its original form. This is applicable to almost any task, and can range from small downgrades to all but elimination. Since the aim is to reduce the resources spent on the task, the type of downgrade depends on what resources the task consumes. The result of a downgrade will be a task that can be described as smaller, less impressive, less thorough, quicker or something similar, than the originally defined task.

Eliminate. Eliminating is really as simple as it sounds; you simply eliminate the task at hand, removing it from the larp altogether. Though simple to do on paper, the consequences are often quite far reaching, especially if you do this on a task that has relations to a lot of central concepts. This is most commonly used, unwillingly, by organisers when they see that they cannot realise their concepts with the available resources. It also somewhat violates the principle of this design philosophy; that the general concept of the larp should not be changed just because the work is minimized, and hence it should be used sparingly.

Outsource. Where the two previous methods were about reducing the scope of the task to some degree, this method leaves the task untouched, but reallocates the work from the organisers to some other party. This is most commonly the players, but it could also be people or organisations that are invited to do a specific task, such as universities or sponsors. This method is applicable on almost all tasks, but it does mean relying on someone other than the organisers to do the job, which at times can be an unpredictable affair. This means that outsourcing important tasks creates a different task for the organisers – keeping track of the progress of the outsourced task. This can be time consuming, especially if the task has been distributed to a lot of people. Outsourcing everything does not automatically remove all work from the organisers.

Re-use. Re-using is similar to outsourcing, and in principal they are indeed identical. However, where outsource is about moving a task from the organisers to another party in the larp, re-use is about locating someone or someplace where the task has already been done, and then using the result of that work. The source might be outside the organiser group, perhaps even outside the larp scene, but it could also be a matter of recycling work done elsewhere within the group of organisers. Many tasks, especially relating to logistics, cannot be re-used, and often the recycling requires a bit of tweaking or modifying to better fit the larp in question.

Buy. Buying is paying a professional to do the job. Basically this is outsourcing with money. While this is a tempting approach to use, most larps have budgets that sharply limit how much they can

pay to have work done by professionals. In addition, it may be difficult to find professionals to carry out some larp-specific tasks – unless they are larpers themselves. On top of this, you will have to spend time creating enquiries, examine offers and, when the product or service is delivered, you have to do some degree of quality control. In consequence, this approach is best reserved for tasks that are time consuming, simple to specify, not larp specific, or some combination of these three.

No promises. This method is distinctly different from the above five, and it is disputable whether or not it belongs as a part of *Design for Work Minimization*. Where the other methods attempt to reduce the workload placed on the organisers by changing it, or try to reallocate the task to some other party, this approach will leave the task unchanged and still related to the organisers. The task and related concepts will not be made public, and only the organisers will know that they intend to realise them. Thus the organisers are not obligated to carry out the tasks, but can realise them if resources permit. In effect, this renders certain tasks voluntary and optional. Naturally, this method is not applicable to tasks critical to the larp, such as providing food and sleeping arrangements for the players.

It should be noted, that you are not confined to using only one method when redesigning your tasks. A combination of methods can be used – even on individual tasks. For instance, there is nothing preventing you from downgrading a task before outsourcing it.

When you have redefined your tasks with one or more of these methods, you can track it back to your concepts and, in turn, apply whatever effects are applicable. Tracking back is the reverse of defining the task; you identify the concepts that created the task initially. If you have defined your tasks based on your concepts, as described initially, this is a simple and informal process. You are then able to consider the changes on the concept, and if you are dissatisfied with the result, go through the process again,

Redefining all your tasks is tedious and most likely a waste of time, as some tasks are more important than others: Some types of tasks are exceptionally worthy of consideration, and they can generally be grouped into three categories. The following should not be considered an exhaustive list, but instead a good place to start.

The most prolific consists of tasks which are very *taxing on resources*[4] and they should be the focus of the redefinition process. If you spend a lot of resources doing a task, you can afford to spend some resources considering whether or not you can redesign it to minimize your work. This could include tasks such as organising pre-written roles or preparing props or setting.

Tasks that are *critical* for the success of the larp should also be considered. Tasks related to organising food, sleeping arrangements and sanitation are all critical tasks, but also tasks related to central concepts of the game should be considered critical. Please note that redefining critical tasks can result in drastic changes to the concepts.

Tasks that are *potentially problematic*, or expected to create problems, should be redesigned to reduce the risk of said problems. Good candidates for this are tasks which rely heavily on many people doing a lot of voluntary work, or tasks that for some reason have a high degree of unpredictability.

4 The most important resources are time, money and, in the case of projects based on a volunteer workforce and with a low budget, social relations. To some extent, all of these resources are interchangeable, as you can pay people to spend time on the project or you can spend time to improve social relations, hence they are considered as one.

So, in short, the way to apply *Design for Work Minimization* is as follows:

1. *Define concepts and identify tasks.* This should always be a part of designing and organising a larp, whether or not you are going to use *Design for Work Minimization*, as it is central to be able to realise a larp.

2. *Identify tasks that need redesigning.* This could be done with the three categories of tasks defined above; resource taxing, critical and potentially problematic.

3. *Redesign tasks.* Redesign the tasks with one or more of six defined methods described above; downgrade, eliminate, outsource, re-use, buy or no promises.

4. *Track back to concepts.* See what the effect of different approaches to redesign of tasks is on the concepts. Then evaluate whether this change to the concept is desirable or justifiable. If not, go back a step and try another redesign method. Continue until you have found the optimal solution.

Case Examples

The first case example is a concept where the setting is a dinner party, and the players are invited guests or hosts. This creates, among others, a task for the organisers in relation to food; it must be prepared and supplied to the players in the game. This can be subdivided into tasks related to purchase of food, storage of food, preparation of food, delivery of food, removal of waste and tableware after eating, and cleaning up. However, for the purpose of redefining this task, we will consider this as one task, as they are closely related.

Downgrading this task can be done in a number of ways. Two different approaches could be to either reduce the number of dishes or reduce the demands to the quality and diversity of the food. *Eliminating* could be done by, for instance, shortening the game so no food is needed or start the game after dinnertime, so the players will have to eat before the larp, moving the responsibility of acquiring food outside the scope of the larp. *Outsourcing* could be done by creating some roles that are servants and cooks, and let them cook the food in the larp (although this creates the task of creating characters for the servants as well). *Re-use* is not really applicable in this case. *Buy* is simple and probably rather expensive: hire a cook or a catering company. *No promises* is not really an applicable strategy as food is a critical consideration.

The second case example has a concept that says that the setting is a small village where people have lived without much change for 50 years. The players send in their own suggestion for roles, and the organisers create all internal relations between the roles – which is a big job even for a larp with just 50 players.

Downgrading is rather straightforward, and could be done for example by only defining the most important relations for all roles (such as family and near friends) or the amount of information placed in each relation (going from half a page to two lines eliminates a high percentage of the writing). *Eliminating* has, once again, a rather drastic influence on the entire larp. This could be done by redefining the setting to a settlers' village where people have recently arrived and hence do not know each other. The most direct approach would be to *outsource* the task and give the responsibility to the players. By setting up an online forum players can search for friends, relatives and enemies there and organise this by themselves. *Buy* is perhaps a bit difficult as you need a writer

with sufficient insight into larps in general and the specific setting of this game. At a glance *re-use* does seem a bit hard, but it is actually possible: By defining six types of relationships (no relation, hate, dislike, neutral, like, love) and apply one for each potential relationship you are able to re-use your own work (though this also includes some degree of *downgrading*). *No promises* can also be done, but since relations usually are a critical part of a good gaming experience it might not be a very good idea in this situation.

The last case example is taken from the well-known larp *Dragonbane*. One of the main concepts for head organiser Timo Multamäki and his team was that they wanted to have an animate dragon, one that was able to move, interact with the players and take an active part in the larp. Acquiring the dragon was one of the many tasks this created.

Downgrading could be applied in a lot of ways and was also used to some degree in the actual larp. A big downgrade could be to make a stationary dragon placed, for instance, at the end of a cave. *Eliminating* is quite simple – there will be no dragon. This is, as often is the case, a rather drastic change and would have changed the larp quite a lot if it had been applied. *Outsourcing* was used in part, getting universities to do some of the technical design. *Re-use* is a bit difficult, as there at the time were no similar dragons around – but design principles from other dragon-building projects could have been re-used. *Buy* is hardly applicable as it would be very difficult to find a supplier of such a dragon – at least within a realistic budget. *No promises* can be used, but it would require quite a redesign in the other parts of the game, as the dragon was a central concept for the larp.

Final words

Through this specific design philosophy and the list provided in the beginning of this article, I hope that I can inspire other larp specific design philosophies and the tools that go with them. This would both make it more accessible for the novice organisers to produce good larps, and it would bring more structure and professionalism to the work of the experienced organisers.

I hope that *Design for Work Minimization*, as presented in this article, can help new organisers make better larps, and help experienced organisers be more aware of the methods they are using and perhaps inspire them to think of alternative ways to design their larp. The goal is to make good larps with less effort, hopefully increasing the number of larps organised, and securing the organisers ability to realise them successfully.

Ludography

Dragonbane (2006): Timo Multamäki and others. Larp played in Älvdalen, Sweden.

The Children of Treasure Trap: History and Trends of British Live Action Role-Play

Nathan Hook

This article discusses the historical and current trends across mainstream British larp, from its beginning up to the present today. It charts the twists in the development of larp focusing on the action larp tradition – the style that includes some amount of physical action such as foam weapon combat.

Through there are some accounts of experiments such as murder mystery games as early as the mid-seventies, the first significant expression of modern larp[1] in Britain occurred in 1981. Rob Donaldson, Peter Carey and John Carey set up what is widely considered to be the first British larp group, known as *Treasure Trap*, at Peckforton Castle in Cheshire, under the company name Donaldson and Carey Ltd. This ran until 1984 with a lot of success – its books claim over five thousand members at its height (not at any particular event), including some from continental Europe and the United States. It was televised once on the children's BBC TV show *Blue Peter* as well as regional television and discussed in an interview on Radio 4. *Treasure Trap* ended in 1984 when the castle was sold. It was also in financial difficulties at the time due to the very cheap player fees – initially players paid £5 for membership and £1 for an event. Playing monsters on an event was free.

The format of the events was closely modelled on *Dungeons & Dragons*, with player characters going on adventures, fighting orcs, searching treasure chests, and so on. The rule system was also borrowed from *D&D*, using the same character classes. Each class had eight levels: The characters reaching the highest level also had to undertake a special 'pro' adventure which was extremely challenging – often only one or two player characters would survive.

The common areas were in-game constantly, with parties of adventurers forming for linear adventures, and occasional mass battles taking place when the castle was attacked. Different areas of the castle were designed to cater for characters of different experience levels. The events were set in an ongoing generic fantasy world, which developed as time passed. All players were assigned to one of two out-of-character groups (reds and blues) who would take turns to play the monsters for each other every other week. Player characters versus player character combat also happened a lot – going home to the tavern afterwards was sometimes the most dangerous part of an adventure.

1 In the interests of space and focus, the scope of this article has been deliberately limited. The theatre-style larp tradition (aka Mind's Eye or Vampire tradition) has not been included here – in Britain this is quite distinct from action-style larp. Britain continues to have a few dozen such events running every month, including those as part of the international Camarilla organisation, smaller multi-city organisations, and independent local games. The freeform larp tradition is also not included. In Britain, this term is generally applied to the one-off largely system-free events with organiser written characters run at conventions or in hotels. There is relatively little overlap in player base between this and mainstream action larps. Tabletop role-playing has also not been included. Furthermore, the scope of this article is limited to the geographical island of Britain rather than the country of the United Kingdom e.g. Northern Ireland has not been included.

Fighting in Treasure Trap. Notice the paint stains on the wall. (Photograph by Malcolm Rich)

The combat system was very complicated, requiring pauses to *battleboard* – to do the maths on paper to check the status of each character. At first weapons consisted of bamboo sticks wrapped in foam. This eventually developed into boffer weapons made of plastic cores wrapped in foam rubber wrapped in gaffa tape. Players would make damage calls when striking with their weapons, based on their characters skills, causing loss of hit points from the location struck. The weapons were coated in coloured dye as a means of tracking damage, red being the lowest.

In the present day, the castle is a hotel and protected by conservation law. The lower bar in the hotel (known to ex-*Treasure Trap* players as the "gargoyle room") still bears the dye marks from the combat that once took place there. A secret door hidden as a false back of a cupboard in a certain corridor also remains there to this day. Despite its name it is not technically a castle at all but rather a Victorian country house built in the style of a medieval castle.

The Second Generation – Children of the Trap, 1985-1989

When *Treasure Trap* ended, it left a large number of players scattered across the country, eager to continue larping. The second generation of UK larps derived or were inspired by the original *TT.* They remained close to it in format, style and rule mechanics. Players were adventurers, fighting monsters, in an ongoing fantasy setting. These games had a variety of magic systems – though some made use of thrown objects to represent spells, most used a point-and-shout approach: "*By my Power I strike you with a Firebolt 4!*" This is in contrast to larps in the United States, where thrown *spell packets* developed as a more popular approach.

In the latter days of *Treasure Trap*, Carey attempted to create a paintball larp with a modern day setting, through that did not last for long. Some other attempts were made to set up *TT* style holidays under the name *Timescape.* This folded badly, and ended up on the aptly named national BBC TV program *Watchdog.*

Donaldson attempted to move *Treasure Trap* to Chislehurst caves, but failed as well: Instead, Pete Garner founded a new larp called *Labyrinthe* in those caves. Prior to securing the caves, he ran adventures in the old warehouses of East London – the sort of place that required stepping over tramps to get in. *Labby* still exists, running every weekend both in the underground cave system

and overland as well. Its running passed to Jan McManus and Simon Morgan[2]. *Labyrinthe* didn't use the *Treasure Trap* rule system, but wrote its own in much the same style, with a high level of complexity.

Versions of *Treasure Trap* itself also still exist. As early as 1983, a spin-off group was formed as *Durham University Treasure Trap*, with the original intention of organising minibuses full of students to the castle. This continues to run, making it almost certainly the oldest and longest continuous larp in the world. Over the years it gradually introduced reforms and developments, shedding much of the rules complexity. In addition to the traditional adventuring format, *DUTT* also runs *interactives*, tavern night events for the characters. In 1984 Birmingham University formed its own group as well (*BUTT)*, through it failed to develop and change as *DUTT* had, and ceased to exist a few years ago. Cambridge University currently has its own group, *CUTT*, which spun off from the Durham group in 2002.

In 1984 Mark Cordory, previously a player of *Treasure Trap,* ran his first larp, using paint covered weapons. After a few other experiments he, along with Abe Lane and Deborah Sims, started running *Mythlore* the following year. It was set up as a larp company with government support under an Enterprise Allowance scheme – a rare case of the government supporting larp in the UK. The funding ran out after a year, but Cordory continued, with the assistance of volunteers. *Mythlore* ran events in the Forest of Dean and the Brecon Beacons, fifty weekends a year, for two and a half years and was featured in a role-play magazine *G.M.* At this point it moved to a permanent site outside Derby – a First World War command bunker. The site included a tavern, street with a few shops, and a small labyrinth. Cordory continued to make props and costumes professionally, while Mike Lee took over running the larp itself. Six months later the money ran out and the site was closed. *Mythlore* was still firmly set in the generic high fantasy adventuring, but was able to achieve a much higher standard of props and costumes than the other early larps. It is also notable as one of a few attempts at commercial larp.

By 1985 various *Treasure Trap* veterans created a number of other larps of their own, including *Realm* and *Spirit of Adventure*. *Flight of Fantasy* was founded in 1986, and still exists under the name *Forever's Destiny*. Some of these off-shoots have gradually increased the complexity of the rules further. Other university larps have come about and faded away after failing to recruit new students each year: some sources claim that national cuts in student grants during the 1990's made a significant contribution to this. These varied student societies played an important role at recruiting new people into the hobby, and also gave larp a young demographic, with players able to spend lots of time but little money.

In 1985 *Fools & Heroes* started. Set up as a democratic non-profit organisation, it has multiple branches[3] across the country, running linear fantasy adventures in a shared setting. Each branch runs a part of a fantasy world, with its own local plots, complemented with national plots ran by an elected campaign coordinator. Every August there is a *Summerfest*, a weekend festival with hundreds of players. While still based on the linear adventuring format, *F&H* removed the rules regarding experience points, and tried to push issues of social status by making characters members of guilds and churches. It is also notable for xenophobic plotlines: humans are the dominant race in the setting, with elves, dwarves and such being persecuted minorities. Its rule system is much simpler than that of the *TT* larps: most characters have one hit point per location, with armour

2 Better known as the professional latex weapon maker and retailer Eldritch.

3 Eighteen branches were listed in 2007.

adding points. This removed the need for battle-boarding.

In 1986 Mike Stringer[4] was working on making latex masks and gaffa tape covered weapons. For the first time, he experimented with using latex instead of gaffa to cover a weapon, developing the first latex larp weapons. Professionally made latex weapons swiftly replaced home-made gaffa tape ones, and today hardly any gaffa weapons are in use in Britain.

In 1987 Mark Roberts left *Labyrinthe* and set up the professional larp *Heroquest*, which still runs to this day. It continues to run traditional adventuring events, with player character adventurers pitted against monsters played by the crew. He remains one of the few people in the world to earn a fulltime professional income from running larps. The rule system is very complicated, with the basic mechanics close the original *Treasure Trap* system. Characters have locational hit points and make damage calls (*single* does four points of damage, *double* does eight, and so forth). Armour and a dexterity attribute reduce the amount of damage taken from each blow (e.g. chainmail might reduce each by five points). Characters gain points for each event, which allows them to buy more skills. Events are aimed at characters around a particular power level, since the difference in play between high and low level characters is extreme.

A number of *Heroquest* players broke away in the early nineties and combined the system with the *Greyhawk* tabletop *D&D* setting, as a basis for a new larp group. The new group, variously called *Howling Wolf* or *Lamaquest* was based at Bristol Polytechnic[5]. That eventually folded around 2001, but with a separate active games society at Bristol University, various local vampire larps, an umbrella larp society called *BLARPs* founded by local graduates and three nearby *F&H* branches in Bristol, Bath and Cardiff, the area produced at the time a large and vibrant larp population with weekly social meetings. Through this locus has now faded, the Bristol Manifesto (Hook 2007) incorporates some of the ideas developed within that community.

The Third Generation – The Rise of the Fest, 1990-2004

Around 1990, the *Summerfest* had grown to over one thousand players. This launched the concept of a *fest* in Britain, a large scale festival larp event. With massively different logistical challenges to previous larps, others tried to run events on this format. This marked the next turning point in the evolution of action larp tradition.

Andy King began his larp career as a player of *Treasure Trap* in the 1980's, and later became a staff member and a referee. He went on to become a founding member of the Lorien Trust. Set up as a charitable organisation in 1992 the trust ran its first *The Gathering* event that year and has done so every year since then, on the August bank holiday at Loco Park in Derbyshire. Currently it attracts around four thousand players every year to its main event and runs smaller related events as well, making it by far the largest British larp phenomenon. Andy King still runs the organisation as managing director, being one of the few professional larp organisers.

The Gathering has an open world in that almost any character concept could be fitted in, including non-fantasy concepts (rumour has it that the year *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* was released, four different people turned up playing Darth Maul). The rule-set is simple by the standards of *Treasure*

4 Trading under the name Second Skin until 1992.

5 Known later as University of the West of England.

Trap, but still complicated with many different damage calls being shouted in combat. Spells and skills are tracked by the use of spell cards, which are ripped when the spell is cast. These game tokens merely represent rule mechanics as they can not be traded or otherwise influence the game world, through the out of character function of supplying them is dealt with by an in-character guild. Large areas of the event are covered by a *ritual of peace*, making all combat non-lethal. Special items are tracked by use of *lammies* – credit card sized laminated cards, describing what their game effect is. Players also carry character card lammies that describe their characters' skills. This means the function of an item can be known by a player who acquires it without having to consult a referee.

Almost medieval car in Treasure Trap. (Photograph by Malcolm Rich)

Lorien Trust also introduced a set piece ritual circle, supported by special effects, where a game referee would judge the quality of the performed rituals and taking into account the level of game skills of the characters taking part involved to determined their outcome: Player characters are able to use rituals to create magic items and especially powerful player characters (e.g. by summoning a demon or elemental).

The player characters are divided up into ten or so factions, led by powerful characters played by game masters belonging to that faction's plot team. By controlling the alliances between the factions, the organisers are able to balance the large set-piece battle at the end of the event in a way *Summerfest* had not been able to do. The event consists of free interactions between the different fractions around the main camps, including massed attacks, with one fraction trying to *roll* the camp of another fraction. The organisers also run linear side adventures for small groups of characters. Players who volunteer to play monsters on such adventures are rewarded with in-game money.

Lorien Trust allows children of all ages to attend their events, giving them characters but with limits on what skills they could choose – for example, younger children are not permitted near the ritual circle. There is also a linear adventure for the children to play, whilst the main battle takes place. This is a significant development: *F&H* and most other larps don't permit children to play due to their insurance policies. However, Lorien Trust has also gone to extreme lengths in order to keep their events politically correct. No mention of God or gods is permitted; the term *ancestor* is used instead. Even referring to the games operations desk as 'G.O.D.' while out of character is officially forbidden. The slightest mention of arson, torture or rape has been banned during time-in at an event, and even a mention of such in a character's personal background is forbidden; murder and genocide is accepted, though.

In 1995 a group broke away from the Lorien Trust due to an internal schism. They created the company Curious Pastimes, which runs the larp *Renewal*. This has continued to run every year, on the same dates as *The Gathering*, attracting 800 players. *Renewal* adapted and rewrote much of *The Gathering* rule system, simplifying it while making combat deadlier and removing the ritual

of peace. In a Lorien Trust game a character reduced to zero hit points only dies after ten minutes, in *Renewal* dying only takes two minutes, and a dying character can be executed in a matter of seconds. *Renewal* continues the Lorien Trust system of factions, with many of the factions even having the same name and concept. One major difference is that *Renewal* stages set-piece battles against non-player characters rather than the other players under a ritual of peace. These non-player characters are played by the other half of the player base.

In 1998, Matthew Pennington (who had previously been involved in the organisation of the *Gathering)*, and others, set up a new fest larp called *Omega*. In contrast to the *The Gathering* and *Renewal*, it had a closed world with a more detailed, fixed setting. *Omega* allowed player characters from a small set of fantasy races, deliberately avoiding many of the traditional ones described by Tolkien. Though it encouraged much higher costume standards, it also defined a minimum costume requirement for each race, so that they could be identified. Players created both their characters and their communities.

Omega is most noted for introducing the concept of *downtime* to large scale larp. The players wrote descriptions of what they wanted their characters to do in-between events, as free text, and also what happened in their communities between games. These downtimes and the interactions between them were moderated by hand; an extremely time-consuming to process with around five hundred participants. Furthermore, *Omega* encouraged *player-led plots*, the idea that the player characters, rather than powerful non-player characters, should be the driving force in an event. Instead of preset fractions, it had many scattered player character groups without game organiser leadership. The group ran two events a year in the Midlands until 2003. The series ended with player characters destroying the game world in the tenth game.

Following the end of *Omega*, Matthew Pennington set up the company Profound Decisions in 2004 to run the frockcoat & flintlock fantasy game *Maelstrom*. This currently runs four times a year. Player numbers have gradually risen, with nine hundred players attending the last event of 2007. Through used in a variety of small larps for many years before, *Maelstrom* was the first fest to introduce flintlock guns represented by cap firing replicas. It sells itself heavily on the idea that player characters should proactively create and lead the significant plots. In place of spell cards, it uses mana crystals, a portable in game resource replacing the off-game tokens used earlier.

Unlike *The Gathering* and *Renewal* which cater for children, *Maelstrom* sells itself as an adult game and explicitly tries to include colonial themes such as slavery and religious war: *Omega* had an age limit of sixteen, *Maelstrom* increased this to eighteen. In its early years *Maelstrom* did allow children younger than two, but changed this policy as it was found to be disruptive.

Maelstrom is perhaps most noted for an elaborate computer controlled downtime system, allowing players to control colonies between events, likened to the computer game *Civilization*. Through it has never claimed the term, some regard it as an extremely simulationist larp for this reason. Much of the player character interactions derive from this system – characters spend events forming trading deals, plotting acts of piracy, planning military invasions, initiating construction projects, obtaining food for colonists, and so forth. These decisions are then implemented during downtime, and the results influence the next event. Characters can also learn and teach each other using the downtime system.

One of the challenges all the fest larps have faced is implementing a magic system that people could follow. Both *The Gathering* and *Renewal* have short spell lists, though the latter has made this easier

to remember by standardizing the range and duration of all spells. *Maelstrom* implemented spells by keeping them mostly secret, but introducing standardized modular effect calls. For example, *double through* means: *"Take two points of damage, ignoring any armour, and start your death count"*. Certain spells require a short performance in a ritual circle, but these are still set formula spells, not the open-ended effects of *The Gathering* and *Renewal*. *Maelstrom* also popularised the idea of characters having global hit points (three by default for a starting character) rather than separate hit points on different locations.

Maelstrom experimented with new ways to implement high fantasy religion. Most characters pray to one of the ten gods by writing down their prayer and handing it in at the games operations desk. A referee reads the prayers, and issues *imperatives* to a small subset of the players who play angelic *eidolons*. They are able to hear the orders by accessing a special computer system, and are then sent out into the world. This has created a feedback loop dynamic within the setting. Unlike the fixed ritual circles marked by a referee, at *Maelstrom* some priests are able to lead mass supplications to ask their God for action. Through a referee is present to note what is asked for and which characters take part, the quality of the rituals is not scored. *Maelstrom* has proven very influential, with recent larps attempting to apply many of its concepts to a much smaller player base. It remains to be seen how well this can be successfully done.

The Fourth Generation – Making the Break from Medieval Fantasy

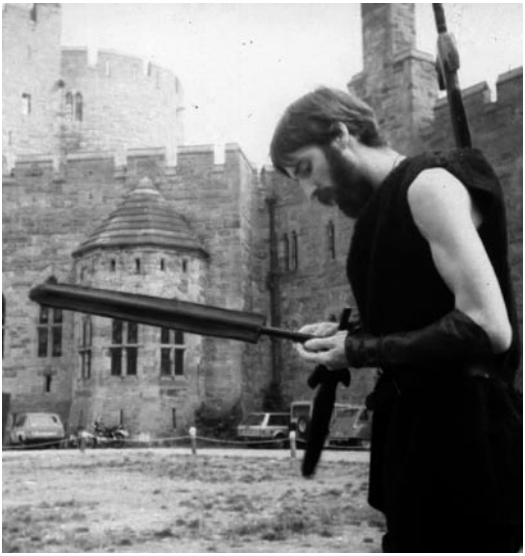
Treasure Trap players. (Photograph by Malcolm Rich)

As the hobby developed, many larpers wanted to leave behind some of the early trappings – the gaffa tape weapons, the complicated battleboard combat, and so on. In doing so, they also started leaving behind medieval fantasy as a genre. Combined with this, the fest larps brought together larpers from across the country, both at the events and on internet discussion forums. A host of new larps began to spring up, without the direct link back to *Treasure Trap*. Discussion on all the larps in last few years is beyond the scale of this article, but a selective overview will give some idea of the range and scope of current British larp.

Years before *Maelstrom* made cap gun flintlocks widely know, *Arcroc* by Dave Hawkins and *Shards* by Andy Leech tried to move from medieval fantasy into pirate era fantasy. *Shards* in particular promoted a very strongly narrativist agenda, or *cinematic* as it called itself. This often left player characters powerless, unable to affect the direction or end result of the events.

Originally conceived as existing in the far future of the *Arcroc* setting, *Waypoint* started off as a far future sci-fi larp run at Manchester University run by David Lascalles. It uses a *buffet approach* to plot, in which are run many plots that the characters can choose to either involve themselves in or

ignore. Games are set at a fixed location, with non-player characters arriving and leaving to introduce and develop plots during the event. It continues to run as an independent larp, using semi-automatic cap guns alongside latex weapons as props. With much overlap in its player-base, *Riftworld* by Martin Livingstone has run since 2003 as a sci-fi horror larp, mixing cosmic and personal horror in a wasted future setting. It is noted for having very well-defined metaphysics (much of which the players do not know) of how the supernatural works. A lot of its plot material arises from cause-and-effect as player characters come into contact with it.



Treasure Trap. (Photograph by Malcolm Rich)

The last few years have seen the rise of brand name sci-fi settings in larp. Currently in the UK there are two *Star Wars* larps, one *Firefly/Serenity* larp and two *Stargate* larps. Larps with such settings have found it a lot easier to recruit players than those using homebrewed settings, through they do present additional challenges in costuming and propping.

Many larps have made use of point-and-shout rule mechanics for guns. While successful in limited situations, massed gun battles stretch this mechanic to the breaking point. Flintlock type guns are represented by cap firers. Larps have also run using (often homemade) laser tag guns and airsoft guns that fire small plastic ball bearings and require the use of eye protection.

Ongoing Trends in British Larp

The British action style of larping has certain characteristics that have not really changed over the years. Though not set in stone, these trends differentiate the British games from Nordic or American ones, just like they differentiate the action style from the domestic freeform and theatre style traditions.

Overwhelmingly in UK larps, *players create their characters*. They have a massive amount of freedom to design their own characters. Most organisers will vet backgrounds and concepts written by the players and may reference them during the game, but that is all. This has been the case since the very beginning, and many UK larpers are reluctant to give up this control over their characters.

In the very beginning, the player characters were *heroic adventurers*, akin to the characters in classic *Dungeons & Dragons*. Through that has diminished, it is still normal for characters to be "heroic" in the same sense that they are exceptional people acting outside of the normality of their society. In games based around politics, most of the player characters are movers and shakers with influence. Playing characters in their own homes is extremely unusual.

Another enduring trend is that even in games with very little combat, it is still common that the majority of *characters carry weapons*. This has had the side effect of supporting a number of professional weapon makers in the UK, and led to the development of impressive looking props.

Role-playing theory has never been fashionable in Britain, to an extent that many British larpers who are active on online forums can be seen as *anti-intellectual*. Narrativism, made popular by the *White-wolf* published tabletop material as an alternative to gamism has been a success, and in some parts of the community it is perceived as the only valid style. This is reinforced because many larps continue to run with game masters essentially stage managing the story. Attempts to suggest greater simulationism often result in online flame wars, which in turn discourage simulationists from speaking up.

Another major difference in comparison to Nordic style larps is that the games do not feature continuous time. Most larps that run for a weekend are *paused for the night* to allow people to sleep out of character. This is partly due to a requirement to allow people to drive home safely afterwards and to accommodate the demands of a regular job. It also allows time for socialising out of character.

Lately some newer trends have emerged in the UK larp scene. These are not quite as established or widespread as the ones listed above, but each year they are gaining stronger and stronger foothold.

Player-led plots have been made popular by *Omega* and *Maelstrom* over the last few years. This is partly a backlash against the heavy handed organiser control (or bad narrativism as some call it) in the older fests and the original tradition of linear adventures. Many now regard the term itself as confusing, and prefer such names as *character-driven* or *agenda-based*. Critics have referred to this as *lazy plot* since it means the organisers are not working directly to create it. While some see this as a shift towards simulationism, in truth it simply passes more control over to the players and away from the organisers.

The Tolkien-esque tradition of fantasy is increasingly seen as old fashioned or primitive by many. This has paved the way for a *diversification of genres*. Whereas in the Nordic countries recent larps have tried to revisit traditional fantasy, in the UK the vast majority of new larps tend to avoid it. For example, *Maelstrom* invented animal-based fantasy races to avoid using the traditional races such as elves. Relatively few new larps use a traditional medieval setting.

The larp demographics are gradually getting older and richer in the UK. This is encouraging more professionally made and sold larp clothes and props, rather than more simple homemade items. This has also encouraged greater *professionalism among larp organisers*, even those running privately and not-for-profit. Through as yet there have been no publicised legal cases arising as a result of larp, it is now widely accepted that weekend events require some kind of an insurance scheme.

Conclusion

The concept that all fantasy larp stem from one root source is remarkable. From what can be established of the history, it seems that in the case of Britain this is true. It should also be remembered that like any social community, there are more dynamic and fluid interactions than can be captured in a short article – or indeed are recorded and available for research purposes. Light-hearted attempts to graphically map the relationships between the different larps in the past produced what became known as the *tree of incest* – a reference to the tightly woven web of

interactions between them.

What has shaped the course of the development of larp in Britain has been its original point of reference and the demographics of the larp population. While it has developed and changed with time, it has done so from a certain point and within a certain range. The biggest question that will determine its future course is whether it will continue its independent development or incorporate foreign ideas – both from other role-play traditions in Britain and from abroad.

Ludography

Dungeons & Dragons (1973): Gary Gygax and Steve Arneson. TSR. Tabletop role-playing games with various editions available.

Treasure Trap, (1981-1984): Donaldson & Carey ltd, regular linears around a castle

Durham University Treasure Trap (1983 – present): university society, Weekly linears and tavern night events in term time

Birmingham University Treasure Trap (1983 – 2001): university society, Weekly linears in term time

Mythlore (1984-1987): Mark Cordory and Mike Lee, weekly linears

Flight of Fantasy / Nothing Ventured / Forever's Destiny (1986-present): regular weekend events

Fools & Heroes (1985 – present): multiple branches running monthly linears and one annual fest

Heroquest (1987 – present): Mark Roberts, regular events with a wide variety of lengths, from weekend events up to six day events.

Riftworld (2003 – present): Martin Livingstone, 2-3 weekend events per year

The Gathering (1992-present): Lorien Trust. Annual fest style game and various smaller events, some fest size in their own right.

Renewal (1995-present): Curious Pastimes. Annual fest with supporting smaller events.

Omega (1998-2003): Matthew Pennington, Paul Wilder, Juilet Morgan (now Wilder) and Elle Smith. Ten games in total.

Maelstrom (2004-present): Profound Decisions, four main fest events a year and smaller spin off events

Bibliography

Hook, Nathan (2007): "The Bristol Manifesto." In Donnis, Gade & Thorup (2007): *Lifelike*. Copenhagen, Projektgruppen KP07. The book for Knudepunkt 2007.

Section B
Art & Design

Frail Realities: Design Process

Justin Parsler

This paper discusses the design philosophy that inspired the UK live action role-playing game Frail Realities, and looks at how that philosophy was realised. This is not an attempt to instruct people on how larp games should be created, but rather shows how one such game was created as a case study to exemplify the early design process. Along the way, many of the tropes common to UK larps are discussed because they are held in common with FR or because FR broke the common mold.

In 1815, French mathmagicians sought to break the Liche Emperor Napoleon out of his heavily warded prison on the Island of Saint Helena. They failed, breaking the world instead, bending time and forever changing the universe.

This is my standard one paragraph introduction to *Frail Realities*[1], a live role-playing game that has been running events approximately every month in the United Kingdom since October 2004. The purpose of this article is to look at the design choices made during the design process of *Frail Realities* in the hope that this will help others when they come to assemble their own system. I have structured this paper as a set of personal statements I made or questions I asked myself in the early stages of the design process, followed by the answer to these statements and questions. Although I will flit around a bit as I discuss each point, I will broadly try to explain things in the order in which they developed.

While I am a Games Studies academic, this is not an academic paper. Instead, this is a review of the design process. I shall steer clear of theory, and any references to such will be severely limited.

Design Philosophy

My early thoughts about the game were pretty much a list of features that I enjoy the most in my larp. The majority of the people I knew at the time attended the *Labyrinthe* larp system[2] that runs weekly, and many would go nearly every week. Labyrinthe is one of the oldest extant role-playing systems in the United Kingdom, and has been influential over the ways in which people approach larp. In many ways, our initial design was created as a reaction to *Labyrinthe*. At the time of *FR*'s inception, *Labyrinthe* (which was run as a business) was poorly managed; it left all the work to volunteers (which is not appropriate when the game was organised to make a profit), failed to pay the owners of sites that were used, had failed to get proper insurance and suffered from many other practical problems[3].

1 Sometimes in this paper I will talk about the game's development in the third person. 'We' is Chris Cox and I. Chris runs Frail Realities with me, and we are in all ways equal, although I have major responsibility for the rules, and originally conceived the design. Between us we write the plots, but Chris also has a flair for characterisation which I lack, as well as having very strong interpersonal and judgmental skills which make him an excellent games master when the game is in progress.

2 "System" in UK larp is generally referred to a set of rules and a game world in combination. So, events are regularly run using the Labyrinthe system, which, although the game master may vary, uses the same world and the same game rules.

3 It is important to note that at time of writing Labyrinthe is under new management and, by all accounts, is now well organised and professionally run.

On a less practical side, I personally was fed up with a 'stock' sub-Tolkien fantasy game, with a rule system developed by numerous people over 20 years and as such, had become full of inconsistencies, making it overly complex. More importantly, to my personal tastes, was the way *Labyrinthe* ran; frequent stops for endless battle boarding that broke any flow of play. Having said all this, there were many features of *Labyrinthe* I liked very much: notably a pervasive ethos that supported a great deal of character development and variety.

There Must Be the Potential to Run the Game Very Regularly

Frequent games were familiar to those we played before, so when I started planning *Frail Realities* I wanted the *potential* to play often, even if it did not turn out that way. Combining character progression with frequent games requires a lot of "room" in the rules for the player character to become more powerful by developing new skills and abilities that broaden their capabilities whilst remaining within their characterisation.

A second consideration was one of character balance. If one player plays weekly and another once a year, then if they play the same characters all the time, the weekly player is going to become vastly more potent than the yearly one. Some games run without significant problems on this basis, mixing players of very different power levels together, and some players do not care if they are weak compared to others. I personally do not like it when weaker players find themselves marginalised. To solve this, we had to restrict how powerful a character could be played during each given event. This meant that people were allowed to play multiple characters, and if they wanted to play every event they would not be able to play their most powerful character at all of them. This worked well: players can still play weaker characters on events with potent ones if they wish to, and accordingly, the rules have been structured as such that it is not instantly fatal to them. Players have embraced the multiple character idea because there is a lot of possible variety in character choices so many people enjoy inventing and then portraying these multiple characters.

At present, *FR* runs a weekend long event every four to six weeks, since its inception. As both Chris and I have other commitments, and a great deal of effort goes into each event, we are unlikely to ever run more often than this.

The Rules Must Be Both Complex and Easy to Learn

Remembering rules, even simple ones, in the heat of things can be tricky. For this reason the rules structure needed to work to a simple set of principles so that, if a player did not know 'precisely' what something did, they could probably work it out. Some larp systems use *battle boarding*: a process whereby the player will have their statistics recorded on paper and a game master will, at intervals, adjust these as a result of damage taken or abilities used. This process breaks the flow of play considerably and I wanted to avoid it, even if it is a good way to keep the players honest.

The rules needed to be fairly complex to support regular play and character development. In order to rationalise these three issues – *extensive rules* that *everyone could remember* and *no need for game master battle boarding* – I developed *Frail Realities* based on a system of power consumption. Everyone has a certain amount of seven types of power. Any ability a player has costs power to use. This system applies to everything; for instance, tough characters use their body power points to soak wounds – they still get cut, but they are not actually wounded. Players can choose not to use body points to soak a wound (and often do for dramatic effect) and, obviously, will eventually run

out of power anyway. Those with a more magical bent use their essence power to bind elementals; scholarly types would use knowledge power to receive information.[4] The system works well in practice.

Battle boarding is done by the players without the presence of a game master; they carry yellow sheets with them (so they are clearly out of character) that are used to record power consumption without distracting them from the gameplay. A game master will sometimes check a battle board, but we have always found players to be both honest and correct.

Because *Frail Realities* has drifted away from the typical rule mechanics common in UK larp, people are sometimes discouraged from playing the game. Keeping track of seven types of power seems to be very complicated – at least until you actually see it in practice, when it becomes very intuitive.[5] Once you understand the basic principles, everything works the same way. Yet there is a lesson to be learnt here: drift too far from the accepted norm and you may alienate some potential players.

In a perfect world, I would like *Frail Realities* to be filmed and the viewer not to know that a game was being played. In practice, this is nearly impossible: the need for calls[6] of various kinds (damage, spells and so forth) means that any viewer would know what they were watching. However, it is possible to create the experience of being the protagonist in a film for the player. This aligns very closely with Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi's concept of *flow* (2002), in which players enter a state where they are not aware of anything except the activity they are participating in.

In order to create this sense of flow, everyone involved needs to know what they are doing. This means players need to know exactly where they stand: they must know how their abilities work and how they interact with others. In short, players need freedom to just get on with it, without the need to ask questions that break the immersion of the experience.

The Game Needs to Make a Profit

I have been managing the play-by-email company Silver Dreamer since 1994, and ran games for a living when *Frail Realities* was launched. Running a larp system, especially one that was going to run frequently, would take a great deal of time – and that time needed to pay for itself. This meant running events for either a lot of players, or charging more than most systems in the UK . I am not a huge fan of big events or camping; I prefer the time people are at games to be spent playing, not putting up and taking down tents. This dictated the need for indoor sites and a relatively small number of players. Indoor sites are more expensive, and smaller player bases mean less income.

A last consideration involves *crew*. Crew is what we call the collection of people who are not playing an event, but are there to support it. This includes any game masters (aka referees) and anyone along to play parts not portrayed by the players[7]. Crew members at UK larp events often have to pay –

4 The complete rules are available at www.frailrealities.com

5 Although character creation and advancement is fairly complex.

6 Almost without exception UK larp has players using 'out of character' speech for spell effects or damage calls. Many systems will have players call a number to represent the damage they are doing on every blow. We have sought to make such 'calls' less frequent in FR, such that damage or special effects are only called on occasional blows.

7 It is common in UK larp for crew who are not game masters to be called monsters. We do not like that word, as it tends to imply they are merely cannon fodder and do not get to do anything interesting.

sometimes they pay to camp, and almost always they pay to eat. We work our crew very hard and accept they are there to help give the players a good time. In exchange, we make the *FR* event free for them including food. This is important because it engenders a very biddable and professional attitude from crew members, and has meant our crew always put a great deal of effort into portrayal of parts, are always keen and work hard. Paying for the food and accommodation for the crew helps express how much we value their time.

All of these factors considered together explains why *Frail Realities* is more expensive than the majority of UK larps. This puts many people off, or means they cannot afford to play. Having said that, our attitude towards the crew as valuable members of the team and not put-upon lackeys means that we have a regular number of people who take advantage of the totally free crewing, and some who prefer to crew than play. We have also attracted some criticism from people who do not believe that we ought to be making any money from running games, believing that it ought to be free. Being paid for the event does prompt a further sense of responsibility from the organisers: even if we are tired or fed up, we go on doing our best because people are paying real money to participate.

To give this some perspective: our events in 2008 will all start on a Friday afternoon, finish on a Sunday afternoon and cost £125. Whereas UK larp averages around the £50 mark for a long weekend, though events usually involve camping.[8] The average price of events has barely changed in 10 or 20 years. *Labyrinthe* charged £18 a day (events running from nine in the morning until six at night with frequent out-of-character breaks) in 1986.

In spite of our initial aims, to date *Frail Realities* has barely made a profit. We also tend to sink most of our capital back into the game. In principle, it is set up to make money, but an event seldom actually will. In retrospect, it seems the only real way to make a decent profit in UK larps is to run large events at cheap sites[9]. However, we are happy with what we are doing and the *principle* that the game is run on a profit-making basis helps us maintain a professional, hard working attitude.

A Deep, Immersive World Is Needed

It is possible to create a very detailed game setting from whole cloth, inventing everything about a world and writing it down for player consumption. The problem with this is that players would then have to read and learn it all in order to fully immerse themselves in the game experience. Not everyone wants to do that.

I did not want yet another fantasy world with orcs, elves and other usual trappings. These worlds are good in that they are instantly recognisable to players, but bad for the very same reason – common fantasy tropes quickly become passé to players who have played in such worlds for some time. One obvious solution is to take the commonalities of fantasy and twist them in some way. This was a viable solution, but I had run a great deal of fantasy larps and, frankly, was personally a bit sick of it. Therefore I now had the attendant problem that would mean creating a whole new world, where players might feel a bit lost within the new context, unable to digest so much new material.

In the early 1990s I wrote and ran a tabletop game called *1815* which was set in the early 19th

8 These figures are an estimate from experience.

9 By way of comparison, Maelstrom events are around £50 and have 500-900 players, FR events are £120 and have 12-18 players (and half as many again as crew).

century, but with fantasy elements. I am fond of this era, and decided to use it as my base line. The idea that our world had been broken into pieces was adopted because it fit the practicalities of the larp environment – if the world was split into small realms, events could be run in fairly restricted surroundings, which meant disbelief could be more easily suspended. We could avoid situations where there is supposed to be a city down the road, but the characters cannot go there.

Working with history presented its own problems that I shall discuss later, but did have a major strength: the setting was recognisable to the players, even if they were far from experts. Accessibility became an issue: to play in a Regency setting would require a lot of investment in props and costume. Time was broken as well as place, allowing players to come from any historical era, meaning that almost any regular larper would have something in their costume cupboard they could use and people with other re-enactment costumes would be able to combine them with their more eclectic role-playing garb. Still, I made sure that 1815 was the 'latest possible date' so that we avoided any contemporary characters that sometimes tend to draw people into playing themselves, or overusing pop culture, which to my taste does not work well within the larp environment.

It cannot be stressed enough how much common frames of reference – in this case our own, real world, history – can enhance a larp experience. These frames help players to talk about all sorts of things and give them a common history and (mis)understanding, all from information they have absorbed through their daily lives. History encourages a sophisticated plot to be overlaid on the familiar. We emphasised to our players however that history didn't need to be accurate, as we didn't want players to compete over who was most knowledgeable of history.

Events Need to be Strongly Plotted

In the action style tradition of UK larps, plots can be broadly divided into two categories. The first of these is commonly called the *fest* game and features a large player base that is organised into competing factions. Most of these games feature some plot, although some have no plot introduced by the games masters, but rather allow all events to be player led[10]. At the opposite end of the spectrum we have the *linear* game, which is heavily plotted by the game master(s) and can often involve progressing from one encounter to another, with the players having no control over the events.[11]

For the purposes of *Frail Realities*, I wanted to review what I consider to be the best bits of these extremes. As a player, I want a strong plot, but I want to be able to manipulate the events as they unfold to the best of my ability. Linear games tend to resist players taking unexpected actions that might disrupt the intended story, with the game masters often keeping them from being successful in implausible ways to move the story on track. This occurs when the constructed narratives are weak; if a plot hinges on one or more things and the players do not co-operate (either wilfully or simply through being unaware of the direction they ought to be going in), the story falls apart. A common example of this is games with mysteries the players deduce rather quickly, thus short-circuiting the story the game masters have constructed, bringing the whole event to a crashing halt. To prevent this, game masters, will often try to keep players from taking actions that would crash the storyline, which usually leads to a great deal of player frustration. Humans do not think nor

10 Maelstrom and its predecessor, Omega are both notable examples of this.

11 A more academic analysis of these two types of games would fit them very neatly into Jesper Juul's ideas of emergent and progressive games (2005). Still, it must be said that many individual larp systems operating in the UK lie between these two extremes.

behave in a linear fashion. Therefore it is unrealistic to expect that they will progress neatly along a railroaded plot in a free form situation such as larp.

The answer to these problems lies in the way the plot of an event is structured. Considering the need to brief crew, prepare props and so on, complete events must be written beforehand – but also written in such a way that they can be altered as the game progresses. To this end, we use a branching and modular writing system (if the players choose X, then Y happens). This is keyed to a scene synopsis, which outlines how events will most likely unfold, including the few events that are totally outside of player control.

This ethic of player empowerment is sometimes simply a matter of making the right choice as a game master: if a player takes an action that would short circuit planned events, and it makes sense for that action to work, then we let them do it. There is a fine line to walk here: players cannot get away with every action, no matter how implausible, but do need to perform sensible actions.

The Players Need Freedom of Choice

There is a natural tendency in larp to think of rules as a restriction on player activity. I believe the opposite to be true: rules can and should empower the players. In a larp, power lies ultimately with the game masters. If the players have a clear set of rules, then they know exactly what they can do and how it works.

When reading the rules of UK larps, one will often find phrases like "*ask the games master how this ability works when you buy it*" or "*the effects of this ability are at the game master's discretion*".[12] We have tried to avoid all such things. Some abilities, notably those that involve divination require the game master to give the players an answer – but even in such cases, the player knows what they can ask and in what form the answer will be structured. Game systems often portray the idea that some abilities work according to circumstances that further empower players, at a game master's discretion. In practice however, this means that the power works only if the player is able to persuade the game master. Instead of empowering the player, it empowers the game master to make an entirely subjective decision.

In *Frail Realities*, we would prefer the players to know where they stand and how their abilities work. If a player has the mesmerism ability, then they can hypnotise a target and ask them questions. If the person mesmerised has a high willpower, then they might be able to lie. The player knows the rules, the person mesmerised knows the rules. It is unlikely a game master needs to intervene in any way. If the person mesmerised is asked the right questions, the player might gain knowledge that the game masters did not expect. Power has been given to the players: they know precisely what they can do, how it works, and learn under what circumstances it might not work.

The Game Needs to Be and Seem Fair

It seems that rules are often bent so that a player can create a specific character – one the rules would not ordinarily allow. This can lead to ill feeling, both justified and not. Ill feeling is not something you want in a game; it will detract from the pleasure of the players. To address this, *Frail Realities* needed a character creation system varied enough to cover almost all character ideas, one

12 Of course, sometimes when a larp rulebook prompts the player to contact the game master for an explanation, it is code for "we have not written this part yet".

that requires that players stick to it.

Some games have secret rules. These create problems that confuse players when they come into contact with them, or will be resentful because they do not understand these hidden rules. People also often assume that something they do not understand is somehow better than what they have. Hiding rules can prompt the players to fudge with the meaning, they might be misunderstood and misused, or they can be used simply to cheat. If the rule is secret, how is anyone to know that a fudge, mistake or if cheating is occurring?

That said, secret rules might be good for some games. They foster an atmosphere of suspicion and confusion, which could be the tone game masters wish to achieve. Yet fairness should not be sacrificed. Fairness, and the perception of fairness, often requires a fully written rule book that is available to everyone. Of course, this can be a massive project for a complex game world. In our case, the project is still ongoing. Though our rules are written down and play tested, they are still updated and tweaked – openly, of course.

Challenges of Historical Settings

In using an historical setting, certain difficulties present themselves. I shall briefly outline the major challenges and present the solutions we came up with in the context of *Frail Realities*.

History

Some people know very little of history, while some know a lot. Others presume they know a lot about history because they once read a book. People who know nothing about history worry at first, but soon realise that we have abused and changed it so much that the knowledge they have absorbed through watching films is reference enough to play. Interestingly, many people go away and read a book about whatever era they are playing a character from, or even base their characters on a historical novel they have just recently read.

We wanted to make clear that both attitudes, fiction and historical "fact", were equally viable worlds in *Frail Realities*. Indeed the name itself was intended to suggest that the "real" is fragile, not necessarily as it seemed or was as expected, and so on.

The biggest problems arise from players who know, or think they know much detail about a given era and hate the fact we changed it. The change is needed I feel, so that players feel free to reinterpret things and nobody gets held to fine points of historical detail. However, many people who feel very strongly that changing history is 'bad' and that the game should be in all ways accurate. The simple answer though, is that we run larp and not re-enactment. We do not want to get hung up on the details, or make our players feel that they 'must' act in certain ways. Oddly the real historical experts who have played with us had no problems with the way we abuse history – they tend to accept that history is highly malleable and largely constructed through a series of popular mythologies and retellings, rather than existing as "fact" (MacCallum-Stewart 2005 and White 1973).

The play of historical personages also raises issues. If players were allowed to play Sir Isaac Newton, then they would bring all sorts of baggage and assumptions of what they could do with him. In our setting, Newton would be a expertly skilled mathemagician, and probably an alchemist and a mage (he did write on such matters extensively). He would probably be better at these things than

a starting character would. Also, if someone were to play him, then nobody else ever could[13]. Thus, we have left notable historical figures solely to the preserve of the game master (though often played by crew).

Religion

Religion is an issue of significance – far more than the introduction of more secular magic as an active force. We use the real world, which implies real world religions. This is not a huge problem until we consider whether religious characters[14] have miraculous powers or not. If religious characters can call on the divine in some way, we need to define what they can do. More than that, we would need to define *who* can call on such powers. Do they need to be true to their faith, or do such powers work for anyone who is ordained. The game mechanics need to be visible in this case as well.

Taking Christianity as an example, the various churches have been filled with people of very different opinions and, in some cases, with very corrupt figures. Can the baby-eating Bishop of Bath and Wells cure diseases by calling on God? This creates a problem: if I am going to have only people who hold true to Christianity call on the divine, then I need to define what a true Christian is. There are certainly players who would be upset and alienated had I done this. Considered in broader contexts, larp has been vilified by various church groups as subversive and anti-religion. This was a major sticking point in the early design phase: what to do about religion?

The dilemma was solved by removing all contemporary real-world religions from the game and replaced them with the worship of Mithras and Isis. Historically, I made the 'old' church based in Florentine very corrupt, which takes the historical place of the Catholic Church in the Middles Ages and Renaissance. The history of this fictional church fits the historical events fairly well and the tenets of the Church matched the way Christianity was practised in the era. Creating a fictional church also made people happier when giving sermons, praying and so forth. Isis and Mithras are universalised in the game world. This means that all "true" religions in the game are some form of worship for one or both of these deities, though often by another name. The whole business is rather complex, but in essence religion was purposely shifted to a fictional footing, whilst still allowing various religious factions to retain their historical role.

Because religious matters are fictionalised, no offence is caused and players are willing to fully embrace any religious beliefs their character might hold. Religion has become a very strong force in the game. Players of religious characters fully embrace their role and do not shy away from certain actions because they feel it might be cause for upset or be in some way ridiculing or insulting someone's heartfelt real world beliefs.

Women

In many historical eras, women are second class citizens. Certainly, if we take the early 19th century as an example, some women excelled in fields normally reserved for men. However, women would always be doing this either on sufferance or in disguise. I wanted women to have the same options as men in *Frail Realities* and, more than that, I did not want them to be "allowed" to do things considered a male preserve, but I wanted it to be accepted as a norm. Women who fight, for

13 The Frail Realities cosmology does not allow a person to be alive in two places at once.

14 I use character here in the sense of an individual portrayed by a crew member or player.

instance, should not be seen as strange freaks, but as a norm.

Religion helped solve this: by making the church a dual one, with a male and female aspect, we postulate a world where women's rights have had active, supernatural backing throughout the majority of history, and women are seen as equals in every way. This means women can play whatever they like, just like the men. There are people who really despise this change; none of them are women.

Gunpowder

The 19th century means gunpowder and guns. If projectile firing guns of any kind are used, then everyone needs to wear eye protection. Cap guns can be used and shots called, but the props are very expensive and it never seems to work well. It is odd that many people will happily speak vocals[15] and point for spell effects, but refuse to do the same by pointing a gun and calling the shot. Perhaps this is simply because we know that we can't conjure a ball of flame and throw it at an enemy, but that if we take a rifle and fire it at them, they will die.

We removed gunpowder as a reliable force from the game world (it exists for the purposes of blowing things up but is otherwise too unstable to be used in small quantities), instead using longbows and crossbows, and having *galvanic cannon* for purposes of artillery. The result annoys some people, but generally the way we have set this up remains true in spirit to the era.

Conclusion

Frail Realities received a curious reception. We often hear it spoken about at other events as a "high end" game, one that demands a lot from players, but rewards the effort they put in. Almost everyone in the UK larp community seems to have heard of it, and the things they have heard have been good. However, we are not swamped with players, and though the game has the numbers to happily tick along, it could easily take more. Partially, this lack of players relative to the public perception of the game is a result of our relatively high prices. Additionally, many UK larpers play in order to socialise, drink with their friends and have an occasional fight while doing a little role-playing. This is not really the ethos of *FR*: our events are challenging, intense experiences and perhaps intensity is not what the majority of UK players want. However, a proper discussion of this is probably best left for another paper. This paper has sought to look at the design choices made when creating *Frail Realities*, not because they are necessarily the 'right' choices, but rather to illustrate the design process. I am well aware that this will be read by larpers from many different countries, and I have little knowledge of the international scene: as such, there may be things discussed here which are the norm in other counties, or radically different.

Most importantly, the process of design is one of creating the game that *you* want. There are few, if any, definite answers to anything. If what is written here sheds some light on your own thoughts, whether because you think it a good idea, or because you violently disagree, then the purpose of this paper has been met.

15 With no exception that I am aware of, all UK larps have spell effects that function by the player speaking some sort of spell vocal, often followed by an out-of-character statement of the spell effect. Sometimes the statement can be dispensed with: the target may know what the spell does, or the effect may be obvious from the words spoken.

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Ludography

Frail Realities (2004-ongoing) Chris Cox, Justin Parsler. http://www.frailrealities.com

Labyrinthe (1985-ongoing) originally conceived by Pete Garner additional rules written by many people over the years, notably (in rough chronological order), Justin Parsler, Ian Knope, Bruno Murray, Jan Mcmanus and Mark Cox. Labyrinthe has also had many directors over the years -again, in chronological order: Pete Garner, Jan Mcmanus, Simon Morgan and presently Andy Byatt. http://www.labyrinthe.co.uk/

Maelstrom (2004-ongoing) Matthew Pennington and other. Profound Decisions. http://www.profounddecisions.co.uk

Omega (1996-2003) Matthew Pennington, Paul Wilder, Juilet Morgan (now Wilder) and Elle Smith. http://www.omegalrp.co.uk/

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High Resolution Larping: Enabling Subtlety at Totem and Beyond

Andie Nordgren
Photos by Rasmus Høgdall

This article introduces the idea that we can describe game interaction in terms of resolution.and describes some of the methods used in the larp Totem to achieve "high resolution" game interaction. These techniques handled conflict resolution, love making, character creation and ensemble construction, building upon the methods developed in earlier Nordic larps.

Coming home from *Totem*[1] in July 2007, a tribal game made for about 25 players set in a distant future of lost culture, I was grasping for a way to describe the strong emotions, the fantastic interaction and how real the game and the world we created had felt. I had experienced the same once before, at *Mellan himmel och hav*, the "positive power drama" set in a space colony that I played in 2003. What was it that made these games so powerful to me and other players, and how could they be understood and compared to other games?

I think some live action role-playing games are a bit like being inside of a movie, while watching it at the same time. You and other players are telling a story that you get to be inside of and experience at least some parts of it as if they are real, as if it they are happening to you. But it is still a little more like watching a movie than experiencing something yourself. I have enjoyed these kinds of games immensely, some examples being *En stilla middag med familjen* and *System Danmarc*, but they never compared to *Totem* and *Mellan himmel och hav* in the "realness" and the power they had to touch me.

So here is the idea: Perhaps we should talk about detail. Not in the setting, or in the props and character backgrounds, but about the detail of the communication between characters. Maybe the interaction in the tightly knit tribe at *Totem* felt so real and powerful because we had managed to create a game world and vision about the game that enabled subtlety across a wide spectrum of possible diegetic interactions. The experience felt, in the words of this age of digital games, like *high resolution* game interaction.

What could this computer terminology have to do with role-playing? I would like to use it to shift the attention when talking about quality of games away from the props, realism of game worlds and detailed character descriptions, to the *detail* and *quality* of interaction. What I want to talk about is not player skill and the material we have available to immerse ourselves into a character and game world, but what tools and agreements we have for making game interaction work. How do we enable or disable subtle diegetic communication? Do we like games that come close to the richness of non-game interaction in all areas, or do we like games that are more abstract and thus further from "real" communication? How do our choices in game design and preparation affect the interaction available to the players when portraying or immersing into their characters? These are some of the questions I'd like to explore.

1 The Totem website www.nioma.dk/totem is mainly in Danish, but features a very illustrative photo gallery.

Meaninful arms in Totem.

Thresholds and Boundaries of Communication

When talking about the game interaction, a first consideration is subtlety in communication. We can talk about a threshold: what does it take for my communication to be unambiguously interpreted as in-game communication by other players? How obvious do I need to be? How do other players know that they can comfortably respond to some act of communication by me, or interaction between me and another player inside the game? I use the words *in-game* and *off-game* because there are rules, agreements and considerations that are part of how we play but not necessarily part of the diegetic world.

The games we make and play have different *affordances* – they allow us, based on open agreement or common culture, to express ourselves inside the game using different levels of detail. A lot of players have participated in games where sitting in a corner silently would be perceived as "not really playing right now" rather than something the character does, or a game where a conflict would only be recognized by other players if it was acted out in the magnitude of a bar fight, or through obviously snide remarks in an otherwise polite situation. If we are forced to interact using a clunky and obvious playing style, we can talk about this experience as a low resolution game experience. If we feel that subtle gameplay will work, the experience is of higher resolution because it contains the potential for great detail.

These issues are sometimes reduced to a question of "good players" (who supposedly understand subtleties and can play in a subtle style) versus "bad players" (who don't), or "good larps" (containing such subtle play) versus "bad larps" (that don't). Instead of this blunt reduction, I think we should talk about how the possibility for subtle play is a group process, not so much a question of skill of individual players. It is about where the players collectively think the threshold is, and where they draw the line between what they choose to interpret as in-game or off-game communication.

Different games aim for different interaction resolution, and rightly so. Low-res games can be tons of fun, and a lot of people consider the fun of games to be that they are not very much like our ordinary lives at all.

The resolution of a game experience is not only about what detail and subtleties we can use when talking to people, or what amount of our body language or winks other players can read from us and use in the feed forward loop of the game. It is also about what parts of life we can communicate about inside the game. Outside games, the possible topics and actions are dictated by social context. Games are no different – only we have to constantly evaluate anything that happens towards three sets of social rules, and negotiate the borderland between them. In *Rules of Play* (Salen & Zimmerman 2003) a three-fold framing of player consciousness is discussed[2]: The person playing a game has the role of a *character* in a simulated world, the role of a *player* in a game, and the role of a *person* in the larger social setting. When we perceive some act of communication while playing a game – a look, body language, spoken words – we have to decide if it falls inside the game or outside it, and if it is meant for us as character, player or person. Communication directed at us as players and characters fall inside the game agreement. There are a lot of borderline cases, usually concerned with topics such as love, sex and aggression. These are things we usually represent inside games through rules for simulation, letting these processes address the player rather than the person or the character. Sometimes there is just a common understanding that these topics should not be fully explored inside the game even if specific rules are missing, and the game culture helps define to what level they can be played out.

We are trying to portray and experience human relationships through our in-game interaction. If these relationships are limited to a lot of non-subtle play or rule based simulation in certain areas, they will likely feel less lifelike than the off-game relationships and interaction we compare them to.

But the boundaries we use for demarcating the game from real life are usually there for good reasons. We don't want players to get injured while playing, and we don't want off-game relationships to be disturbed just because we want to portray similar relationships inside a game. But if we are aiming for a game interaction experience that is high resolution across the board, we should think of ways to bring these topics back inside the game with the possibility for subtle interaction between characters while still upholding the boundaries between life and play, between character, player and person, that entice us to play games in the first place.

Diegetic rules is one such method – you take a topic that is normally placed outside the game or simulated in an abstract fashion and try to weave into the fiction a way of portraying these relationships and processes that enables subtle interaction and that does not threaten to cause harm outside the game. *Ensemble play*, working with the players as a group before the game and letting them influence parts of the story and game world presents another way of increasing the potential for high resolution interaction since it can take players to a common understanding of where game boundaries are that is built during workshops rather than based on current trends in the gaming culture at hand. Both methods were used at *Totem*. Using that game as an example, I will discuss some game mechanics and design choices of the *Totem* game that enabled a lot of high resolution interaction in the hope that these examples can be useful for organizers and players when deciding what kind of game to make or play.

2 Originally from sociologist Gary Alan Fine, who researched tabletop role-playing cultures ethnographically. He based this distinction on Erving Goffman's frame analysis.

Practising Ars Amandi in a workshop before Totem. (Photograph by Rasmus Høgdall)

The Totem Game

The vision for the diegesis of *Totem* was a world where there had never been a dramatic apocalypse. Civilization had peaked, and then slowly deteriorated. More and more of culture and knowledge was lost, and all that was left in the Nordic countries were old overgrown ruins and small scattered tribes of people trying to cope in a harsh world by hunting, gathering and some herding. The game was set a couple of thousand years after civilization as we know it.

Peter S. Andreasen, who had the original vision for the game, he says that the first inspiration for the theme and genre came from a documentary about the indigenous people of New Guinea.[3] It took nearly six years for the idea to grow into the actual production of a game. The use of diegetic rules was a design decision from the start, heavily inspired by the use of the *Ars Amandi* method in *Mellan himmel och hav* that declared arms as the primary erogenous zones and sexual tools, instead of using some representation of intercourse[4].

The game setting was a rite of passage where two tribes with mostly similar cultures met to ritually introduce their young to adult life, and let the old ones pass away. One tribe was a matriarchy, the other a patriarchy. Both tribes shared a culture where people in the tribe all fit into a strict status hierarchy, and everyone had a totem animal that was a strong marker of personality. Before the rite, the young had no identity or totem animal and could not participate in the rituals of adulthood. They were slowly introduced to all parts of adult life during three days of rituals, before leaving the site as adults.

3 An email interview.

4 This game and the methods used are described in two articles in Beyond Role and Play by Emma Wieslander (2004a, 2004b).

Both tribes were led by the dominant gender, who also could take several mates. Status fights were never carried out between the genders, only within them. Two strong themes in the game were the clash of these two cultures, and the general loss of culture where more habits, stories, rituals and explanations were forgotten every time the tribes tried to reproduce their rite of passage.

The game location was a destroyed farm in the Danish countryside. The houses had burned down, leaving behind a set of ruins overgrown with weeds and a small patch of woods. This created a closed setting where the organizers had built a fireplace, a ritual circle, a sweat lodge and some other smaller places that were cleared to make arenas for play. Players slept on hay beds and sheep skins in a small shed.

The game was played by 24 players, with four additional organizers who portrayed the elders who led the rituals. It was preceded by two mandatory workshops where tribe culture, characters and relationships were created, starting with the original vision of the organizers about what loss of culture could mean in the futuristic tribal setting.

Aiming for High Resolution at Totem

Totem used a lot of methods to bring its world and inhabitants to life. The workshops were used to establish the methods that were later used in the game.

Characters as Relationships

The first thing you notice when making characters for a closely knit tribe, is that there is really only one thing to care about: The position of your character compared to the other members of the tribe. As there will be no need to introduce yourself to any outsiders, all labels, titles, backgrounds and professions are useless. The sometimes very tangible flow of status and connections between tribe members is the only thing that has any meaning, and this is your entire universe. So how do you create this universe in less than four workshop days?

You could say that characters at *Totem* were very thin. They were developed through a meditative dream journey led by one of the organizers in one of the pre-game workshops. Players were lying on the floor, and the organizer talked them through flying down over a vast landscape and down towards a group of people walking. Where are you in the group? Are you a leader, or a follower? Is there someone walking beside you? Do you feel comfortable, lonely, angry or something else? This very bare bones idea of your character was all we had when we started creating the group relationships through other workshop methods.

There were *frozen moments*, where scenes from the past were constructed with the players in the scene frozen in time. These could be changed by the other players, and short live scenes could be played and discussed. There was another dream journey where the totem animal was found, which added a little more about your character as an individual. The first syllable of the animal was also your name. We went back 10 years in time, exploring who we had loved and lost during the childhood years, walking around the room finding and losing each other; characterizing the relationships. The status relationships were also explored, and an alpha male and female was chosen for each tribe, fighting it out using the *Ars Ordo* method for resolving conflicts (see below). We also sat in a ring and created specific relationships by tossing twine into a web of relationships. All of the methods focused on building group relationships. Even though many of us still felt unprepared

after the last workshop, we hade created a culture that was a working framework for making sense of the world inside the game.

All these methods focused on the group interaction rather than character background, which greatly supported subtle communication inside the game. Playing within the boundaries of what position of status you yourself were able to claim within the group could feel a bit dangerous at first; how separated am I really from my character? I think we all felt ok enough with it in the end since we had the very clear purpose of using the status positions to build what was one of the main cultural features of the *Totem* tragedy – finding your place within the hierarchy.

The workshops also worked on the player relationships. When you have acted like screaming monkeys hunting for mango, everyone has already embarrassed themselves in front of each other, and can afford to take game relationships to a more serious level without any significant risk of further embarrassment.

One of the main lessons of *Totem* is that letting go of the individual character and focusing almost solely on the group and its relationships can be a very effective way of enabling high resolution game interaction and strong individual dramatic arcs. If you can build a group of players *and* a group of characters, the game world doesn't need a very detailed history, description of politics, technology and races and so on to come to life. When the relationships in the game feel real, the game world feels real. You have the ability to pull the action in the game from the clunky levels of kings and politics, down into the very subtle shifts and processes in the group.

I think every player at *Totem* experienced a strong personal narrative formed by the changes in their relationship environment on the way to adult life in the three days of ritual. Like the character *Rå*, who felt sure about who was going to take him as a mate, was wrong about this and very unhappy

Practising Ars Ordo in a workshop before Totem. (Photograph by Rasmus Høgdall)

about it, fell in love with a girl from the other tribe (taboo) and was subsequently forced to be the mate of the alpha female in his own. In the end however, *Rå* won the place as the first of the men in his tribe just like his father had hoped.

Tools for Love and Hate

We use rules when we cannot trust players to represent a topic inside the game in a safe, coherent way that doesn't spoil the game. Using diegetic rules is a way of moving these topics back inside the game world rather than excluding them or representing them with rules that are clearly off-game in the player's head.

Totem used diegetic rules for handling lust and aggression. The *Ars Amandi* method developed by Emma Wieslander for *Mellan himmel och hav* was used to handle lust and intimacy. This meant that in the world of *Totem*, love and affection were displayed by the touching of arms. This method works well because it gives the players a high resolution possibility to show affection and act out sexual relationships without (at least formally) threatening those parts of the player's everyday life. This means, that in situations where you in everyday life perhaps would have the impulse to be physically close, you can transform that impulse into a believable action inside the game (touching someone's arms) instead of pushing the thought out of your head or engaging in an act of simulation much further from the activity you had an impulse to engage in.

Violence and aggression is another part of human life that is usually represented through rules in larps. A question when you want to bring these elements back inside the game is how you can make it costly to lose a fight without making the price real, physical hurt for the losing player. This was solved in *Totem* by a method for status fights dubbed *Ars Ordo*. The method has several stages. The first is eye contact: If you lock eyes with someone, the one with lower status will look down. This small kind of status fight will happen all the time in everyday life, confirming the status positions in the tribe. It passes in seconds, and no-one else usually notices. This happens until there is someone who won't look down, and thus chooses to pick a fight. If none of the contestants will look down, they enter a second phase where they move towards each other. By this time there is an audience, other tribe members notice that something is going on. At this stage, looking down costs you more socially than it did when no one was looking. If the conflict is still not resolved, sound and more movement are added to the struggle. Through roaring, snarling and trying to make yourself bigger you try to make your opponent look down and back off. By now it is a matter for the whole tribe. Everyone is looking, and the one who eventually backs down by looking down can rightfully be forced to the ground, crawling to show submission. If it seems the conflict cannot be resolved by the two people involved, the other tribe members decide it for them by standing behind and supporting the one they think should come out on top.

This method created lots of opportunities for high resolution play, both for the two players involved in a fight and for the rest of the tribe. There was a clear outlet for aggression with very obvious consequences for the loser, and since the shift in status positions would also affect the other members of the tribe almost everyone got some form of interaction from every single status fight and from the constant shorter instances of eye contact that never escalated into one.

A sensitive aspect of how this method was used in *Totem* was that an initial version of the status hierarchy was established during the workshops by using the *Ars Ordo* method. If you could not claim an elevated position in the character group hierarchy, your character would not be of high

Totem. (Photograph by Rasmus Høgdall)

status. Peter S. Andreasen explained that this part of the method can "backfire" since players can't use game rules to simulate higher status than they can claim through the social fights of *Ars Ordo* that substitutes this kind of rules.

It would be interesting to see if this method or a modified version could be used in other fictional settings and still feel as believable as it did in *Totem*.

Visual Relationships

Another part of tribal life was the ritual painting of the arms and face of every tribe member. The face and arms were first covered in mud that dried to a gray-white mask, upon which the sign for your totem animal and other decorations were painted. Painting everyone was a tribal matter, but you were generally painted by a mate or would-be mate. The dominant gender would paint their own totem sign on their mates and be painted with the same sign in return by the submissive partner as a signal of acceptance of the relationship. Since you could not paint yourself, the beauty and attention paid to your arms and face became a sign of status as well. An effect of making love using the *Ars Amandi* method was that your arm painting was thoroughly messed up and had to be lovingly (or not so lovingly) repainted again when the lovemaking was over. Painting your sign on someone when taking them as a mate was also a strong signal of ownership, and the male carrying the sign of the alpha female in the matriarchy would gain a lot of status from this. Who painted whom, with how much detail and care, and with what signs all signaled your relationships and status clearly to other players, and also left visual marks of your interaction that could be seen by players who were not there to witness it at the time it happened. The act of painting each other was very intimate, if somewhat cold when new layers of mud were added. Some examples of the strong interaction it enabled for my character Må include:

Må was painted the first time by her love from last summer. It became a last fleeting memory of what had been, and a sort of good-bye ritual for the two.

When Må woke up the second day at the ritual site, somewhat late, she knew it was now allowed for her and the other females in the tribe to take mates. When she came down to the fireplace and started looking at the men of the tribe, she suddenly saw wolves painted on what felt like all of them. Ulv, the alpha female has taken three mates, and since there are only seven men in the tribe and four women all in all, Må quickly realizes that if she wants to keep her position as second in command she needs two mates for herself. One she took out of love, the other one for pure status reasons.

When Må took her first mate, she knew one of the other women wanted the same man. Må didn't care much since she perceived herself as above her in status, but took the opportunity to paint her totem sign on the male and thus seal the marriage when the other woman was not present. When she came back to the fireplace later, no interaction was going on between Må and her mate, but the sign of the seagull, Må's totem, was clearly painted on his arms marking what had happened. The other woman was outraged, and later tried to erase Må's totem signs from his arms by painting them over with fresh clay, a provocation that escalated into a full blown status fight over the male.

These stories are only fragments of the interaction in *Totem*, but visualizing the relationships by ritualistic paintings provided a multitude of opportunities for highly subtle communication.

No Revolution

The overall theme of the game was tragedy – the loss of culture. There was to be no new inventions, no new tales, and above all no revolution in the game. Every player should basically spend the game finding their position in the given cultural hierarchy, which would in most cases result in some sort of tragedy. Perhaps you ended up at the bottom of the hierarchy, perhaps the love of your life ended up as someone else's mate. Perhaps you fought your way to the top just to find it lonely and a heavy burden. But find your place you would, and whatever you could remember of what had happened during your rite of passage, your knew you would pass on to new children of the tribe one day when it was time for you to complete the adult life you had just entered.

The theme of tragedy enabled high resolution play by creating a boundary for diegetic actions that was at the same time strong and light. It helped make it very simple to interpret and make sense of interaction in the game, and acted as a common safety net for decisions about where the story should go as a whole that made it easy to create meaning in individual game situations. But at the same time it was a light enough guidance not to disrupt these interactions with too many off-game considerations. It could be called a milder form of diegetic rule that was interwoven in the tribe culture, and thus became a strong part of the story for every character while guiding the game story as a whole in a general direction. It was not in the minds of the people in the tribes to try to change their way of life.

Closing Notes

There were many more methods used, and there is much more to tell about *Totem* as a game, but I

Totem. (Photograph by Rasmus Høgdall)

have touched upon some of the aspects of the game that helped create high resolution interaction.

A broader philosophical question raised by the use of diegetic rules and an aim for high resolution game play is how close we want our games to resemble everyday life when it comes to the realism of relationships. Larps are powerful since they put us into bodily experiences of relationships. Rules and abstractions form a safety net that help us keep game realities separate from non-game realities.

In the *Male Workshop* at Knutpunkt 2006 (Pedersen 2006), an early version of the *Ars Ordo* method was played by a group of 30 people who spent half an hour doing alpha male exercises and had only paper thin characters when trying the method. This basically positioned players against each other, and clearly this was no fun at all for some of the participants. When asked how the workshop was part of the *Totem* process, Andreasen described it as a very raw embryo of an idea for *Ars Ordo* that was hastily thrown into live testing. He doesn't think any character could have held up as a safety net for the egos in that room after all the exercises in male dominance. The test made the importance of having a clear definition of why a method such as *Ars Ordo* was used very obvious. It would have to be a tool for character communication, not for simulation on the player level or a tool for people to battle out real life status.

It could be argued that when we have access to increasingly subtle diegetic communication, the things communicated in a game could spill over into our lives outside of the game, making it harder to uphold a sharp boundary between ourselves and the characters we play. This is probably true on some levels. Our bodies and minds have experiences inside the game that are so similar to the processes that make up everyday relationships, that sometimes we can't help but to react to them as a person as well, not as player or character. High resolution games can touch us deeply, perhaps

because when we reach a certain level of subtlety we can't really hide much of ourselves behind the character even if it is obvious that we are playing a game and the character has its own reasons for action.

Some would argue that this is bad, that the character should always be a separate entity and that people who let their "personal feelings" slip into the game are bad players since they couldn't keep the distinction clear enough. I think we will always have to live with the blurred boundaries and borderline play, but if we understand a bit more about what parts of humanity we want to enact on the character, player or person level, and in what resolution, we will be better equipped to see and negotiate the boundaries in ways that benefit ourselves and our collective game experiences.

A question I have asked myself after comparing *Totem* and *Mellan himmel och hav* to other enjoyable but more low resolution games, is whether the type of high resolution play I have come to appreciate in these games is only possible in games played by an ensemble. I hope that this is not the case, and that the idea that we can talk about game interaction in terms of resolution can bring some insights as to how you may want to play or create your next game.

Ludography

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Walking the White Road: A Trip into the Hobo Dream

Bjarke Pedersen & Lars Munck

On a warm autumn morning, six hobos began the most important journey of their life: To bury their best friend and greatest love. What needed to be done was clear to them, and as the journey took them closer to their goal, they could see their own salvation peak at the horizon. This article describes the preparations and execution of a larp co-created by all players and the experiences and techniques used to make a truly life changing game.

The Open Road. (Photograph by the Road Knights)

In *The White Road* the participants played road knights who walked approximately 40 kilometers on an open road to reach the sea. It was played over three days, from September 8 to September 10 in 2006, on the roads between Copenhagen and Frederiksund. The game had six players – three of them men, three of them women.

The White Road is inspired by the Danish "road knight" hobo culture[1]. The road knights follow a strict code of rules: They do not do drugs, steal or beg for money. They are often seen equipped with baby carriages, alcohol and Danish flags. They wear ragged makeshift uniforms consisting of old discarded uniform jackets, a cap or hat, and a lot of pins and medals. When they have been through the initiation process, which lasts a year, they are christened by their peers. [2]

1 "Landevejsridder" in Danish.

2 For more information, see www.landevejsridder.dk and www.vagabondavisen.dk (in Danish).

The Knights of The White Road pose for the camera. (Photograph by the Road Knights)

The players of *The White Road* portrayed a group of devastated individuals, total strangers to each other, each of whom have discovered a burning spark of hope through a person they met on their journeys. This person was very important to the characters, but he is now deceased and all that remains are his ashes. This person is still, even after his death, the most powerful symbol of hope and enlightenment the characters have ever experienced in their life. He was a guide, a father figure, a lover and a friend, and he had a different, but always a special relationship with each character. The remains of the person lie inside an old milk bucket, to be scattered at sea at the end of the journey. The focus of the larp was to explore the carefree world of the road knights, to play a character who had hit rock bottom and only recently begun the process of rebuilding his existence.

The title of the game was at first chosen at random. Later in the process, it transformed into an image of an inverted world where the sky is dark and the road looks like it is made of chalk, so bright that it hurts the eyes. The players took this image and made it a focal point throughout the game; striving to see the road as sacred ground and treat it with respect.

The original idea was to make a road larp, a larp adaptation of the road movie. During their journey the characters hunt for freedom and the dream of a better life, wondering what lies beyond the next hill. The focus of the larp was not in the endless possibilities the characters could choose from, as seen in so many larps. Instead, the purpose of the trip was made very clear from the beginning: The players knew the route to the sea and had agreed to be true to this narrative. Thus, the motivations of the characters were already fixed. What the players were left to explore were all the little stories and emotions on the road towards this common goal. Simply put, *The White Road* was about walking from point A to point B and seeing what happens in between.

The Process

This larp was somewhat different in structure, process and execution than most other larps because of two main factors. Firstly, because it had a heavy focus on each player's ability to create the larp proactively and in cooperation with the other players, and not rely on an organiser's passive and dictated views of how the larp should be understood or run. Secondly, because it was made under the vow of the Dogma '99 manifesto (Fatland & Wingård, 2003). The manifesto sets strict rules on what is allowed in the creation of the game.

The Dogma '99 manifesto concerns itself with eliminating all excess in a larp in order to find the true essence of larping. The manifesto defines larp as *"a meeting between people who, through their roles, relate to each other in a fictional world"*. Since this is all you need to larp, you can cut away all of the excess you normally tend to believe you need in order to larp. For example, in Dogma '99 all objects are what they are, so a boffer sword would be nothing more than a boffer sword in the larp, not a dangerous steel blade. Game mechanics as a whole are forbidden; what is possible in real life is possible in the larp. This eliminates many possibilities from an organiser's point of view, but at the same time it forces you to focus on the single most important part of larping: the relationships between characters. At *The White Road* we broke one rule. We did not use real human remains in the urn. This was for legal reasons. The authors of the Dogma '99 manifesto were contacted, and we were permitted to still call it a Dogma larp in spite of this small violation of the vow.

Due to these design constraints, *The White Road* was organised collectively.[3] All players were organisers and no single person had the right to overrule another's idea of a character or their understanding of the world around him. The larp was created in discussions with all players present. No characters or other texts were written about the larp. Only practical issues were written down. This made the idea of the larp, characters, and relations between the characters set in the mind of the players in a more natural way. It also prevented players from making mistakes about the game; what you, as a player, remembered was also what your character would remember. Just as relationships in real life are extremely difficult to put on paper, so were the relationships in our game.

As a part of the character development process, we were in spired by the real road knights' baptism. Prospect road knights are to submit to strict rules and live a full year outdoors without receiving any social welfare. If they are found worthy, they are then baptised at the yearly summit and given a new name that symbolises a personal event or trait. So in *The White Road*, the player did not have any say concerning the name of their own character. The other players found a name that characterised the individual and it made a great base for the further development of the character.

The players met three times before the game, using 15 to 20 hours in total to create the larp. The time was intentionally limited, in order to avoid overdoing the game. Normally, when you organise a larp you tend to go into meticulous detail about various aspects of the larp. This consumes immense amounts of time and often has little or no impact on the game. One of the main goals when we created *The White Road* was to make a larp that did not exhaust the organisers so all the creative energy was gone when the larp begun. By playing in the real world all the problems, such as finding a location or building a setting were eliminated. We only needed to concern ourselves with character relations and a very short verbal description of the characters' background, costumes and

3 Martine Svanevik (2005) has described how to cohesively create larps collectively. The paper was not known to the organizers until after the larp, but the ideas presented in it reflect almost exactly our process with The White Road. It describes the process effectively and it's a great practical guide for organizers and players alike. We recommend it highly.

baby carriages, which is an iconic symbol of the road knights.

Making the Real Tangible

Most larps are held in private spaces with no interaction between players and non-players. Since *The White Road* would be held on the roads of Denmark, we had to take into account that there would be relevant communication between players and non-players. This had the potential of leading players into problems. We had to show responsibility and common sense when interacting with people who had not volunteered to participate in *The White Road*. On the other hand, we did not want this consideration to become a hindrance to playing for the participants.

We decided to eliminate this problem by not considering the game world as a created reality placed in a fraction of the real world, but instead decided to view the entire ordinary world as the game world. Merging the game world and the ordinary world gives endless possibilities to the players, since the merged world becomes vast and the players can go anywhere. However, since a route had already been agreed on, this would not be a problem in *The White Road*.

One of the consequences of making the real world the same as the game world was that the players had to treat everyone they met as equal characters. Instead of trying to work around them, they had to invite them to participate, even though they had to do it without their knowledge and in a respectful manner. This extreme expansion of liminal space and the consequences thereof had to be handled in a way that enabled the players to cope with the massive input from the real world.

Because road knights are commonly known as drunks, we could not deny the fact that alcoholism should be a part of our characters. But using alcohol in larps is usually not very successful. When

Knight at night. (Photograph by Road Knights)

people get too drunk, they tend to default back to their own drunken selves, leaving the character behind. But used as a ritual method, like in *Hamlet* (2003), we wanted to explore its possibility to expand the liminality. The inspiration came from one player and his simple experiences with hangovers and drunkenness – start the game with a heavy hangover, and keep that feeling going.

We decided to experiment with *the afterburner method*. The night before the game the players made the final preparations for the game and had a wet party in costume, but not in character. The next day the players woke up in-character and hung over. This fit the road knight mindset perfectly, and afterwards the players kept the buzz going by drinking moderate quantities. The point was to avoid getting overly drunk, but at the same time dampen senses and enable players to cope and interact with the real world. The method worked flawlessly.

> I lay awake enjoying the heat and enduring the intense snoring coming from Hvalrusen sleeping next to me. After an hour or so I start to sober up and the snoring gets on my nerves, so I defy the cold autumn night, dragging my sleeping-bag outside the scruffy tent. I go through my pram, increasingly irritated, but with a sigh of relief I find an almost full bottle of cheap martini. Lying in my dirty and smelly sleeping-bag on the cold ground and feeling the booze warming and relaxing me I can only think about how happy I am. Complete freedom, from myself and from the world. And under the stars I eventually fall into a blissful drunken sleep with an empty bottle in my hand. (Player comment.)

The Experience

We found the experience of playing the larp simply amazing. The joint creation process made all players equal, which made them all feel equally important. The very short production time gave the game a great momentum and made the beginning of the game almost overwhelming.

A great surprise to the players was the way the real world forced the characters upon the players: truck drivers we encountered constantly greeted us, confirming our road knight characters as real. When trucks passed by they honked and waved and expected us to wave back. This ritual confirmed that the two different groups, the road knights and the truck drivers, both had their daily life on the road and thus shared a kinship. This experience gave the players confidence in their characters and helped them believe that they would not be exposed as players. During the larp, non-players never exhibited any mistrust toward the players; in their eyes, the characters were real. This left no room for the players to react without the character: The players did not have to "perform", they could just "be". The reactions from the bystanders were very friendly and positive almost every time. This is due to the fact that road knights are very well-liked in Denmark, which naturally helped the players a lot.

The way society reflected our social status as road knights was extremely interesting. On the one hand, we accepted our place on the lowest level of society, while on the other we were empowered by the romantic/symbolic value intrinsic in our role as road knights, envied by people because "the free follow the road". We were simply in awe of the way we were given special status and treated with the utmost respect. An example of this was when two of the female players went to a supermarket to use the remaining money on a case of beer, and discovered they did not have enough money to pay for it:

> Foremost, I remember feeling a little sorry for the young clerk behind the supermarket register

> who had to tell us we didn't have enough money. The line behind us had grown while I – in my rather besotted state – fumbled with the few coins we had, trying by some miracle to make them multiply in my hand. All eyes where on us by then. Normally, the embarrassment would have been agonising, but during our short time on the road we had all hit rock bottom and were by then used to those pitiful looks that met us everywhere without ever reaching our eyes. What I didn't expect was the man standing right behind us in the line helping us to the money we needed. He stood there, an average family dad, with his little son by his hand and smiled as he gave me the DKK 10 we needed, right in front of all the other customers. Damn, it still brings tears to my eyes to think of him. He made that moment magical. (Player comment.)

The only bad experience was when one player left the group to use a private restroom in a shady pub. Just as the player has sat down to relive himself, the door was busted open by one of the regulars who wanted to see if "the filthy hobo had fallen asleep", as he put it. He did not throw the player out, but asked him to leave. Even though we prioritised safety, the only safety measure we could come up with was to stay in one group, or if necessary, break up into smaller ones. Parting from the group could be risky, even dangerous.

We did not meet any real road knights during the game. This problem was discussed extensively before the larp. How to interact with a person when you have basically stolen their identity? We tried to get hold of the real road knights, to hear their opinion, but to no avail. We never found a good solution to this problem. This needs to be resolved before making another larp using this method.

The success of the game involved some amounts of luck as well. The weather was perfect for walking, warm and overcast. The afterburner method also had the intended effect. The players were in a constant state of being more or less intoxicated. Never too drunk to not play, and never too sober

Afterburner method in action. (Photograph by the Road Knights)

to cope with the massive game world.

The distance walked wasn't too much. The baby carriages the players had helped a lot, as nothing had to be carried. The players also only had provisions for half of the trip, which kept the weight down and provided a natural break to the walking, as the players went shopping for more. The movement proved to be an important factor in focusing the players on the narrative. The fact that the characters got closer and closer to their set goal intensified the game. It could be said that the physical movement of the players moved in tandem with the narrative of the larp.

When doing larps with this method, a big issue is the vast amount of trust one needs to put in one's fellow players. Since the character creation is limited, one naturally brings a lot of oneself into the character. Additionally, with alcohol, the very limited number of players, and close physical proximity there is no room for doubt about the intentions of the player-to-player interaction. This could break the balance of the larp, and as such, the trust issue is the main weaknesses of this type of larp. It is not impossible to overcome, one just needs to be very focused on the issue.

Some of the players experienced post-larp depression (Larsson 2003). The reason for this was they went from an almost care-free existence, where the only needs were getting alcohol and food and finding a quiet place to sleep, to the players' complicated lives, with bills to pay and personal relations to maintain.

> When we agree that the larp has finished, I somehow cannot let go of the blissful drunken feeling from the road, wishing it back. A simple and thoughtless life. For every hour that now goes by, I feel increasingly depressed, and once the last of the alcohol wears off, I start to get physically ill. By the time we meet for dinner and debriefing, I am cold sweating, and my hands are shaking uncontrollably... but it stop when I drink my beer! It is quite shocking to me that the larp could have physical as well as existential consequences that extend into my own real life. This made me ponder upon the idea of being "truly happy". (Player comment.)

The transition back to the players' normal lives was quite a bit harder than seen at most other larps. A thorough debriefing and stepping out of the character (*deroling*) is very important in games that are driven by close and intimate social interaction.

This way of producing larps is very easy. With the right idea, the right chemistry, and a trust between the players, you could have an amazing larp with almost no work and within a very short timeframe.

> The atmosphere in the group has been rather tense since we figured out there is no more beer. I stand next to some shrubs, pissing, when the wind (or my swaying) suddenly makes me hit my panties instead of the ground. That it simply the last drop, and angry at the world I hang my piss-drenched panties on my pram to dry since they are my only pair. In an attempt to cheer me up the ever-considerate Hønen gropes the wet panties and smilingly states that they will dry soon in the wind, and that I shouldn't feel down. Not until after the larp do we realise how gross that actually was; in the moment the thought didn't occur at all. (Player comment.)

One of the organisers, Kristin Hammerås, is currently making a documentary about the road knights and has lived on the road with them for several weeks.

Ludography

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Adventurous Romanticism: Enabling a Strong Adventurous Element in Larp

Katri Lassila

This paper presents the work of Katri Lassila and Laura Kalli, a duo who has been developing a new style of live action role-play – Adventurous Romanticism – for the past four years. The Kalli & Lassila style is all about reproducing the feeling of childhood play while using classical literature and contemporary popular culture as inspiration. The four larps written and produced in this style have been played in Finland during 2003-2006.

A pirate in Yksisilmäinen merirosvo.
(Photograph by Katri Lassila)

Laura Kalli and I have been writing larps for years before we met each other. The settings ranged from cyberpunk to fantasy and from Finnish civil war to *Kalevala*. Yet we had noticed a problem which seemed to be very common: the feeling of dullness and lack of action. We felt that genres and the various playing styles of the time had all become too familiar. We also thought if we don't enjoy meetings and uncomfortable family gatherings in ordinary life, why would they be exciting in larp, even if we dramatically cast ourselves as queens or vampires? We wanted to achieve the feeling that we experienced during childhood – the feeling of pure joy and focus, which was normal to both of us as kids, when we imagined being pirates, cowboys or Robin Hood's merry men.

Four Adventures

We began writing a small experimental larp called *Imperiumin viholliset,* that was played at Ropecon 2003[1]. The game was about a meeting of ultimate villains, members of The Enemies of the Imperium, a secret society aimed at replacing Queen Victoria with a human-like machine. The genre combined steampunk with historical adventure, following in the footsteps of Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1887-1930) and Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999). Everybody had masked themselves with Victorian style masks. Secret names were used as we called each other Purple Frog, Red Eagle and Black Scorpion. The idea of fake names was taken from G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908). Otherwise, the scene of secret society was from Hergé's Tintin comic book *Les Cigares du pharaon* (1934). There was a catch of course; everyone around the table was in fact a hero, but imagined that all other participants were real villains.

1 Ropecon is the largest Finnish role-playing convention gathering together approximately 4000 larpers, tabletoppers, collectible card gamers, miniature gamers and other hobbyists.

I played the leader of the society, and questioned the other characters about the details of our plan, "agreed in the last meeting". A shared back-story had not been written beforehand and the thus the players had to improvise what supposedly had happened in the previous meeting. At the turning point in the larp I was handed a note from the automaton servant. I stood up after reading the note and proclaimed: *"There is the gravest information that's become in my knowledge: there is a traitor among us!"* As every single character was in fact a hero, every player interpreted that this note was a reference to them. A battle ensued and most of the characters were killed. Finally, it was revealed that the letter came from The Napoleon of Crime, Doctor James Moriarty, who had lured all of his enemies into one room, just to dispose of them for once and for all. As usual, his evil plan had succeeded perfectly.

In this first experiment, a couple of our players shared that they not only enjoyed, but revelled in this deep and theatrical, exaggerating yet invigorating style of play. Encouraged by this we decided not to merely write a new game, but also to initiate a new style of playing in general: *adventurous romanticism*. Playing with that style (humbly referred to as the *Kalli & Lassila method*), creating a believable reality is not the goal. The most important aspect for a player is to "play along" even more than normally in larp: players must see themselves not just as characters but partly also as narrators, whose object is to generate as much action for the others as possible. Every player considers their character's actions based on their theatrical and dramatic aspects. If a character knows a horrible secret, the player should choose carefully the most interesting and dramatically most effective time to reveal it to the other characters. The idea is to exaggerate in the style of old movies and to put oneself in the line of fire, over and over again. This is demanding, but it offers a lot and it makes the game more enjoyable for everyone.

Horror in a Victorian Mansion

A good example of this style was our next game *Norsunluukosketin*. It continued with the theme of *Imperiumin viholliset* with a touch of Victorian horror in the style of Edgar Allan Poe and H. P. Lovecraft. One scene especially embodied the style perfectly: A group of heroes entered the mansion of The Enemies of the Imperium. Some of them paused to ponder whether it was safe to drink the tea offered by the evil villains. There was a moment of hesitation while the heroes calculated the risk. Then one of them commented with a speck of irony in his voice: *"But what kind of a monster would poison tea?"* That comment was a perfect example of the style we aimed for and the player had understood the idea perfectly. Tea, in the archetypal romantic Victorian horror, is a holy object: It reduces the stereotype of the English culture into one cup so to speak. Even the lunatic professor with her companions – *"the meanest and the most evil of all of God's creatures, the one who makes Jack the Ripper appear a boy scout"* – even she would not ruin *tea*.

At the turning point of the game, the psychic medium suddenly had the urge to play with the ivory-keyed piano in the living room. The piano belonged to the long lost, grieved and betrayed Eleanor. Playing with it was forbidden, as the professor feared it would summon some evil. Once long ago, Eleanor had been the leader of the Enemies of the Imperium, but in the battle against The Society of the Very Special Persons her own followers had betrayed her.

> *"My dear Mister Bowley! How wonderful that you got to join us! I was just telling my companions here how well our friendship was developing."* She lifted his chin and the man stared at her as stricken by some horrible apparition. He sighed: *"But –Eleanor? I don't understand... These villains have captured you and are planning to destroy our country!"*

"Captured? Me? Oh no, you have misunderstood the situation, my dear!"

I then saw that Eleanor had once again repeated one of her most elegant tricks. She had sought Bowley's gang and pretended to be but a damsel in distress. The woman was that kind of actress, that even an angel prince couldn't have resisted those tears and tender sighs. And Sir Remington Bowley surely was no Archangel Michael. That gallant fool had fallen in love with Eleanor. And he wasn't the only one. The general's eyes were also burning. "The innocent victim" had tipped the heroes where her cruel captivators kept her. And no hero could resist that kind of call. Well, now "the heroes" would learn from their mistakes. For that short while they would be living, anyway.

Eleanor laughed again. *"I'm their leader!"* Then she shot Griffin.

(*Norsunluukosketin* background material, translated by the author)

The larp ended in a theatrical effect. Eleanor's ghost, who had been seen walking outside around the mansion, entered and slowly ascended the stairs. Players gathered at the top of the stairs, staring at the woman in white, a veil concealing her face. She started to lift the veil, players stared at her intensely – and a sound of a gong signalled the end of the game.

In preparation for the game, we encouraged players to familiarise themselves with a vast selection of novels and movies that were vital for understanding the world the characters inhabited. It is worth noting, fictional characters do not always make the wisest or most logical decisions. Indeed, if they did, there would not be any movies where a girl is trapped inside the haunted house or books where a boy decides to join a group of pirates hoping for an interesting life. With suspension of disbelief, we want players to dive into these unrealistic worlds of fiction so deeply that they wouldn't make the wisest choices either.

It is difficult to let go of the hold of the character, of the wish to have the character succeed. Most players are opportunists, and even in larps, the goal for many is to win a game: to survive, to find the treasure, to win the prettiest boy, to ascend to the throne. Getting caught by the pirates is far more dramatic than succeeding to hide, but doing so is challenging and takes a lot of guts.

Hey Ho, and a Bottle of Rum

In our third larp, *Yksisilmäinen merirosvo*, we stranded the players on an island and gave them a pirate adventure, which included every pirate cliché from hidden treasure to the Caribbean witch-woman and zombie captain. The game took inspiration not only from the popular movie *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003), but also from whole a lot of older swashbuckler stories, such as R.L. Stevenson's *The Treasure Island* (1883), and Frederick Marryat's novels. On the island, where the legendary treasure of a horrible captain had been buried, were the crews of four pirate ships and their prisoners, the King's men:

"Whip that pig, Little Pew! He'll tell us everything he knows in no time." Captain Black Judith cried, laughing.

"Aye aye, Mam", replied the almost seven foot tall Little Pew and raised his hand.

Captain Lionell Smith closed his eyes. He would not scream. He was one of His Majesty's bravest

captains. "Long live the King!" he yelled.

The whip slashed his shirt in two pieces and blood ran down his back. The cruel pirates laughed around him. God in heaven, give me strength, he prayed.

Our players had done their homework well, and the game was filled with wonderful pirates in passionate duels. In this larp, the players indeed also got to run, hide, search and dig from all their heart's desire.

Secrets of the Amazonas

Our latest larp was called *Amatsonien kuningatar*. This time we drew our inspiration from all the old-fashioned pulp adventure novels and movies, where the heroes look for their treasures in hot jungles or in burning deserts. Direct influences included the *Indiana Jones* –films (1981-), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *The Lost World* (the 1912 book, not the dinosaur film) and *Tarzan* books (1912-). We spiced the game with some Nazis as well: A pulp adventure with Nazis never goes wrong.

Writing was again an important part of the process of establishing the right feel for the game: We wrote lots of stories for different character groups and mailed them for players in advance. An example where the famous archaeologist John Humber describes his experiences in The Adventure of the White Owl:

"With Deborah, we had travelled for days in the most unpleasant, dense and humid jungle

The good and the bad archaeologists in Amatsonien kuningatar. (Photograph by Katri Lassila)

somewhere between Ecuador and Panama, when we finally reached our goal. While trying to kill those infernal bugs, as big as my hand, which had been eating us alive all the way, I spied between the lianas the monstrous relic before me. It was a temple, old and deep, buried in the vegetation, the sacred place for the odd Lulamba-tribe. Time had swept the Lulambas away from this earth a long ago, presumably when Cortéz and his gang caused some disorder here. But their temple (hopefully) with its riches had stayed. And with a little luck, soon I would hold the most precious of them all: the statue of a white owl, carved from pure gold, with the eyes made of white diamonds big as figs.

Yet I was not jumping of joy in the courtyard, at least not yet. After some dull and long research in the libraries we had come to a conclusion that the Lulambas had not been an exceptionally nice lot. Deb had read the ancient manuscripts with the kind of passion that I feared that some spiders would soon nest in her hair. But there had been some benefit to this. For some reason she enjoyed reading those old, bug eaten papyruses, hieroglyphs and annals. She also was the one more language oriented of us. Of course, I too spoke some forgotten languages, I knew from several all the important words such as "curse", "trap", "mummy", "danger" etc. Well, you get the picture.

(*Amazonien kuningatar* background material, author's translation)

The game was about Pandora's Box, hidden in the burning African desert and guarded by Bedouins, a secret all-female warrior tribe. The coveted relic was hunted both by the Germans and the Brits, even though only the pure hearted ones could lay their hands on it. The harsh trials to find this object included duels, whipping and entering a horrible sand pit with snakes, spiders and scorpions. The larp ended in fireworks when the treasure was finally found: The box was opened and the original home of Amazons, the long lost island of Atlantis rose from the ocean.

Adventure and Beyond!

With *adventurous romanticism* we try to make a larp an enjoyable experience for everybody. The games created by our standards are made to entertain and liberate people. One of our central design principles is that every character is in a leading role. When planning the cast of characters for a movie or a book, it is easy to centre the story around one or two of them, leaving the others to supporting roles. In a larp that shouldn't be done: The most common mistake made by larp authors is to create some crown-headed main characters with interesting, big schemes and leave the servant girls to ponder if they should first serve the duke or the baron. There is always a big risk that some players would fall ill or not show up, but the right answer is still not to write unimportant characters. The challenge is to create themes that are equally important for all. We cannot claim to have mastered this completely, but it remains our goal. Naturally different players have different playing styles: Some are louder, others prefer more action. That makes the challenge even greater.

One way of achieving the idea that everyone has a leading role is to leave out all the unimportant servants and mindless warriors. When the occasional dying Bedouin is needed, the game masters can play those parts, or ask some external people to help out. Such *supporting characters* are informed of their roles well in advance and are directed by narrators. We have been using supporting characters for soldiers, dying prisoners, robots and the like. Another important type of character is the *partly directed character,* and can be played by the players. But the players are also informed and asked in advance to help the game flow in the desired direction. Those players get to initiate actions

The sand pit in Amatsonien kuningatar. (Photograph by Katri Lassila)

by making big decisions that affect several characters. Partly directed characters are played by volunteers who enjoy their special role in the larp.

One of the most important things in organizing a successful game is taking care of the practical matters. We strongly believe that even if the *characters* face innumerable difficulties including hunger, cold and mosquitoes carrying deadly diseases, the *players* should not. Our experiences have shown that it is easier to act in character if everything in the player's life is in order. As organizers, we try to make sure that the practical matters work, no matter what.

Despite the fact that our games are meant to be entertaining, it does not mean that they do not have a message. The continuing theme has been the equality of sexes. We have learned through years of experience in Finnish larps, the leading characters are often written for men, whereas supporting characters are generally written for women – regardless of the writer's gender. Naturally there are real differences between writers, and equality has grown a lot over the years. Yet when the two of us entered the larp scene years ago, we found it irritating that we tended to play fishermen's wives much more often than leaders of the assassins' guilds. In our character writing, we strived to be as equal as possible: The pirate captains and adventuring archaeologists as well as the damsels in distress and Don Juans have been both men and women in our games.

We use as few game mechanics as possible. We believe that the players are able to judge by the situation, whether it is more dramatic for them to win a fight or to get wounded and surrender. We all know that in the beginning of an adventure movie, it is quite alright for the hero to get caught by the villains, but when the duels at the end of the larp come about, the heroes will prevail. If some characters have special abilities such as "mystic kung-fu", those players are simply told that they will automatically win any fights that happen. These abilities can be used to make sure that essential

plots reach their goals.

We believe that by diving into the adventure, the game is equally fun and exciting, at the same time. These games are made for adults, who are capable of letting go of their adult roles, and are able to truly play to rediscover their childhood, without shame or guilt. Though the games are not realistic, the players are able to tap into deep emotions within their characters. Perhaps it is the aspect of letting go that liberates the players from learned models of ordinary behaviour, and gives us all a glimpse of what play really felt like when we were children.

Ludography

Imperiumin viholliset (2003): Laura Kalli and Katri Lassila. Played at Ropecon 2003, Finland. (Eng. "The Enemies of the Imperium").

Norsunluukosketin (2003): Laura Kalli and Katri Lassila, with help of Markku Wächter and Antti Salovaara. Played in the Stansvik Mansion, Finland. (Eng. "The Ivory Key").

Yksisilmäinen merirosvo (2004): Laura Kalli and Katri Lassila, with help of Markku Wächter and Antti Salovaara. Played at the Tavistholmen island, Finland. (Eng. "The One-Eyed Pirate").

Amatsonien kuningatar (2006): Laura Kalli and Katri Lassila, with help of Heli Aho, Markku Wächter and Timo Degerth. Played in sandpit in Vihti, Finland. (Eng. "The Queen of the Amazons").

Exhuming Agabadan

Matthijs Holter

The reality game Agabadan was an experiment in decentralised play, in which the content was provided by the players. Players created their own world views and interacted with each other through common and distributed rituals and gatherings based on those world views. The decentralized model and processes used turned out to have unforeseen vulnerabilities, and over one third of the players dropped out of the game. The game provided strong subjective experiences for those who were able to follow through.

The Agabadan symbol.

This article discusses the reality game *Agabadan*[1], which was played for one month in the spring of 2007. It was both a great success and a great failure. The article is, due to the very nature of the event, very subjective. Towards the end of the game, despite my role as a game facilitator, I had no control over anybody else's experience, just my own. Therefore, this is only a story of what the game was for me.

> Agabadan is a reality game in two parts.
>
> In the first part you form an individual, alternative view of the world. It could be a religion; a paranoid schizophrenia; a mystical philosophical approach to reality. You do this by practicing noticing strange things during the day, and creating a system around them.
>
> In the second part you challenge yourself and the others to actions, rituals and creative work based on your new world view. During the game you will receive tasks explaining how to activate yourself and other players. You'll be told to set up meetings, create rituals, and do things on your own that you usually wouldn't do.
>
> As closure, after a month we create a ritual together. (*Agabadan* rulebook 2007)

Beginnings

In the winter of 2006 I spent some time thinking about a game that never got made. It was going to be called *Hell Bastards!*, and would have been about walking around and seeing conspiracies everywhere, putting up notes in your house trying to piece it all together, understanding how *they*

1 Agabadan was created by Matthijs Holter (facilitator, rulebook editor, web design), Erlend Eidsem Hansen (facilitator, method groups) and Espen Nodeland (facilitator, forum administrator).

were out to get you. It would have been the perfect solo game for bad hangover days. It became the first part of *Agabadan*.

In February 2007, I posted an idea for a larp on the Norwegian web forum laivforum.net. It was to be about achieving a magical conspiratorial mindset, performing rituals alone or together, and spreading out and looking for clues. The idea was strongly inspired by what I'd read about *Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum*[2]. Veteran game organiser Erlend Eidsem Hansen was the first person to reply, but it soon became apparent that there were many interested people – in wildly varying locations. Quickly, the idea of a decentralized game was formed. Groups of people in Oslo and Trondheim would sometimes meet, and at other times communicate via e-mail, forums and letters. The larp would be perfect for using Hansen's larp-hacking techniques (Hansen 2007), which were specifically designed for players wanting to contribute to the game and make it their own. When I asked for partners willing to help create the game, Hansen and Espen Nodeland signed up.

The three of us sat down and hammered out the basic design principles of the game that we were to create: *Player investment*, the idea that all content was to be created and shaped by the players. *Distributed puppet mastery*, meaning that the players set up situations for each other. *Game master replaced by a facilitator*, which in practice meant that the three of us would be the authority on structure, keeping things moving and other things in the same vein, but we wouldn't supply content (such as setting and background material, pre-defined group conflicts to play on, or names of characters and locations). The last principle gave us the space and freedom to join the game also as players, on the same level as the others. We decided to stick to these principles to the very end – this was, in fact, becoming an experiment, and we wanted to see how it would turn out.

Our hope was that players would create things together – that their many world views would conflict and merge, that their interactions would be shaped by their own desires and interests. We were hoping players would take the opportunity to play with their identities and use the game for their own purposes – pure entertainment, personal exploration or something in between. But most of all, it was an experiment – we wanted to see what kind of play would emerge from our rules. Specifically, we set out to see whether using only player-generated content in a game with no central authority would work.

What Were We Making?

Both we and the players were asking the same question throughout the process of creating this experience. "*Is this a larp?*" In short, yes, we believe that *Agabadan* was a larp. But it was a new kind of larp.

There are some forms of role-playing that are not easily categorized, and *Agabadan* is one such form. In *Agabadan* players would play themselves, and all events that occurred to them as part of their daily life would also be part of the game. I played myself. I went to work, I put my kids to bed in the evening, I got drunk. At the same time, I was a different *version* of myself. I was a Matthijs who believed in nature spirits that had their own goals. I sat at the beach and had conversations with a swan. I moved around rocks in my garden to make sure they weren't sending their bad energy into my house. I followed a flock of seagulls in my car, because I knew they were leading me to something I'd forgotten – two pieces of blank paper washed out by the rain, a message from a god.

2 For a description, see for example Jonsson et al (2007) and Stenros et al (2007).

The form is akin to larping in that the player uses her body to portray someone she is not, and interacts with other players in the same mode. It shares traits with pervasive games, in the active in-game use of real locations, such as parks and city streets. It is more distantly related to alternate reality games, in using the real world as a platform to build the game on.

However, it has the most in common with what the Swedish magazine *Interacting Arts* (Widing 2007) has dubbed *värklighetsspel* – or *reality games*. In a reality game, players act as if the game's reality is the truth, actively taking part in the creation of the narrative, but often playing with her own identity instead of a fully constructed role-playing character. We classified *Agabadan* as a reality game, even though *identity game* might have been a better term, as the actual playing field was the identities of the participants.

> You'll be playing on these things:
>
> World view: Your new, expanded view of the world
>
> Agenda: A goal and attitude you define for yourself, to give direction to your play
>
> Methods: Two different techniques you will tend to use in rituals
>
> Two sleeping participants: People who don't know they're in the game. You 'll play on your relationship with them.
>
> Two places: Houses, natural spaces, marketplaces – places you want to connect meaning to in the game.
>
> Your local area: You'll be connected to other players in the same city or area.
>
> (*Agabadan* rulebook)

We set up a forum for players and started inviting them. In addition, we sent out the rulebook to twenty people we thought would be interested. We talked about the game with friends and acquaintances to generate some buzz, and along the way Erlend contacted a group of larpers in Sweden. A discussion about the game started, and we defined four geographical groups for the game: Oslo and Trondheim in Norway, Stockholm in Sweden and a final group called "The Wanderers", consisting of players who would be far away from anyone else during the game.

We were starting to get ready for the official start when the Stockholm group sent in a bunch of pictures from their *Agabadan* event. They had just started on their own! I was stunned and happy; the players were already taking control over their own game. The pictures showed a group of people spray-painting the *Agabadan* sign, sitting around a fire, and generally having a good time. What they were up to exactly we never knew.

Playing Agabadan

Agabadan was designed so that it would last five weeks. Each week had a different theme and a different goal, building on what had happened earlier.

Week One – Build Your Worldview

The first week consisted of the players constructing a world view, based on their experiences from real life. The aim of this part of the game was to help participants open their eyes and minds to external impulses, to see the world in a different and perhaps magical way. Several of the players decided to report on this in public on the forum, posting about strange daily events and building on them to create systems of belief. Some communicated with animals, and claimed to get responses showing some understanding. Others built on experiences from *Momentum*, getting back in touch with the spirits which were used in that larp. Others again described strange and paranoid encounters in the workplace. All these events were real – but players interpreted them differently than they usually would; they used their new systems of belief to understand reality in a new way.

This form of solo play was wonderful for some, but hard to do for others. Even though they made the effort, some players were simply unable to fully believe in their own fictional worldview. Others, like myself, succeeded exactly by seeing it as a fiction – "it's okay, I don't really believe in this stuff, I'm just playing – look at me, I'm outside in the cold rain looking at these soggy pieces of paper, aren't I silly!" After a while, the fiction still started to bleed through into the more rational part of my mind, and it was easier to let go and embrace the fiction. It was, in fact, a slow form of self-hypnosis.

For some of us, the forum was a way to validate and record our play. By publicly posting about our experiences, we could focus on them, make them more real, and make them part of a greater narrative. Some players, however, were reluctant to use the forum. One Stockholm player proclaimed he didn't need all this solo play, and only wanted to be called on for the major events. This gave us the first inkling that people did not know what they had signed up for: The major events on the horizon were to be based on what we were building in solo play at this stage, and were to be planned by the players. The facilitators had no mandate to set up grand unified events, nor any intention to do so – that would run counter to the design principles.

It was only after *Agabadan* was over that we found out that a significant fraction of the Stockholm players had not actually read the rules, and did not know how the game was meant to be played. The information they got was second-hand, and for a large part it appeared they were basing their play on a local Swedish tradition of reality games.

Week Two – Show Your Worldview

During the second week, players were required to consolidate their worldviews and send descriptions of them to the facilitators. The finished view would consist of several items: Players were to define a personal agenda, something that they wanted out of the game. They also picked method groups, such as *images* and *movement*, which were to guide how they would perform their rituals, and provide a way of grouping players together. And, of course, they had to think about the symbol and word *Agabadan*. This had very deliberately never been defined (except, of course, as the name of the game); both the symbol and word were chosen to be as connotation-free as possible, to see if players were able to imbue it with meaning of their own.

During this week we tried to contact all of the players by phone. We asked them how everything was going, and whether they had any practical questions about the game. There were very few questions from the players, though we did not reach all of the Stockholm players. A few players dropped out at this stage, due to lack of time. Some never submitted their world view to the facilitators, and we

took special note: This might be a sign of players dropping out without telling us.

Week Three – Interact With the Other Players

We had spent the second week polishing the first set of tasks for the players. These two sets of tasks were in many ways the backbone of the game: They required players to interact with other players, very often picked at random or from a specified group. We envisioned a criss-crossing spider web of decentralised interactions between all players. In order to avoid problems with players who (inevitably) would be unable or unwilling to finish their tasks, we made sure that each player would on average interact with five other players. If one dropped out, there would still be plenty of things to do.

There were three tasks, written in both Norwegian and English, all designed to promote interaction. First of all, each player was assigned a group (based on their geographical location) to meet up with for a multi-ritual gathering. At this gathering each player brought objects for two randomly chosen people in the group – objects that could be connected with those players' world views. At the gathering, each player was responsible for creating and running a short (10 to 30 minutes) ritual with the group, based on their own world view. Finally, players were asked to design rituals for two randomly chosen people in one of their method groups, and then send the instructions on how to perform them to those players.

Again, we had to deal with the risk of drop-outs. I made sure to set up the groups so that each group had at least three players I knew were active, and would come to the gathering; each group was also given one potential drop-out. My intuitions were right: Even though there were a fair amount of drop-outs, the groups were large enough to survive.

In the task descriptions we had suggested that the rituals should have a positive, motivational aspect which would enhance group cohesion. Indeed, the ones that were performed followed that suggestion: Rituals were both peaceful and positive. In my group one participant had a complex ritual of channelling the strength of old Norse gods, another had a simple and wonderful pear-tasting ritual, and I led the group in a grass-sowing ritual, since I was focusing on nature and growth in my world view.

Having participants with different world views meet was probably what we as designers had been most anxious about – how would it work? In my ritual group, there was a feeling of tentative exploration and openness. We were there as real people, but it was easy to perceive the others as parts of their own fictional world – a priestess, a seeker. The feeling of worldviews meeting for the first time was, for me, analogous to exploring a new potential friendship. We were really listening to each other in the park that day.

We exchanged gifts – my most notable one was a Norse ritual object, a *volse*, which I'd gone to some length to borrow from a friend of one of the players. These gifts had been intended to provide hooks and inspiration for further game play – however, it seems from player reports that most of them were stashed away and forgotten, and had no real effect on the game.

The method experiments were a mixed success. In a perfect world, each player would have performed two rituals and designed two rituals. We had asked players to report on the forum when they performed tasks; however, a lot of players only used the forum sporadically, and some didn't answer their e-mails, so by now we had little real information on what players were doing. A rough

estimate based on random data suggests that about half the players actually received and performed a ritual; some received one or two rituals without performing them. It was becoming quite clear that the only players who were getting something out of this were those who participated actively.

As a player, I sent out a ritual to two players, asking them to go on a journey between two areas they had selected for their significance. The players were to look for specific signs and people to help, and on the way, make a phone call to one of their passive players. One of the players performed the ritual, and the report was exuberant and positive. The other answered more than a week later, and had not been able to go through with the task due to illness.

Week Four – Intensify Interaction

Our plan from the start was that as the larp went along, we would progressively give the players more freedom and responsibility. When the time came to write the second set of tasks, we had a brief discussion about whether or not to stick to this plan – we knew some players would not be able to handle that much freedom. However, at this point it seemed most of those players had already dropped out – I believe a little more than half the original participants were active at this point, but again, there was no way of knowing. In keeping with the idea of personal responsibility, we also resisted the temptation to start badgering individual players to get them back into the game.

There were three tasks given for this week, based on ideas we'd thought out in the planning phase before the larp started. The first task was a completely free ritual, in which the players could in effect do whatever they wanted with whomever they chose. The second task required each player to send a personal challenge to a randomly chosen player from the same method group. This challenge would ask that person to do something they would not normally do. The third task was to perform a ritual incorporating somebody else's world view, either to integrate the two, or to fight against an opposing world view.

The challenges that players designed for each other were varied and interesting. The one I received was physical: I had to wade out into the cold water, pick up a rock and meditate on the feeling. This was very challenging within the context of the game: in my worldview, rocks were imbued with a life-negating symbolism. I challenged another player to visit his childhood home, and he reported back on an interesting journey to a place where strangers now lived. Challenges of an erotic nature were also issued. Some players were elated, some depressed, some silent about their experiences. The subjective experiences were coming to the forefront, and reports from players spoke of feelings of empowerment and personal magic.

The incorporation rituals were less of a success; player reports were mostly silent on this matter. I performed a ritual in the toilet of a train, taking pictures of the torn-up pieces of a map of Stockholm. I printed the pictures and sent them to two Stockholm players, but never heard anything back.

Week Five – Planning and Performing the Final Ritual

The original plan had been that the players in each geographical area would design an ending ritual. By now, only the Oslo group was active and reporting. There was uncertainty among the players about when and how we were going to do this, and discussions on the forum were hesitant and floundering. We, the facilitators, stayed out of the process for as long as we could, but finally it

seemed like there was not going to be an agreement without a central authority – so we dropped our experimental pretences and suggested a time, place and structure: Another multi-ritual gathering. Each participant was to prepare an ending ritual, a way for them to close *Agabadan*. Each participant, of course, had a different view of what *Agabadan* was.

The final rituals were very varied. One participant orchestrated a war between positive and negative interpretations of *Agabadan*, represented by pieces of paper, in which the negative versions prevailed. Others used music and dance to bring closure to the game. Each participant, in turn, ended *Agabadan* in her or his own way.

Teachings of Agabadan

The main problem of *Agabadan* was that some players did not follow the rules, or communicate with each other. Some players would also drop out of the project without telling anyone. As the experience was designed as a network, the result of players not performing their tasks and attending gatherings was that others were deprived of play opportunities. It would be very easy to blame the individual players for this, but when *half of the players* do not complete their task by the rules, there is obviously something wrong on a higher level. I believe the problem was in the unrealistic expectations of the facilitators, and the uninformed expectations of the players.

The players were expecting something other than what they got, even if the rules were available before the larp started and the facilitators explained everything as it was going on. The rules had been written and re-written many times, with editing from both facilitators and non-participants. Though no rule presentation can be perfect, it is unlikely that flaws in the rule set, as it was written, were a major reason for this problem.

It was clear that *expectations trump rules*. This seems to have been the case especially for the Stockholm players, probably due to two facts: First of all, they were recruited by a handful of central participants, and only got a second-hand explanation of the concept. Even though the rule book was mailed out to all participants, many simply did not read it. Second, participants were expecting *Agabadan* to be in a tradition of alternate reality gaming and pervasive larping they were already familiar with. In Oslo, there is no such tradition, and participants knew they would have to think differently and learn a new way of doing things.

Some participants reported after the event that they missed having a central, official fiction and an authority group to rely on – the complete transparency of *Agabadan* was not what they wanted or expected. For them, the experiment was a failure.

The facilitators, on the other hand, were expecting players to have the time and interest to use the web forums on a regular basis. This was naïve in hindsight, but still much of the game depended on it. Those who did not log on regularly ended up not posting reports of their tasks, not reading important messages, being ignorant of other players' worldviews, and most importantly, not partaking in the only central community-building arena of the game. Some players were estranged by this – they were posting, but sometimes it seemed as if nobody was reading. This is a common phenomenon on internet fora, and later implementations need to address this problem.

To conclude the first point: We required all players to learn the game rules from the written manual. It didn't work, even though the manual was well-written and distributed to all players both in print and electronically.

The other lesson relates to the community building. The players that stuck with the game to the very end were pretty much the same people who actually came to the very first local gatherings and performed rituals together. Those who did not make it to that gathering dropped out fairly quickly.

This can be interpreted in at least two different ways. On the one hand, if someone doesn't participate early on in an event, it is a good indicator that they are not motivated to follow through. On the other hand, if someone does not *physically meet* the other players, they are inclined to drop out from simple lack of contact. *We need to see each others' faces.* No matter what the interpretation, it is clear that the first physical meeting has a great significance for, and effect on, later play.

As mentioned earlier, each player belonged to a geographical group and a method group. The geographical groups, which required a physical meeting, corresponded with later group cohesion and participant responsibility. The method groups, which required only virtual meeting, did not inspire such cohesion and responsibility.

To conclude the second point: We tried creating virtual player groups in the hope that they would be reflected in real-world interactions. However, virtual groups, in and of themselves, did not automatically create real-world group bonding.

All told, *Agabadan* was a mixed success. Participants whose circumstances allowed them to play the game as intended by the designers had deep and meaningful experiences. Some participants and non-participants seemed to expect personal crises and traumas; nothing of the kind was reported. However, a game of distributed responsibility is not for everyone. Even though most players we talked to seemed to understand what they signed up for, some didn't like the form once they tried it. As the form is new and demanding, a high player drop-out rate was to be expected. This problem will likely sort itself out if a similar event is organized again; those who participated in *Agabadan* will know what to expect, and can make a more qualified decision on whether they want to participate or not. For later implementations, some way of ensuring player investment before the game begins might be an area worth exploring.

Ludography

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The Nuts and Bolts of Jeepform

Tobias Wrigstad

Jeepform is a style of freeform role-playing that stresses the importance of the meta-play, transparency and tailoring the techniques to emphasise the story. It has been likened to improvisational theatre, psychodrama and performance art, and been called "what theatre might become" as well as "freeform role-playing done right." This article is a personal introduction to jeepform, its background and how it differs from freeform, and some jeepform ideas and techniques interleaved within the rest of the text with a tiny bit of analysis sprinkled on top. In a sense, this is a partial ingredients-slip from the jeepform kool-aid bottle.[1]

Table-top and larp achieve story through simulation – jeepform doesn't.

The way I see it, both larp and tabletop role-play approach storytelling from a more or less simulationistic approach. Larp tries to create a spitting image of the shared fantasy with real gaming locations, real props, walking and talking like your character, and so forth – a simulation of the game world where the agents are the larpers immersing into their characters. Tabletop, on the other hand, uses rules, dice and probability to simulate the workings of the fictional world and to unify the shared fantasy into a consistent whole. In both larp and tabletop, by playing by the rules and immersing one hopes to create a good story. However, these stories are like the "stories" of actual life: they have less than optimal dramatic curves, non-perfect timing, and they tell tales that are no good until you are given the missing piece of the puzzle post-game. In contrast, jeepform role-play is not about simulating, but about collaborative creation of tight, dramatic and story-focused role-play.

This article is about jeepform role-playing, about some of its core values, how to play, run and write jeepform games. Most jeepform ideas are completely compatible with (or stolen from) any tabletop or larp game you might be running, or might just save you from the hassles of organising a larp to be able to tell that story of yours.

Capsule Guide to the Roots of Jeepform

Jeepform role-play revolves around the story and the experience of playing. Jeepform sprung from the Swedish freeform tradition (which can be roughly described as incorporating larp-like elements into tabletop and approaching storytelling much like writing a script for a play or a movie). For the jeepers and creepers of *Vi åker jeep*[2], freeform role-play was a reaction against elements in tabletop, including the following:

Rules

Dice

Tables

1 This article is based on presentation material developed together with Olle Jonsson, Thorbiörn Fritzon, Martin Brodén, Per Wetterstrand and Anders Nygren. A list of jeep people can be found at jeepen.org/people.

2 Eng. We go by Jeep, a distributed group of role-players accumulated over the years who publish and preach under the jeep moniker.

Dragons

New York

We view *rules* (in the *Dungeons &Dragons* sense of the word, for simulating a world or determining the outcome of an action) as bad because they constrain the game too much and focus on the wrong thing: simulation rather than story (admittedly, some Forge-style games are moving in the right direction with respect to rules). In many games and sessions, the game master must bend the rules or ignore them to avoid destroying the dramatic structure of the story. In other games (or stories), rules are just completely unnecessary.[3]

Dice are bad because they behave randomly. Granted, sometimes this is necessary, for example if it is *impossible* to decide between two equally interesting outcomes of an action, or if we just get stuck. But the way dice are used in traditional tabletop, they are just not beneficial to the story.

When it comes to *tables*, both kinds are bad. Tables in rule books are bad because going in to rule books to look things up breaks the flow of the game and draws attention away from the story and playing the characters. Furthermore, the canonical living room gaming table is bad as it distances the players from each other and encourages a sit-down style of play instead of using your entire body for acting things out. Sitting down generally makes a game less energetic, forces breaks in the game to talk about what the characters do rather than doing it. Not using your entire body for playing your character is like calling your boyfriend on the phone rather than meeting him – just not as good.

By *dragons*, I do not mean dragons specifically, but the erroneous notion of bigger monsters being cooler than smaller ones – or no monsters at all.[4] To jeeps, facing your suicidal, bullied-as-hell teenage daughter makes for a much more powerful scene than facing a boatload of orcs. Stories do not require monsters, at least not the kinds of monsters that we generally came across in most tabletop games in the days of old.

Last, by *New York*, I again do not mean New York specifically. For some reason, we have seen that most scenarios and campaigns take place in made-up worlds and cities that are labelled as "officially cool" from being featured in movies and TV shows. Why are there so few vampires in backwater towns? Why do so many players refuse to play games about their home towns?

Freeform

On the Swedish con scene, the freeform movement came to the rescue in the early to mid 1990's. It was partly inspired by things like dramatic writing and script writing, movies and larp, the latter

3 As a side-note: Jeepform uses the word rules a bit differently. Some recent examples of Jeep type rules can be found in Gang Rape (2008): "Having a game master is not allowed – every player must be either the victim or one of the rapists" or "Not all rapists can be strangers" or in Doubt (2007): "Time is linear" or "Doubt is a heterosexual game". Another use of rule can be found in Jordsmak (2008) where every scene must last for exactly one song of a particular album.

4 Many Nordic playing styles have moved away from this today, even though some feel the need to hide behind Space Bedouins or global conspiracies to get the juices flowing.

(notably not using complex character sheets or resolution mechanics) being on the up and up.[5]

Many freeform stories were less fantastic in terms of monster encounters, people started using their bodies to act things out, and less fantastic diegetic locations started cropping up. There were fewer quests, no hitpoints, levels or experience points, and the outcomes of actions – and in most cases, the development of the game – was governed by the rules of collaborative storytelling: all things that improve the story are Good Things™. Freeform games experimented with how games were played, and questioned many of the standard practices of traditional tabletop. Freeform got rid of conventions such as each player having a character of her own and games being about a group of humanoids following a story arc. In freeform, you had a patch-work story with five different scenes with four new characters in each that would never meet.

My personal retrospective definition of freeform is this:

freedom to adapt the form to the story, for every story

This should be compared to starting out with the rules of, say *Vampire: Masquerade* (1991), its world, mythos and standard way of playing. Naturally, though one can play awesome games with *Vampire* or any other tabletop game, here we are talking about *the telling of a specific story* and then finding or constructing the game world and necessary game mechanics to do it, rather than the other way around.

Enter Jeepform

Jeepform builds on the Swedish freeform legacy. The way I see it, freeform stopped being about adapting form to the story at hand pretty early on. The will to experiment died out, and freeform became a label for a fairly fixed form where a group of characters experienced an "adventure" in mostly linear time relying heavily on role-playing rather than action sequences, as no-one had yet come up with a satisfactory solution for playing action or resolving action elements. Freeform games and tabletop games started to converge again, making freeform to some extent a for-free role-playing book, distributed and kept alive in oral tradition, making it less approachable by the man on the street.

In hindsight, jeepform can be viewed as a reaction against a few trends in freeform, including but not limited to the following:

Fixed form

Lack of premise or subject

Heroes and villains

With *fixed form*, we mean that the freeform toolbox stopped growing while it was still small, and that the parts of it that were actually used were only a subset. Jeepform seeks to enlarge the toolbox and emphasises that every game design starts with a blank page and that things like *character*

5 At Swedish role-playing conventions, people were competing in role-playing, originally by solving quests, later by performing their characters. The most important positive side-effect of this was that conventions featured "official games" run in parallel by many game masters. Different authors were competing in creating the best games, for some definition of that, which naturally spurred people's willingness to experiment.

ownership (only Bob plays Dracula), *linear time* and similar classic freeform defaults are optional. Their use must be a conscious choice and the game designer must be aware of their effects on the game.

Jeepform games try to have a *premise* or a *subject*, meaning they are about something. They are not supposed to just be the coolest story you could come up with at the time of writing (although they sometimes are). Premises and subjects can be as pretentious or non-pretentious as one likes. Classic examples of premises are "love conquers all" and "greed leads to misery", but they can be much more colourful and interesting. A subject for a game can be memory, misremembering and disremembering. Having a subject or a premise helps you focus the game on what is relevant and also helps players and game masters determine what is right for the story at hand, how to approach it etc.

Jeepform games recognise that *heroes and villains* are not necessary ingredients for a good story. The characters do not even need to be the lead characters. It is not necessary for the characters to save the world for a game to be involving, interesting or stimulating. Saving a relationship can be equally rewarding, and is easier to relate to and immerse in. What do the guys in the sausage stand talk about all day? What is it like to fail graduation? What happens after I casually convert to Judaism in order to marry Disa?

All in all, jeepform is a kind of freeform that is *form-oriented, subtle and directed* – in both senses of the word. It enlarges and enriches the freeform toolbox and encourages use of a wider range of techniques and the abolishing of a stable notion of what it is.

Do it Like the Larpers – Except Don't

Jeepform is generally played in a light-weight larp style without actual props or prepared game locations. There are several good reasons for that, as a larp style of playing makes the game more agile – several scenes can be played out simultaneously, the entire body can be used to play the characters, and less time is needed to convey information such as movement, which can be simulated by using the physical space. A well prepared gaming location forces the story to fit to the room, while a generic venue can turn into anything that is required by the story.[6]

Constructing a car out of four chairs is neither very cool nor does much for immersion – but it gains agility. A player can exit the car by opening an imaginary door and step out. Again, this allows things to happen in the game, and the characters move about without forcing the role-playing to pause in favour of broadcasting meta-comments[7] such as "I step out of the car" or "My character steps out of the car".

Most Nordic larpers would (rightfully) tell you that avoiding out-of-character communication facilitates immersion, at least to a certain extent. Avoiding out-of-character communication makes it easier to connect to the thoughts and feelings of your character, the essence of role-playing besides storytelling. Voice-overs from a narrator rather than descriptions from a game master give a more dramatic flair and opens up for a non-impartial storyteller.

6 It should be noted that Swedish freeform was developed playing in 30-person class rooms in schools, something which has definitely had impact on the style of play.

7 Players talking about the game.

The Importance of Telegraphing

One of the most important and constant activities of a jeepform game is *telegraphing* – the broadcasting of information that helps keep the shared imagination in sync, preferably in an unobtrusive way. In tabletop, you generally rely on meta-communication for this, speaking out of character about the imagined physical reality. In larp, most things represent themselves voiding the need for much of the telegraphing (but sometimes creating the need for more – what can I do with that prop of yours?). In most jeepform games, we try to do all telegraphing in character. This is agile – we can use gestures and postures and a lot of such things can go on simultaneously without pausing the game. Below are a few examples of telegraphing, both from a game master's and a player's points of view.

Postures and Space

Our example characters climb out of the car constructed by chairs and enter a bomb shelter. They first exit the car and move a couple of meters to symbolise the movement (and to have enough clear space away from the car so it is clear that Bob is still by the car and not where the others are). The game master takes the lead as they climb down the ladder. She walks among the players as if she too was entering the shelter. She touches the wall saying "*I wonder what that smell is*". She is crouching as she walks telling all the players that the roof is very low in the shelter. She shakes from the cold and perhaps even stutters a little. All her input is in the form of thoughts and feelings attached to some unnamed character allowing the players to decide what does and does not fit with their character.

Alternatively, she might be very specific about what character she is giving information as. This can be useful if we know that Richard, whose thoughts and feeling the game master is playing, is a claustrophobic. The other players will realise that their view of the current location differs from Richard's, and perhaps not crouch and not feel the cold or the smell. If the game master needs them to feel the smell too, she could just briefly make eye contact with another player saying "*Yeah, I feel it too,*" thereby solving the problem. Another way is spitting out tiny bits of information as short descriptive bursts (e.g. "*gray stone*", "*damp*", "*sounds of water dripping*") without interrupting the characters. Different game masters have different styles, which is a good thing.

By crouching, the game master will make the players crouch. This allows a player to run for the exit and at some point stand up straight to show that he has exited the shelter: Other players see this and can thus avoid talking to him or mistaking him for still being in the shelter. Telegraphing with your body is powerful and agile and helps immersion. At least when you've learned to interalise it.

Symbolic Props

Jeepform discourages the use of actual props as there is generally no way of knowing what kinds of props a game might need. Instead, we use symbolic props: Any object can represent another. An object that is commonly found around game locations is the pen, so let me give you some examples on how a pen is telegraphed to represent something else.

Manny gives a bouquet of flowers to Phyllis. Manny's player hands the pen over saying "*I wanted to give you red roses, but they only had yellow*". All players now know that the pen represents a bouquet of flowers: When Phyllis breaks the pen in two and throws it on the ground, the action cannot be

misunderstood.

Later in the game, half of the same pen is used as a knife. Still groggy after the seizure and car crash, Richard threatens to kill Manny unless he tells him the truth about what happened: Why he passed out in a car only to wake up in a cabin that he has never seen before. He pulls the pen out of his pocket and holds it to Manny's throat. When Manny starts talking, Richard relaxes and puts the pen down on the table. Fred sneaks up behind him and grabs it, shifting the power balance.

Telegraphing in Time

In the jeepform game *The Upgrade!* (2005), the game space is divided into three areas: past, present and possible future. Everything that takes place in the present is supposedly shown on a TV screen. Players whose characters are off-screen watch the scene in the present area and may at any time start a scene in the past area or possible future area that gives context to or changes the meaning of the scene going on in the present.

The way the game is set up, the mere act of standing up and walking onto the stage is telegraphing "*I'm starting a scene which will give perspective to the scene on the TV screen*". In such a scene, the player on stage can assume any character at any point in time. To avoid pausing the game too much, telegraphing can be used here too. For example, an idle player walks onto the stage, causing the TV screen to pause. The player turns to the rest of the idle players saying "*Maude, dear, will you come into the kitchen?*" Now, all the players know the scene is set in the kitchen, that the player who will walk onto the scene will be Maude, and that the player on the stage is Danny, Maude's husband who was previously introduced. To cast Danny as Danny, Maude may answer, "*Yes, Danny darling!*" if she wants to.

Telegraphing creates an opportunity for vagueness, which is almost always a bonus. If the tentative Maude wants to, she might walk in saying "*Don't do that again. I hate it when you call me by her name.*" Likewise, Danny could do the same thing, saying "*Christine, you shouldn't have come back here again. I'm expecting Maude home any second! You must understand it is over,*" probably surprising the player supposedly playing Maude, and everyone else.

Details Considered Harmful

Naturally, at times it is not possible or necessary to use only in-character telegraphing. The key is to keep the telegraphing short and unobtrusive to avoid disturbing the game.[8] A good rule of thumb is to think of telegraphing as steering a vehicle by very light nudges, soft enough not to cause any real loss of speed.

Telegraphing to introduce characters or places should generally be kept short. For example, long descriptions of places can usually be cut. Focus on the important bits, and keep the rest vague. Vagueness is good as it allows the players to fill in the missing details in their head or in the shared fantasy, both of which are good. Most things in role-playing games will not benefit from a dictator deciding every little detail. When you go collaborative, you must start thinking not only about what information you include, but also what you exclude to give space to other players to contribute. This is a new dimension to many players, and getting used to think about it generally requires some practice.

8 See Night of Nights (2008) for a counter-example, though.

Transparency

Transparency denotes the absence of secrets. The jeep believes that secrets are bad for most role-playing games, including but not limited to jeepform ones.

Since jeepform players are collaborating to create the best possible story, they should be equipped accordingly. This means that secrets between characters should not be secrets between players.

If everyone knows that Manny is falling in love with Phyllis, the players can cooperate on creating situations toying with this fact. Fred can make sure to give them space, or the opposite, depending on where the game is going, or Phyllis might start getting friendly with Fred to make Manny jealous. Fred might even strike up a conversation with Manny about how raunchy Phyllis is, and how he'd like to tie her up and have sex with her. The point is that if Manny's player is the only one who knows about Manny's growing affection for Phyllis, the chances of this making it into the game in a good way are slimmer. The same thing goes if Manny is the spy who has infiltrated Fred and Phyllis' terrorist cell. Knowing that Manny is a spy will help the other players to make the game better and more interesting.

Sometimes, keeping a secret makes for a nice surprise in a good way at some point in the game. Jeepform does not ban secrets between players, but stresses that they are rarely needed. Start out with the game being completely transparent, and only hide things if you think it will be an improvement.

Full Transparency

In the spirit of transparency, you may ask whether it might be better to show the scenario to the players beforehand. Some games definitely benefit from the players not knowing what is going to happen beforehand and some do not. Jeepform is about collaborative storytelling and not about the game master surprising the players with an unforeseen story twist that changes everything in the end. Just as with the players' secrets, rather than secluding things by default, do it the other way around. Whatever you do, do it consciously, understand the effects, and do it for a good reason.

But what is the point of playing if you know the story in advance? One part of the answer is that it is about the same as watching a movie where you know the hero is going to make it, but it is still exciting to see how she will pull it off and what the consequences will be. Players behave randomly enough for almost any story to take unexpected turns, and the game can also be about surprising each other by taking it to the next level. Bottom line: just because you know the end does not mean you will not be surprised by how it is achieved.

The jeepform game *Baby Steps* (2006) is a good example of a game with in-game secrets that is vastly improved by transparency. It is a game played as a therapy session: Three people are trying to come to terms with different kinds of guilt surrounding the death of a child. This game is about how slow the session progresses, how easy and appealing it can be to roll around in the mud of your own misery, and how hard it can be to forgive or let yourself be forgiven. The characters all have the exact same information of the night when the mother accidentally killed her child with the car, even though they are free to interpret it however they want. They know each other's secrets and desires, which helps them push each other's buttons during the game. The game is also about looking back, which is played as short scenes interleaved with the session. These scenes are entirely player-driven and thus the players need to have all information about the events that took place.

The players constantly negotiate the fates of their characters in the meta-play: will they take a step towards closure, no step at all, or a step in the wrong direction? In this case, the game is about playing it well and making the session powerful and moving. As there is no winning or losing, there is no need to keep the players in the dark. The game master playing the psychologist is instructed not to give a straight answer to any question or directly help the characters reach closure, but to only mediate. This is pretty much the only fact of the game that is not told the players.

Talking about the game in advance to agree on a suitable tone for it is a good thing, even if this discloses the fact that the characters will die in the end. Collaboration requires that the players have some kind of converging focus and are going in the same or compatible directions. Too many secrets and chance elements are bad in this respect, unless handled very well and with care.

Power to the Players

In jeepform games, the players generally enjoy a high degree of freedom with respect to their characters – and sometimes to the story. A player may add detail to her character at any point as long as it does not make the character inconsistent. Anything may be added, including story-relevant additions to the character's past, sexual preferences, skills, diseases and possessions. Furthermore, the players may add detail to the surroundings, and where appropriate, call for additional scenes. The players can also decide between success and failure and their consequences. These things are generally handled without resorting to out-of-character communication.

The reasons for this additional freedom are threefold: several heads are better than one at providing rich details; it will improve the story if the characters can be adapted to it; and because it makes the game more agile. Having to turn back to Rivendell because you didn't bring enough rope gets old pretty soon.

Giving this power to the players makes proper telegraphing even more important as the players might otherwise, by mistake, abuse their power and damage the game. The game master must ensure that the players are aware of how their power might be used at all times. This is done through telegraphing and a combination of restrictions communicated at the start of play. For example, before the game, the game master might instruct the players to not change details about their characters' backgrounds, as further details will be revealed during the game.

Power Over the Story

In addition to having power to change things about their own characters on the fly, jeepform relies on the players to make decisions about the outcome of action situations with respect to where the story is going. In many cases, the outcome of an action is not as important for the story as its impact on the characters it involves. In these situations, the players will often decide what happens, negotiating amongst themselves and with the game master in the meta-play while continuing to play their characters.

For example, Phyllis, Manny and Fred are playing a drinking game (in-game), basically a glorified truth-or-dare. A dice is rolled and a pawn is moved an equal number of steps to a new square. Some squares require the player to answer a question, others simply require her to take a shot of vodka. The players play without dice and place their pawns on the squares that allow the correct type of truth questions and dares. Phyllis' player decides that Phyllis has bad luck and ends up drinking

loads of vodka in the beginning, making the character drunk. The player reasons that this will make it more believable to be forthcoming with the questions, and lowers her guard towards Manny. She has a feeling that the game is headed in a direction where Manny and Phyllis will end up sharing a bed.

Later on, Phyllis and Manny are being chased by Richard and Fred. The game master realises that the important thing about this chase is how it cements the relationship of Phyllis and Manny, as they are faced with a common enemy. She also realises this will give ample opportunity for Richard to disclose why he is acting the way he is, while talking to Fred in the car. In this case, the players are facing each other, Phyllis and Manny on one side and Richard and Fred on the other. Seeing each others' faces will help the players to negotiate on what should happen. Phyllis and Manny stress over being chased and quickly start yelling at each other, Manny's player says "hold onto something, here they come", before making a *Star Trek* –inspired gesture to indicate that the car was hit. As Fred yells "Look out for that sausage stand!", everyone knows that Richard and Fred are hitting a sausage stand. Richard says: "the wheel is stuck," and Fred slams his fist into the car door in frustration. "We've lost them. Damn it!" The game master cuts the scene and fast forwards: "Later that evening, in the motel room, with the car safely parked in the forest," pointing at Phyllis and Manny.

In the above example, the chasing players decided that it would be nice if they did not catch Manny and Phyllis, and decided to collide with a sausage stand and get stuck. When Richard decided that the wheel was stuck, he could glance at the game master, giving her the opportunity to shake her head ever so slightly if she had another idea about what should happen. If she did, Richard could have backed off the situation by saying "I'll reverse out of it. Just sit tight!", and the chase would have gone on. Richard could also glance at Phyllis and Manny to see their opinion on the suggested outcome.

Truth is in High Flux

In games where players get to decide the outcome of actions, rewrite the past of their characters and pull whatever out of their backpacks to support the story, the truth is in a high state of flux. Sometimes there is no truth – only story.

Not having too fixed a notion of truth gives a lot of freedom and allows the story to go anywhere. In *The Upgrade!*, a player may temporarily take on another player's character for a short scene that serves as a comment to the ongoing game. The player has the same power over the borrowed character as her regular character.

For example, if Julia and Tom are falling in love on a couch in Tom's apartment, another player might suddenly leap up and start a scene in which Tom has another woman in his apartment the night before where he is saying similar things to her. This brings new information into the game and makes the situation more interesting. Is Tom, now obviously a ladies' man, playing Julia, or is he falling for her for real? Quite possibly the scene just improved the game by bringing more possibilities to Tom's player.

Similarly, playing a story backwards will cause constant reinterpretations of the previous scenes. "Why did I do that? Aha!"

Truth being in high flux affects things like character creation. If where the character grew up is not

relevant to the story, it is not important, and thus it should not be included. In some games, the details you leave out are every bit as important as the details you include. The character description should still be enough to go on, but let the players themselves fill in the blanks while the game is running. If it seems like a good idea to establish two characters as sisters half-way into the game, go ahead! The usual tendency to over-specify background information is often bad for the play.

It is important to introduce new facts in such a way that other players can "back out" if it doesn't fit their wants (rather than relying on rules like "embrace everything"). Throwing yourself at someone yelling "*Sis!*" might not be a good idea as it does not leave the player room to back out.

Abuse of Power, and the Problem of Power Shifting

Generally, players never abuse their game master powers[9]. They realise that when the man with a knife threatens them in the alley, they are threatened for a reason and thus, inventing a gun that was never mentioned before is most likely a bad choice.

The biggest problem with giving power to the players is coaching them to make use of it. Some players are uncomfortable with making decisions about things traditionally controlled by a game master or are afraid of making the "wrong" decisions. Be sure to use telegraphing in a way that makes the players secure about such decisions, and be sure to always discuss player power with your players until you are sure they have grasped the concept and are comfortable enough with it to actually use it. As was visible from the car chase example, they have every possibility of coordinating with the game master to avoid messing up the big picture.

The Levels of a Game

While jeepform neither follows, encourages, or presents a specific model of role-playing, it realises that a game takes place on at least three levels simultaneously: *the actual game level*, *the meta play level* and *the inner play level*. Most likely there are other names for these and elaborations on the distinction, but this is outside the scope of this text.

The actual game is everything that goes on in the shared fantasy – the interaction between the characters, etc. This is what is generally meant by "the game". The meta play is the social interplay between the players who are playing the characters, and the inner play is what goes on inside the minds of the *characters*.

Meta Play

Just as the player's character will experience something during a game, so will the player. Some will claim that separating the player from the character is impossible. Quite a few actors seem to differ. In this text, it won't really matter.

If the premise of a game is to discuss infidelity, then it seems likely that the game can be played as well in the meta play as in the actual play. Or rather, the actual play is just a way of affecting the players (that exist in the meta-level by Jeep terms) through the characters (that are in the actual play).

9 Likely, in part because jeepform games isn't about winning or loosing, or XPs.

Affecting the characters is perfectly possible through the players. Showing your players horror movies before playing a Cthulhu scenario will likely make their characters behave differently. Why not leave the window open to make the room a bit colder for the arctic scenario?

A very classic example of meta play techniques can be found in traditional tabletop sessions. There, the game master would at times roll a dice, hide the result and consult a table to determine if the players had alarmed the guards or spotted a hidden item. This would tell the players that something was happening and increase the tension. Many game masters realised this and started performing the stunt when no guards or hidden artifacts were present in order to indirectly affect the game: keep the players (and their characters) on their toes.[10]

Jeepform acknowledges things going on outside the game and capitalises on that to improve the game. If there is an important hockey game the same evening, can the players' desire to learn its outcome be exploited in any way? If two players are an item, can that be used to achieve an effect? If most of your players have played your previous games, can this be used?

No Sign of Alex (2001) is about misconceptions and memories. "*Is this really a memory or did I just dream it up when I was young?*" To this end, the players' character texts are filled with inconsistencies, things that the characters should probably not know, et cetera. The goal is to create an uncertainty among the players about what is really true and what information they can use. Does this text really depict what was going through my cousin's mind, or is this my interpretation? Albeit subtle, hopefully this inflicts the game and the reading of the character text and more importantly makes the players feel as their characters should – a bit confused and not certain of what is true. In that game the game master should constantly lie to sustain the uncertainty.

Inner Play

The inner play is what goes on inside the mind of the characters. Exposing the inner play brings more information about the characters to the table, which is great in the spirit of transparency. It also makes it more interesting to have introvert characters and play – for example – conflicts that never give rise to some actual action.

From my experience, use of monologues (where a character says what is on his mind while other pause) is widespread in at least Swedish and Danish freeform. If Tom, secretly, flirts with a barmaid while Julia, his girlfriend, is there, Julia's monologue can make the scene much more interesting.

In *Salaligan* (2000), monologues were used to skip the violent part of the game where the characters assault a police station with the purpose of killing as many police officers as possible. Rather than playing the scene, or playing a scene where the characters discuss the events, the players give one short monologue each about how they felt, also detailing what happened. In this monologue, one character also turns the whole scenario around by making the players, not the characters, understand what is going to happen down the road – how the game is likely to end. This particular example combines fate play with monologues, more or less inserting a fate through the character monologue. Players understand the new direction the game is taking, and start moving characters in the right direction.

10 Other classic, great techniques for affecting the meta play include mood lighting and music. These are well-known and there is nothing we can say here that would bring anything new to the world.

Yet another unobtrusive technique for exposing the inner play is called *insides/outsides* (Højgård, 1971). When playing with insides and outsides, the player gives running comments discussing what goes on inside the *mind* of a character (insides) regarding what happens in the actual play (outsides). In *Doubt* (2007), two players used this technique brilliantly in a flirt. Peter was flirting with his wife's assistant Maude at a fashion show, and promised to buy Maude one of the dresses shown on the runway if she would let him see her in it. He would pick dresses, and if he managed to pick one that had not yet been sold, the deal was on. Peter had "talked to the audience" about Maude to show that he was sizing her up. During the negotiation of how many tries Peter would get to pick a dress, Maude turned to the audience saying things like "one is too little, I want him to make it, but is three too much, like I am throwing myself at him?" After Peter had picked the wrong dress twice, Maude was thinking "please, pick the green one, the green one," which Peter of course did.

If the characters' thoughts are spoken out loud, there is suddenly much more information to act on, and certain characters and scenes become much more interesting to play. By not making entire scenes about the inner play, the game stays agile. Of course, it is perfectly possible to make a game that is played largely in the form of monologues, and make action in the actual play comments on the monologues.

Fun, Not Funny

For players, game masters and game wrights[11] alike, it is important to realise that you can have fun even though the story is not funny. Funny is often the easiest way out, and the easy road only stretches that far.

When using techniques that rely heavily on meta play things, it is very tempting to start making jokes. People laughing at the fact that it is the fat guy that plays the slender gal or people making shrewd in-game references to a situation that took place earlier today in school. This is all good and well, but don't get stuck in it.

What is a comedy role-play? Does the comedy lie in how crazy the action is in the eyes of the players (as in the *Fawlty Towers*-esque *Badehotellet* (2006)), or would the characters themselves be laughing if they could watch the game?

A lot of players I've met over the years have had trouble taking role-playing seriously. People having trouble letting go of the fact that we're really just people pretending. But more importantly, a lot of players are afraid of taking role-playing seriously because of the fear of sucking: if someone has pretensions, it is actually possible to fail. While this is true, sucking hardly ever matters. And the pain of sucking is so little in relation to the adrenaline kick of nailing the game. If you can't get players to shape up, avoid them. And tell them why.

Pretension is not a bad thing. Wanting to achieve something, whether it is "I want to write a game about staying or breaking up in a long relationship because that's where most of my friends are in their lives right now" or "let's examine what happens if our paladins are cowards that always back

11 Game master being the person or persons running a game and the game wright being the person or persons conceiving, designing and writing up the game. In many countries these are generally the same persons, but at most Swedish and Danish cons, game wrights write self-contained games which are run in parallel by multiple game masters.

away from fights," will make your game more interesting than just playing aimlessly to see what happens.

As should be apparent to most readers of this book, role-playing is a medium of expression, just like painting, creative writing or shooting movies. We can do stuff with role-playing, therapy for ourselves and our friends, exploring our prejudices about a certain topic, make political games about stupidity and racism and whatnot. These things are going to be fun, even if you are not laughing even once (but please do). Having the balls to take it seriously, having and showing pretension and not taking the easy way out is going to make more great scenarios. And I want to play great scenarios.

Conclusion

I have tried to cover the basic ideas of jeepform, and in doing so, I have left out descriptions of techniques that can be found in greater abundance on the net. Jeep games use a lot of tricks to get where they want to; there are techniques such as *allegoric play* (dancing to symbolise sex), *contextualisation* (pause and play a scene that explains something about the current scene), *character pools* (anyone may pick any of the seven dwarves at any time), *fast forward* ("*10 minutes later, crying!*"), *inside/outsides*, *repetition* (playing a scene over and over with different input or from different angles), *sitting and standing play* (using different stances to allow the game to be carried out at several levels simultanously), *the superman system* (start with a defining moment later in the game, and then from the beginning), and so forth. Descriptions of these and more can be found on the website of *Vi åker jeep*[12]. Jeepform is one incarnation of freeform, and the label likely fits more games and people than those officially using the jeep moniker. The original reason for using the name jeepform rather than freeform was so that Google could find it – the term freeform has become terribly overloaded over the years.

Jeepform playing style is certainly related to improvisational theatre. From an outsider's point of view, the two activities might even be indistinguishable. To my mind, the big difference is in the mindset of the players: Jeepform is still role-playing and approaches story-telling from a role-playing perspective by using a lot of improv tools (a lot of good stuff can be ported straight to role-playing from improv). Improv does not become role-playing if you add rocks-papers-scissors and hit points.

For those wanting to dig deeper, the *Vi åker jeep* website is a great source of games in Scandinavian and English as well as a dictionary of techniques and lists of pungent "truths" about freeform and jeepform role-playing. All games are runnable by anyone who has printed the booklet from the PDF, as is common in the tradition of Swedish and Danish convention games.

And remember that how you tell the story is as important as the story itself.

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Behind the Façade of A Nice Evening with the Family

Anders Hultman, Anna Westerling and Tobias Wrigstad

Larp allows us to experience stories in a very powerful and realistic way. However, the physical restraints of time and space constrain the storytelling. In A Nice Evening with the Family a handful of techniques and methods borrowed from freeform role-playing and theatre were used to enhance the experience.

In this article, the organisers of *A Nice Evening with the Family*[1] describe their game and explain the goals that they set for themselves. The game mixed live action role-playing with freeform and theatre and used numerous techniques, such as *story-oriented play, avoiding crappy play, contextualising* and *exposing the inner play* in order to achieve its goals.

Premise-wise, *A Nice Evening* was a game *about family*. Being an interesting theme that anybody can relate to, it had great potential for touching people deeply. The characters originated from six different plays and a film that had later been turned into a play. The film, Thomas Vinterberg's *Festen*[2] (1998) provided the structure for the action. The game was set in a birthday party for Helge, in which Christian, Helge's eldest son, reveals in a speech that his father molested him when he was a kid. The other guests react by spending the evening trying to ignore this fact. The players were guests at the party which were also characters in one of the plays.

The characters came from Henrik Ibsen's *Et Dukkehjem* (1879) and *Gengangere* (1881), August Strindberg's *Fröken Julie* (1888) and *Leka med elden* (1893), Ann Charlotte Leffer's *Sanna kvinnor* (1883) and Anneli Mäkelä's stage adaptation of Tove Jansson's book *Pappan och havet* (1965).[3] All these Nordic plays are about family and façades, which created a strong unified theme for the game.

Inspired by theatre, the game was divided into four differently themed acts, which used different playing styles and also structured the game. The first act was the *family act*, where surface is more important than honesty and characters behave themselves. The second act, initiated by Christian's outing of his father as a paedophile, was about the *breaking of the façade*. During this stage emotions started to break through. The third act, *the demons are out*, was about letting emotions loose and running wild and true. The fourth act, which was actually played first, was about *rebuilding the façade*; the characters pretend that the previous night did not happen, and have found a way to polish their shields.

Though the game was structured in this way and the players knew what their characters were supposed to do during each act, the players were not constrained; they could decide how the events took place and deviate from the plots outlined in the original texts. The fact that the game was set in the present day (instead of the end of the 19th century) liberated the players to construct new readings of the plays. The plays were also integrated; some characters were merged in order to created bridges between the plays, and all of them were guests at Helge's party.

1 Full credits in Anna Westerling's paper in this book.

2 Eng. The Celebration

3 English titles in order: A Doll's House, Ghosts, Miss Julie, Playing with Fire, True Women and Moominpappa at Sea.

The event was constrained in time to one evening and spatially to the mansion and its lawn. This was intentional; the jeepform methods were used to extend the gaming space, even if the players never left the game area. Jeepform is an especially method-heavy branch of freeform[4] that stresses the importance of premise, leveraging on the meta-play, and generally deals with realism and everyday topics in a non-fantastic setting.

The game took place at a mansion south of Stockholm and was run four times in a row. Each game was two days long and had about 40 participants and 13 staff personnel.

The Goals of A Nice Evening

In terms of storytelling, *A Nice Evening* had numerous explicit goals. It intended to achieve certain structural goals: *story-oriented play, avoiding "crappy play", contextualising* and *exposing the inner play*. This served to give the player an intense and emotion-packed journey during the 11 hours the game lasted. We wanted no one to be able to escape and everybody to feel like the main characters of their own emotional journey. We now describe our goals before describing the techniques we used to achieve them.

Story-Oriented Play

In the authors' opinion, larps focusing on a 360° illusion[5] are generally simulation-oriented rather than story-oriented. This means that the game is set up by facts (you are a knight), conditions (you hate that guy) and desires (you want to be the king) before the proverbial "play" button is pushed and the larpwrights sit back and watch the game (as opposed to the story) unfold. This approach mimics life, which in our opinion generally is bad from a story perspective. We chose a different approach, which promotes story immersion as well as (classic) character immersion.[6]

A Nice Evening did not attempt to create an illusion. This facilitated the use of our toolbox since players were free to remain both players and characters and to use the blunt immersion-breaking techniques such as the *meta hour*, *monologues* and the *black box*. As their characters, players were expected to feel and react in a natural way; i.e., a character gets happy when he meets his mother. As players, they were expected to broadcast their intentions to other players and be sensitive to such information broadcasts from other players.[7]

Of course, the foremost component of creating story-oriented play was basing the game on plays with scripted outcomes, building a web of story threads between characters and developing them together with the set goal of recreating the play. Knowing a thing or two about the outcome of the game allows for interesting play; for example, if Krogstad and Ms Linde know that they will not get back together again until after the dinner, they can throw themselves in each others' arms at first sight, knowing that both players have the responsibility to back out, or just take it slow without

4 Freeform can be described as a hybrid of tabletop role-playing, larp and improv. See Wrigstad (2008b) in this book for a discussion on freeform and jeepform.

5 The 360° illusion aim to represent a complete game word without symbolism, in order to create a physically immersive environment where the game feels as real as possible. See Koljonen (2007).

6 Also see Wrigstad (2008b) in this volume for an extended treatise on the subject.

7 Also known as telegraphing in the jeepform lingo. Also see Wrigstad (2008b) in this volume.

The black-clad director in action. (Photograph by Natalie Sjölund)

fearing that the other player is misreading the signals[8].

Runtime game mastering was pivotal in making the game story-oriented and not simulation-oriented. It made the necessary coordination possible to let key events happen at the right moment in time, in the right order, in front of the right people, and otherwise stay true enough to the story without sacrificing flexibility. The meta hour provided a useful recap moment to unify the players' perception of reality and vision of where to go and how.

Avoiding Crappy Play

For *A Nice Evening*, we wanted a way to enable play in locations that were not physically on-site, for instance to burn down the orphanage in Ibsen's *Gengangere* or to include characters with no players (in the second game, in which there weren't enough players for all characters). We also wanted to make sure that the game was equally good for both the players in leading roles and the players playing extras. For example, we wanted some key scenes to be accessible by all characters and players, which at times involved sexual intercourse or other things players did not want to play in a non-simulated manner.

8 In jeepform terminology (Wrigstad 2008a), this is known as the Superman system. In games following the Superman system, players are given a target scene or situation: The players are then expected to make their way to this target. Trivially, the target scene might establish that two characters have broken up or that one of them is now dead. See http://jeepen.org/dict for more information.

Resorting to vague references to imaginary off-site locations or non-existent characters was regarded as a bad solution. This is no problem in freeform games or tabletop role-playing games, but with 40 players scattered over a large area with players coming and going, it's not practical to let one person play multiple roles or enable interaction with imaginary objects. Our simple way around the problem was to restrict the use of such techniques to the black box, the meta hour and the *psychologist*. As all players attended the pre-game, they were well-prepared and aware of what was expected of them and what they could expect from others.

Contextualising

Contextualising means giving context to an action by examining what preceded it or what consequences it will have in the future. The method has been used in some jeepform games (e.g., *The Upgrade!* and *Inga spår efter Alex*) and this proved to be a good match in *A Nice Evening* as well, since a lot of the plays had important parts that took place before the events played out in the game. What had really happened between Mrs Alving and Reverend Manders and what had caused Ms Linde and Krogstad to break up so many years ago? And will Christian really be free of his demons after outing his father's abuse?

Not making decisions about the past beforehand makes the game more malleable, and it becomes possible to work out the nature of past relationships as you go. Tools such as the black box and meta hour played pivotal roles here.

Exposing the Inner Play

An old jeep adage says, "*The inner thoughts and feelings of the characters should preferably be expressed in the game using appropriate techniques*" (Wrigstad 2008a). Of course, the reason for this is that many of the most important things in a story happen inside the characters heads, and it is a shame if these are lost to the world. Equally importantly, full transparency cannot be achieved unless all characters' agendas are known by everyone involved. For example, Reverend Manders' actions cannot be properly interpreted unless we realise that he is jealous of everyone else having a family. Naturally, this can be stated before the game, but this only works if this state is constant throughout the game and if you have players who can keep a lot in mind. Techniques such as monologues, the meta hour, the psychologist, and runtime game mastering allow exposing such inner play.

These different methods all served the purpose of creating a better and tighter experience for the participants. We wanted them to experience the story as intensely as possible. To fulfil these goals, the players were bombarded with techniques, and if they did not find the best possible experience they should always have had a chance to find a director or use one of the provided methods to take their story in a new direction.

Pre-Game Techniques

Flexible and malleable storytelling based on a shared dramatic curve from static scripts requires careful setup. The four-act dramatic structure started with lies and smiles and ended with truth and chaos. The acts began at pre-determined times without any breaks in the game, and players were free to improvise events on top of the overall dramatic arc. The players were allowed to make their own interpretations of the scripted plays, and also craft their own dramatic structures in them.

There are two conventional ways of preparing characters in Swedish larps. Either the game masters write up and distribute the characters beforehand, or assign some players as group leaders and have them assemble groups, hoping that characters will spring to life. When preparing *A Nice Evening*, we came to the conclusion that neither of the two solutions was satisfactory.

One of the credos of the game organisers was that the game was *by adults, for adults*. We wanted to make a game where you could arrive more or less completely unprepared, without having read the scripts or even having been assigned a character, and where the participants had equal opportunity to prepare and be informed. We also wanted the interpretation of the plays to be done collectively by the players in their *script groups* (consisting of all the players with a character belonging to a certain script). Last, we also needed time for our participants to get to know one another and to learn the plays, the meta-techniques and the additional back-story. To cover all these issues, we decided to make the pre-game as long as the game itself, eleven hours, which for most groups was still not enough time to do all the things the organisers and participants wanted to squeeze into it.

The most important component to the pre-game was the *directors* – our game masters. Every director was in charge of one specific play and the players who played the parts. During the pre-game phase, the directors led the process in workshops, helping the players to get to know each other, reading and interpreting the script, explaining the vision, premise and techniques of the game and so forth. During the actual game they functioned as game masters. The luxury of having approximately one director per five players allowed every group to be prepared in the way that best suited them, helped to create a good setup for what the players at hand were interested in, and allowed us to cater to the specific needs of individual players.

Broadly, the goals of the pre-game phase were to have the script groups make their own interpretation of their play, familiarise the participants with the techniques of the game, build inter-character relationships and create a feeling of trust between participants both within the groups and over group boundaries. The groups also created dramatic structures for their own interpretation of the script, and inserted them in the over-arching structure based on the scripts.

To prepare the group of directors we created a toolbox consisting of a more or less abstractly described set of methods they could use as they saw fit. The group dynamic exercises were stolen and adapted from theatre, role-playing, larping and meeting management. We stressed that the directors, when acting as facilitators, should be aware of the tendency of newly formed groups to follow the first initiative spoken and the persistent master suppression techniques (i.e., bad ways of taking control and asserting leadership over a group) used by many eloquent players. A typical pre-game could look like this:

> Evening, Day 1: Players gather and introduce themselves; discussion about expectations and fears; reading parts of the script; acting out a few scenes; quick walkthrough of the techniques; producing a rough timeline of events that happen during the larp.
>
> Morning, Day 2: Physical group exercises with all participants; short group meetings to establish inter-character relationships; returning to the script groups to finish the timeline of events, reading some more of the script, play some important scene from some character's past and do some trust-building exercises.

We wanted the process to make the players feel safe and confident, yet allowed to wander as far from the path as they wanted to. The directors' job was to get the group back to the framework if

they strayed too far off. We assigned each player a director who would take care of all the pre-game exercises, in order to create a feeling of security that is important for fully engaging in the game. Basically, you always knew that if you got lost somehow, the director was there for you.

Crafting Contact Surfaces

To make *A Nice Evening* a unified experience, instead of several larps played in parallel in a shared space, we worked hard on connecting the different plays. Naturally, the selection of plays was done with this in mind, but further measures were needed. To create a common reason for the characters to be in one place, the film *Festen* was chosen as the frame for the stories in all the plays: all characters were present in order to celebrate Helge's 60th birthday. All characters in the other plays were Helge's family and friends, which created some natural connections between the other plays as well.

To be able to manage all of the interconnections, we created groups spanning across the plays with different kinds of characters that somehow belonged together: the lodge, the kitchen, the girls from the big city and so forth, some of which overlapped. During the different pre-games, inconsistencies and design mistakes were found in these groups, which were ironed out for later instalments as we furthered our understanding of the complexity of our own creation. Still, overall, the groups changed in every game, and if we had done ten games more they would still be changing, since we saw new things after each game and with each particular group of players.

Our main goal was to create diegetic opportunities for the characters to interact. We wanted to facilitate interaction without affecting suspension of disbelief in a negative fashion. Where people would be and whom they would meet was a constant source of design problems. For example, the upper-class setting required a formal dinner with fixed seating. As all who have attended such parties know, they can sometimes be great, but more often than not tend to compose of boring small talk with total strangers. In the game, being stuck with only a few fellow players, unable to interact with others for too long would lead to crappy playing.

This particular problem was solved by changing the seating between every course, inserting breaks between the courses, and by serving dessert buffet style. Additionally, we also tried hard to keep the dinner as short as possible. For example, we explicitly forbid unplanned speeches, as those would have stopped the story and prevented the players from acting in the larp.

Experiences

Having lots of time with your fellow players before the game starts is great for some players and lousy for others. Since we made a game for people with different backgrounds, including first-time larpers, the pre-game was absolutely necessary. As a positive side effect, this also unified the vision of the players so that they would have compatible goals and push the larp in the same direction.

On the second instalment, we waited until a few hours into the pre-game before assigning characters to players. Many participants have said that this helped them to really get into the entire script instead of just focusing on the parts that related to their character. As a downside, a small number of participants felt that their experience suffered from the fact that they could not prepare their characters well enough in advance. Since most participants did not have this problem, we are confident that a well-organised pre-game is sufficient preparation for any larp where gear and

costume is not a big deal.

Desire for "more time" is inherent when working with group processes – if we had taken two days to do the pre-game we would still have had too little time. We believe that our eleven hours were a good compromise, and certainly good enough for an eleven-hour game. Our number one time consumer was reading the scripts, some of which were more than 50 pages long taking three hours to read. We tried both reading the full script, and reading only important pieces here and there, but neither method was perfect. Reading a full Ibsen script takes time and effort, but reading just parts of it is also problematic – especially if people make very different interpretations or read it in foreign languages. With scripts as long as Ibsen's we should have made more time for reading the script, or demanded that everyone had read the script a few times in advance.

The greatest problem we had during the pre-game was the unwillingness of some participants to take the stage and act things out. Many larpers are either too lazy or scared and convinced that good larping can only come from endless talking. We wanted to have a mixture of actions – talking, trying, playing, acting, failing and thinking, which was difficult in some groups. In the groups that were willing to try and fail, the approach worked well enough. But if we had to do it again, we would go for more trying and less talking still, to make the pre-game stage sessions even more rewarding.

Runtime Techniques

In this section, we describe the runtime techniques we used to achieve our goals.

The Black Box

The black box was inspired by Black Box Theatre and was implemented as a bare room with a simple boom box. The room was used as a tabletop or freeform role-playing space, which was shielded from the rest of the game. This allowed jumps in time and space and players taking on temporary roles without the risk of players with an unaligned view of the world stumbling in. The worlds in the black box were seldom abstract, but a few initial keywords by a director generally made players' views compatible enough. Many kinds of scenes were played out in the black box.

Symbolically played memories. One example of such a scene is childhood abuse, which requires characters to travel back in time, and is hard to simulate for obvious reasons. In the black box, one could easily imagine being in the children's room 20 years ago and abuse could be played very symbolically just by touching and talking. Directors would narrate or ask questions, such as *"how does it feel to have your fathers weight pressing on your back, his moaning in your ear"* to help players connect with their characters' feelings. A more abstract example was playing the realisation that your husband is a child molester sinking in, which was done with the husband and wife opposite each other, lovingly touching, and game masters walking around going over the molestation, asking questions, and sometimes even addressing the players or each other with their real names while talking about who has the capacity for having sex with children, getting hard-ons from posters with 14-year-old models and the like.

Scenes taking place in off-site locations. For example burning down an orphanage, Knut's terrible interview at the art school, which was also metaphorical in the fact that all the critics who thrashed his art were the players of the other characters in Knut's play (as a side note, it's worth pointing out

The starter at dinner. (Photograph by Natalie Sjölund)

that this would not really be possible in a 360° illusion game).

Scenes with other participants. The black box also allowed the entire set of players of *Fröken Julie* to be involved (again, very metaphorically) in the pivotal sex scene between Jean and Julie which completely reverses their power balance. Sex scenes were in many cases simulated by way of dance improvisation, which nicely allows expressing power, sensuality, affection, etc. This is similar to the *Ars Amandi* method but to the authors' minds transcends it by far.

The initiative to use the black box to play a scene could come from pre-planning or an initiative during the game from either game masters or players. If a player needed a scene he or she could enter the black box and order the scene he or she wanted.

The Meta Hour

The meta hour was a bad name for a good concept that somehow got stuck. The idea was to put a one-hour break into the game, similar to but different from act breaks[9], and use the break for playing scenes around the events that had taken place so far, possible even replaying a scene if necessary.

During the meta hour, the directors guided their script groups in different ways, according to their taste or needs. The meta hour was mainly used to play scenes in a freeform style, free of the time

9 Breaks in the game that marks changes in the diegesis according to a predefined act structure. An early example of a game that used act breaks is Hamlet (2002).

and space constraints of (most of) the rest of the larp was succumb to, for purposes of contextualisation – giving events and actions proper or additional perspective. In that way it was very much like the black box, but the meta hour was set in time, not in space.

In practice, sometimes, the meta hour was also used to update all players of the progression of a story, to direct players or to plot scenes to come. Here, as in the pre-game people, wanted to talk a lot, but we generally tried to keep this short in order of giving them more time on the floor.

Some players would come to the meta hour with ideas of scenes that they wanted to play; for instance they might want to explore back-stories they had come up with during the game. Often, the directors also had ideas of things they wanted to emphasise.

One director staged a very happy birthday the previous year with *Festen* crew before pointing out that they had all totally forgot the daughter who had just committed suicide. Another director staged a character's dream-future, in which she was famous in Parisian fashion circles, and then replayed the scene as it would turn out in reality: The character was introduced as a commodity and was faced with the implicit decision who to give a blowjob in order to get to even stay at the party. Both these examples were played as "freeform scenes", in the second case with all players but one taking on other characters. On a side-note, the last example led to tragically beautiful scenes in the end of the game, where the excited character was invited to visit Paris – although the players all knew what this trip would eventually lead to.

A common problem among players was dealing with the rapid changes from playing your character in the family dinner setting to working with the character in other settings during the meta hour and then quickly back to the dinner setting again. Since some players need more support in this than others, the transitions have to be prepared well. Basically, the meta hour aided game masters and players to reify the premises of the plays by putting their fingers on certain facts or moods by playing scenes around the matters in point. Sometimes, it also provided a much-needed break or opportunity for player to realign their visions for the rest of the game, or simply inform each other of events.

Monologues

Holding a monologue is generally the act of speaking a character's inner thoughts out loud for other *players*, as opposed to *characters*, to hear. Monologues have been used in freeform games for over 10 years. Originally, they were often pre-written texts to be read aloud, but have been gradually put under player control. In *A Nice Evening* we included the monologue technique to expose the inner play.

The in-game location was enhanced with two monologue platforms: One was placed in the lodge's quarter and one in the living room. On a monologue stand, you were free to speak the mind of your character. The other players were encouraged to listen to monologues and keep in mind the player-character dichotomy and be careful about what information would spill over from the player to the character. The monologue space in the lodge room was used during a poker game where players used it to disclose their hands, which allowed players to rig their own card games. In one game the otherwise quiet and solemn Reverend Manders suddenly shouted "*I also want to have a family! I'm lonely!*" from a monologue space, creating a powerful impression in everyone present.

The monologues were used sparingly, more often in the less crowded room. However, when they

Drama in A Nice Evening with the Family. (Photograph by Natalie Sjölund)

were used, they often led to good scenes. Furthermore, the only case where a monologue was misinterpreted was because a game master had failed to point them out in the pre-game.

The Psychologist

The psychologist was partially inspired by *The Doctor* from the larp *OB7* (2001). *OB7* was set in the late 1960's or early 70's, at a time when the Swedish secret intelligence agency (IB) interned political activists in order to place infiltrators in activist groups. One goal of *OB7* was to investigate "the solo play", as many characters were locked up in isolation during most parts of the game, which turned out to lead to sleeping more than anything else. The doctor was an anachronistic character that existed only in the characters' minds, who would visit the characters' cells and play the devil's advocate and offer a welcome break in the solo play. *A Nice Evening* included a psychologist – an in-game character existing on a meta level – that you could visit at any time during the game.

Players were instructed to visit the psychologist if they found themselves stuck in an interpretation of their characters that no longer worked well, if they wanted to play on inner thoughts and feelings that they couldn't find motivation in their characters to talk about with other characters. The game masters played psychologists in rotating shifts in their own personal ways. In one game, Jean from *Fröken Julie* found himself constrained by his character – he needed to be pushed in a certain way, more or less given absolution to move forward in a way that might seem illogical for his character. When confronted about his behaviour by the psychologist, he was able to reason about why a certain change was needed, and thus arrive at a logical explanation for this slight character change

that was blessed by the psychologist. Sometimes, the psychologists could attempt story-coaching by giving out "homework", much like a real psychologist might do. This required milking the subject for enough information not to mess anything up, unless the game master playing the psychologist knew enough about the current interpretation of the character's script from the start.

On at least one occasion, the psychologist was used to discuss the difference of how a game actually turned out in contrast with what a player who had never role-played before had imagined, and who expected the game to function differently from what she had understood in the pre-planning discussions. Occasionally, players also visited the psychologist to be assured that they were playing the game right in which case the answer was pretty much an affirmative yes regardless of the situation.

Many players naturally sought out the psychologist out of curiosity, and were hopefully rewarded with some thought-worthy discussion that led to interesting scenes or personal reflection. At rare times, a director would address the player and, for example, ask for similarities between the player and her character, what the player would have told the character to do in the current situation. Naturally, the psychologist did not exist in the diegesis and the action of entering and exiting the psychologist's office was ignored by players who happened to observe it.

Runtime Game Mastering

Reminiscent of the angels of *Knappnålshuvudet*, the directors dressed in black were probably the most popular part of the *A Nice Evening* toolbox. Whereas the directors were assigned to specific plays in the pre-game, they could venture all over the place when the game was afoot. They did not use any predefined official *A Nice Evening* style, but relied on their personal game mastering styles from role-playing or freeforming. Game masters also made sure that all actions were seen, even if they happened off-site. For example, Christian (*Festen*) being thrown out of the party was helped by game masters:

> *Christian is thrown out twice in the script and both times two game masters helped carry him outside, securing him to a tree the second time. Moments later, when Christian had been let free by a player brilliantly going off-script, the same game masters coached Christian as he was running back into the dining room to shout more obscenities to his father a third time. When the same player tried to untie Christian again, he was stopped by the same game masters who thus reverted the game back to script again. Stopping him simply entailed gently grabbing his shoulders, turning him around and sending him back to the house. A game master would also stay with Christian by the tree, as a comfort to a tied-up player and to serve as audience to his inner struggles. Major characters such as Christian generally received less attention by game masters, as their plays provided more structure to rely on.*

Inner Voices. Game masters would be the inner voices in characters' heads to create live inner dialogues. For example, a game master might move alongside Christian as he is strolling alone by the jetty and ask if it was worth it, and if he thinks things will ever change, or even ask why it took his sister's suicide for him to work up the confidence to expose his father as a child molester. In the second game, a game master would stand close by Christian, grabbing his ass and whispering details about the abuse in his ear as Christian listened to his father's opening speech from the 2nd floor balcony and later watch Christian write his speeches in his room waiting for the dinner to start. These are good examples of how *A Nice Evening* worked on giving meaning to solo-scenes and

reifying the inner play. A game master would ask a player why she always picked up partners from the bottom of the barrel: "*Is that all you think you deserve?*"

Some players used the game masters as roaming psychologists. The players who were in need of someone who would listen to their inner thoughts sought out a game master and started talking to her, and the response would come as the psychologist voice. Many players returned to the same game master a few times during the evening and it became an important part of their running inner dialog. Since the players did not have to enter a specific room and could contact the game master they wanted it really improved and exposed the inner play of the characters.

Coordinating Events. A very concrete way in which directors facilitated story-oriented play was in coordinating events. They would try to make sure that players were at the right place at the right moment in time, by taking them by the hand and leading them somewhere, by gently pushing them in the wrong direction, by blocking the door for them, by whispering something about the air on the balcony, or sometimes bluntly stating "*I think you should go to your room*", all depending on the situation. If Ms Julie's suicide was coming up, they would make sure that her father did not leave the house just before.

With the game masters constantly focusing on the characters, their story and the progression of the plays the players could spend less time wondering if they were missing something or someone and more time on their characters and motives. If something went wrong, the game masters could set it right and the story could go on.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that having an informed audience that can bless your actions, actively *see*[10] you, help you when you're stuck, help you wind up at the right place at the right time and who would serve as your inner voice if necessary will be a game enhancer. A few post-game comments suggested that game masters should be more uniform – wear exactly the same clothes, use exactly the same phrases, techniques for moving people around. As this input came predominantly from larpers with less of a background in freeform role-playing we take this as an indication that people need more training at ignoring irrelevant details and focus on the key parts of the game.

On the other hand, at times this was suggested in connection with the garden, where it was dark at night and it was difficult to tell directors and characters apart. This is an example of why, if your goal is story-oriented play, you need to be able to focus on the story and remove the detracting elements of darkness, coldness and other forces of nature from the picture.

Conclusion

It is all about focusing on the story. What kind of a story do you want to tell, and what tools will you give to the participants in order for them to experience it? We have suggested some here. Take them, change them, use them or do what you think is good for your story. Just remember – if you want your participants to experience a story, as opposed to a simulation of an imagined reality, give them the means to do so. Generally, reality, and simulation of it, are boring. You are not able to get the dramatic highs or feelings that you wish for if you go away for a weekend. Therefore – go for the story.

10 See as in acknowledging your existence, that you are a part of the world and that your actions have bearing on the world.

A Nice Evening with the Family let go of many of the usual laws on how a larp should be. It wasn't a larp in the classical meaning, it was an "event" borrowing techniques from freeform and jeepform, theatre and larp combined in a new way. For players willing to try new ways and explore new territory, many of the techniques mentioned in this article are there to be used and reinvented in future events.

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Stupid Stories: Using Narrativism in Designing Agerbørn

Jonas Trier-Knudsen

This article describes the design of the Danish larp Agerbørn, which attempts to realize the narrativist ambition of telling stories. The underlying question is whether or not larps can be used as a narrative medium, but the style is practically oriented so that organizers can use elements of the design.

The NPCs were as archtypical as the characters in Agerbørn. The hunter and the author shown here. (Photograph by Jens Niros)

We were tired and obsessed. Tired with large-scale larps where nothing happened. We felt that we were placed in a playground where all the fun, action and dramatic scenes were something we had to bring with us if anything dramatic was to happen. We dreamt of designing a larp were something happened, and where the *same* happened to all the participants. Furthermore we were obsessed with stories. We loved the dramatic flow of cinema and the depth of well-written literature. These were the two pillars we wanted to build a larp on.

These vague and slightly pretentious notions inspired us to write a narrativistic larp. Our main ambition was to tell stories. To create a place where our players would not endure endless periods of meaningless downtime, imitating day-to-day interaction or waiting for a touch of either action or party in the evening.

We had ideas of our own, but we did not try to reinvent the wheel. So we looked around for guides and evaluations. Previous articles on narrativism have been dominated by a manifesto-like rhetoric (my own and Troels Barkholt-Spangsbo's (2007) included), though there have not been as many efforts that test any of these ideas. Simply put, I have not seen narrativism move beyond the theoretical discussions into the real practice of setting up a larp, out of the normative and into the descriptive. This article attempts to do just that through some of my own personal experiences working with narratives.

Agerbørn

Agerbørn[1] was set in an era that could have been the American Midwest in the early nineteenth century, though an important point is that it wasn't. The setting was something of an atopia – a *no*place. We aimed at creating the same vibe you get from literature and movies, where the story is focused on a locale and its people, leaving the surrounding world as unimportant.

The story took place at a roadhouse by a crossroad in the middle of nowhere. The not-further-defined nation was at civil war between the pioneers in the west, and the metropolitan people of the east. This place was a hallow: the last known point before the uncharted territory. Passing through here were some fifty people who were all fleeing or moving away from their background. There were deserted soldiers, pioneers and a minor religious community among others, all escaping the war, following a self-proclaimed prophet. As the crossroad setting strongly indicates, the overall story arc guided ways for people to choose their path in life, making what we labeled *the fateful choice*. All the people passing through the town would reach a moment of clarity: an understanding of which path in life was the right one for them, and which road to take when the larp ended. The players were explicitly told that their characters would have to make this choice during the game.

The larp was written for 60 players. The characters were divided into six groups so that each corner of the world was represented by a set of typical characters[2]. In addition to this, the fifth group played the staff at the roadhouse, and the sixth was a group of NPCs thoroughly instructed by the creative organizer. The latter was primarily used by the characters who briefly helped with set-up and further story development. The larp lasted for one and a half days and was contained in a closed location. The players were not in a confined space, but beside the roadhouse and the crossroads, there was nothing surrounding them except for the expanse of the open countryside in the great out-of-doors.

Working with *Agerbørn* crystallized our view of *narrativism*. In this project we worked from the following three base assumptions:

Larp can be used as a narrative medium. Larps can be used to tell stories. Naturally this doesn't imply that it works the same way as other related media (e.g. cinema, literature), but it has its strengths and weaknesses, much like its siblings.

The core of the larp is a good story. This means that in the moment-by-moment of gameplay, a player should feel the rush of a great scene, and in retrospect s/he should be able to interpret the story and extract more meaning than was experienced at the time.

Meta-knowledge of game mechanics, characters or plot is not a weakness. Players should have the ability to plan as much ahead as they like and foreknowledge of the game is never an expression of weak design. On the contrary, narrativism sees it as a way for the players to flesh out the overall structure of the story presented by the organizers.

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1 Agerbørn was organized by Jesper Heebøll (coordinator), Anna Balsgaard (set design), Jesper Bruun (public relations), Elisabeth Haase (logistics and sanitation) and Jonas Trier (fiction design), with Jens Niros (web), Søren Ebbehøj (construction) Anders Frost Berthelsen (game dynamics) and others. Agerbørn was played between the 17th to the 19th of August 2007 at Ryegaard Dyrehave, Denmark.

2 Not meaning that each group of characters came from the direction they represented. Rather each character was thematically linked with a road, so that they – in choosing their path – had a point of origin.

A smaller group among the people following the prophet was labeled "Salt of the Earth". (Photograph by Jens Niros)

In summary, the overall goal here was to answer the theoretical question of whether or not players could tell stories through larp. Thus we came up with the following design, solely dedicated to creating the story-telling larp.

Simplicity of Design

The design of *Agerbørn* was based on simplicity, as we believed that would be our road to success. Instead of creating an original and redefining story, we wanted the players to act within a familiar narrative and setting, so that they would have an intuitive understanding of the flow, mood and characters.

Basically all *characters* in *Agerbørn* were stereotypes, or at least characters that were very easy to recognize as being cliché within a particular context. For example, the owner of the roadhouse, Job, was the classic elder, whose primary quality was wisdom and knowledge of the land. In general the characters were not necessarily "deep," informed by a logical coherent background. Rather they were reduced (or upgraded) to plot functions. In other words, they were not expected to have any more substance than was required for making playable stories. Furthermore, players were allowed to change less important features in their backgrounds during the game if it helped catalyze the story. This narrowed an individual player's sense of being complete in order to better focus on the common narrative.

The *setting* was best described by the old trusty "less is more" credo. Our ambition was to make it as simple as possible. This was designed so that all parts of the surrounding world were just slightly above the level of a caricature. Instead we used the outside world as an indication of the fundamental mindset of the characters. In short, each corner of the world (and thus road)

represented an archetypical set of values.

The north was the front of the war: the deserted soldiers coming from this area were marked by the horrors of the trenches. Flesh and physicality were their keywords. Opposed to this was the final frontier of *the south*. It was the uncharted territory and a place where people told strange stories. No one but desperados and madmen ventured there. No characters came from here, but naturally this was where the prophet was leading his flock. On the other axis, *the east* represented civilization and urbanization. The people were metropolitan and cultivated. Rationality and culture were their thematic anchorage. Finally, *the west* was the place of pioneers, a source of frontiersmen and rawhides. The people from this area were hardened, preferring a hands-on, no nonsense solution to problems. Their keywords were gritty intuition and nature.

The naivety of this order was a way of presenting the basic *dynamics* of the game in a tangible and clear manner. The oppositions allegorized by the crossroads were the basic conflicts in the larp. By integrating them in the setting, we gave the players flexibility to use the game dynamics as a reference without breaking the diegesis. This approach was used in order to center the player's interaction on what was at hand, to make it possible to talk about the larp's game dynamics without moving away mentally or physically from the larp area.

We tried to discourage any play based on references to an outer world; instead, we attempted to direct all possible topics of acting inwards – towards the centre of the larp. The setting was not a backdrop, but a concrete entity that players could engage other players with.

Thusly, the players build their interaction on *genre*, rather than representing an arbitrary culture. Therefore we put a lot of work into defining that genre as best as possible. Firstly, we included a thick genre description in the written material, defining the typical plots, characters and conflicts contained within it. Secondly, we hosted workshops where we presented related fiction within our self-enclosed genre, such as *Sleepy Hollow* (1999) and *The Village* (2004) and literature in the vein of H.P. Lovecraft and 19th Century gothic horror stories. In short, we crafted a genre and then coined the term *countryside horror* to describe it. In our introductory texts, we included this short presentation of the genre (excerpt):

> *Society and mood*
> The basic mood is sinister and the setting is generally dystopian. The community believes that is does what is good, but the reader (i.e. the player behind the character) and fictive outsiders don't. The genre applies a fair amount of superstition and occultism. It can be anything from shamanism to gothic witchcraft, which helps set the sinister mood. [...]
>
> *Heroes*
> There are two typical heroic protagonists in countryside horror. The first is the *pragmatic* who tries to unmask the locals' superstitious beliefs. The supernatural however always ends up showing itself and thus forcing the pragmatic hero to review his firm beliefs in rationality. [...]
>
> *Themes*
> A typical theme is that of *collective repression*. The community always tries to repress or forget their dark acts. As a dystopian, sinister spiritual unity the isolated villages of the genre lack self.

They turn the blind eye and blame outsiders. (*Agerbørn* background material.[3])

This approach is relevant to making a larp within a diegetic world the players are familiar with (such as *Star Wars*), with the overall goal being to create a familiar setting and story. However, the process of outlining a genre changes the focus of the events that are played out. With a *Star Wars* larp, a high degree of intertextuality is expected. The players will consistently base their play on dialogue from an outside source – and not only in the lines they speak, but also in the actions they perform.

Within a genre one cannot default to a fixed narrative. The genre provides players with typical characters, conflicts and narrative patterns, but it never quite reveals exactly what will happen. One can retain an embraceable atmosphere and still have an aura of originality. Defining a genre in a cross-section of several components of published fiction frees the players to be creative in their interpretation of the genre, but avoids the possible misdirection of fan-boy enthusiasm.

To make this approach work, we relied on a general principle of openness. In realizing the narrativist ideal, we believed that no secrets were to be kept from the players. By forewarning our participants about what would happen (not in detail, but the general expected development of the plot was included in the written material), without limiting them from knowing the personal details of each other's characters, we could support the participants with the mental surplus to focus on the narrative; the art of living out the story.

Furthermore, we used preliminary *workshops*. First of all these were to make sure that we – the organizers – were clear in our mediation of the larp. This banal point proved more valuable than first expected. Informing individual players face-to-face still seems to be the most effective way to communicate an idea.

Secondly, we used the workshops for character creation. The participants were first paired and then interviewed each other as if they were close friends of their characters-in-the-making to answer all questions about them. This had a double effect: the interviews forced the participants to reflect upon their character-concepts, and was thus a simple technique for character creation. Players also gained a process-oriented knowledge of each other's internal workings of their character. Rather than investing a lot of time exploring each other's characters, players started the larp from this point, and could then begin to explore what stories they could tell together.

Finally, we tried to experiment with different styles of play. An interesting question when working with narratives is the dilemma of the protagonist, and whether this elementary part of classic narratives is applicable within our medium. In the eleventh hour we developed a game mechanic and tested it in a small party game. However we did not feel fluent enough to use the mechanic in the larp itself, but the concept can be useful with proper modifications and testing. This technique is called *Pass the salt, please*.

A group of five to 10 players are set in a familiar setting (we used a bar), with simple characters. The participants interact with and simulate the environment. At any time a player can say "pass the salt, please" (originally we wanted it to be set at a dinner table; the object is of no importance). When a

3 Translated from the Danish. The original text can be found at www.agerboern.dk. When the text speaks of community it is a double reference to a) that countryside horror stories usually are set among smaller, rural communities, but also b) as a general notion of how groups of fictional people work within the stories.

The crossroads were marked with the classic sign pointing towards each corner of the world. (Photograph by Jens Niros)

player receives the proverbial salt, s/he becomes the protagonist of the story. All other players direct their actions at the protagonist either directly through interaction with the character, or indirectly through e.g. talking about the character. The overall ambition is to make the character the centre of the spontaneous story. After a while, another player can ask for the salt and so on.

Our participants concluded it would be nearly impossible to properly implement this mechanic in a larger-scale larp. However, they entertained that it could be an interesting element to introduce in either a smaller larp or in a pocket of a larp area. It added flow and thus created a fast-paced story (at least compared to the stories traditionally experienced though larps), which made us consider that some of the techniques could at some point be useful. A crucial point about *Pass the salt, please* was that the use of narrative elements seemed somewhat artificial. In the words of the players, it created a distance between player and game, and left them with something other than the traditional larp-experience.

Lessons Learned

Working with stories is hard work. Using larp as a narrative medium proved itself to be a challenging task, and *Agerbørn* made this extremely clear to us. After the project was brought to an end, I realized that the following three elements of the design came closest to realizing our ambition. Of course as it always is when talking about design, this is but one approach among many – the following is what worked for our specific project within our goals.

Simplicity works. Even though most organizers with story-telling ambitions would prefer to have the depth of a well written novel or the crispy surface of a David Lynch movie, simple is better. When the players are in game, they develop a double consciousness, both understanding the overall

story along with the actions played out before them. At *Agerbørn,* one of greatest successes was the integration of game dynamics into the setting. Creating a coherent environment where all the strings are tied together and all elements of the larp are integrally linked has proven more rewarding then ever imagined.

The *concept of genre* is extremely useful. Genres are great because they place themselves in the cross section between interaction rules and diegesis. In many ways a genre can include the best of both worlds when crossbreeding narratives with larp. It includes the necessary do's and don'ts of the diegetic rules, but is never forceful in its directions. It enables the players to tap into an intuitively understandable source of information and inspiration, but never tells anyone exactly what to do.

Establishing foreknowledge of the setting and characters works. It gives the players a sense of calmness in their play and allows them to focus on the actual interaction. Paradoxically knowing details a character would never be aware of seems to strengthen the player's connection with the diegesis. Naturally, I can only again recommend communicating this information through workshops. Time after time, it has proven to give the players a strong sense of ownership of the larp[4].

However the big question remains whether we succeeded in our ultimate goal - did we tell stories or not? And the answer is undeniably yes, but stories were distinctively different from those told through traditional narrative media. Our players were all part of the great story; their characters were fashioned so that the themes and events of the larp would be relevant to them, but to a great extent this did not fulfil our aspirations towards applying the narrative.

To me it seemed that – as it has been pointed out before (Petterson 2004) – there is a natural resistance to stories within our medium. Traditionally a story is a fixed progressing entity, which carries its meaning in the evolution of the characters and plot. However in many cases, larp has at its core the freedom of action, rendering the fixed progression of impossibility. But perhaps the loophole for narrativism lies in the word "traditionally."

Narrativism Through the Looking Glass

One could argue that in its current form larp has worked so much towards a praxis where a narrative has lost its foothold to the personal experience usually labeled "immersion." Therefore trying to tell stories through larp is possibly both naïve and slightly dated. However narratives – or stories – have at the least played a significant role during the infancy and further upbringing of our medium. As numerous articles have pointed out, larp can be seen as the bastard child of improvisational theatre and traditional tabletop role-playing. Both of which are inclined towards the narrative: an inclination which is still visible in many of the larger scale larps held today.

Consider the western larp *Once Upon a Time* (2005), which used a fictional interpretation of the American West commonly portrayed in films rather than a compilation of historical facts. A second example could be that the primary creative organizers of the renowned *System Danmarc* (2005) were consistently referred to as 'the directors', and thirdly one could in a broader perspective see the enormous boom in people larping after *The Lord of The Rings* film trilogy. Finally *En stilla middag med familjen* (2007) made this connection extremely clear in their acknowledgement of using cinematic and literary references. On several levels, including design, self-perception

4 In the case of Agerbørn, we had one group of players who did not attend a workshop. Their understanding of the basic concepts and the setting of the game were limiting compared to the rest of the players.

and as social phenomenon, I see larp – not as dwarfed by cinema – but highly influenced by it.

The question here is whether these larps told stories? It can be argued that they were all focused on using a known setting for an otherwise traditional larp, thus focusing on neither narrative nor narration. Rather they could be seen as setting the scene for stories, trying to create the perfect atmosphere rather than actively telling it.

However I believe that this argument is based on viewing larp within the context of other media. If larp is to be embraced and accepted as a narrative medium per se, the community must first outline the strengths and weaknesses of this particular medium. Like all other narrative media, ours has elements that it is good at and things that it is poor at.

After setting up *Agerbørn,* we came to the subtle conclusion that the foremost quality of the larp is that it activates a physical, bodily way of understanding the story. The major drawback from a storytelling point-of-view is that the stories are carried out by free agents, meaning that the narrative is hard to fixate. The story can be ever so simple and clear cut in the minds of the organizers, but once it is handed over to the players, it is bound to become somewhat out of focus, underscoring that the general arcs in the story must be simple and easy to grasp by a broad base of motivated players.

Compared to the sibling media, larps are thus extremely focused on the act of reading (playing out) rather than the work itself. This however is not to be thought of as a weakness. Rather it is the beauty of using narratives in larps: the players get to shape and flesh out the story. The process of filling in the blanks can give the kick of great scenes in the moment and the satisfaction of interpreting a greater meaning afterwards.

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Levelling the Playing Field and Designing Interaction

Troels Barkholt-Spangsbo

This article provides practical advice on and concrete examples of how to design larps. It offers a terminology for talking about different kinds of social contracts: simulation rules, regulatory rules, behavioural rules and mise-en-scènic rules serve different purposes in larp design. This paper uses Eirik Fatland's work on interaction codes, and connects them with various kinds of social rules.

I have argued (Trier & Barkholt 2007) that a larp organizer should establish a *framework* to help the players navigate in the fictive realm or the diegesis of a larp. The framework should be:

> A basic structure where everything – all the elements of the story – are connected, so that the player participating in the larp may leave it with a sense of story-wise coherence. [...] [This framework should also be] made obvious to all players by being the firmament upon which all the elements are based. Also, it provides all players with a tool to navigate within the actions possible in the larp. (Trier & Barkholt 2007.)

It can be connected to what Eirik Fatland (2006) calls interaction codes. Fatland describes the interaction codes as a *"set of improvisation patterns and their establishing sources"*. The framework can be seen as the source of all improvisation patterns, in the sense that *"it provides all players with a tool to navigate within the actions possible in the larp"* (Trier & Barkholt 2007).

In this article, I will define and describe some of the tools at the organizer's disposal when trying to influence the stories, establish the interaction codes and construct the framework of a larp. The focus of this article is on the practical application of the different tools, which is why I will strive to give plenty of examples; but as all tools should be adapted to the specific larp, my descriptions will be general in outlook.

In short, Fatland describes how interaction codes shape the players' actions during a larp. The interaction codes determine which action is the most likely in a given situation – Fatland uses a science fiction larp as an example. If the players' reference is *Star Trek*, the interaction codes will make the players say things like *"Beam me up, Scotty!"* and expect to find friendly aliens on unknown planets. As Fatland describes, it is important that the players understand and share the interaction codes, otherwise the role-playing will be dysfunctional, as the players do not meet each other's expectations. Fatland discusses two groups of methods for establishing interaction codes: derivation from references and larpwright authorship.

I believe it is necessary to take one step further back when designing the larp. The players' choice regarding which references are applicable to a given larp should be guided by a dialogue with the organizers to avoid misunderstandings, and the larpwright should consider the players when making design decisions to achieve the greatest effect. This way the choice of references becomes an integrated part of the larpwright authorship.

The Social Contract

Social contracts are the most important tool in any organizer's toolbox. The social contract is

an agreement, explicit or implicit, made before the larp starts. The agreement can be between organizers and players, or between players. This is a very broad way to understand the term, which is why I have broken it down into smaller categories of agreements: *simulation rules*, *behavioural rules*, *regulation rules* and *mise-en-scènic rules*[1].

Notice that I present a vocabulary for talking about social contracts as different kinds of rules. This terminology includes what we traditionally refer to as the rules of a game, but expands to include any type of agreement that defines how players should act during a game. It is important to note that separate from these categories describing the different ways to shape a specific larp, there exist rules governing the media of role-play – these rules often have root in different traditions, which is why they sometimes differ from place to place. They include rules that state that you shouldn't make assumptions of the character based on the player (or vice versa), or that you should treat everything that happens in the game as separate from ordinary life, or that the players are not allowed to quit the game before it ends except under special circumstances. These rules can in some cases be argued to belong to one or more of the following categories. How one perceives and defines these rules is often symptomatic of ones basic views and assumptions of the media role-play – or indeed games in general. In this paper my intention is to discuss different design-issues – not to discuss how local role-playing traditions define different perceptions of the media.

Simulation rules are used to simulate actions the players do not wish to enact, but still wish to include in a larp. They use non-diegetic mechanics to translate actions, object or symbols from the diegetic realm into the non-diegetic, or back. Simulation rules include most of what is traditionally seen as rules, common examples being combat, magic or sex. Simple simulation rules often carry with them several unspoken rules. For example: *"when you are hit with a latex foam sword you lose one hitpoint, you die when you run out of hitpoints"* usually includes the rule *"a latex sword is a representation of a steel sword and shall be treated as such,"* unless of course the scenario takes place in a world where everyone is highly allergic to latex foam. Simulation rules can also include other forms of simulation, such as the *Ars Amandi* method[2] as it was used in *Ringblomman* to symbolize traditional sex. In *Ars Amandi,* sexual acts are enacted through elaborate touching each other's arms. A rule creates simulation when X is actually Y.

Regulation rules are the non-diegetic rules that apply even within the larp, and they are not debatable. Breaking a regulation rule will often get a player expelled from a larp. Most of them are never mentioned, as they should be obvious to any person. They include the local non-diegetic laws, even if the diegetic events take place in Mordor. They also include warning signs when a larp setting is located near dangerous electric installations. A rule is regulatory when it is just as severe inside the game as outside it.

Behavioural rules concern how a character should act in a given context. They are non-diegetic and mostly focused on defining the genre and style of a larp. In an Errol Flynn-style pirate larp, a behavioural rule could be: *"When a pirate captain laughs heroically everyone around him or her shall stop what they are doing and listen to what the captain is saying".* In *Slægtsfejde*, the organizers supplied guidelines on how to escalate a conflict between families trough gift giving, public

1 Derived from the term used in film and theatre where it has many different definitions. Directly translated it means "putting on stage", which is why I have chosen it – as the rules it define helps define the setting or set the stage.

2 See Wieslander (2004) for details on Ars Amandi.

insults, bar fights, and finally, direct assaults. Behavioural rules can also take the shape of fateplay[3], where organizers supply the characters with specific triggers such as *"Ordering a character to fall in love with the woman who calls him 'little man'"* (Fatland 2005). Behavioural rules are similar to interaction codes when not spoken out loud. They are differentiated by the fact that behavioural rules are formulated as non-diegetic, but affecting diegetic actions. Thus, a generic example of a behavioural rule is: When X, do Y.

Mise-en-scènic rules are diegetic rules defining the setting of the larp. They are most often disguised under headings like *"Cultural Description"* or *"The Society of the Bavarian Illuminati"*. These are rules like *"Two stripes on the shoulder means Sergeant"* or *"Ars Amandi is how sex is performed in the culture of the characters"*[4]. Moving rules from the simulation category to the mise-en-scènic category enables the players to interact more freely within the rules. They can even be broken without anyone being a cheater – they're just playing rebels instead. Mise-en-scènic rules often affect behavioural rules by setting the standard of the genre. A generic example of a mise-en-scènic rule could be: When X happens, it *means* Y.

Why All These Rules?

Recognising all these different categories of rules enables the game organizer to be more precise when communicating the framework of a larp to the players. They provide an overview of the different ways of shaping the interaction codes of a larp. If the goal is to create a larp where battle is the dominant activity, then the simulation rules should spell out how the players can and should fight each other. If the focus is on competition between the players, simulation rules should be used to ensure fairness and regulation rules to enforce security measures, as you can expect the players to fight to the best of their ability. If the goal is to shine the light on traitors in the camps the night before the battle, use behavioural rules to force someone to betray another. Depending on whether the battle should be heroic or gritty, different mise-en-scènic rules should be applied to define the fighting style of the characters.

In addition, as social contracts can be implicit, it is important to note that implicit agreements can be unclear and understood differently by different parties. Defining agreements as rules allows organizers to define agreements clearly, avoid misunderstandings, and define which agreements can be bent and which are set in stone.

The downside of this kind of larp design is the complexity of the information if every agreement concerning a larp is described in detail. Trying to describe a larp purely in terms of rules is sure to make players frustrated, as they will need to remember everything – not to mention that it is nigh impossible to write them down in full unless the larp takes place in an abstract universe where there is no place for improvisation. Thus it can be more suitable to use what Fatland (2006) called derivation of interaction codes by reference.

3 Fateplay is a technique where the organizer writes specific triggers in a player's role such as: "If you see a black cat you shall confess your robbery of the bank to the nearest person". In this way it is possible to predetermine certain chains of events.

4 In Ringblomman players engaging in Ars Amandi simulated penetrative sex. In the diegetic world of Mellan himmel och hav the gestures of Ars Amandi were sexual.

Interaction Codes by Convention

When Fatland (2006) described interaction codes by conventions, he showed how players can derive interaction codes from references outside the larp without necessarily being explicitly told which references to use. He defined three categories of conventions: genre and reference, situation, and larp scene.

Conventions of genre and references are in use when an organizer tells the players that they should be inspired by specific genres or works of art. The players recognize the genre or specific applicable traits or actions from the work, and draw conclusions on how to behave from it. By *conventions by situation,* Fatland refers to how different social situations lend themselves to different kinds of behaviours. For example, at a classic party-larp where the characters are guests at a wedding, a player only needs to know that he is the bride's uncle before he begins to plan how to get drunk and embarrass the family as quickly as possible. By *conventions of larp scenes,* Fatland means traditions established by certain groups' playing style. An example could be the Einherjer-school of larping. This Danish organization has organized larps a certain way for years. One of the most recognizable feature of their games is the *"if you can, you can"*-principle[5] when designing simulation rules. The principle is based on the assumption that characters only can perform actions credibly when the player can too, and that organizers should strive to make the stage as real as possible, for example by making it possible for a player to pick a physical lock instead of just pretending to do so.

Players most often derive expectations regarding the behavioural and mise-en-scènic rules from Fatland's categories of genre, references and situations. Similarly, the players primarily base their expectations for simulation and regulation rules on the traditions of different larp scenes, but adopt interaction codes unconsciously. This means that an organizer should be aware of which conventions his players will draw upon, so that he can play to the strengths of the conventions and point out when the interaction codes are expected to deviate from the conventions.

The Compromise

As noted earlier it is seldom practical to try to define, describe, and communicate, the framework of a larp completely in terms of rules, as it may be too limiting and complex. A possible solution to that problem is to give players an understanding of the framework through different references, or including different elements in the larp which will guide the characters However, doing so presents its own set of problems, as too general references may lead to dysfunctional role-playing. If the organizer has supplied the reference dark fantasy, there are several possible ways for the players to interpret what to do in a given situation. References that are too specific may seem limiting and more like scripted interaction or theatre. The compromise may be to draw on conventions of reference and genre, situation and larp scenes, but add coherent rules packages.

Coherent rules package is a bundle of rules, which support, enforce and expand each other. To be effective they should be self-contained. The use of *Ars Amandi* in *Totem* serves as a good example: The game was very much focused on status battles – status was derived from which mate a character had, the mate's symbol would be painted on each character's arm. The use of *Ars Amandi* as a mise-en-scènic rule ensured the paint would be smeared and need to be repainted, leading to the players focusing on each others arms and the status of the symbols upon them. This meant that the different mise-en-scènic rules reinforced each other. As an example of the opposite, many larps seek

5 "Kan man så kan man" in Danish.

to emulate a society by having laws and courts. But the letter of the law is not a complete justice system. It requires tradition, precedence, lawyers, and juries to become one. Another problem with the law text is that it requires people to learn much more than the supplied text or instead derive their interaction codes from references, which may account for so many situations at larps in courtrooms resembling American TV series. Most importantly, the law is constituted by a culture, where *Ars Amandi* defines the culture. I believe this to be the main reason why *Ars Amandi* has won influence by being part of successful larps, while we haven't seen many courtroom larps. Another reason could be that *Ars Amandi* focuses on etiquette and social rules, whereas law is focused on matters that are not an as integral part of social interaction as for example status.

Status. Improvisational theatre troupes spend much time practicing status, as status is one of the most defining traits of social interaction (for a thorough discussion of impro, see Johnstone 1979). As the act of larping consists of social interaction, it should be no surprise that many larps also concern themselves with status and social rules. In a larp, we can make status tangible by expressing it physically so that others are able to witness and experience it. Etiquette and social rules can exist simultaneously as behavioural and mise-en-scènic rules – which can make them difficult to change in practice to match a situation. The peasant may refuse to bow to the knight because of a silent rebellion, or because he has forgotten, does not understand, or never read the description of the feudal system provided by the organizer? I argue that by moving etiquette and status into the mis-en-scènic category, players will be able to interact with the rules instead of being restrained by having to remember and adhere to an informal and disorderly set of rules.

Another possibility is to express status with costumes and props, as is done widely (the king's crown, the peasant's dirty clothes), but is not so widespread as to make the status changeable. Vampire larps such as *Nightlife I-III* and *Danse Macabre* based on White Wolf's *World of Darkness* have tried implementing status directly by having it represented by coloured ribbons on the characters' costumes. The ribbons could be changed between players by the rumourmongers and heralds of the vampire court. This way of representing status can be both a simulation rule, by letting the ribbons be intangible for other players, a behavioural rule, by decreeing that the ribbons should be obeyed and their carriers status could not be contested by other characters (*Nightlife*), or a mise-en-scènic rule by making the ribbons apart of the social game played by the vampires (*Danse Macabre).*

Communicating Interaction Codes

There are many different ways of communication to familiarize the players to the interaction codes. Communication can be mediated or interpersonal. The most classic form of communication used by larp organizers is the mediated text delivered in letters or on homepages. Text is useful for delivering facts, regulations, some simulation rules, and listing which references the organizers wish the players to use. Lectures or conversations have many of the same options as text-based communication, but gives the organizer an opportunity to clarify points and answer questions, which normally provides a better chance of understanding the general meaning and message, but makes it less certain that specific facts are noticed and remembered. Interpersonal verbal communication happens all the time, and is seldom completely in the organizer's control. Players approach organizers at all times and in all places. The organizer can try to counteract this by establishing official channels of communication. Players even talk to each other about the larp, which means that well-informed players can help the organizer by reinforcing the organizers' communication – but also that an organizer should be vigilant for influential but misinformed players.

Pictures and concept art are also widely used, both to communicate how costumes are supposed to look, give an overview of the gaming location and to convey a sense of the theme and mood of the larp. Closely related to pictures are trailers and other short film presentations, which many organizers use in the promotion of larps. Another possibility is to show films that convey the correct genre: for example the organizers of *Agerbørn* showed an episode of the television series *Supernatural*. Trailers and movies have the same possibilities as pictures or drawings, but can also show different behavioural rules.

Other forms of communication include exercises or workshops, often used to teach players mise-en-scènic rules with a physical nature (such as ways of greeting a superior officer or operating a submarine). Exercises can also be guided tours of the gaming location or thematically relevant places used to evoke certain associations. For example, if the larp is about a group of nomads, the organizers could show the players different places their characters are supposed to have travelled.

The Stage

The physical realm offers some of the most overlooked tools at the organizer's disposal, the stage, costuming and the amenities. The stage should in this context be understood as the physical area in which a larp takes place. It can be anything from a detailed town constructed for the occasion, to an empty warehouse or a backyard. The physical setting of a larp is traditionally perceived as one of the most legitimate tools to shape and affect action during a larp (compared to, for example, fateplay, which by some is considered prohibiting the players' free will and improvisational abilities). Sadly, the possibilities of the stage are often neglected or seen as a project for people trying to achieve a perfect illusion. Often, little energy is put into designing how the stage can affect the players during a larp – and how it shapes the interaction codes.

Character traits. The social status of the different characters can be illustrated and defined by the size of the stage at their disposal, how lavishly it is furnished or decorated, and so forth. Height difference also encourages status. The people living on the upper floor will be more likely to play a higher status when interacting with someone whose garden they can look into form their balcony. Similarly, characters will be more likely to act like artists if they have an exhibition in a gallery.

Architecture encourages constructing buildings to enhance certain traits; high ceilings foster creativity, open offices with transparent walls supposedly foster teamwork and so forth. The same can be exploited in the stage. Allies will be more inclined to stay loyal if they can see each other, and enemies will be better prepared if they can choose when to meet.

Communication patterns. The stage can affect how characters interact and how information is spread. Is there a town square or marketplace where many meet? If so, most rumours will probably be spread there. Does the stage consist of small rooms and dark hallways? Then information will spread slowly from group to group, and some might even miss certain pieces of information altogether. How accessible are the different parts of the stage? Does the warehouse have a locked cellar to which only the owner has the key? Then the owner may keep secrets from anyone he chooses not to let into the cellar.

Intrigue is encouraged by small rooms and possibilities for secret meetings. If there are hiding places or ways to avoid one's enemies, characters will be able to escalate conflicts earlier in a larp, knowing that they have a chance to stick around in hiding instead of having to receive the punishment

immediately. If the larp takes place outdoors, then the placement and number of fireplaces will have a profound impact on how political groupings shape. If it is cold and there are only two fireplaces, people at one campfire will have the opportunity to badmouth people at the other – especially if the other campfire is bigger or more luxurious. However, if it is possible to see the other campfire it may counteract the tendency. Several campfires provide an opportunity for more groups, and more exchange between the groups.

Centrepieces. In capture the flag, the flag is an obvious centrepiece, which shapes the game almost completely. Though larps are rarely that straight-forward, it is still possible for an organizer to use centrepieces on the stage to shape a larp. This is often done unconsciously by spending more time on building churches than housing for peasants. When participating in a larp one should try to notice which part of the stage the organizers have spent most time and energy on. You can safely assume that that will be the place the organizer intends to stage most of the action during the larp. Examples of typical centrepieces are jousting arenas, great halls, senates or the bridge on a spaceship.

Explicit references. It is possible to strengthen certain interaction codes or behavioural rules by having supporting, explicit references to known conventions on the stage. The abstract nature of the larp *Persona* was supported by the stage being painted with chalk on the floor of a warehouse. Lighting can be used to underline a reference to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* by illuminating a balcony in red light (if the simple fact that there is a balcony does not lead players to plan secret dates there). Another example is to furnish a room as a temple to attract clergy and rituals of different kinds.

Costumes can be used in a variety of ways. The most obvious usage is in referencing. Soldiers in totalitarian uniforms or with masks will soon fall into matching habits. Two larps used costumes in conjunction with *Ars Amandi* in two different ways: *Mellan himmel och hav* used the method as a replacement for regular sex and the following taboo attached to showing arms by having costumes that covered the, whereas *Totem* had costumes that left the arms visible and instead covered in paint. A completely different approach would be to let the costumes hinder the players' movement. It would be possible to reinforce the despair in the trenches of the First World War by letting characters wear vintage gas masks and making them run. They would quickly run out of air and be exhausted.

Amenities. When attending a larp the players expect a certain level of comfort. They expect the organizers to have arranged for the basic amenities to be available, or at least to be informed what they should bring themselves. Skipping the ethical discussion on whether it is right to put physical pressure on players by deriving them of food, limiting the amounts of sustenance is an easy way to create conflict in a larp simulating a society. Food is often the most dominant part of the economic system of any larp. By controlling the amount of different kinds of food products, the organizer can make one be more luxurious than another.

In *Efter vinter kommer vår*, food was used purposely to create conflict. The characters arrived at the gravel pit where the game took place without any food, and had to find it hidden around the area. There were more than enough vegetables but a shortage of meat, which even led to a characters death over a can of kippers. At other larps, such as *Mellan himmel och hav* and *U-359*, the organizers changed the day cycle. In the first example, the organizers did it to create an ambient and otherworldly feel and also to emphasise the difference between different player groups. In the second example, the purpose was to emulate the work shifts on a Soviet submarine in the 1960's.

Conclusions

There are plenty of ways to design a larp. The important thing is to be aware of what you do and why. Whether you want to facilitate experiences or just want your players to have fun, it should be reflected in your design choices – your choices of tools. In the end, there are no rules set in stone or specific ways that are better or worse than others. This article has presented some tools, whether it is how to communicate how the players should act in specific situations through interaction codes and rules, or which effect a given buildings layout will have on the communication patterns of a larp. I don't pretend to present a certain way to organize a successful larp. One of the few things that can be advocated is coherence. Do not be too inclusive! It is better to have a larp with a narrow focus and coherence, than a larp that tries to do everything at once and points in too many directions. This also means that the guideline *"Keep It Simple, Stupid"* or KISS, is valid when designing larps. Choose a few elements and let them shape the larp. It is better to define the outline of a structure and let the players explore how the inside looks, than it is to hint at a much larger structure by only showing a small part of it. Show the parts that define the rest of the larp – don't try to describe every last detail. That leaves too much room for forgetfulness and misunderstanding.

Even though this paper is aimed at larp organisers, it is relevant for players as well. As a player, one should strive to understand the interaction codes, the framework and the purpose of the larp. It is also important to be observant of organizer communication. If you are able to understand that, you should be able to understand which larps you will enjoy, and which you won't. Instead of basing your judgement on whether you normally enjoy sci-fi, you can consider whether you enjoy debating with friendly aliens, fighting hostile aliens or rooting out traitors aboard you own spaceship.

Designing and shaping interaction should be the core of an organizers work. Not as a task delegated to the back of the line behind the tasks of ordering toilets or writing a cultural description – but as the very core of all other tasks when organizing a larp.

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The Age of Indulgence

Juhana Pettersson

Role-playing games are a way to do things you want to do, but wouldn't in ordinary life. In this essay, I discuss role-playing as the art of indulgence, of playing games as a way to fulfil desires, based on several indulgent larps and tabletop role-playing campaigns.

I recently talked with an autoworker whose hobby is larp. He said that he has a stressful job and that when he plays, he wants to be a hero. He wants to slay dragons, beat up orcs, and save princesses. After a weekend of adventures, he is ready to go back to the assembly line. Not surprisingly, he was not terribly interested in conceptual, demanding, and harsh art games.

I've made a lot of harsh games, especially in tabletop. In my 2005 book *Roolipelimanifesti,* I documented the ideas that were born during a few years of making realistic games about ordinary people in miserable situations. These games were a reaction against the genre-based extravaganzas of my youth, with games like *Vampire: The Masquerade*. Inhuman protagonists were a key element in those games. It was bizarre to spend years playing characters who never have to go to the toilet. After a decade spent in fantastic worlds, I felt I had to start making games about people with recognizable issues and dilemmas, people like you and me.

The best example of these games is one I participated in as a player, the tabletop campaign *Lohkeileva kynsilakka*. We played a group of students living in the same student apartment. The early games featured a lot of hangovers, bad sex and ugly realism. Later, the focus turned to fantastic elements and festering, unpleasant relationships.

These were not fun games. They were about exploring unpleasant themes in a relatively safe social environment. They were not relaxing; at best, they could claim to be cathartic. They were also some of the best games I've made and played in. Still, after a while, like the autoworker, I wanted games that let me do things I like to do.

Giving In

In his presentation at the 2007 Knudepunkt in Denmark, Henri Hakkarainen (2007) proposed that role-playing games are a way for people to do what they wanted to, but would not as a part of their everyday existence. For example, it can be fun to be really obnoxious, but real life rarely affords this pleasure without consequences. Hakkarainen argued that this lack of consequences is the key to making it possible for people to do things in games that are otherwise impossible. He also argued that sometimes people need a pretext to do fun things. You might be afraid of seeming like a creep if you ask to play a character who is an asshole, but if the game masters ask you to, why not? This means that for Hakkarainen, the role of the game master is to ask people to do fun things.

My first game of indulgence was the larp *Luminescence*, which I organized in 2004 with Mike Pohjola. The game originated in an installation I experienced earlier that year at the museum Palais de Tokyo in Paris. Unfortunately, I've forgotten the name of the piece and the artist, but it consisted of a large room, where the floor was covered in flour. You took your shoes off and walked into the room, experiencing how the flour and the general ambience felt. The space was large, and the flour billowed into the air with each step, appearing as a low, alien mist in the sparse light. The sensation

Luminescence. (Screencapture from a short film by Juhana Pettersson)

of walking barefoot in flour was unique and very pleasant. I wasn't happy just to walk in it. I wanted to wallow in it naked. After I got out, I called Mike and told him we needed to do a game about flour. After a bit of persuasion, he agreed.

Based on my experience, we made a game where you could wallow in flour in your underwear for three hours. We designed characters and themes involving cancer and therapy. The characters were cancer patients, enrolled in music therapy to come into terms with the fact that they were all going to die. One set of characters was a group of men who all had prostate cancer and had formed a "prostate posse" in therapy. Still, the core experience of the game was always the flour. The other elements, like the characters and the themes, simply provided a framework for a prolonged and meaningful interaction with the flour. We wanted the players to get everything possible from the flour. Instead of the tantalizing hint of tactile pleasure offered by the installation I visited, this would be a total experience.

Luminescence was a success, and why not? Flour feels great on naked skin.

At the time, my artistic justification for the flour was to illustrate the assertion that role-playing is the art of experience (see Pettersson, 2004). This may have disguised the fact that there's not necessarily a lot of intellectual content in these physical indulgences. *Luminescence* was not a profound game, even though it may have been a profound experience.

It is probably not hard to understand why you would want to participate in a game of indulgence, but why make them?

All role-playing games are collaborative creative efforts between the organizers and the participants. Players who are invested in the game are more creative, they are willing to give more of themselves. Players who get to indulge are more invested in the game, and therefore more creative. This is not surprising. But which player is more willing to make an effort for the game? The one who plays the homely and shy spinster cook, or the one who plays the gorgeous, universally desired fashion queen? You could argue that indulgent games are the opposite of "hard core". In the hard core games of our youth, you would play a deformed, retarded prisoner who was beaten in his cramped cell, while in the indulgent games of today, you get to play beautiful people in pleasant surroundings.

All games of indulgence tend towards themes of over-consumption, excess and carnality by their very nature. As *Luminescence* demonstrated, however, it is not a real necessity to make the game explicitly about these themes. An indulgent game will feature excess in itself. It doesn't have to be stressed. Rather, the indulgences create an underlying sense of pleasure in the game, making it easier to employ other themes, especially difficult ones.

Imagine *Luminescence* without the flour, a game in which everybody moans about their various cancers in a boring, white room. That would have been a depressing, difficult and unpleasant game. In contrast, with the flour it was a game with a strong potential for physical joy.

Off-Game Indulgences

Wallowing in flour is a physical pleasure; you can experience it without the framework of a larp. Other off-game indulgences that work well in games are good food, alcohol and destruction in general. I was discussing indulgence in games with a friend who had never participated in a larp. She said that her ideal larp would be one where you could throw old cathode tube television sets from the window of a tall building and watch them crash into the sidewalk. I have destroyed two old televisions for fun, and I would be happy to participate in that game.

Food and drink are obvious pleasures where the only danger lies in the torpor that follows the gluttony, and the weakening of faculties that follows getting drunk. One of the best, most indulgent tabletop sessions I've participated in was a part of Mike Pohjola's *Tähti* tabletop role-playing game campaign.

Our characters were members of a teenage girl band in a half-utopian, half-dystopian cyberpunk future Finland. One of them had gotten engaged to a Russian acrobat and was visiting his family in St. Petersburg. The visit was realized in the game as a mini-larp with three visiting players filling out the roles of grandmothers, siblings, mothers and fathers along with the regular players whose normal characters were not there. I played the husband of the acrobat's sister.

We had a sumptuous feast of Russian food, as you would have when the future daughter-in-law comes to visit the family for the first time. We had vodka, champagne and wine. It was supposed to last for half an hour, but it went on for three hours. We ate well, played through the family dramas and drank a lot. I had a fight with my father-in-law in the kitchen, the fiancée was traumatized by the culture shock, and everybody traded stories about how they had proposed

My character was an alcoholic. After the three hours, I was quite drunk, but not too drunk to play. The visiting players left, and we continued the game in a more usual fashion. At one point, the game master wanted to stop the game because of excessive giggling and hysteria, but we told him that the game was going great, and he relented and let it continue. The game master also reported each game

session in a blog. Over time, eating and drinking became such an important part of the game that he started putting the "menu" in the reports.[1] Routinely after each game, you would be drunk and sick from all the eating and drinking.

The most traditional form of fantasy larp indulgence is, of course, hitting people with padded swords. A friend, a woman in her mid-twenties, had her first larp experience in a German combat game. Afterwards, she said that next time she would want to play an orc, because then she could fight all the time.

The Perfect Larp

Larp is great for indulgence, because you get to do things for real. What would be a perfectly indulgent larp?

In terms of action, the perfect larp would require the players to flirt and to fight. Everybody would be required to look as good as possible, preferably within a strong overall visual design. The game would feature a feast of good food and copious amounts of organized drinking. The players would be required to engage in physically pleasurable activities such as wallowing in flour, swimming, being in a sauna, and so forth. They would be required to destroy physical objects, such as television sets, in large quantities.

Flirting could be realized by making a rule that you can only talk to people you are in physical contact with. We used this rule in *Luminescence* to embody the social experience of the game, but it does facilitate flirting equally well. It certainly made wallowing semi-naked in flour a more sensual experience. Diegetic content and character design should give the players reason to flirt, as well as off-game instructions about the theme of the game. Whatever the theme is, it would be interpreted in a context of emotional turmoil and desire for intimacy and contact.

Designing a game for physical combat shouldn't be too hard. Fighting ties in surprisingly well with flirting. The proximity of death and the physical thrill makes people flush with excitement that may be channelled into social activities. Combat is made easy if you have a rule that all interpersonal problems should be solved with a non-lethal swordfight. The sword fighting may seem bizarre in the context of the art world, and should be defined as "normal" when briefing the participants. Make all the characters really emotional, and make sure violence doesn't have too many consequences, and fighting will ensue.

Let's make an example of an imagined game about an art auction. The characters are auctioneers, curators, collectors and artists. The game is about immortality.

The game material stresses the importance of sex in determining who gets what. The curator wants to flirt with the artist, the artist with the collector, the auctioneer with everybody. The off-game instructions conflate sex and commerce, making success exclusively about who you know and who wants to fuck you.

All the characters care passionately about art, so much, in fact, that they are willing to defend their

1 The blog and the reports had a strange life of their own. Some people read the blog even though they didn't play in the game, and some non-player characters were made more prominent based on "fan requests". One of the players worked as a substitute teacher in a junior high school. She said that the boys in her class had discovered the blog and had some questions regarding her adventures as a lesbian teen pop star.

ideological positions with their fists. To make fighting easier for the players, they are provided with rules stating that all discussions about art are to be conducted with padded swords. In a sense, everybody is fighting for their shot at immortality, because the character who wins, at both sex and war, is the one who will be remembered forever, either through his or her own works or by proxy.

The art auction doubles, of course, as a party, with a great feast of delicacies and wine. The players are encouraged to waste as much food as possible, to throw it around and at each other, to eat what they like and smash the rest into the ground. This requires a lot of food, but as long as it is not all on the table in the beginning, it is not impossible. There is a special focus on custard cakes, which may be eaten or thrown at your enemies.

The result is a mess. Because of this, the art auction itself is be held by a swimming pool, with attendant shower facilities, so that everybody can get cleaned up if things get too messy. No food in the pool, of course: That would be quite unpleasant.

The auction is interrupted with planned art performances and non-planned art terrorist interventions featuring massive destruction of objects, inviting other characters to join the destruction as well. The destroyed objects are old household appliances, and the tools of destruction are sledgehammers and other big, satisfying heavy things.

Would it be a good game? Maybe.

In-Game Indulgences

Tähti was a great game for in-game indulgences. The autoworker who wanted to play a hero engaged in an indulgence. He indulged his desire to be a hero, in the fictional context of the game. Off-game indulgences are indulgences you could engage in even without the benefit of a role-playing game. They are things like good food, alcohol and pretend violence. In-game indulgences are only possible through the agency of role-playing. They are often tied to the kind of characters you play: cool characters, sexy characters, powerful characters. There are other kinds of in-game indulgences as well. These are often scenes in a game where you get to be cool, sexy or powerful.

Tabletop is well suited for in-game indulgences, not least because you are not tied to your own body when designing your character.

In *Tähti*, we were teenage girl pop idols, sexy and successful seventeen year olds dealing with fame, adolescence, love and success. A far cry from the angst-ridden, average failures we played in *Lohkeileva kynsilakka*.

It is great fun to play a seventeen year old girl. You can go overboard with relationships and soap opera, and if there is too much heartbreak, there is always a concert scene to fix things up. I indulged even more by making a character that was enabled to act as much as possible.[2] She loved to perform, was outgoing, fearless, tactless, a perfectionist, helpful, aggressive, conflicted, immoral, reckless and ambitious, all characteristics that drive you into new situations.

The effectiveness of the indulgences in *Tähti* was readily apparent in the way we always managed to find time to play. It was a high priority for every player because it was meaningful, pleasant and fun.

2 For a discussion of enabling and disabling characteristics in character design, see Montola 2004.

The key to indulgence is immersion. It is pointless to play a hero if you and the people around you don't immerse in the game and the characters. I, as a man, cannot play a teenage girl pop star without heavy immersion, because the character is far removed from my personal experience. In addition, I was the only male player, and so the only player with no personal experience of what it is like to be a teenage girl. In this sense, the others got to go through personal material related to their own experiences in a way that was impossible for me, this may be another form of indulgence.

Tähti featured possibly the most indulgent conflict resolution system I have ever seen. When you wanted to have random input from the game system (Does the gig go well? Do I succeed in humiliating my rival?), you ate a Chinese fortune cookie and read the message contained inside. The message was then applied to the situation at hand. For example, if the cookie said: "*You will enjoy success overseas*," there might be a representative of an American record company in the audience who is so happy with what she sees that she books an American tour for the band.

The thing is, Chinese fortune cookies rarely contain bad fortunes, so usually the question is not whether good things happen or not, but rather a question of what kind of good things happen. The fortune cookie is like a loaded die: you often get sixes and never ones. Needless to say, it was pleasant system.

Cool

In early 2007, I started a tabletop campaign called *Tuliunikko*. I wanted to give people what they want, and make a sexy, cool, superficial game. *Tuliunikko* was a superhero game set in Hollywood. The player characters were superhero celebrities whose lives consist of going to exclusive parties and fighting strange super villains.

The characters were created in collaboration between me and the players. I think the player who best grasped the game right from the start was the one who said that he wanted to play a character who was like *"George Clooney walking in slow motion in the power shot from Ocean's Eleven"*. Another character was a cross between Illyana Rasputin from *The New Mutants* comic book and the pop star Christina Aguilera. One player mixed up David Copperfield, Mandrake the Magician and Tarzan. The fourth character was an immortal ballerina.

I suggested that instead of focusing on back-story or even personality, the players would go to Google Image Search and amass a collection of pictures that in aggregate would be the character. All the characters and concepts were designed to be as cool as possible. We did this by liberally borrowing from movies, comics, everything that could be made to fit together into the permissive and all-embracing world of the game.

In *Tähti*, the premise of the game was highly superficial, oriented towards cool band stuff, shopping, things like this, but during the campaign, deeper themes emerged. The characters may have been pop stars and the game content largely a cross between MTV and a teen soap, but the themes of adolescence, growing up and friendship are universal. The fact that the characters were still young Finnish girls, coming from a world very familiar to us, gave the game unexpected depth.

Tuliunikko was deliberately designed to be superficial, and ironically, it failed because it was too superficial. In retrospect, I would say this was because it lacked a personal connection that would have enabled the players to make an emotional connection to the material of the game. It was pure indulgence, with no emotional core to hang it all on. The emotional truths of *Tähti* enabled the

players to improvise and be assertive within the game, but the lack of clearly defined ground in *Tuliunikko* made it hard for the players to make the game their own.

The problems of *Tuliunikko* were best demonstrated in one particular episode. One of the characters, Princess D, is transported to the far future. The world is in ruins and mankind has perished. The only people left are a scattered group of immortal super-beings, one of whom is the future version of the immortal ballerina. They live in a small group in a technological paradise, where every desire is met and no excess has consequences. Their lives have become intolerable exercises in ennui. All the other players had these future immortals as characters except for the player of Princess D.

To make the game suitably excessive, I asked all participants to bring small quantities of expensive delicacies and champagne. They were eaten during the game, but in retrospect I think that the excesses would have been better illustrated by throwing the cakes through the window and into the street.

The future game did not fail, as such, but I compressed it in half on the fly and had to make sure I came up with more and more outlandish spectacle every moment, as the themes of ennui and excess proved not to be able to sustain a game. Ennui means boredom. Characters suffering from ennui are terminally bored. They are not dynamic characters by any stretch of imagination, and fail to create content by themselves. Therefore, the only way to keep the game moving as the game master was to push it along by force.

The future game was the epitome of cool character design. The immortal ballerina had evolved into the Empress, who habitually travelled with a vast android court that constructed rococo palaces wherever she went. One of the new characters was billed as "The Last Superhero", and had absorbed the powers of all the dying, mortal superheroes at the end of history. She had a floating symphony orchestra consisting of 300 robots and a robot conductor following her, making sure her life always had a suitably dramatic soundtrack. Another character was a synthetic pop star with an endless number of clones of herself everywhere, both in the real world and in cyberspace.

Finding the human dimension in these characters proved difficult.

The End of Indulgence

Is too much of a good thing bad for you? *Tähti* proved to be so satisfying for the players that we became quite possessive of the game, smothering it in the end because we were unwilling to let it go.

Going for a larp of total indulgence, like in my example, makes the game an overwhelming excuse for excess. The participant may lose sight of the artistic goals of the game because he's in a drunken stupor, overfed and overstimulated. In a sense, all super indulgent games are the same game. In *Tähti*, we had a number of sessions where we ate and drank so much, our ability to really appreciate the game was impaired. The physical pleasures overshadowed the game itself.

Luminescence was the first indulgent game I made, and still the best, I think, in no small part because it focused everything on a single, powerful physical element at the exclusion of all others. It was a pleasure, not an orgy. Other, less spectacular, but still important indulgences for future larp organizers are decent sleeping facilities, good toilets and showers, and functioning transportation. Indulgence is a tool, but if you make it the sole content, you will end up with an excess of excess.

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Parlor Larps: A Study in Design

John H. Kim

The term parlor larp is the name for a series of published larp scenarios from Shifting Forest Storyworks. It referred more generally to the format: a larp scenario playable in a single room, with prewritten characters and minimal preparation, to be finished in a few hours. It is a case study in how to make larps accessible to inexperienced players. I analyze the design and play of these games on several levels, based on the play of nine games of this format, including five I directed and one I wrote. There are several levels of analysis: the formula for a distribution of characters, the arrangement of in-game action within a limited scope, the write-ups of characters which is split between given information and questions for the player, and the conflict resolution mechanics including physical, emotional, and social.

The term *parlor larp* is intended as a direct parallel to the term *parlor game* – an English term dating from 19th century Victorian pastimes for the rich. One dictionary definition is "any game usually played indoors, especially in the living room or parlor, as a word game or a quiz, requiring little or no physical activity." Typical parlor games include *Charades*, *Twenty Questions*, and *Blind Man's Bluff*.

The *Parlor Larp* series was a line of 64-page booklets produced by Shifting Forest Storyworks, a small press company based at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. They published 11 Parlor Larps between 2003 and 2006. Each game was a scenario for 4 to 8 players, plus a director who acts as a game master and a game organizer, that could be played within a single room with minimal preparation. The games fulfil a little-filled niche of a larp that resolves in a few short hours and is playable by both enthusiastic and occasional role-players.

The scenarios require little in terms of costuming or props, but can definitely benefit from such. They rely on a system of narrated conflict resolution, where conflicts can be physical, social, or emotional. Thus, the games consist of dialogue, walking around and also action narrated by the players. Most larps of the series take from two to four hours of play.

I have personally participated in ten parlor larp sessions. I have both directed them and played in them, also participating in sessions run by the people from Shifting Forest Storyworks. This paper is based on experiences from participation in *All Saints' Eve*, *Hamlet*, *Garden Station 4*, *The Mirror Room*, *Snow White* and *Queen of Spades*. I have also designed one scenario, *Stagecoach*.

Game Format

Each booklet has 12 pages explaining the basics of larping and the parlor larp rules, which are the same for all scenarios. They then have roughly 12 pages of notes on the specific scenario – including public background to be read to the players and notes for the director. The rest of the booklet consists of two copies of each of the eight characters.

As an example, I will use the *Hamlet* scenario[1], both because I have directed it multiple times and because the setting and characters should be familiar to most readers. The background is the same as Shakespeare's play, taking place in Act 4, between Scene III and Scene IV. At that point, Hamlet has

1 I have earlier written a review on the scenario (see Kim 2006).

The players of the Stagecoach scenario at GenCon Indy 2007. (Photogrpah by John H. Kim)

accidentally killed Polonius the night before, and is about to leave for England with his old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The larp begins in a postulated going-away party for Hamlet. The scenario diverges from the play when Polonius' son Laertes arrives unexpectedly. Demanding to know what happened to his father, he immediately brings to a head the play's key issues.

Characters

The categorization of characters is a key part of the format. Each of the published Parlor Larp scenarios includes eight characters with a specific mix of three pairs of descriptors, namely:

- Goal-Oriented / Emotion-Oriented
- Simple / Complex
- Dark / Light

As eight includes all combinations of these, a player can pick a character simply by picking one option for each of the three categories. In beginning the scenario, it is common for players to express a preference based on the three categories. The characters are then scattered out to match these preferences as closely as possible.

This is intended to fulfil several purposes. First, it accommodates a mix of styles of play among the players. Some players can pursue goals in a more competitive fashion, while others concentrate more on immersing in emotions. There are complex characters for delving into, and simple characters for

new or more casual players.

The orientation also has a use in setting up the action of the game. If all the players actively focus on pursuing their goals, the overall flow of the game becomes muddled. Emotion-oriented characters still have goals, but they are more distant, abstract, or impractical – thus giving the players license to react more, rather than concentrating on achieving their goals.

Casting

In practice, I found that the use of the categories was quite successful in casting players to characters. When players did have issues with the character they received, it was often the result of not getting their preferred category. This might be self-fulfilling, though, in the sense that not getting their preferred category might color how they express dissatisfaction. My evolved process for casting was to ask everyone their preferred categories first. I would then work out overlaps first, and then cast based on my quick assessment of who would work best for the role.

When I gave the players prose descriptions of the characters first, it often obscured important points about the characters' roles. Partly, this was because there is often important information about the characters that is secret. In one run, I had cast one character because the player really wanted to play a reporter and no one else expressed interest. However, the reporter was secretly a warmonger who drives conflict, and the player did little to fulfil that function.

Example

Most of the eleven published larp scenarios are based on original characters. For these, characters are generally written to be non-gender-specific. Each character is given an alternate set of names like "John/Jane", and often referred to by the first initial ("J"). As an example, however, I would use familiar characters. The following are the characters from a larp adapted from the Shakespeare play *Hamlet*:

- Hamlet (Emotion / Dark / Complex)
- Claudius (Goal / Dark / Simple)
- Gertrude (Emotion / Dark / Simple)
- Ophelia (Goal / Dark / Complex)
- Laertes (Goal / Light / Simple)
- Rosencrantz (Goal / Light / Complex)
- Horatio (Emotion / Light / Simple)
- Marcellus (Emotion / Light / Complex)

This cast is pretty much what one would expect given the play. The character of Guildenstern was not included as it is redundant with Rosencrantz. Marcellus is a castle guard – the same who saw old Hamlet's ghost in the beginning. He is there to protect the king, but also has his doubts due to the ghost that could influence him in a conflict. In this case, only two of the characters are women, though as noted it is an exception.

There are some curious points in the design of *Hamlet*. The two obvious goal-oriented characters are Claudius (seeking Hamlet's death) and Laertes (seeking revenge for his father). Hamlet is between these, and consistent with his behavior in the play, he is classified as emotion-oriented.

The surprising element is the other two goal-oriented characters: Ophelia seeks personal power and the truth about what happened to her father. She may be unhinged, but she is definitely using others' pity of her to her own ends. Rosencrantz does not have a primary driving goal, but rather a set of goals including gaining influence and power as well as Ophelia's love and Hamlet's friendship.

Character Sheets

The character sheets include a brief background, a list of goals, abilities, and items. On the back is a list of questions. The characters are all left with six to ten open questions for the player to answer about their motivations, background, and feelings. The game recommends checking with the director for feedback and thoughts about the answers, but this can also be done privately to save time.

The questions for the Hamlet character are:

1. *So... The big question first. How insane are you? Are you pretending? A little bit off? Completely off? If insane, how did you get that way?*
2. *And the next one: Why do you have such a hard time killing Claudius?*
3. *And the third one: Do you love Ophelia? If not, how do you feel about her?*
4. *What do you actually want from her?*
5. *Why treat her so curtly and erratically?*
6. *Discuss your sexuality. Why flirt so explicitly with Ophelia at the play? Anything else of note?*
7. *How do you feel about killing Polonius?*
8. *What did you study at Wittenberg?*
9. *What was your relationship with your father before his death?*
10. *What do you like about Horatio? What do you get from him? Is there anything you want from him that you don't have?*

The front of the character gives brief background and goals. The questions ask the player the motivations behind their defined goals, as well as refining details of the background and goals.

Conflict Mechanics

The core of the mechanics is a set of rules for conflict resolution. The mechanics cover not just physical combat, but also social conflicts (publicly denouncing someone) and emotional conflicts (making someone feel guilty). Using the conflict mechanics means that the two players drop out of character, compare numbers twice, resolve the effect of the conflict, and then resume in-character play. This takes around thirty seconds with a little practice.

Of course, players do also resolve conflicts without these mechanics. There are arguments conducted in-character and sometimes even mock physical struggles.[2] However, there is an expectation that the rules will be used for very serious or life-threatening conflicts.

As I view it, the mechanics attempt to fill several functions. Most importantly, they help resolve possible deadlocks in the progress of events. By deadlock, I mean a conflict between two characters

2 The rules do not have any prohibition against players touching, as in White Wolf's Mind's Eye Theatre series.

that remains in place and becomes repetitive. For example, in my run of the *Snow White* scenario, the Prince and the Queen's advisor became deadlocked in an argument over the Queen's execution. This was a sore point in post-game discussion. The mechanics also add tension to the scene, by making a palpable possibility for characters to be taken out of the game through mechanics-based damage. This is of note even if the rules are not used. Consider the contrasting case of a non-combat larp where characters may only be hurt by players' consent. When characters can be killed unexpectedly, there is an extra-diegetic tension parallel to movie techniques like scary theme music or close-up shots of threats.

Thirdly, the mechanics also highlight to the players social and emotional conflicts. Even if social conflicts are not used, the players are reminded that by the mechanics, social conflicts are palpably dangerous. In the *Hamlet* larp, this is noticeable particularly in the character of Ophelia. Without the mechanics, she could easily be overlooked as a helpless girl – but with the mechanics she is very dangerous to the other characters, which can sharply change how players view her. Finally, the mechanics may encourage shake-up of the natural social hierarchy of the players. If some players have characters with mechanical strengths different from their usual mode of play, that may offer them a different social experience than usual.

Note that the first and the last functions are based on the direct effect of the mechanics on the flow of play, while the second and the third one are based on players' perception of the mechanics. Whereas Christopher Sandberg (2004) suggested that larp elements may be divided by their effects into "straight" and "circular" – I think that the mechanics, like most larp elements, have both direct and indirect effects.

Also, while the mechanics are not diegetic, they are taken as symbolic of truths about the characters. For example, the mechanical power of Ophelia's social abilities prompted a different interpretation of the character.[3]

Of course, there are also inherent drawbacks to the mechanics – notably the time it takes to explain them, the interruptions of in-character play in using them, and the possibility for characters to be eliminated from play against the preference of the player.

Implementation

The rules include a single set of mechanics that handle three categories of conflict: physical, social, and emotional. There is no random resolution: instead, everything revolves around *function levels*. Each character has five function levels, which are an abstract measure of how well the character is. They combine physical, emotional, and social state. If you are reduced to zero, you are out of the game. Because you only have a handful of levels, you can't engage in many conflicts during a game.

Conflicts are resolved by quick diceless comparison of numbers. In addition, each character has a set of numerically rated conflict abilities, such as *fighting* or *intimidate*. Each character also has three *resist* scores, one for each conflict category.

The basic rule of conflict is simple: the character with the higher score wins. To initiate a conflict, you use an ability marked on your sheet. You compare your active ability with the opponent's resist score. Whoever has the lower score loses and takes the difference in function levels of damage. If

3 See Loponen & Montola 2004 for an interesting analysis on symbolic meanings in larp.

you go to zero function levels you are dead if by physical conflict, outcast if social conflict, and insane or collapsed if emotional conflict.

The key exception here is that you can sacrifice function levels to increase your total in a conflict. Each conflict begins with the two sides simultaneously revealing how many function levels they bid. This almost never helps you survive, but may help you oppose other characters or achieve your goals. In short, this is an extremely lethal system that encourages sacrifice to go out with a bang.

There are a few other exceptions: For example, weapons increase the damage done upon a successful physical attack. Also, many abilities only work for a limited range of function levels – badly injured characters cannot engage in swordfight. Lastly, characters may have special abilities described on their sheets. For example, Hamlet has a special *soliloquy* ability that allows him to freeze the game to speak. Characters may also have limited use abilities, like *intuition*, which allows the player to ask the director a yes/no question.

Evaluation

In my experience, the success of the mechanics is mixed. Some players are more open to their use than others. However, even among players who buy into using the mechanics, they have sometimes resulted in confusion and/or dissatisfaction.

Still, in most cases they did achieve their primary goals. They were used sparingly, only to resolve conflicts that could potentially block the progression of events. Players did have technical complaints about use of the mechanics. However, when there were complaints, the main complaints were about the larger structure of the scenario rather than the results of the mechanics.

On a technical level, the format for presenting the character abilities is obscure, and the use of negative numbers makes comparisons more difficult than necessary. When I designed my own larp, I rewrote how the abilities are presented and used only positive numbers from 0 to 5.

Conclusion

In general, I find parlor larps excellent resources for running a pick up and play scenario with little or no preparation. The *Hamlet* scenario benefits especially from some gathering of props, but it still runs very well without any tweaking.

The scenarios are wholly driven by player characters. Even though the director may choose to play supporting characters, all conflicts that drive the game take place within the player group. The mix of player characters is well-considered and creates a working play dynamic: Even though goal-oriented characters are needed to drive the action, having too many of them would lead to excessively cutthroat games. Having too many complex characters would make the game confusing while having too few of them simply makes the game too flat. The mechanics can work well to maintain tension in the game. Everyone is very close to being taken out, and usually multiple players will be taken out during the game. Even so, since conflicts are so dangerous, they will generally be concentrated in the latter half of the game.

However, there are a number of drawbacks, mostly to do with the execution of the concept. The mechanics are somewhat complex for single-evening play, particularly when explaining them to

players inexperienced with systems of this sort. It is a strength that this is a game that non-gamers can jump into easily, but explaining the mechanics can be tricky. I have played parlor larps once or twice without mechanics. However, for this to work well one should really modify the scenario.

Even for those used to role-playing systems, the notation used is obscure at best. The second edition clarified this slightly, but it could be much improved. I think better notation and character sheets could potentially remove much of the mechanics-related difficulties.

I have personally developed one scenario, *Stagecoach*, in this format. The game is set in the universe of Joss Whedon's television show *Firefly* (2002) and its film offshoot *Serenity* (2005). The key to development is beginning from designing the "cage" – the limited scope that allows conflicts to be played out in a single room. Inspired by John Ford's film *Stagecoach* (1939) for inspiration, the parlor larp is set in a small high-speed space ship. There would be conflicts among the crew, and the entire ship was threatened by the possibility of attack by space-faring cannibals – parallel to the threat of Indian attack in the film.

I had developed a core set of characters already before conceiving of the parlor larp scenario. However, I found the categories useful for deciding about which characters to add in or leave out, and how to align them. I ended up with ten characters rather than the eight that is standard for the Parlor Larp series, adding one goal-oriented character and one emotion-oriented character to keep the balance.

One of the most difficult parts was assigning the various mechanical abilities to characters. If I had not had experience playing in eight other Parlor Larps, I would have found this nearly insurmountable. A guide or tool for generating character abilities would be a useful addition to the line. Still, for what they are doing, there simply is nothing comparable to the Parlor Larp series.

While there are a great variety of innovative larp designs, testing and developing multiple larps within a specific format such as this is useful. The experience fosters insights into details of the design and presentation – such as a balance of character goals and emotion – that can be applied to a much broader spectrum of larps.

Ludography

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Section C
Research & Theory

24 Hours in a Bomb Shelter: Player, Character and Immersion in Ground Zero

Heidi Hopeametsä

A player enters the fictional world of larp through a character. However, it is possible to immerse also in other aspects of the game, such as the physical surroundings, the story, or the challenges the game offers. I approach immersion as the way the player engages in a game when pursuing the optimal experience of flow (a concept introduced by Csikszentmihalyi), which can be achieved via these different aspects. I use the larp Ground Zero as an example. The game was a distressing experience, which was nevertheless considered to be positive and valuable by the players. It therefore provides a good case study for discussing immersion, the roles of the player and the character, and experiences which are simultaneously real and fictitious.

* * *

> I had thought about the interesting possibilities of the conditions in a bomb shelter as a [setting for a] live action role-playing game. My starting point had to do both with technical aspects (the possibilities given by the closed environment e.g. for using [special] effects to get a stronger and more concrete experience) as well as psychological and social aspects (the closed space, the relationships between people under stress, and the world above them that decides on their fate without them).
>
> Quite soon it began to involve issues about society and ethics concerning the insignificance of the individual under a big system, and the insignificance of seemingly great individual problems when faced with issues of life and death. (Jokinen 2005)[1]

This paper looks at larp as a new form of expression, its characteristics and its potential to provide experiences that are simultaneously real and fictitious. I discuss the concept of immersion and how the optimal experience can be achieved through immersion into different aspects of the game.

I approach the subject through a concrete example, the game *Ground Zero*, which is considered to be among the groundbreaking Finnish larps. *Ground Zero* follows a diverse group of American families from one street in Tulsa as they spend 24 hours in a bomb shelter. The background is an alternate history version of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, in which nuclear war breaks out.

The game was organised by Jami Jokinen and Jori Virtanen in Turku, Finland in 1998, 1999 and 2001, three times with different players. As source material for this paper I have used 13 debriefs[2] and email communication between the organisers and the players on the game mailing list from the 2001 realisation of the game, as well as email interviews with the organisers[3]. When *Ground Zero* was played for the third time, the game was already famous and the participants had expectations concerning the quality of the game. The debriefs were sent to the game mailing the week after the

1 All primary source quotes translated by Syksy Räsänen.

2 The word debrief refers to the post-game event where the players share their experiences, and also to texts about the game from the player's point of view that game organisers often ask players to write after the larp. I sent a request for the debriefs to all 20 participants of the 2001 realisation, and got 16 responses. Everyone who answered was willing to help with my research, but two persons had not written a debrief and one debrief had been lost.

3 I have not played in the game myself.

game and they were written for the organisers and the other players.

Creating the Magic Circle of Larp

In larps the participants construct stories by living them in a shared fictional framework which has game-like features. In this paper for practical reasons I refer to larps as "games", because the larp event is commonly referred to as a "game" by larpers. There are almost as many definitions of a game as there are books written about games. In game studies, role-playing games have been classified as "limit cases" (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, 81-82) or "borderline cases" (Juul 2005, 43) of games because they tend not to fit well the definition of a game for one reason or another. However, in the context of this paper, a perfect definition of a game is not needed, nor is it necessary to decide whether or not larps are games. Role-playing games evolved from miniature wargames (Mackay 2001), and were in the beginning clearly identifiable as games. Role-playing as a form of expression has changed considerably over the years, but it still retains many aspects of playing a game. Recognizing those qualities which have been carried over from more conventional games can be helpful in elucidating the nature of this new form of expression, regardless of how well it fits the definition of a game.

Roger Caillois has examined play as an activity that is free, separate, uncertain and unproductive, yet regulated and make-believe (Caillois 1958/2001, 9-10). All play has rules that define it and separate it from ordinary life. In games, rules tend to be explicit. There are larps such as *Ground Zero*, in which there are no explicit rules around which the game would be built, apart from the rules that define the larp space.

> What kind of rules did the game have?
>
> None, except that the doors to the bomb shelter, which were unlocked for off-game safety reasons, were in-game locked. (Jokinen 2005)

However, all larps have certain implicit rules that the organisers and players have internalised and which are not thought of as rules at all. Everyone knows that the game will end at a certain time or with a given sign, that objects gained during the game usually need to be returned to their owner after the game, and so on. These "invisible" rules make entering the *magic circle*[4] possible, and they provide the framework for the players' actions during the game. The magic circle of larp is a fictional world that every participant helps to create by acting in it. Jesper Juul has noted that space in games is a combination of rules and fiction: the level design of a video game can present a fictional world and at the same time determine what the player can and cannot do (Juul 2005, 163). Larp works exactly like this. The fictional world of larp is formed from the physical surroundings, the imagination of the players, and the rules which support the imagination at points where the fictional world differs from the real world. Juul points out that there is an important distinction between the description of a fictional world and the fictional world as it is actually imagined. This is because all fictional worlds are incomplete. (Juul 2005, 122) In a larp, the players have received a description of the fictional world before the game begins, either in a written form or verbally from the organisers, and in the case of *Ground Zero*, players also took part in building the common description already before the game. However, during the actual game every participant further

4 Magic circle is a term that Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman have borrowed from Johan Huizinga to describe the special place in time and space created by a game. This is where the game takes place, and playing a game means entering the magic circle, or creating it as the game begins. (Salen & Zimmerman 2005, 95)

constructs the world by acting in it according to the picture that their imagination has formed of the game world and its inhabitants. Markus Montola has described this phenomenon as constructing diegeses[5] in interaction. According to Montola, every participant in a role-playing game constructs their diegesis when playing, and role-playing is the interaction of these diegeses. (Montola 2003)

Roger Caillois divides games into four categories based on the attitude that the player has towards the game. These categories help explain why players enjoy the game: *agôn* (competition; "the desire to win by one's merit in regulated competition"), *alea* (chance; "the submission of one's will in favor of anxious and passive anticipation of where the wheel will stop"), *mimicry* (simulation; "the desire to assume strange personality") and *ilinx* ("the pursuit of vertigo"). (Caillois 1958/2001, 11-12, 44) In agôn, the player relies only upon himself and his utmost efforts; in alea, he counts on everything except himself, submitting to the powers that elude him; in mimicry, he imagines that he is someone else, and he invents an imaginary universe; in ilinx, he gratifies the desire to temporarily destroy his bodily equilibrium, escape the tyranny of his ordinary perception, and provoke the abdication of conscience. (Caillois 1958/2001, 44)

Caillois has a rigid view about the attitude associated with a given game. In particular, though a game may belong to multiple categories, there are certain categories which Caillois considers incompatible: for example, no game can belong to both agôn and ilinx, or to both alea and mimicry (Caillois 1958/2001, 72-73). However, it is a peculiar feature of larp that, while it always involves mimicry, all of the other attitudes can be present or absent in different mixtures, not only in different games, but also for different players in a given game. In the examples considered by Caillois, playing a given game necessarily involves a given attitude; the attitudes are a fixed property of the games. In larp the situation is different: a given larp can include a mixture of all four categories in varying proportions for each player. This versatility of larps, their ability to simultaneously involve any or all attitudes of gaming identified by Caillois, may in part explain the appeal of larps. Just as the players in a larp define the fictional world by acting in it, they define the character of the game by their expectations and attitudes. Attitudes are not only qualities of games, they can also be qualities of players.

Ground Zero is an example of a game combining mimicry, alea and ilinx. It featured immersion in fictional characters and acting out their roles, the players were subjected to chance as they did not know how the events were going to unfold, and the game elicited strong emotions caused by the closed space, distressing situation and special effects. *Ground Zero* is somewhat unusual for a larp in that there was no possibility for agôn: the organisers explicitly told the players that they are expected to immerse in the game through their character, and emphasized the fact that there are no quests to solve (Jokinen 2001b).

Immersion and Flow

How does one enter the magic circle, the fictional world? In larp this always happens through a character. Mike Pohjola (2004) even defines role-playing as "immediated character immersion"[6]. But what is immersion?

5 Diegesis means a fictional world or the truth about what exists in a fictional world. Diegesis includes everything we know about the world. In addition to the facts about the diegetic material reality, it includes perceived history, expectations of future, hidden knowledge and secret feelings. (Montola 2003)

6 By this, Pohjola refers to an idea of "immediate art" that is experienced as it is created and has no use for the division between performers and audience. (Pohjola 2004)

When we are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter – when we really throw ourselves into the act and forget the surrounding world – we are immersed in the game that we are playing, the book we are reading, the music we're listening to, and so on. This kind of experience of immersive engagement is what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls a *flow* experience. He describes it as

> a sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about other problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. (Csikszentmihalyi 1991, 71)

Flow gives a deep sense of enjoyment through the feeling that we are in control of our actions. According to Csikszentmihalyi, the best moments occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile. Optimal experience is an end in itself: the act of doing is a reward in itself (Csikszentmihalyi 1991). This is an accurate description of larp experience at its best.

Csikszentmihalyi explains that enjoyment appears at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are finely balanced with the person's capacity to act (Csikszentmihalyi 1991, 52), and that flow is a subjective experience and dependent on the person's attitude: there is no guarantee that someone will have a flow experience even if their skills and the challenges that the activity provides would seem to match perfectly. It is not the real challenges which matter, but the person's perception of them, and likewise it is not the person's skills, but the skills they think they have. (Csikszentmihalyi 1991, 75) In the context of video game studies, Jesper Juul has argued that flow does not explain the fascination with mechanically repeating trivial tasks, because repetition should lead to boredom but that doesn't always happen (Juul 2005, 112). But what Csikszentmihalyi posits is that it is possible to find flow anywhere, even in the most boring, repetitive tasks. He gives many examples how people who e.g. work in factories can find flow in their very repetitive job. The key is to set goals for oneself, to build a framework for achieving flow in places where most people would find no challenge. The quality of experience can be transformed at will. (Csikszentmihalyi 1991, 145-157)

According to Csikszentmihalyi, games – among other activities such as making music and rock climbing – are designed to make optimal experience easier to achieve. What makes games particularly rewarding is that they are built to make it possible to go beyond expectations, to achieve something unexpected. In larps, the magic circle of the game provides a safe, controlled environment, where the players can have experiences they are not able to have – or may not even want to have – in real life.

In this paper I make the assumption that every player ideally wants to find flow from the game she plays. So, in this context, with "immersion" I mean *the way the player engages in a game when she pursues the optimal experience*.

Immersion is not the same as flow: it is a means of achieving flow. Immersion implies surrendering oneself to the game, which is necessary for experiencing flow. Of course flow doesn't occur every time a player immerses in a game, but the possibility is always there, and that makes playing worthwhile. Immersion is easier in some games than in others, depending on the game design, but flow is a highly subjective experience. It is possible to find the flow experience even in games where the design does not support it.

Flow can be achieved through different aspects of the game. Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä's gameplay experience model divides immersion into sensory, challenge-based and imaginative immersion[7]. The model was developed for video game research, but it offers useful a framework also for role-playing studies. Sensory immersion is achieved through the audiovisual aspects of a game. In larp, this would be everything we experience through our senses; the physical surroundings and the characters of the fictional world. Challenge-based immersion is achieved when one has a satisfying balance between abilities and challenges related to motor and/or mental skills. In larp this includes mental, social and motor skills; from emotional challenges to fights and succeeding in plotting, for example. Imaginative immersion is the experience of becoming absorbed with the stories and the world, or identifying with a game character, which is exactly the same in larp. These three dimensions of immersion usually mix and overlap. (Ermi & Mäyrä 2005) This division helps seeing the aspects through which one can find the optimal experience in larp.

J. Tuomas Harviainen separates three possible levels of immersion in larp: character, reality and narrative immersion (Harviainen 2003), which is interesting because all these could be placed under imaginative immersion in Ermi & Mäyrä's model. However, it is possible for a player to approach a larp as a game with specific goals to achieve (agôn attitude), and where the success can be readily evaluated by how well one succeeds in these tasks. Even though this approach, which falls under challenge-based immersion, is not immersion in the sense usually understood in the context of role-playing games, it can provide the experience of flow just as well as immersion in imaginative or sensory aspects of the game. Harviainen's division can be used to complement Ermi & Mäyrä's model: it presents the components of imaginative immersion in larp and makes it explicit that character immersion is only one of these.

True Fiction: The Player as the Character

Gary Alan Fine separates three layers of identity present in the gameplay of role-playing games: person, player and character. Player is the participant as someone playing the game. The players have some knowledge of the structure of the game as they control their characters. But at the same time, they are the characters too, and on the other hand they are people in a social context apart from their role as players[8]. During a gameplay session one switches between these frames. (Fine 1983/2002, 186, 196-197)

It is common to describe the process of "becoming" a larp character as character immersion, which involves the assumption that during the game the player is her character, and that she thinks and acts as the character and not as the player. This is linked to *immersive fallacy*, as presented by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *"the idea that the pleasure of a media experience lies in its ability to sensually transport the participant into an illusory, simulated reality"* (2004, 450-452). Salen and Zimmerman stress the fact that the player becomes engrossed in the game through the act of playing, which is a process of metacommunication, a double-consciousness in which the player is aware of the artificiality of the play situation.

> But the very thing that makes their activity play is that they also know they are participating

7 The model is reminiscent of the Caillois' categories: sensory – ilinx, challenge-based – agôn, imaginary – mimicry. Only the alea attitude of subjecting oneself to chance is not present.

8 Because I don't consider in more detail the player identity of the person who participates in the game, for reasons of readability I use the the term "player" in its usual sense of a participant who is simultaneously a person and a player.

within a constructed reality, and are consciously taking on the artificial meanings of the magic circle. It is possible to say that the players of a game are "immersed" – immersed in meaning. To play a game is to take part in a complex interplay of meaning. But this kind of immersion is quite different from the sensory transport promised by the immersive fallacy. (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, 452)

Switching between the frames of character, player and person can happen even during very intense moments in a larp, as the following post-game description of the events shows:

> Then, by coincidence, Mrs Stanislavski [a character] started talking about the same psalm! What a coincidence, I thought. I got a bible from the mormon priest who had lost his faith, to read the psalm aloud. The mood in the bomb shelter was really oppressive, as the children and women were weeping in shock. I read the psalm aloud and then I was FOR REAL so moved that my voice broke FOR REAL (it wasn't acting). Then I decided that, okay, now it's going to happen that [my character] James Willis will see the light, because otherwise it wouldn't be believable for such a tough man to be so moved. (Debrief 1, capitalization in the original)

In *Ground Zero*, the players were informed in advance that the game is based on the depth of the characters and their relationships, and not on a plot or on completing tasks (Jokinen 2001b). The building of a common fiction started in July 2001, three months before the game, when the characters had been allocated to the players (Virtanen 2001a). The players were provided with the essential background and personality of the character, which they used to build their characters with the game organisers and the other players (Virtanen 2001b, Jokinen 2005). Players of a given family discussed the relationships within the family, and for example the players of children went through what kinds of games they played together. On the mailing list, the players shared tips about web pages with information about the dress for the era, discussed the attitudes toward music and religion and organised movie nights where they watched popular movies from 1962. A few weeks before the game the organisers started sending daily news of the game world to the mailing list, and encouraged the players to send emails describing their characters' activities that would be visible to the other street residents. In the evening before the actual game there was a pre-game: the characters had a barbecue party. This was meant to give the players a feel for the characters in an ordinary situation, before the crisis. The intention was just to prepare the players for the game, but many players considered the pre-game to already be an important part of the game. (Jokinen 2005, and messages on the game mailing list) This way the players built the game world and fitted their subjective diegeses together as seamlessly as possible already before the game.

The players knew beforehand how the game begins: the air raid siren rings on Sunday morning, October 28, 1962, and the characters hastily gather inside the bomb shelter.

> The door closes.
>
> The only contact with the outside world is the radio, and from newscasts it becomes clear, bit by bit, that this is not a drill but a real crisis.
>
> The horrible events of the world fill the bomb shelter. Different people react differently, the situation aggravates and undoes old social problems and creates new ones. Many things are seen in a different proportion.
>
> Finally, the electricity fails and the shockwave [from a hit by a nuclear warhead on the city]

> creates an apocalyptic mood. The city above the shelter is gone. The radio is silent, the characters are enclosed in the shelter. It has become their salvation, prison or grave. (Jokinen 2005)

In the real world, the game took place in the basement of a youth center, which had been set up to look like a bomb shelter from the 1960s. The organisers had hidden speakers in the game area that they could manipulate from outside. They were used for the radio broadcasts and for the sound effect simulating the shockwave, which created a physical sensation of the floors and the walls shaking. The characters had no influence over these predetermined events, but otherwise the game flowed from the relationships between the characters as interpreted by the players who immersed in them, without any goals or interference from the organisers. (Jokinen 2005)

In larps like *Ground Zero*, the character cannot know more than the player[9]. Checking information that the character should know but the player doesn't by going off-character, stepping outside the magic circle, would violate the rules of the game[10]. Therefore careful preparation is called for: *"As a player I should have remembered to say that I am a weight watcher and ask people not to bring sweet energy bomb desserts, but as I didn't remember, [my character] James heartily gobbled up all the sweets."* (Debrief 1, regarding the pre-game.) That the player feels that he is the character, while recognizing that it's a game is apparent in the descriptions of real-life activities where players refer to themselves by the names of the characters: "*We of the Willis family decided already on Friday afternoon to play the breakfast in-game [...]"* (Debrief 1).

A debrief describes the bomb shelter experience from one character's point of view[11]. This includes private thoughts, the player reflecting on the situation through their character. The characters weighed their life and the things most important to them, dealing with the crisis in different ways. The level shared with other players during the game included the display of these inner emotions, actions like weeping and sleeping, and events caused by social tensions which erupted in the atmosphere of fear and despair: quarrels, apologies, confessions, expressions of love, settling of accounts, and helping others.

Some players write in the first person, some in the third person, and it is common to explain the character's background or thoughts so that the readers (assumed to be the game organisers and other players) can better understand the motives and actions of the character. Debriefs often include descriptions of feelings or thoughts during the game, but as they usually have been written into a seamless story, they are presented as the feelings and thoughts of the character, not the player.

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9 In some larps, typically more goal-oriented ones, it is permissible, and indeed common, to step away from the game world and ask questions as a player and then step back in again.

10 On the other hand, the character doesn't know everything that the player knows: "As a player I have grades in chemistry and biochemistry, so I knew well that it was just a harmless color change reaction, but [my character] James of course didn't. To his wife he said "How about that, the commie's daughter is studying how to make bombs"." (Debrief 1)

11 The game begins with the characters rushing into the bomb shelter straight from breakfast. At first the characters think that this is just a drill, and spend their time by arranging practical matters inside the shelter, and for example playing Risk or cards, reading a book, and listening to programs and music from the radio. The news broadcasts provide information about the outside world at regular intervals. By noon the characters hear that war has broken out, and the atmosphere becomes more serious. After the nuclear bomb explodes at 17:25, the game organisers no longer interfere with the events in the bomb shelter. The game goes on until morning, when a soldier (played by one of the game organisers) knocks on the door of the bomb shelter, asks for the number of survivors and says that he is not permitted to say what has happened outside. The game ends a couple of hours later.

On the basis of the text it is impossible to say how the player experienced the events as a person, unless she explicitly comments on it, which seems not to be the rule. Perhaps this is because of the common assumption – and ideal – that one has to immerse in the character so deeply that there is no division between the character's and the player's experience. Debrief is above all a description of the events of the game: one player even apologised for not writing a debrief, even though she had written many pages of thoughts brought on by the game[12].

In the comments accompanying the debriefs some players explicitly wrote that the character was very different from them, and that they had thought that it would therefore be difficult to immerse in the character, but:

> To my enormous confusion the immersion experience was incredibly strong, and it was actually frightening to notice how the character's *reactions* were often almost completely different from the way the player reacts, be it in scary, sad or happy situations. Before the game I didn't believe that it would be possible to achieve such a perfect experience of immersion in any game. (Debrief 7)

Even though *Ground Zero* was "only a game" and the players knew that the situation was fictitious, the experience was very strong[13]:

> Many of the character's experiences and feelings were almost genuine reactions to situations such as the reality of the explosion. There was no division anymore into which one of us was scared, me or [my character] April, because we were the same person, I. And I was scared. I had genuinely slipped quite far into shock and it was long before I [realised that I] heard distant talking, as [my character's husband] Richard tried to calm me down. The moment was very real and strong. (Debrief 9)
>
> Before I hadn't thought it possible that one could get so strongly into character. I didn't even THINK many off-game thoughts during the game. I even saw in-game dreams in my sleep. (Debrief 1, capitalization in the original)
>
> Let me say right away that I have never felt as strongly a terrible need for human closeness and a bottomlessly deep loneliness than I did at times as Stephanie during the game. (Debrief 2)

Immediately after the game ended, the game organisers began the debrief session, where the players were told what will happen over the next two months in the bomb shelter. The characters will notice that the shelter had not fully withstood the blast and moisture will seep in, symptoms of radiation sickness will appear and at least two of the characters will die of radiation sickness (the organisers did not say which two), apathy will take hold, morale will falter, and when the characters finally get out, they will find that nothing at all is left on the surface. This look into the future was not part of the game as such. However, it certainly affected the game experience, especially because it occurred right after the game, when the roles of the person and character had not yet become clearly separate.

> Ha, cruel gamemasters; leaving the fates of the characters open was exceptionally cruel. Now,

12 I have included such messages as debriefs for this study.

13 Reading the comments about the game, I noticed the players used expressions such as "huge", "incredibly great", "incredibly strong". In the original Finnish, such words are even stronger than in English. This suggests that the players felt that the experience was almost too powerful to put into words.

> after guessing and pondering, I had to look for possible fates by reading from the webpages of the city of Hiroshima a history of the time after the atom bomb, and a pile of (e.g. cancer) research about the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and became completely depressed. :((Debrief 7)

However, in the next paragraph, the player again thanks for a great game.

The gameplay experience achieved as a character can affect the player as a person. It is hard to draw the line between the player and the character, especially with regard to emotional reactions and sensory impressions. During a larp, one doesn't change between the player, person and character frames as visibly as in a tabletop role-playing game, even though these frames are present. Even supposing that the player has given up her own identity during the game and taken on the identity of the character, the person playing the game is physically present throughout the larp. The character's physical experiences are also experiences of the player, and she can learn from them.

The Positive Negative Experience

The game organisers warned the players about the distressing nature of the game beforehand (Jokinen 2001a) so that the players knew what to expect. Everyone voluntarily stayed in the bomb shelter until the end of the game, even though they were free to leave at any moment if they found it emotionally too difficult to continue.

> None of these [flow] experiences may be particularly pleasurable at the time they are taking place, but afterward we think back on them and say, "That really was fun" and wish they would happen again. After an enjoyable event we know that we have changed, that our self has grown [...] (Csikszentmihalyi 1991, 46.)

How was the distressing experience seen as a positive experience? What did the players learn from *Ground Zero*?

The game offered, in a safe environment, an experience which was real and fictitious at the same time. The players spent 24 stressful hours in a (simulated) bomb shelter, weeping, fearing for the worst, but knowing that the situation was not real, and they could reflect on the situation from an outsider's perspective. This is not dissimilar to reading a book or watching a movie – except that in a larp you are physically, concretely present in the situation and have influenced the way things have happened, by interacting with the game world and the other players.

The events of the game and the emotions it raised were discussed in the debrief session after the game, and also later with friends and on the game mailing list. Two players mentioned they had cried when they had thought about the game several days later, and one player said that new interpretations about the game arise every day. The "fictitious" experiences had, on some level, been real experiences. Satu Heliö has noted that the post-game debrief session offers opportunities for the individual players to narrativise their experiences of the game. By verbalising the actions she took during the game, a player builds a story out of the game. (Heliö 2004) On the basis of the debriefs, it seems that many players felt a strong need to process the game experience in writing, and narrativising after the event defines a space for interpretations. One of the players mentioned at the end of her debrief that writing really helps in dealing with the emotions brought on by the game. The debrief shapes a narrative out of the events of the game, and the act of writing the debrief can be seen as a part of the process of coming to terms with the game experience, while not capturing

the totality of the game experience:

> I've written the text below two--three times. [...] It still doesn't capture what went on in my head and in my stomach during those 26 hours. (Debrief 13)

None of the players complained about being distressed and scared during the game, even though everyone described these feelings, at least from their character's point of view. One person even wrote that he enjoys immersion in "negative" emotions more than immersion in "positive" emotions, and would gladly have played in an even more distressing situation. On the contrary, the players emphasize one after another what an incredibly amazing and moving experience the game had been:

> I can't say that it was "fun", as that would be corny considering the topic of the game and so on. But I'm very pleased that I could be there. The experience was _really_ huge. A large part of the game took place inside my head and it was an incredibly great experience that I wouldn't exchange for anything. The warnings from the game organisers about the intensity and oppressiveness of the game were not in vain. (Debrief 1)
>
> And I wouldn't exchange the experience for anything. I am extremely pleased and grateful to have had it and the thoughts it has brought. (Debrief 8)

The players mentioned that the closed space brought a particularly powerful physical sensation, as two rooms were shared between twenty people and there was no possibility to retreat into a personal space. As the players (and their characters) didn't know what was happening in the outside world, the couple dozen steps they could take in the bomb shelter marked the limits of their world. One player says that the game changed her world on a personal level, and another interpreted the game as a statement for activism that prompts people to think about political issues in general. Many people highlighted the relationships and the closeness between people, and players had very strong experiences from playing family relationships in an extremely distressing situation. For example, players said that the game offered a deeper understanding of how people endure in and adapt to difficult situations, how important it is to take care of others, and that even small things can be important. For one player, the experience proved that normal, good motherhood is possible, and showed that love can exist and keep you going even in the most horrible situations.

The way the players wrote about their feelings concerning the game suggests that they had found the flow experience in *Ground Zero*. The game design supported the possibility of achieving the flow experience using all three dimensions of immersion presented in Ermi & Mäyrä's model. Closed space and special effects such as the radio transmissions and the shockwave supported sensory immersion, and the human relationships, closeness, the reactions of others and so on naturally had a big role; in larp the player is inside the game's fiction physically and through all senses. Imaginative immersion was character and world oriented, as there was no preplanned plot. The distressing conditions in the game provided also mental (emotional) challenges. It seems that the organisers succeeded well in their experimentation on the technical, psychological and social aspects that was the starting point for organizing the game.

> No previous game has generated such strong feelings in me during the game or afterwards, made me care about the characters so much or made me think about live role-playing from such a completely new perspective. (Debrief 7)

Conclusions

Larp has the potential to produce works of art and spells of entertainment, like literature, theatre and cinema, and *Ground Zero* presents an interesting example of larp as a medium developing beyond entertainment.

The player debriefs testify that the game was an intensive, claustrophobic and distressing experience, but also an experience that the players considered a remarkably good one, and one from which they have learned many positive things. The way the players wrote about their characters and their gameplay experience in the debriefs demonstrates how events in larps are real and fictitious at the same time. The players experienced very real emotions and reactions to fictional events, and they also learned from these "fictitious" experiences. This happened not simply by watching and interpreting as in passive media like movies or books, but by living the events themselves.

Commonly, immersion has been taken to mean immersion in the character. J. Tuomas Harviainen has written about how the player can immerse not just in the character, but also in the story and the game world. In this paper I have taken a broader view, along the lines of the gameplay experience model of Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä, which divides immersion into imaginative, sensory and challenge-based immersion. The three kinds of immersion discussed by Harviainen can all be seen as different components of imaginative immersion. The flow experience in *Ground Zero* can be understood as arising through all three kinds of immersion considered by Ermi & Mäyrä. It is possible to achieve flow experience through just one form of immersion, but the fact that all of them were strongly present in *Ground Zero* and supported each other helps to explain why the experience was so powerful.

Role-playing games, including larps, offer the possibility of affecting the fictional events, of making things happen, of taking part, which is something the traditional, passive media cannot provide. In larp the player is physically present in the fictional world, and participates in constructing the fiction and maintaining the illusion of reality by constantly imagining and thus creating the subjective diegesis. This new form of expression offers novel possibilities for immersion and "being another", something that needs to be studied and understood more.

> I also want to tell you – after the game I strongly felt that I'm done with larping for the moment. Ground Zero was such a pure and strong experience that I will never encounter its like again. [It is] The same kind of feeling that at least I get after reading a very good book. After that I get the feeling that I won't find anything better anywhere, so it's pointless to try.
>
> Maybe this will pass with time, like the strange sensation that's still going around my stomach. (A player on the game mailing list a few days after the game.)

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We Are the Great Pretenders: Larp is Adult Pretend Play

Erling Rognli

There are extensive similarities between larp and the pretend play of children. The relation between these activities is proposed to be a matter of developmental continuity rather than mere resemblance. This is further considered to be of central importance to future larp research, and of great possible utility for larp design.

A statement of identity is a strong claim. When making such a claim, as the title of this paper indeed does, it feels important to ensure that eventual disagreement is directed at its actual content. Strong claims are prone to be misunderstood, perhaps because their boldness tends to provoke readings that are more confrontational than thoughtfully critical. In order to avoid some of these possible misunderstandings, it seems useful to start by pointing out certain claims which are *not* meant to be made herein, implicitly or by extension. Declaring that larp is adult pretend play does not in itself involve making any judgement of intrinsic value or suitability for artistic or political purposes. It does not mean proposing that serious or sensitive topics may not be larped about. Neither is it a call for conducting larps in any specific way.

Some may also, reasonably enough, question the utility of yet another definition of larp, as several have been presented in the past. However, the present point is not that larp should be *defined* as pretend play for adults. I firmly believe that such definitions cannot capture the essence of their referents, because the notion of such essences is not valid for real-world phenomena. Drawing up necessary and sufficient criteria for the application of a term taken from natural language is usually not possible, because this is not the way natural language is structured (Wittgenstein 1967). A definition is a way of focusing and directing discourse on a topic, drawing attention to certain elements or certain ways of looking at them. It is not, I believe, a useful tool for describing reality.

Larp, as a noun derived from an abbreviation, is a perfectly sufficient term on its own. That is not to say that larp is a completely unique, novel form of social interaction. Larp has a multitude of more or less closely related concepts and activities, as do all clusters of activity sharing a name (Wittgenstein 1967). As it has been pointed out elsewhere, larp has many resemblances to other such ways of interacting, with deep historical roots (Morton 2007). The interesting point is that when the actual behaviour involved is considered, the resemblance to pretend play is far closer than to any other larp-related form of human activity. The similarities between larp and pretend play are extensive, not coincidental and highly relevant for the future of larp research.

This should not be taken to mean that no other perspectives on larp are valid or useful. The larp phenomenon extends beyond the pretence behaviour that constitutes actual play. Certainly, the real-world social aspects of the larp scene deserve closer study. Another relevant example is the historical development of larp, involving considerable influence from both re-enactment and tabletop role-playing, and hence ultimately also wargames with a strong ethos of simulation and realism (Mason 2004).

Many of the particularities of larp compared with other forms of pretend activity might be explained by these historical influences. Still, pretending something to be the case lies at the very heart of larp as a phenomenon. Pretending is what larpers actually do.

Understanding Pretence

Pretence is constituted by the conscious projection of a manipulated mental representation on the physical and social reality, and by acting in accordance with the projected representation while being aware of its counterfactual nature (Lillard 2001, Nichols & Stich 2000).

Projection is what separates pretence from daydreaming, and to a certain degree tabletop role-playing from larp. When pretending, we map our mental representation of a fictitious state of affairs to our concrete surroundings; mentally transforming a cardboard box to a car or a rubber sword to a deadly weapon. This does of course not only apply to the identities and natures of various objects, but also to the meaning and significance of words and actions as well as to the identities of our self and others.

The projected representation is manipulated, altered and transformed in various ways during the course of pretending. Nichols and Stich (2000) suggest that all pretence rests on an initial premise, which is subsequently elaborated through both inferences and creativity. The premise is in essence the content of the familiar childhood phrase *"Let's pretend that..."* It is a basic statement of what is true in the pretend reality, but also an implicit statement of theme, what the following pretence is to be about. Through inferences and creative ideas, the initial premise is elaborated and extended, and this process continues throughout the pretence.

Inferential elaboration is the process of determining what is true in the pretence reality by integrating one's knowledge of the premise with current perceptions, what has already happened in the pretence, and relevant real-world knowledge (Nichols & Stich 2000). These inferences may, but need not, be logically valid. Their defining property is that they are drawn from existing information.

For example, if I pretend that an empty cup is filled with tea and then turn the cup over the table, I will by extension pretend that the tablecloth is now wet, an inferential elaboration of my initial premise. The causal relation that is employed to manipulate the pretence reality is in this case not drawn from within the contents of the pretence premise, but from my knowledge of causal relations in the real world. However, causal relations that apply within the pretence may just as well be drawn from the premise of the pretence. Larps involving magic are excellent examples of this.

Non-inferential elaborations constitute the most specifically creative aspect of pretence in the model proposed by Nichols and Stich (2000). Pretenders are not limited to building on what has already been established, but may also introduce more or less completely novel content in the pretence. Creative elaborations may still be constrained in various ways, by convention about theme or style and by being required not to contradict previously established pretence content.

It is important to note that elaboration may be constituted by various forms of both internal and external behaviour. Thoughts about what is true in the pretence, both inferential and creative, extend the pretence representation of the individual pretender. These internal elaborations may be communicated and validated socially and thus be adopted into the shared representation of those involved in the pretence.

The communication and validation of such elaborations may happen implicitly or explicitly; in larp terms with or without breaking the diegetic frame. Among children, both are common in pretend play (Bretherton 1989), but it seems that in larp implicit negotiations and/or clear

norms of authority over various aspects of the pretence are preferred, although this needs further investigation. Rules and game mechanics can be conceptualised as formalized, explicit ways of regulating elaboration.

Concrete actions, interpreted in accordance with the premise, are an equally important source of development in the pretence. Pretend actions propel the pretend situation forward, giving it the quality of a narrative. Actions are obviously important for pretence to occur, although they may not strictly speaking be necessary.

All the while when pretending, we maintain a parallel representation of the actual state of affairs. This is evident in that ceasing to pretend does not normally entail confusion or a sense of waking up from a dream. A defining property of pretence is that the representational contents of the pretence reality do not influence our mental representations of actual reality in a literal way. In the terms of Alan Leslie, the pretence representations are *decoupled* (Leslie 1987). The representations of what is true in the pretence (or larp) reality are not integrated in our beliefs about what is true in reality.

Pretence involves action, acting as if the elaborated premise was true. However, both in the pretence of children and in larp, not all types of actions are executed in a naturalistic way. For many forms of activity, pretence is only a matter of mental stance and shared understanding. The pretender acts in the exact same way as she would when not pretending. In these cases, the pretence concerns the meaning of the actions, not the actual actions performed.

For obvious reasons, harmful, dangerous or impossible acts cannot be pretended about in the same fashion. No amount of shared understanding of pretence will change the fatal effects of a bullet to the head, nor will it enable anyone to fly on their own. Other actions may be pretended about, such as sex and certain levels of abuse, but opinions may differ on the ethics and safety of this. Pretence is socially constituted, and which aspects of reality one believes may be voluntarily transformed will vary with philosophical outlook. If an action has practically irreversible consequences, be they relational, emotional or physical, it may not be possible to pretend it simply by transforming its meaning through shared understanding. If the consequences of the action cannot easily be confined to the pretence reality, its meaning outside the pretence remains real. A radical view of reality as a social construction may at least in theory allow pretending about a wider range of actions, but it is rather unclear whether your emotional reactions can always be expected to conform to your philosophical convictions.

Both children and adults pretend to do what they can or will not do for real by employing other actions as iconic or symbolic signs, concepts described by semiotic theory. Iconic signs are tied to their referents by observable resemblance, while symbolic signs are linked to their referents by convention (Loponen & Montola 2004). It has been argued that the multiple levels of meaning inherent in role-playing, further confused by the dual realities of pretend and non-pretend, makes the communication one engages in to role-play highly vulnerable to misunderstandings (Loponen & Montola 2004). While it is true that children do employ various strategies for clearing up misunderstandings and communicating explicitly about ongoing pretence, this does to a greater extent concern negotiating divergent ideas for further development of the pretence. Their abilities to handle the multiple levels of meaning are in fact rather sophisticated (Bretherton 1989).

It is also unclear to what degree the semiotic complexity of larp actually does cause misunderstandings during play, as there is little but anecdotal evidence available. Although misunderstandings may be expected on basis of the complexity in itself, a pretence perspective would predict that sorting out

the multiple levels of meaning during pretence presents less of a challenge than any other type of situation with a comparable level of semiotic complexity.

If closer examination should reveal this to be the case, it may be attributed to our natural facility with pretence. Pretend play is a phenomenon with ancient roots, probably extending well beyond our own species (Bekoff & Allen 1998). Humans show a limited ability to differentiate between pretend and serious actions even as infants (Ma & Lillard 2006, Rakoczy & Tomasello 2006).

There does not appear to be any unitary motivation behind larping, although we have very little actual data on why larpers are willing to expend such extraordinary amounts of effort to play. It seems, but this is strictly speaking guesswork, that larp serves many needs or provides many different things to different people at different times.

It can be a way of being together, the motivation being mainly the possibility for socialisation. It can be a way of expressing, acquiring or working through emotional experiences. It can be about the joy of making things to play with and the satisfaction of finishing them. Costumes, villages and period equipment and tools come quickly to mind, but such immaterial things as social structures, cultures, fictive histories and religions should perhaps also be included. It can be about trying other roles; experiencing a world from an unfamiliar point of view. Some would perhaps also claim that larping is its own reward, and that the motivation is intrinsic in the activity. The purpose of larp is in that case simply the sheer joy and pleasure of playing. All these motivations may apply to larping, but they all apply equally well to the pretend play of children (Bretherton 1989, Sutton-Smith 1997). It seems clear that larp and pretend play share much, both in structural and motivational aspects.

The Character – Pretending to Be Another

In larp, the character has traditionally been considered very important; more so than in other forms of pretend play (Henriksen 2007). The reasons for this primacy of the role are probably historical and tied to the way larp grew out of tabletop role-playing. This warrants a specific treatment of how the pretence perspective can incorporate characters as an element of pretence.

In the pretend play of children, there are also characters (Bretherton 1989), although these are usually not developed to the level of complexity that larp characters often are. Pretending to be a character involves both pretending to be someone who thinks and feels in certain ways and pretending to be part of certain relationships to the physical and social pretend reality.

In the terminology of pretence, the larp character is an elaborated pretence premise, concerning the identity of the pretender. Different styles of larp seem to expect or require different levels of pre-game elaboration and place different emphasis on the private mental and the relational aspects of the character. Pretending the inner mental life of a character is not really different from any other form of pretence. It still concerns the inferential and creative elaboration of premises, although the premise concerns such things as the thoughts and feelings of the character.

Understanding larp as adult pretence may contribute to demystify the reported subjective phenomenon of character immersion. Although the term is problematic in its ambiguity, there seems to be a general agreement that play is experienced in varying ways. Sometimes play may feel enacted and deliberate. At other times it may seem more spontaneous and almost involuntary (Holter 2007). It has also been suggested that what is often meant by immersion is experiencing the

fictional world in a way that is similar to how everyday life is experienced (Lappi 2007).

Given that the account of pretence as the creative and inferential elaboration of premises applies to larp, the subjective experience of such everydayness may very well correspond objectively to the level of automatic processing involved in making those elaborations. Human cognitive processes are to varying degrees explicit, conscious and effortful on one hand, and implicit, non-conscious and automatic on the other (Schneider & Chein 2003). When the elaboration of the premise is accomplished largely automatically, this may give rise to the subjective experience of everydayness, as automatic processing is indeed a hallmark of everyday life (Bargh & Chartrand 1999). This rather prosaic view of immersion may perhaps not appeal to all, but it could allow larpers to tap into a considerable amount of empirical literature on automatic processing and to use this knowledge to construct larps that facilitate this form of immersion.

Larp as a Form of Pretend Play

The claim that larp is adult pretend play is not merely a statement of similarity. It is a claim of developmental continuity. This means proposing that larpers employ the same fundamental skills and basic cognitive capacities to larp as children do when they play pretend games, and that there is considerable similarity in what motivates us to engage in both forms of activity.

These skills are of course not used only for larping by most adults. Nor are these needs only met by larping. Quite the contrary; many other adult activities are built on playful foundations (Sutton-Smith 1997), and of course, rather few adults regularly participate in larps. Still, larping does not require any special training in order to take part. In those cases where special skills or knowledge are needed, this never concerns the ability to pretend as such.

In fact, any interested adult is in essence a competent larper, because any such adult has at some point been a playing child and hence a competent pretender. Larp as we know it may be situated in a specific cultural context or historical period, but children of all cultures engage in pretend play, even in cultures where it is frowned upon by the adults (Carlson, Taylor, & Levin 1998). It is probably also safe to assume that they have been doing so for as long as there have been children.

Larp is obviously not the only form of play (or even pretence) that adults engage in. Larp is not unique in being an adult expression of the human ability to pretend, but in being so close to the pretence of children while being done by adults. Improv theatre has already been described and interpreted as such an adult form of pretend play (Göncü & Perone 2005). Improv theatre must be considered a close relative of larp, although by form, not by origins. Improv and larp both belong to a family of activities related to playful pretence, along with such activities as theatre, carnivals, clowning, ironic humour and sexual role-playing (Sutton-Smith 1997). The most universal and original form of such playful pretence is the pretend play of human children. Compared to the other members of the family, larp is very close to these developmental roots.

The similarities outlined so far, both in motivation and behaviour, attest to the close relationship between larp and childhood pretence. This must not be taken to imply that larp has developed directly out of the play of children. Larp represents a return to a playful past, not the activity of adults who never stopped playing. One could, however, entertain the thought that humans who would keep on doing pretend play as they grow up would end up doing something we might have recognized as larp. Then again, the actual historical development of larp is probably a convoluted

matter and deserves proper scholarly treatment by others.

Conclusion

I have argued that larp must be understood as an adult form of pretend play and attempted to point out certain avenues of thought leading out of this understanding. To study and describe larp in a productive fashion, we need to place it in the correct context by relating it properly to other forms of human activity. I believe that there are compelling reasons to accept the perspective of larp as adult pretend play and to let this perspective inform, inspire and guide future research in the area. This may necessitate abandoning previous, larp-specific theories and models, but in that case, it is the only reasonable thing to do. Theorizing about larp as an isolated, unique form of activity is not viable in the long run. This is partly a matter of theoretical economy; of not reinventing the proverbial wheel too many times. More importantly, it is a matter of adopting basic assumptions about the object of study that conform to reality.

Rather than inventing or adapting terminology, we should employ one that already fits the subject. Rather than building all new theories, we should attempt to become familiar with what is already known about what we are doing. The literature on pretence is quite extensive, and only a small selection has been cited here. In addition to informing and advancing future research and theorizing, this literature might also contain knowledge and insights that can be applied to designing and organizing larps.

Researchers in the fields of game studies have already called for an aligning of the explanatory paradigms of adult games and children's play (Brougere 1999), questioning the sense in viewing these activities as separate expressions of human creativity. Play is a mode of being, encompassing in the most absolute sense a very wide selection of human activity (Sutton-Smith 1997). Playfulness, and pretence in particular, has been implicated in the phylogenetic development of creativity (Carruthers 2002), in maintaining evolutionary vital variability in behaviour (Sutton-Smith 1997), and in the development of the human capacity for intersubjectivity (Lillard 2001). Play is serious business, and the scholarship of larp needs to get in on it.

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Are You the Daddy? Comparing Fantasy Play in Children and Adults through Vivian Gussin Paley's A Child's Work

Andreas Lieberoth

Children play games, and so do many adults. What we often fail to realise is how directed and negotiated pretend play usually is, even among the smallest children. Case studies from Vivian Gussin Paley's A Child's Work (2004) are used to exemplify how children use techniques similar to adult role-play, such as defining characters, negotiating diegetic details, and ongoing mobilisation of new content. In this paper, such similarities are used to explore the phenomena "scripting" and "representational negotiation", and venture a few notes on similarities and differences between children's pretend play and 21st century adult role-play.

I read a very inspiring book recently about how kids construe and share their fantasies seamlessly and fluently, and how emerging stories help the young minds grasp the world around them. I was doing research for a paper on imagination and supernatural thought when I happened upon Vivian Gussin Paley's book *A Child's Work* (2004). It was short and not very theoretical, but appeared to contain a lot of quirky anecdotes on kindergarteners' play, which might come in handy as examples of children's vivid imagination. While flipping through the pages, I realised how much Paley's children showed in common with my own observations of role-playing adults, and I decided that a short commentary was in order.

In Paley's classrooms, stories are the order of the day. Children are encouraged to tell their own stories at a designated story-table and enact them on a play stage, recruiting others to participate. Children understand this form of play intuitively, and use the demarcations of play and overarching narrative to explore new facets of the theme; very much like role-players, who also play their games under the guidance of certain authorities and agree on main premises long before actually getting in character. But further, Paley also strives to translate the snippets heard at the story-table or in the blocks and doll-corners into dialogue with the children. Adults may through mediation and curiosity participate in children's mental lives without invading unfolding fantasies by bringing issues back to life at later times, to discuss them, ask questions and perhaps seed some answers.

In the following I present several illustrative passages from Vivian Gussin Paley's lifelong experience as a kindergarten teacher and researcher at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, and her visits to classrooms across the world. Roles, story and the negotiation of fantasy are considered, followed by a quick discussion of play in adulthood. I conclude that the differences between role-playing and children's pretence are mainly rooted in the relative maturity of role-players, and the institutionalisation of certain control elements, which children may also use in less formalised versions.

I usually take the position that adult role-playing is an institutionalised manifestation of common human dispositions for play, symbolization and interaction, but I have also praised the imagination and empathy displayed by dedicated players. So, the questions for this short text become: How, if at all, does adult role-playing differ from children's spontaneous fantasy play? Are there marked differences in themes, structure and methods, and finally, in light of Paley's child-studies, can role-playing in all fairness be viewed as an adult-version of pretence play?

Teacher, Mommy and Dinosaur

When asked about their pretence, children often reply by way of identities and roles, like lion, mailman or mommy. Such answers could be interpreted as stating the game's title or a misunderstanding of the abstract question, but mostly it just means that children play roles, and use them to define and develop plots in their games. Consider the following example:

> "Pretend you're a frog and you jump into a bad guy but you don't know it"
>
> "Grab 'em!"
>
> "He's stealing kitty!"
>
> "Get him, over there, get him!"
>
> "Blast him, grind him up, he got the gold!"
>
> "Meow, meow, meow"
>
> "Here's your kitty, Snow White."
>
> "Are you the dwarfs? The frog dwarfs?"
>
> "We're ninja dwarfs. The frog is a ninja. Watch out! We might have to blow this place up again."
>
> (Paley 2004, 30)

As any sociologist will tell you, role defines action and social relations, and is really just a way of talking about certain positions within society. These are good for establishing a shared fantasy stage, because they draw on well-known stereotypes whose actions: the plot of a mailman play is pretty clear cut, so it might as well be called "delivering mail" and traits (frogs afford jumping) are iconic to the child. All aspects of everyday life (family, school) and fictions (story books, TV) may serve as pre-prepared seed packets for such play identities and their embedded actions.

At times, however, the cast of a traditional story-arch like *Little Red Riding-Hood* might not fit the humour of all participants, and thus new constellations may emerge:

> "Someone has to be the wolf," Red Riding girl said, putting on the red velvet cloak.
>
> "I'm not the bad guy!" argued Erik, in a vest and tie.
>
> "You're really the dad hunter but you pretend huge teeth."
>
> "Like a wolf? See it bited me so my teeth got stronger like a wolf."
>
> (Paley 2004, 23)

Children readily mix existing stereotypes into new conceptual blends, which afford new plots and storylines. Since action is imbedded in identity, Super Peter Rabbit can act differently than regular Peter, and thus adds new dimensions to a game. Children appear to intuitively understand and accept such blends, as long as they are privy to their various sources.

Playing with identity is both important and inescapable. Humans are hardwired to deal with individual identity and social relations, and such themes spurt forth as the mind matures. The anthropologist Antonia Mills (2003), who has studied fantasy play and cultural beliefs in India and the United States, suggests that externalising identity in play-roles or imaginary friends stems from the young child's struggle to understand the difficult metacognitive phenomena "self" and "other". Once these mature, play becomes much more explicit, and even more complex notions such as "real/pretence" and "false/truth" make their way into fantasy games.

Why children role-play and try on faces is hard to explain, although the main reason seems to be fun. Other explanations concerning development and issues nagging children, however, abound. For instance, playing house might seem like a dull idea, since kids experience household-settings every day. One might therefore suggest that children wanted to try on other more powerful (or absent), roles in the family, but apparently most kids actually prefer the role of the baby (usually an iconic inept or naughty child, of their own age or below), which indicates that children negotiate *their own* identity through the game, negatively defined in against other positions such as parents or younger siblings. Likewise, the parent-character's attitude and action is mostly portrayed in relation to the baby's antics, confirming the suspicion that "house" is really all about the child. This seems to apply to most other games, where aspects of the child's own mental world becomes apparent. Thus, playing with identities concerns the children's own place in the world, and the dramas that come with it.

What's the Story, Peter Rabbit?

Stories coaxed from children may take unsuspected forms. One boy, when asked to tell a story of his own simply stated *"Frederick"*, and left it at that. His name was Frederick. None the less, play and story seems to go hand in hand.

In Paley's transcripts, it becomes obvious that most pretence games whether facilitated by an adult or not, are initiated by a certain amount of what we might call scripting. A child takes the initiative, and introduces a plot:

> "Ahzz! Water, water! Pretend we are walking in Egypt and there's no water but we see a big river." [...]
>
> "Scrub the floor Cinderella! You can't come to the ball!" (Paley 2004, 4, 12)

Notice how both examples include dramatic conflict. Sometimes such gambits simply evoke a scene, using familiar cues, and sometimes scripts are more elaborate, presenting the twists and turns of the story about to unfurl in greater detail. Paley's book is ripe with examples.

As noted, play usually revolves around simple casts, themes, or well-known stories. Paley noticed how stories read aloud in kindergarten, such as *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Charlotte's Web* or *Cinderella*, were repeated and changed over and over again, and even news-stories like the 9/11 terrorist-attacks make their way into playtime, compiling bits and pieces scavenged at home or from the media. The seeds of play flutter carelessly across the world.

In one of Paley's classrooms, children are encouraged to sit and tell stories of their own devising, and act them out through social play. The teacher acts as a mediator between the story and the enactment, distributing roles and asking clarifying questions, but even without a teacher's intercession, children

avidly translate shared narratives and characters into play. It is their way of talking about things. Stories and themes may be repeated and changed many times over to afford new twists and turns, but each time all agree on the general plot. In the fluent relationship between play and stories, the human tendency to experience time, identity and causality as *storied* (McAdams 1993) becomes apparent. Children present the game-to-be as a narrative through scripting, but contrary to adults they have little qualms about deviating from the original plot or conventional rules of storytelling. Play-narratives are all but well-structured, and most kids probably wouldn't be able to recount them afterwards, but the experience of being part of a bigger story is there – visible in both expectations, scripting and the way children often use narrator-speak to negotiate play.

The reason why we are good at recounting conventional narratives and tend to impose narrative schema reality, may simply be that stories usually follow culturally specified narratological rules (Fludernik 1996), which children are only starting to internalise. Certain themes seem to take up most of the games played between bouts of adrenaline, such as family and friendship (emotions, trust, the mother-loves-me-best story) and good and bad guys (morality, conflict), and colourful characters like super-heroes, dinosaurs and vampires seem to help demarking identity and possibility. Stories read aloud or seen on TV are a salient source of inputs and inspiration in the lives of children, who do not have a well-defined way of acquiring and evaluating theoretical knowledge. Therefore, they copy both content *and* structure of the narratives they are presented with, just like role-playing games seem to follow certain dramatic rules, even if they claim to provide freedom of choice to the players. The emerging plots and themes enforce constraints on our literary minds. As C. G. Jung noted, "the creative mind plays with the objects it loves" and both children and role-players take the most appealing topics up over and over again, each time refining the story or fitting it to their current concerns and inspirations. This analysis can easily be imposed on the classical genres of teenage- and adult role-play, where issues of empowerment and social boundaries seem to be heavily represented compared to other themes.

Antonia Mills has found that certain cultures assume that imaginative children are interacting with actual spiritual beings or have memories of past lives (Mills 2003). Indian style of play differs much from its American counterpart, which seems to be much more introvert. Perhaps therefore, few Indian children are reported to have imaginary companions, while somewhere between 15 and 66% of American children do at some point (Taylor 1999, Mills 2003). Most North European children are supplied with stories in abundance by TV, film and computer games associated with their toys, and might therefore find avid inspiration, or more depressingly, create fewer original ideas of their own, when interacting with the furnishings of their rooms. Types and styles of play thus seem to be heavily influenced by both cultural and situational factors.

Room for Negotiation

Negotiation, as defined by Berger & Luckmann (1966) is the ongoing discursive approximation of worldviews that occurs in human communication. When rummaging through Paley's accounts of the dramas unfolding in the doll-corner, one is confounded by the amount of scripting going on, but also how easily such scripts are bargained and changed according to the likings of the participants. Intricate mental imageries are transformed by a few words, hardly noticed by anyone (i.e. Lieberoth 2007; forthcoming).

For example, as *Cinderella* is evoked once again, one child suddenly and assertively changes the familiar turn of events:

"Scrub the floor, Cinderella! You can't come to the ball."

"Then why don't you come to the birthday."

"Whose birthday?"

"Me, I'm baby Cinderella. And there's no mean sisters so you can't be mean to me. You could be a nice sister or a good auntie."

(Paley 2004, 12)

In a sense, this shows the clashing of different fantasies, but it is also a clear example of communicative action: Others are not repelled by the notion of a more harmonious family, but encouraged to take part of the Cinderella-girl's vision, turning to a different part of the original story's timeline. Translated into play, the narrative can be slowed down at a point of the children's liking (Paley 2004, 24). The inner representations of the players are seamlessly aligned, because the negotiation respects the invisible constraints set up by the shared *Cinderella*-framework. Negotiation implies shared ownership of the story or game. There may be struggles to retain control, and some kids may take on a game-master-like role and become dictatorial, but by and large, negotiation within the shared framework ensures that everyone gets to contribute and stay on the same page. The source-story seeds the common frame of reference, while negotiation makes new magic happen on the spot. Curiously, the words "pretend" and "imagine" are often used as children either attempt to seed ideas into the minds of others or express elements still open to negotiation. Something *not real* - not even in the play reality. The words act as a form of disclaimers, inviting metacognitive consideration of pretence elements, even before they become real in the game.

As a child, I enjoyed creating elaborate dioramas and scenarios using Lego or Playmobile toys, but since my mother usually insisted on clearing up the fair towns and epic battles after a few days, the fantasies would evaporate as props disappeared back into their boxes. There is almost always some stable locus of control in a game, but some are more stable than others. Physical objects anchor shared attention, making points of reference, or authoritative participants may serve as a narrators or game-masters of sorts. In this respect the toys and costumes chosen at the outset of a game can place some elements beyond negotiation, and remind everyone of the chosen plot. They become seeds for imagination, as well as coveted objects of power. Whether in the world or in the mind of an authoritative participant, conventions narrow the field of options.

Once scripts for a story are more or less formally agreed upon, play might unfold like a theatre play, but similarities fade once the story changes and gets fluid; from there on in, play has more in common with *role*-play than *a* play. Small children, however, have much shorter attention spans than adults. Sustained attention and goal representation develop as the child's will and ability for sequenced action mature, and even though this may be a part of discreet mental systems originally evolved for impulse-inhibition and more complex sets of action, the entire mind benefits. Thus, children's pretend play gradually becomes longer and more consistent with age. Children who play much with others seem to acquire the capacity for prolonged pretence earlier, which indicates that semantics and *theory of mind* (conscious realisation of the mental content of others, see Leslie 1994, Lieberoth 2006) kindles general cognitive development. Another explanation might be that less mature players are cued in by older peers, thus creating an environment where some or all participants contribute to the others' representations of the game. Adult play increasingly seeks the structure and narrative guidance to which culturally competent individuals have grown accustomed.

As our minds mature, we develop towards general cognitive independence from external cues, but we also become anchored in systems of meaning and authority, from which it can be hard to escape. This is a paradox of adult fantasy play.

The examples of play-negotiation fit strikingly with my previous studies of verbal-cue role-playing (Lieberoth 2007; forthcoming). The main differences actually seem to be the comparatively larger shared frame of reference between adults, and more sophisticated use of language, artefacts and discursive devices, which can be accounted for by age alone. The practice and methods basically seem the same.

The Value of Play

Play comes with intrinsic pleasures. Why else would children and adults keep doing it? But play and fantasy may also serve psychological and developmental purposes.

Creating vivid imaginary worlds and characters does not seem to be compensation for loneliness or lacking stimulation *per se*, but does require that the children have time to themselves. This is supported by Antonia Mills' finding that imaginary companions are reported infrequently in pre-modern societies, such as rural India, where children are engaged in family labour and live within large extended families with loads of available adults and playmates (2003).

Paley's short book was written in praise of fantasy play, and its importance to the early lives of children. In a world where tests and hard rote-learning curricula and are once again marching on the carefree years of childhood, it is important to note the value of play: Both as a handy tool for learning and communicating, and as an all-important part of childhood growth, play serves a number of more or less distinct social, psychological and developmental functions.

Any form of social exchange is pleasurable to us. Apes grooming each other receive endorphin rewards, which may have been carried over to the general domain of social exchanges – particularly gossip about others (Dunbar 1996, see also Lieberoth 2006). Indeed, referring to fictional people in the first person mirrors an exchange of social information: Through play we not only speak "as", but also "about" the characters and situations seeded in our minds. Play is a safe way of talking about the ever-expanding field of social possibilities and dramas of our lives.

Pretence also serves as a canvas for the children to paint their own sentences, stories, and even self-image; it spurs them on to apply their emerging social and semantic skills, and bootstraps developments in peers. Children must also experiment to create boundaries for reality, and take in the new. This comes naturally (Leslie 1994), but as Paley emphasises, there seems to be an emerging relationship between play, communication and analytical thinking, and even the ability to tell self from others (Mills 2003). Each may influence the others. Play allows children to collaboratively experiment with words, stories and images, and formulate their own theories. They form questions and answers in a language that has not yet been tainted by pure reason, which helps children in their most important job, namely taking in new impressions from the world around them. As Paley aptly puts it, *"The mind that has been freely associating with playful imagery is primed to tackle new ideas. Fantasy play, rather than being a distraction, helps children achieve the goal of having an open mind, whether in the service of further storytelling or in formal lessons."* (Paley 2004, 26)

Finally, stories, games, toys and even beliefs may function as transitional objects, mediating between the child's own self, and coveted or imposing characteristics of maturity (Clark 1995). As such

personal features are integrated with personality, the need for mediation through play and fiction dwindles, and interest may decline. Of course, we never cease changing, so certain themes might be rehearsed and negotiated over and over again as mental training, or a comfort blanket of sorts. Even adults seem to need fantasy.

Does Fantasy Die Out in Adulthood?

Moving on from Paley's children, we may turn to the question of adult fantasy play. Few studies outside psychiatry and psychoanalysis have concerned themselves with the fantasy lives of adults and older children. It is widely accepted that the propensity for various sorts of play dwindles as the child matures, and is replaced by intensely group-focused activities and approximations of adult conduct in the teenage-years. For instance, children seem to lose interest in lifelong imaginary companions in middle childhood (Taylor 1999, Mills 2003), although it is possible that they simply go underground because of frowns from parents and peers. In other cases the companion is genuinely abandoned form one day to the next, and the child might even invent an end to the story, where the imaginary companion perishes or moves away (Taylor 1999). A rich fantasy life might thus persist well beyond late childhood, but in more internal versions. If certain fantasies serve a psychological purpose, like supplying transitional objects for attributes missing in real life, they may eventually be integrated in the maturing personality, and thus lose their function. Other children might feel embarrassed and babyish because of childish activities, and chose to move on themselves. Alternatively, many fantasies might find external anchoring in fiction, games, digital entertainment, one's own children or institutions such as role-playing.

There are, however, also good reasons to believe that personal fantasy survives. A study conducted by Ilse Siegffe-Krenke at the University of Bonn reports that an astounding 28 percent of 16-17 year olds mention imaginary others (a grown-up way of saying imaginary companions) in their diaries (Taylor 1999). It could be argued that keeping a diary indicates a particularly introspective mindset, and so the sample might not be entirely representative of the general youth populace. Comparing Seiffge-Krenkes subjects to controls and/or role-players on a personality inventory might for instance reveal such artefacts. Generally, relating to imaginary others in adulthood is not all that uncommon. Writers and their readers establish close bonds to almost independent fictional characters. Strategic awareness of other human beings is at the crux of social existence, and can just as well concern absent or fictitious persons – especially if these embody real concerns in the imaginer's life, like an ideal self or the gaze of a deity. Pondering one's role-playing character when not actually engaged in a session (what skills they should have, how they live, their future plans), might count as such.

Of course, fantasies serve different purposes and follow other themes in adults than in young children. Ambitions and dreams may become more earthbound, and thus seem less fantastic if equally vivid and therefore fly under the radar of many studies, and some fantasies expressing aggressive and sexual desires might be kept well under wraps. Imagination, however, is honed though life, so it is safe to say that fantasy doesn't die out; it just changes and finds new institutional outlets. Role-playing games may indeed facilitate integration between the vivid fantasy life of childhood and increasingly social orientation of teenagers.

Giants in the Playground

Since this is chiefly meant to be a review of thoughts raised by Vivian Gussin Paley's 2004 book, this chapter has been grabbed from doll-corners and play-stages across the globe, supplemented by my own reflections and ceaseless theoretical musings.

In closing, we turn our new knowledge of children's fantasy play to understanding adult role-playing. Role-players strive to achieve the same things that children do effortlessly and spontaneously. As adults, they still have it in them to take flights of fancy, but somehow everything in adulthood has to become more structured; more controlled.

Role-playing games are initiated almost in the same way as fantasy play, but all things being equal, more formally. The message, however, remains the same: *"let's play"*. The initiator usually sets the stage and demarks the official plot, surrendering snippets of reality-influence to the players. Participants may thus rule over the small plots of fantasyland that is their own character, their actions, and perhaps some background information conjured up during play, but the overall game remains at the mercy of a strict social contract, arbitrated by the organiser. The last 20 years of role-playing have seen both an increase in control techniques and an inevitable counter-drive to escape them.

Role-playing organisers take great pains to aid in the construction of a shared story, by explicitly aligning expectations, supplying necessary tools et cetera, and they usually move upon the face of the waters making sure the game progresses on track. Not because adults have shorter attention spans and need more help to imagine, but because we like social contracts to be explicit and somehow visible – maybe predicting our own tendency to bicker in the face of ambiguity.

While children bumble along, then change things and then lose interest, adults remain committed to the same game, sometimes for days on end, and expect it to somehow come to fruition; to reach a meaningful conclusion that can be milled over and repeatedly reconstructed afterward. We have a culturally inherited way of structuring our stories, and as we rehearse such patterns over and over, we come to expect that life itself conforms to such patterns, and the games we play doubly so. Organizers cater to that need, and make sure that everyone gets to take the product home. Here lies a major difference, since modern self-conscious consumers of social commodities expect time spent role-playing and preparing for said game to yield some kind of discreet result – usually a good memory or story to tell. For children, this is not so. They play spontaneously and should have nothing better to do, while adults consciously make a choice to role-play. Perhaps this is why many role-playing games conceived before the free-form era have built-in goals and rewards. Not because players are all greasy gotta-win-gamists at heart, but because goals, rewards and meaningful conclusions conform to the way contemporary western adults see the world in general.

Finally, it seems fair to say that like fantasy play and imaginary companions, role-play serves some social and psychological needs. Role-playing creates a wonderful forum for social interaction and sates our hunger for gossip and social drama, and even supplies "safety hatches", like chat-room trolls or self styled "pickup artists" may protect their fragile selves from rejection behind imaginary personae. Since role-playing integrates the vivid fantasy life of childhood with the social orientation of teenagers, I would further venture the proposition that role-playing characters serve many of the same functions as imaginary companions and celebrity-infatuations, given how much time teenagers spend fleshing them out in their quiet minds.

Although adults may always exist on the periphery of children's fantasies, they are very good at drawing up boundaries of their own. Where children have trouble explaining concepts like pretence, fantasy and imagination, adults are very explicit about such things, and welcome the tools to sort them out. Play seems to remain the same in adulthood, but role-players add an additional level of structure that, depending on finesse, can be helpful to share and immerse in a common fantasy, or turn out as a sheer tool for power that kills spontaneity outright.

Conclusions

Narrative begins early; the storied conception of time and reality can plainly exist in play without the cultural and linguistic devices that adults seem to prefer in place. Children meet stories more than half way (Paley 2004, 14).

The purpose of this text was to view role-playing and fantasy in the new light of honest and naive stories created by a bunch of imaginative children, and recorded by a dedicated scholar-slash-kindergarten teacher. I hope that this chapter has widened your perspective, and fuelled questions of your own.

We are always at the periphery of each others' worlds, but engaging in common activities and weaving elaborate fictions may bring us closer for a little while.

Adults get better at relating theoretically to fantasy, but that may be why it seems harder to really get into a game as we grow up. The trick, then, seems to be abandoning the adult superstructure of language and theory, and returning to a time where the wonders of play were self-evident. Play may bring us closer to our childhood, because, at the core, role-play and children's fantasy play is very much the same.

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Kaprow's Scions

J. Tuomas Harviainen

This article re-introduces a way of looking at live-action role-playing as an artistic and possibly ideological descendant of an earlier expressive form, the Happening. In it, I will go through rules set for such events by Allan Kaprow in 1966, analyze those rules and compare them to the conventions of larps. Additionally, I will suggest new ways of looking at larp as art and on viewing earlier theories on larp as performance.

We have seen claims that larp is either the same as psychodrama, or interactive theatre, or drama, or re-enactment, or ritual (see Morton 2007 for examples). Or, at the very least, very much like them – or a descendant of them. In this article, I (re)introduce a new way of looking at live-action role-playing as art.[1]

I am not suggesting that we disavow any connection to the roots of our art. On the contrary, it is imperative for the evolution of larp that we recognize the history and contributions of various predecessors and siblings. If we do not, we end up increasingly often re-inventing the proverbial wheel, and badly at that

In 1966, Allan Kaprow wrote the book *Assemblage, Environments & Happenings*. He had already coined the name *Happening* in 1957 for certain artistic events that were taking place at the time, and Michael Kirby had written and edited one book about the phenomenon (1965) that included several scripts (detailed descriptions of how the Happening is to proceed).[2] Kaprow's book, however, codified the appropriate way of performing Happenings into a set of rules.[3] As we look at those rules and the purpose of said activity, it is hard to ignore their similarity to modern larp, especially the experimental ones taking place in the Nordic countries and Italy.

Happenings were essentially a style of pre-planned performances created to affect the performers themselves, and typically had no audience. They grew out of Dadaist and Surrealist roots and a general dissatisfaction with the theatre of the time (Kirby 1965). As Kirby notes, they were created in a "compartmented structure", i.e. so that their pieces were (supposedly) self-contained and hermetic. Pieces of a Happening could be part of the same work, yet not have any contact, correlation or common plot together with other parts of the performance or the surrounding world. Furthermore, the participants were expected to ignore elements that weren't part of the Happening, including things such as people preparing the designated playing area, or people walking by if some part of the piece was performed in public. As anyone involved in a larp notices, the expectation on selective suspension of disbelief in the two forms is much alike. (See also photographs in this article.)

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1 The direct similarity between Happenings and larp, including the basics of what I discuss here, was introduced in 2005 by Gareth Martin on the Forge forums (Martin & al. 2005) It has also been briefly mentioned by Morton (2007). Sonesson (2000) lists them as similar activities, but fails, probably due to his rather limited view of "larp", to make a more direct connection.

2 Kaprow himself declares the word, which was already in common use, unsatisfactory in Kirby 1965, due to it denoting something that "happens", whereas proper Happenings were always carefully planned events.

3 Kaprow did acknowledge throughout his work, though, that the numerous other creators of various Happenings and similar phenomena did not necessarily share these principles or the same goals.

Photograph of the 1962 Happening called Courtyard by Allan Kaprow. (quoted from Kaprow (1966a), Photograph by Lawrence Shustak)

There were Happenings of various types. Kaprow (1967) lists six "rough directions": *A Pocket Drama* of people pushing intimately together in a small space like a club or a studio, an *Extravaganza* presented on stage for an audience, an *Event* of audience concentration upon a non-traditional, brief element such as a light bulb going on and off, a journey-like *Guided Tour* around some urban or rural area, written notes of *Ideas* or *Suggestions* given for people to perform or ignore, and, of most interest to larp, *Activities*, which consisted of performing normal, often mundane tasks as a form of art meant to be self-experienced.

The description of a proper Happening is far too lengthy and complex to provide here. However, Kaprow (1966a) has written two short, never-performed examples that were used to illustrate the concept in general:

> Naked women eat giant bowls of Cheerios and milk atop a mountain of used tires. Children disgorge barrels of whitewash over the mountain. A hundred yards away, men and women swimmers in brightly colored plastic pools continually leap out of the water to catch with their mouths rubber gaskets festooned with Life Saver candies that hang from chains of men's belts. The mountain is taken down, tire by tire, and moved into the pools, and the water spills out. The children tie the adults together with the belts. They pour whitewash over the now still heaps of bodies. Then they buckle dozens more of the belts around their necks, waists, and legs. They take the remaining Life Savers to a factory-fresh tire shop and offer them for sale in laughty voices. (Kaprow 1966a, 202-203)

According to Kaprow, this scenario would be a "rough, fast-moving affair" with overtones of salvation (the Life Savers) combined with nourishment (the cereal), "pleasure of life" (the candies), baptismal (the pools and the whitewash "milk"), wheel of progress and fortune (the tire), death and destruction, and a proverbial phoenix rising from the ashes in the form of the children leaving the bound, dying adults and playing in a new environment, the tire shop.

> Spaghetti is cooked and eaten by at least two people
>
> At least three motionless men are covered from head to toe, with chocolate icing, by at least the same number of women
>
> A group of at least fifteen dogs on leashes are fed tinned dog food by their masters
>
> At least ten people are packaged up in plastic film and are dumped or delivered by truck
>
> At least twenty people with brooms sweep as long as necessary (Kaprow 1966a, 204-205)

Accompanying these actions is a list of three sets of two times and a location, such as "A Street – Thursday, Friday, 5 P.M." and a mention that each action may be performed once or twice, at one or two prescribed environments and at their respective times, as desired. The choice is left to the performers, meaning that the activities may end up occupying the same place at the same time, and that the participants do not know what (if anything) is happening at any of the potential times

in any of the other locations. There are ninety-six potential combinations, leaving very much to chance.

Kaprow (1966a) states seven "rules of thumb" that emerged from within the Happenings scene. As can be seen of the rules, they are mostly concerned with elements prevalent in Happenings of the Pocket Drama and Activity types, which I also mostly refer to when speaking about the similarities and artistic heritage here. The rules are:

> (A) The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible.
>
> (B) Therefore, the source of themes, materials, actions, and the relationships between them are to be derived from any place or period except from the arts, their derivatives, and their milieu.
>
> (C) The performance of a Happening should take place over several widely spaced, sometimes moving and changing locales.
>
> (D) Time, which follows closely on space considerations, should be variable and discontinuous.
>
> (E) Happenings should be performed once only.
>
> (F) It follows that audiences should be eliminated entirely.
>
> (G) The composition of a Happening [...] is evolved as a collage of events in certain spans of time and in certain spaces. (Kaprow 1966a, 188-198)[4]

The basic rules most obviously coincide with certain formalist approaches to larp, such as the *Dogma 99* manifesto (Fatland & Wingård 2003)[5] or the suggested experimentation of Gerge & Widing (2006), and do not seem to match other kinds of larps, but the legacy goes beyond such elements. The transformative intent of the two activities is alike, which becomes obvious when a closer look at Kaprow's descriptions of the rules is taken. For example, rule (B) is given a reason in the following manner:

> When innovations are taking place it often becomes necessary for those involved to treat their tasks with considerable severity. In order to keep their eyes fixed solely upon the essential problem, they will decide that there are certain "don'ts" which, as self-imposed rules, they will obey unswervingly. (Kaprow, 1966a, 189)

However, he later notes in the same chapter that

> [The] freedom to accept all kinds of subject matter will probably be possible in the Happenings of the future, but I think not for now. Artistic attachments are still so many window dressings, unconsciously held on to to legitimize an art that otherwise might go unrecognized. (Kaprow, 1966a, 189)

4 Kaprow had a different wording of the same rules in the essay Happenings are Dead (1966b), which was re-published as a part of Kaprow 1996. The essential points of both rules systems are identical.

5 It is of interest to note how both Dogma 99 and the cinematic Dogme 95 Vow of Chastity (http://www.dogme95.dk/the_vow/vow.html) it was based upon stand, while being highly similarly formalist, in almost complete opposition to Kaprow's rules for Happenings.

Photograph of the 1964 Happening called Household. (quoted from Kaprow (1966a), Photograph by Sol Goldberg/Ithaca Journal)

Throughout this article, I will be arguing – through examples from larp design and play – that current-day larp, whether experimental or not, is not only the heir of Kaprow's ideals, but also their fulfillment. The games we make are his "Happenings of the future".

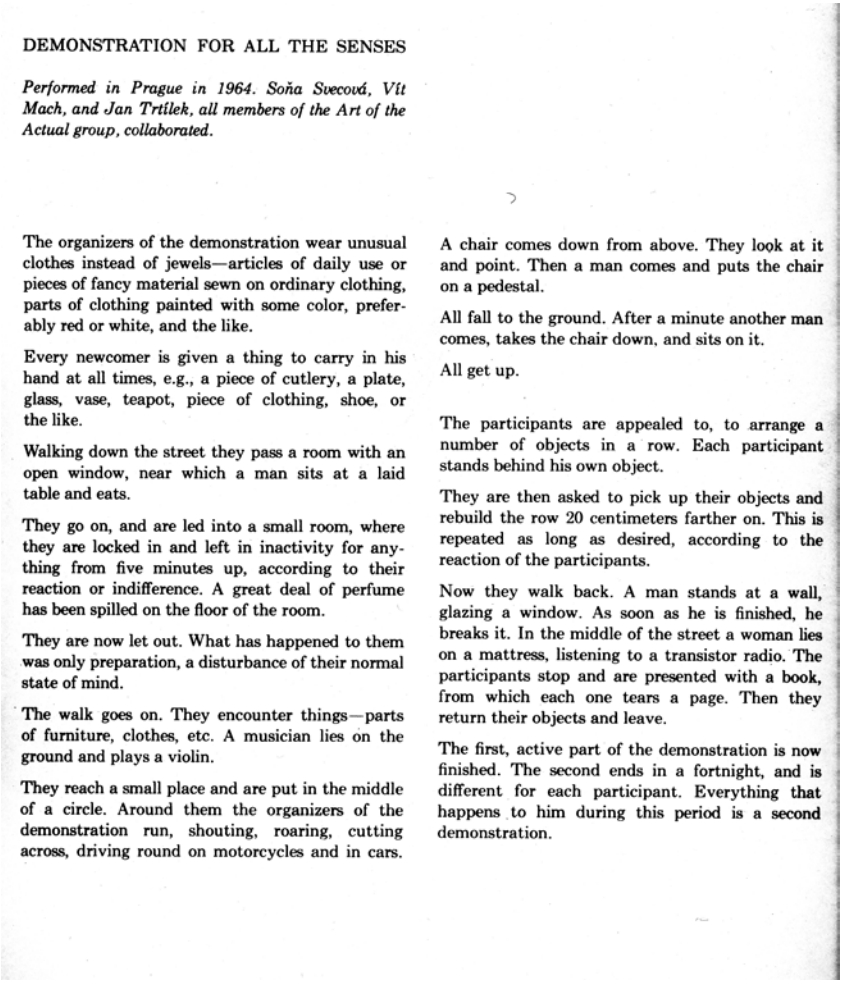
Rule (A): Blurring the Line

According to Kaprow, the point of keeping the line between life and art as fluid as possible is twofold: first, this creates maximal interaction between the handmade and the readymade, invoking something special, and second, because works existing at that junction cannot be judged by standard criteria. This argument is especially true in the case of games that intentionally blur the line, whether pervasive, "reality" games (see Stenros, Montola, Waern & Jonsson 2007 and Widing 2007 for recent examples) or larps taking place in an urban environment.

In addition to the artistic side, there is a certain pleasure inherent to such play (Montola 2007)[6], even though players also report that they receive enjoyment from larps precisely because there is a clear line between them and reality that provides a feeling of safety (Mattsson 2007). These two points are not at all mutually exclusive, however, and may actually both significantly contribute to the enjoyment of larp play (Harviainen 2006).

Yet keeping the line between art and life fluid has a far wider interpretation: in order to truly impress the players, a larp (or pervasive game) has to create such a blurring *in some manner*. Creating a 360° illusion of reality (Koljonen 2007), seeking a total character-immersive state (Pohjola 1999)

6 Note that Montola does not truly distinguish between urban larps and pervasive role-playing.



DEMONSTRATION FOR ALL THE SENSES

Performed in Prague in 1964. Soňa Svecová, Vít Mach, and Jan Trtílek, all members of the Art of the Actual group, collaborated.

The organizers of the demonstration wear unusual clothes instead of jewels—articles of daily use or pieces of fancy material sewn on ordinary clothing, parts of clothing painted with some color, preferably red or white, and the like.

Every newcomer is given a thing to carry in his hand at all times, e.g., a piece of cutlery, a plate, glass, vase, teapot, piece of clothing, shoe, or the like.

Walking down the street they pass a room with an open window, near which a man sits at a laid table and eats.

They go on, and are led into a small room, where they are locked in and left in inactivity for anything from five minutes up, according to their reaction or indifference. A great deal of perfume has been spilled on the floor of the room.

They are now let out. What has happened to them was only preparation, a disturbance of their normal state of mind.

The walk goes on. They encounter things—parts of furniture, clothes, etc. A musician lies on the ground and plays a violin.

They reach a small place and are put in the middle of a circle. Around them the organizers of the demonstration run, shouting, roaring, cutting across, driving round on motorcycles and in cars.

A chair comes down from above. They look at it and point. Then a man comes and puts the chair on a pedestal.

All fall to the ground. After a minute another man comes, takes the chair down, and sits on it.

All get up.

The participants are appealed to, to arrange a number of objects in a row. Each participant stands behind his own object.

They are then asked to pick up their objects and rebuild the row 20 centimeters farther on. This is repeated as long as desired, according to the reaction of the participants.

Now they walk back. A man stands at a wall, glazing a window. As soon as he is finished, he breaks it. In the middle of the street a woman lies on a mattress, listening to a transistor radio. The participants stop and are presented with a book, from which each one tears a page. Then they return their objects and leave.

The first, active part of the demonstration is now finished. The second ends in a fortnight, and is different for each participant. Everything that happens to him during this period is a second demonstration.

The script for a 1964 Happening Demonstration for all the Senses (Kaprow 1966a)

or manipulating the connection between the player and the character (Harviainen 2005) are all ways of making that line fluid – by covering it physically, or mentally, or exposing and utilizing the line's structure itself. Again, such methods are not mutually exclusive, as the case of *Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum* (2006) illustrates (see Stenros, Montola, Waern & Jonsson 2007 for details). One of the problems, though, of any advanced blurring techniques is that they do not work on all players: a technique that increases commitment to play or believability of the environment for one participant may decrease it for another.[7]

The act of creating a temporary reality – a place where a fictional new *life* takes place – for a larp is following this rule at its most obvious.

7 A good example of this can be found in the feedback of A Nice Evening with the Family (2007), http://www.larp.com/galadrim/debatt/gigen.cgi?read=41866

Rule (B): Non-Artistic Sources Only

Because (successful) larps provide a more through sense of reality than a performed Happening, this rule takes on a new meaning. As Kaprow himself notes, one can eventually yield the ban on certain kinds of references. Drawing larp material from popular culture and arts is very commonplace (Phillips 2006), so it would be easy to presume that experimental work would be more true to breaking away from artistic conventions. This is not true, however. The connection to various art forms in larp is very strong, even if it does differ in style depending on the level of experimentation (Fatland 2005a).

How, then, is it possible to say that larping follows this rule? The answer lies in the following statement by Kaprow:

> The Happening is conceived as an art, certainly, but this is for a lack of a better word, or one that would not cause endless discussion. I, personally, would not care if it were called a sport. But if it's going to be thought of in the context of art and artists, then let it be a distinct art which finds its way into the art category by realizing its species outside of "culture." (Kaprow 1966a, 190.)

The problem is not in the sources or the methods; it is in what Kaprow calls the "highly sophisticated habits" of other art forms. By way of bringing events – even events borrowed from other arts – to the level of personal experience, a larp breaks those habits (Pettersson 2006). If we look at larp play itself, instead of criticizing it as some other form of activity, this difference becomes obvious.[8] This can be done either through statistical trait comparison (Sonesson 2000) or by analyzing player feedback from various larps.

By likening larps to theater, storytelling or psychodrama – or Happenings, for that matter – we are actually denying their uniqueness as an art form or medium. This does not mean that comparisons should not be made, but rather that a new attitude should be adopted. Instead of saying "Larp *is* phenomenon X", we should be writing about "Larp *as* phenomenon X" and acknowledging the difference. By starting to see the difference ourselves we are following the spirit of this rule, and not needing its letter.

One element drawn from other mediums that deserves special consideration is that of a plot. Expecting some sort of a causality, and a story of some kind, seems very natural to people used to other media. According to Kirby,

> Happenings have abandoned the plot or story structure that is the foundation of our traditional theatre. Gone are the clichés of exposition, development, climax and conclusion, of love and ambition, the conflicts of personality, the revelatory monologue of character. Gone are all the elements needed for the presentation of a cause-and-effect plot or even the simple sequence that would tell a story. (Kirby 1965, 13.)

How on earth is it possible to combine this character-hollowing approach to larp and say that we are dealing with something very much alike? To answer this, we must look at what tools were used

8 Laws (1995) notes about the sibling phenomenon of tabletop role-playing: "I submit that if RPG criticism becomes an active and growing field, that it will likely identify unique criteria that mark high achievement in gaming. Like the glossy, over-serious Hollywood literary adaptations that once won praise from critics, games that win acclaim today for their adherence to criteria from other narrative forms may eventually come to be regarded as dated and naive."

to break the causality, to remove the story from the equation, and then see how they manifest in a larp.

Rules (C) and (D): Space and Time

In larp, space and time considerations tie in with the narrative. As games of information, larps are heavily dependant on communication between characters (Harviainen 2007b). Whether the right elements – be they both characters or a character and an environmental element – meet in the right fashion is crucial for larp design, and this is where space and time come in. Kaprow wanted to break the feel of a stage, and to make sure the Happenings were experienced on the time system (whether real or perceived) they required. To break time and spread out a play is not the same as creating an intentionally disjointed experience.

> A single performance space tends towards the static and, more significantly, resembles conventional theater practice. It is also like painting, for safety's sake, only in the center of a canvas. Later on, when we are used to a fluid space as painting has been for almost a century, we can return to concentrated areas, because then they will not be considered exclusive. (Kaprow 1966a, 190.)

Geographical and temporal obstacles to communication are bound to happen in a larp, especially one taking place in multiple locations. Having events take place at a corresponding pace with one another is extremely difficult. Yet larp designers still experiment with both unspecified areas and clearly defined larp environments where the physical continuity of the game's reality is only a fiction.

Game time is an even more curious thing. Kaprow states that

> It is only natural that if there are multiple spaces in which occurrences are scheduled, in sequence or even at random, time or "pacing" will acquire an order that is determined more by the character of movements within environments than by a fixed concept of regular development and conclusion. (Kaprow, 1966a, 191.)

Various methods have been devised to manipulate time and event flow in larps. One of the best known is the use of Fates, rules stating that particulars events will take place in the larp at predetermined times or conditions (Fatland, 2000), such as "when you see a man exiting the hospital, you will give him a rose", but basically any use of planned events at play is a way of coordinating time. Kaprow suggests various lengths for Happenings, from brief chance to continuity within mundane life, all of which see frequent use in larps and/or pervasive role-playing games.

What Kaprow, given that he worked with scripted pieces, does not take into account is the effect that knowing the artificiality of artificial time has. As Faaborg (2005) notes, player behavior in a larp may become diegetically illogical as the end of an event approaches. Inflation in the value of both physical/fiscal resources and character lives is a commonplace phenomenon in larps, especially less well developed ones. In some sense, though, this problem is actually a part of the legacy I am referring to here: the sense of multiple times with differing significances is very much in the spirit of Happenings.

That which Kirby (1965) and Kaprow (1966a) define as the lack of a plot or continuity from one piece of the work to the next also takes place in a larp, but not by intentional cuts in space

and time. It happens because the players have adopted a lusory attitude, i.e. accepted rules that limit their behavior because doing so increases the pleasure gained from playing (Suits 1978). In a larp it manifests as a willingness not to know (especially in-game) everything there is to know, which in turn means that each player has a completely subjective experience of what is taking place in the game, regardless of whether there actually are common, shared elements (Montola 2003, Harviainen 2007b).

> A picture, a piece of music, a poem, a drama, each confined within its respective frame, fixed number of measures, stanzas, and stages, however great they may be in their own right, simply will not allow for breaking the barrier between art and life. And this is what the objective is. (Kaprow 1966a, 193.)

I would personally venture further and say that despite Kaprow's claims, Happenings did not allow for that breaking either. Larps and pervasive games, however, do, and that is why we are, in my view, the heirs of this legacy.

Rule (E): Play Only Once

Transient events such as Happenings or larps cannot be repeated. There may be reruns for some purpose, such as allowing for a new or larger attendance, but that is typically an exception. Even for Kaprow, these exceptions are possible and permitted:

> [T]here is a special instance of where more than one performance is entirely justified. This is the score or scenario which is designed to make every performance significantly different from the previous one. Superficially this has been true for the Happenings all along. Parts have been so roughly scored that there was bound to be some margin of imprecision from performance to performance. And, occasionally, sections of a work were left open for accidentals or improvisations. (Kaprow 1966a, 194.)

Larps exemplify this exception. As Fatland (2005b) notes, larps can not be scripted. They are an emergent form of play (in the theatrical, gaming and pretence senses of the word) that builds upon potential seeds of events. Some of those seeds are pre-planned, others emerge on their own during play. The results can be anticipated to a certain extent, but not reliably predicted, as there is no way to ascertain in advance which pieces of information will lead to action (Harviainen 2007b). However, just as there may be occasional talk of larp players having certain habits in play, so were there in performing Happenings, as this statement which directly follows the previous quote displays:

> But since people are creatures of habit, performers always tended to fall into set patterns and stick to these no matter what leeway was given to them in the original plan. (Kaprow 1966a, 194.)

For Kaprow, the concepts of *Chance* and *Change* were very important in experimental art. A piece undergoing Change is meant to be transformed by others' hands, typically that of a participating audience.[9] In contrast, a piece of Chance is allowed to transform, but does not require that to

9 It pays to note here that Kaprow, like many other creators of Happenings, was originally a painter, and the concept of Happenings was developed through more static forms of changing, impermanent art like Assemblages and Environments (Kirby 1965).

happen. In essence, a Chance piece was supposed to become what it became, regardless of what that was and how it got there. In my opinion, larps exemplify this quality.

Looking at two examples of larps with multiple runs showcases this point. The two day long *A Nice Evening with the Family* (2007), being based on following the plotlines of literary and cinematic scripts (and thus, theoretically, in conflict with Kaprow's rule (B)), was played with a very tight main sequence of events. Yet, despite the reliance on various plot waypoints, what took place between those waypoints differed significantly from one run to the next.

In contrast, *A Serpent of Ash* (2006/2007) is a set of 12 characters with shared history, having one discussion for an hour and a half, designed so that the resulting style of game may wildly differ from one run to the next (see Harviainen 2007a for details). Personal feedback collected from the organizers of each run, as well as some players, shows that on some runs, and for some players, it was a very quiet and immersive game, for others pure drama. On one notable occasion, it was even considered highly competitive (i.e. gamist). When there is the possibility that someone may or may not confess to a crime or an affair, be it true or false, and those confessions carry heavy consequences for all, even a single such act transforms the larp to a very different experience than the other runs. Add to this the possibility of each run having a different mood from the start, and no two are alike.

Kaprow himself states that

> In the future, plans may be developed which take their cue from games and athletics, where the regulations provide for a variety of moves that make the outcome always uncertain. (Kaprow 1966a, 194.)

As physical, regulated activity and as a game, larps already contain all the right moves – at least in potential. Add to this that within the wider concept of Interactive Drama, larps embody a set of uncertainty principles: they are always a drama created through emergence, not just interaction.[10] As art and drama, they are even in repetition unique, one-time events, the very embodiment of Chance.

Rule (F): No Audience

What does it actually mean to eliminate an audience from play? In the question of a larp as theatre, the question of whether the players are an audience is highly important. Kirby, when speaking of Activities, notes:

> [Performances] may be done alone, privately. Other performers may see certain portions. Sometimes there may be accidental spectators. But the performances are intended to be done – to affect the performer – not to be observed. These performances, which may be called "Activities," are not theatre because they do not have the intent to affect an audience. (Kirby 1987)

In direct contrast, some larp theorists have argued that larp is a form of theatre, performed for oneself and for the other players:

10 "Interactive Drama" is in this case a term containing larp, freeform role-playing and murder mysteries (Phillips 2006).

Photograph of the 1961 Happening called Mouth by Robert Whitman. (quoted from Kaprow (1966a), Photograph by Robert R. McElroy)

> In Interactive Dramas, the audience and the performer is neither separated by space nor by function. The performer is the audience of her own and other's performance. There is still "drama" and "tension" in that the outcome of the plot is still a mystery. (Phillips 2006.)[11]

One approach attempts to solve this issue by making a distinction between theater for and theater with an audience, and extending from that to the point of ritual theatre, where audiences are also participants (Szatkowski 2006). The question is therefore what the intent of the players is. What if there are several? As I have noted elsewhere (2006), larp participants have very different goals in playing. Some indeed favor playing for other players and/or for the sake of (what they see as) the story, some only for themselves, and these habits do not really mix. The effect of interimmersion, i.e. committed play creating a feedback loop where every player's input makes every other player's experience stronger, thus increasing their own input in turn, and so on (Pohjola 2004), exists on the very edge of whether such activity can be seen as performance.

One can claim, like Lancaster (1999) or Phillips (2006), that larps are undeniably performances, but that does not make them so. Some players may perform (in the theatrical sense), while others treat the game very much like an Activity and simply *do*. These are not the same: for one player the larp is a stage without an audience or with a participant-audience, for another it is a temporary life. Both perform actions, but only the first one for *the sake of the performing itself*. To call both approaches "performances" is only possible if one sees all life as a (set of) dramatic performance(s) as well. Thus this too is a question of "larp as" vs. "larp is" in connection with performance, a question of not making overt generalizations based on just a look at the external side of what is being done.

11 The article, and its earlier version (1996), also contain notes on differentiating larp from deconstructionist theatre, another type of experimental play that shares many goals with Happenings, including some thought on how larp unconsciously accomplishes many of the goals of said deconstructionist drama.

Yet what is Kaprow actually after with this rule? He states (1966a, 196) that all of the participants should be fully committed to the Happening. An empathic reaction from a seated audience is too mild, and actively forcing people to participate is simply too destructive for the event. What actually matters therefore not how the players participate in the event – be it Happening or larp – just that they do so with full intent. Even if someone is just playing for the others, he or she is doing it all solely within the context of the play.

Additionally, it is interesting to note that what Kaprow declares an exception to this rule, the unwitting participation of people outside of an event played out in public, is for all practical purposes identical to what has been said about similar situations in pervasive role-playing and urban larps. The outsiders are not players, they are a part of the environment (Kaprow 1966a, 197; Montola & Waern 2006).

Before declaring that larps follow Kaprow's intent in removing the audience to the letter, there is something about the nature of roles that needs to be discussed:

> Let us compare a performer sweeping in a Happening and a performer sweeping in traditional theatre. The performer in the Happening merely carries out a task. The actor in the traditional play or musical might add character detail: lethargy, vigor, precision, carelessness [as well as signs of place and time]. (Kirby 1965, 17.)

The act of players assuming a new, temporary life in a larp means that they too are merely carrying out a task, just as a different person than they normally would. Again, it must be emphasized that note every participant plays like that, so for some the same larp may be a piece of theatre, and their actions would thus represent everything that Kirby rules out of presence in a Happening above. This split is of course most obvious in larp groups where there is a strong connection between the local larp and theatre scenes.

Kaprow (1966b) stated that in order to avoid playing habits, Happenings should be intended for nonprofessionals only, and should not be rehearsed. Kirby took a more lenient approach, saying that for some parts it is necessary to have a person capable of producing a required task, such as prone hopping, and this may require certain extra arrangements. Furthermore, some Happenings have even used a stock cast (Kirby 1965). The ideology is very similar to that of using acting-oriented players in certain roles of a larp, typecasting others, and yet having much of the casting more or less still by chance. In the first run of *A Nice Evening*, the person playing the leading role declare himself in advance a person "only interested in the external drama, and not at all in the internal feelings of the character". In a very theatrical larp such as that, this is a reassuring position that promises stronger drama for the other players. Stated at the beginning of an immersion-oriented game, it would mark that same player as incapable of participating in the larp at the required level and thus presenting a clear risk to every other player's game experience.

The theatrical and the experiential side are both there, in Happenings as well as larps. It is only a question of balancing the two and making sure they match the nature and needs of the event.

Rule (G): Composition

Kaprow requested that Happenings be composed as collages of events, with particular attention paid to the materials, dependent of them. As they were intended to blur the line between art and life, Happenings should not place the idea of the art above the physical tools. Neither should a too

strict, formal system such as an art theory be used, as that too leads to emphasizing the form over the reality.

> A Happening perhaps alludes more to the form of games and sports than to the forms of art; in this connection it is useful to observe how children invent the games they play. Their arrangement is often strict, but their substance is unencumbered by esthetics. Children's play is also social, the contribution of more than one child's idea. Thus a Happening can be composed by several persons to include, as well, the participation of weather, animals and insects. (Kaprow 1966b.)

The collaborative approach to creation follows this pattern in larp as well. Regardless of whether there is only one designer, or several, or the whole game is done as an equally shared effort, the event itself is a collaboration. Because of the unpredictable, emergent nature of larp play, every participant is contributing to the collage of events. Furthermore, while Kaprow's idea on how much the originator can prepare and script is very different from a typical larp, there is still a similarity: if we compare the creative freedom available during larp play to how the game was designed, and then the actions of a Happening and the script they are based upon, there is a similarity. Both rely on unrehearsed, emergent actions that create a lasting impression. One is just more tightly wound than the other.

This could be bypassed as just an accidental similarity or by saying that both phenomena share a theatrical root that results in a script/play correlation. Yet if we look at sibling phenomena and some formalist larp ideas, it is possible to see that there is more to it. First of all, larp designers have for a long time, through various methods of physical representation, paid attention to the material side of play. At its most common, this is just a question of weapon props, but covers also issues of whether the game environment should be perfect (Koljonen 2007) or whether it is permitted to use items to represent other items at all (Fatland & Wingård 2003). In larp, the effect of matter on the mental experience is well acknowledged. And if symbolic representations borrowed from, say, theatre are used, that is an artistic (or sometimes, unfortunately, economical) choice geared towards affecting the players' experiences, not a falling back on some abstract rule.

As far as scripting is concerned, what has earlier been said about things such as the use of fates, story emergence, and so on, still qualifies here. In addition, other types of interactive drama shed some light on the correlation. For example, the role-playing style called Jeepform[12], a way of creating "the best possible story" through the use of tools such as breaking events for commentary or allowing any additions to be made to the situation at hand if they enhance the tale being told, has much of the stricter scripting of Happenings, but not their non-interference while running. And in pervasive games what is or isn't a part of the game may not be known. Both types of game succeed in accomplishing many of the same goals as Happening but through highly different ways than larps do.

A final point on composition should be mentioned: Kaprow repeatedly envisioned that in the future it might be possible to create Happening scripts and instructions that could be sent through mail, yet remained skeptical of other people's ability to run them as well as he did (Kirby 1965). Now that there are online libraries with larp and freeform scripts available, there are indeed Happening-like texts available for public use. But, like Kaprow himself noted, some events simply can't be run by others.

12 http://www.jeepen.org

In Conclusion

In the last chapter of *The Theater of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin (1980) writes about how a (then) new, radical type of expression called Happenings has undoubtedly been influenced by earlier rejections of traditional concepts of plot and the devaluation of dialogue. Esslin sees them not as theatre, but rather as something new, yet related:

> It is as yet too early to pass judgment on the validity of these efforts, on their potential as sources of a new art form. But it would be too foolish to dismiss them out of hand, merely because some – not by any means all of the earliest experiments were childish or amateurish in their execution. (Esslin 1980.)

This is the attitude we should be seeking, as we look at the next step along the ladder, from Happenings to larp. As I have shown, it is just as easy to say that larps fulfil in spirit all that Happenings set out to do as it is to say that they do not match the letter or possibly even the intent of Kaprow's rules. And, additionally, it seems rather easy to deny any connection between the two phenomena, given that probably very few larp designers are actually familiar with Happenings in the first place.

Yet, paradoxically, this is our true advantage. Because we are not bound by the tenets of our predecessor, because we have not been thus far aware of the connection, we are able to look at the rules of Happenings with a sense of freedom. We can see what others have done, and why, and pick the pieces that we like – both the conventional and the ideological pieces. Given that Happenings did the same with traditional theatre, yet were still very much tied with either acknowledging its conventions or abolishing them through strict rules, we have a clear advantage.

What is currently being done with experimental larp and pervasive role-playing, in both the Nordic countries and beyond, is taking an art form and using it to create new experiences. And it is done freely, by mixing of good ideas from various sources, by taking up and abolishing rules as needed. Likewise, regardless of what Kirby may have said about leaving the plot or story behind, since we have an art where a plot may not at all be needed, we may have one because it's now a choice, not something that is expected or demanded by the art form. In the freedom of these choices on how to implement the art of experience, can we see the very spirit of Happenings, alive again, in larp.

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Key Concepts in Forge Theory

Emily Care Boss

Underlying much of a surge in independent role-playing game publication is a body of role-playing game theory referred to as Forge Theory, or the Big Model. This and related concepts were formulated through discussion on online fora, particularly at one called Haephestus' Forge. Play and design of the games also informed its development. These ideas offer an outline of the structure of role-playing and describe techniques used in table top and other role-playing games. The following is a summary of the background and key concepts of this theory.

Founded in 2001 by Ron Edwards and Clinton R. Nixon, the discussion forum *Hephaestus' Forge*[1] saw the birth of an online community, an independent publishing movement and a body of analytical role-playing game theory. Each of these developments supported the others. Discussion on the Forge included a focus on design of tabletop role-playing games for publication and sale. Publication of games made techniques accessible to being incorporated into the theory. The discussion occurred among a community with a strong do-it-yourself ethic and an interest in free proliferation of knowledge. The outlook of this community fostered feelings of collaboration and support for one another's work and a spirit of innovation. Social bonds created online were then strengthened through shared work and play at conventions. Essays written were critiqued by the group, and ideas from them were applied to game design and tested through play. And conversely, games designed were analyzed, the analysis commented on, and the new insights used in play and design. So, although Forge style analysis of games was developed by a large and shifting group of people who contributed to this body of theory through various means, Forge theory has benefited from being derived from a mixture of theoretical analysis, critical commentary, accounts of applied play and hands on design. The assumptions, model and issues which make up Forge theory provide a framework for analysis of the experience of role-playing which has been extensively applied to table top play, and which can be profitably extended to other forms of role-playing such as live action and online.

Discussion at the Forge built on concepts pioneered by others. A major influence was the usenet list serve rec.games.frp.advocacy (RGFA), which was active in the mid to late 1990s (Bøckman 2003). For example, the terms *Gamism*, *Narrativism* and *Simulationism*, defined by Ron Edwards (2001) and later called *Creative Agendas*, are descended from the Gamism, Dramatism and Simulationism of advocacy's *Three-Fold Way* (Kim 2003).[2] This has resulted in some confusion, unfortunately, since the same word refers to a different concept in each discourse: on advocacy, the terms referred to the methods used in play, on the Forge, they described aesthetic preferences of players.

Another touchstone for the theory was contemporary published games. For example, *Rule Zero*, the idea that if a rule in a game doesn't work for your individual play group, one should throw it out, replace it or modify it. Called "remodelling" the rules, by Gary Gygax in the context of *Dungeons & Dragons*, each play group was invited to work with the set of rules of a published game until they

1 The Forge (www.indie-rpgs.com) is an online forum and resource website, created to host discussion on role playing theory which had begun at another forum called the Gaming Outpost and a website called Hephaestus' Forge which contained links to independently published role playing games available during the years 1999 to 2001.

2 GNS, the Three Fold way, and Robin Laws' player types form links in a chain of thought on types of gamers and gaming which traces back at least as far as an essay by Glenn Blacow in Different Worlds #10 published in 1980 (Mason 2004).

found a subset of the rules that made it functional for that group. This rule was included in game texts of the period. Ron Edwards' 1999 essay *System Does Matter* was in direct response to Rule Zero. In it Edwards posited that if rules needed to dropped or modified that might be due to a conflict between kind of play the game supported and what was desired by the players. Or were the rules functioning to begin with? These concepts formed a foundation for further analysis of the act of role-playing and critique of prevailing practice.

Forge Theory in a Nutshell

A simple statement of Forge theory is that player preferences matter and that the procedures applied will affect both a player's enjoyment of a game and how the game functions. A large portion of the theory deals with the discussion of player preferences. Another section deals with the dissection of procedures, methods and Techniques (essentially the rules of the game), which can be functionally used to support play. Yet another portion is devoted to problems and quandaries arising from play – both functional and dysfunctional – for some of which satisfactory answers have been found, while others persist as issues that are questioned and struggled with to the present day. However, the central organizing representation of the concepts of the theory is a diagram called *The Big Model*:

[Social Contract[Exploration[Creative Agenda=>[Techniques[Ephemera]]]]]

The Big Model breaks down the experience of role-playing into nested levels of distinct yet overlapping activities. Ron Edwards described them this way:

> Every inner "box" is an expression or realization of the box(es) it is nested in. For example, Exploration is a *kind* of Social Contract, and a given GNS mode is a *kind* (specifically, an application) of Exploration. (Edwards 2002b)

Each of these nested levels corresponds with a core assumption of Forge Theory:

1) Social Contract: role-playing games are social activities (Edwards, 2001)
2) Exploration: what happens in the shared fiction is determined by consensus of the participants (Baker 2002)
3) Creative Agenda: players have different, sometimes conflicting preferences about desired styles of play (Edwards 2001)
4) Techniques: rules are all of the methods through which we enact our play (Lehman 2005)
5) Ephemera: system is the sum total of rules used *as they are put into play* in a particular game session and includes non-formalized interactions between participants (Edwards 2004)

Beginning with the first assumption, all gaming exists within the social context of the players. The *Social Contract* (see below) resides on this level. Within the Social Contract level is *Exploration*, the activity of role-playing itself. It is defined as the process of creating and adding to the shared fiction. After Exploration comes Creative Agenda. Creative Agenda describes a player's aesthetic preferences and choice in play. The three identified Agendas are made up of families of related play styles. The Agendas themselves are seen as mutually incompatible, or as likely to cause conflict among players who are acting upon different agendas while playing together. Within this level are *Techniques*. These are types of procedures agreed upon and used by the play group to arrive at the shared fiction, essentially the rules of the game. The model is completed by *Ephemera*, the moment

to moment activities of play. Ephemera are the uses of Techniques in play.

Each of these levels, the assumptions behind it and associated concepts are outlined following.

Role-Playing as a Social Act

[**Social Contract**[Exploration[Creative Agenda=>[Techniques[Ephemera]]]]]

1) role-playing games are social activities

In his *Introduction to Forge Theory* (2005), Ben Lehman points us to the first assumption:

> When looking at the theory that comes out of the Forge, there is one basic assumption that, while not unspoken, may not really be spoken loudly enough. The *only* consideration of Forge theory is the real people participating [in] the play of a role-playing game. Anything else – character motivation, genre concerns, setting material, rules, game text, whether elfin ears are 2" or 3" long, whether or not they are playing a role-playing game at all – is considered solely in terms of the effect that it has on these people, their experience of play, and their relationships to each other and their own creative output. (Lehman 2005)

This assumption is the foundation for all the rest. For many years, Forge theory was synonymous with the term "GNS". The Creative Agendas of Gamism, Narrativism and Simulationism, have garnered the bulk of the attention given to Forge theory. Much discussion has been spent on their aspects and whether games support a player in achieving them or fail to do so. However, central insights of Forge Theory have come from elaborations on *Game Contract* or *Social Contract* of play.

The term Game Contract was coined on RGFA to describe the often unspoken and unconscious agreements made between players and game masters that underlie their common play experience. (Corley 2001) It was defined in a later period conversation:

> [Essentially] it is like the social contract - an imaginary agreement amongst the players and between the players and [game master] as to certain salient points of the game. Which points those are, and what the agreement is, varies from game to game. (Corley 2001)

Explicit agreements also make up the game or social contract. Things like taking turns hosting the game, or the game master not having to bring food would be included, as well as things deciding the game system or the tone of the game. Social contract clashes can cause great discord in a group. Having one player who thinks it is okay to talk about work during the game and a game master who goes for a total party kill may make the game an uncomfortable experience for someone enjoying deep and immersive games.

Coming from this starting point, that players make agreements about how they will play the game, Ron Edwards (2001) then made the observation that all game interactions are social interactions.

> It all comes back to the social situation, eventually, because role-playing is a human activity and not a set of rules or text [...] Role-playing is carried out through relying upon the real, interpersonal roles of living humans, yes, even of opponents. (Edwards 2001)

This is a simple observation and acknowledgement of the fact that role-playing, as with all games, takes place through human social interactivity. However, it expands the concept beyond the usual in-game/off-game dichotomy through which the game experience is viewed. Approaching role-playing first as a social activity invites in the view of participants as whole people with views and histories, interacting with one another based on social identities as well as for interpersonal reasons. It also acknowledges that rules and roles within a game exist within a larger social context. What is at issue is how the real human agents come together to create an imagined experience together. The theory addresses the specifics of this social act.

Exploration and the Shared Fiction

[Social Contract[**Exploration**[Creative Agenda=>[Techniques[Ephemera]]]]]

2) what happens in the shared fiction is determined by consensus of the participants

The second base assumption underlying Forge theory is that what occurs in the fictional events of the game, known as the shared fiction or diegesis (Loponen and Montola 2004), is a product of and subject to the common understanding of the participants (Baker 2002)[3]. Their creative consensus, if you will. While two players' understanding of the shared fiction may never be identical, as long as their understandings of the events are not in conflict, the events can be understood as having occurred.[4] This shared understanding is what makes something established within the shared diegesis rather than approval by any given single individual. This is in marked contrast to the view that the game master is the final arbiter and controller of all that happens in fictional events of the game. Instead, the primacy of a game master's input to the fiction is given to them by the group as a whole.

In *GNS and Other Matters*, Ron Edwards refers to the creation of a shared fiction as Exploration. Originally coined by Aaron Powell as an alternative to the term Simulation, Exploration referred to the emphasis in that style of play on experiencing and fleshing out aspects of the game world. (Logan 2001) It was adopted by Ron Edwards as the term that describes the basic act of role-playing. It includes playing a role, describing setting, rolling dice and all the activities associated with creating the shared narrative fiction.

Specifically, the process of Exploration is divided into five components or elements, which are common to any game: *Character, Setting, Situation, Color* and *System*. (Edwards 2004) Character and Setting refer to the fictional entities portrayed by players and the time, cultures and regions they inhabit. Situation is the events that happen, how characters interact with one other, and the troubles they face, Color the descriptive or specific elements of any aspect of Exploration. Color is often thought of as the least important part, "just color", but since it is that which gives texture and interest to what is experienced in the game, it may in fact be the most critical element of all. System refers to the rules of a game. However, what this refers to has an expanded definition in Forge Theory. It is described colloquially as the *Lumpley Principle*:

> **Lumpley Principle:** "System (including but not limited to 'the rules') is defined as the means by which the group agrees to the imagined events during play. (Edwards 2004)

3 The statement from which the Lumpley or Baker/Care Principle is derived.

4 As long as the interpretations are equifinal, in the words of Loponen and Montola (2004).

So, System includes the written rules of a game text as well as the unspoken agreements or unnoticed practices which the players use. To state the second assumption again *"what occurs in the fictional events of the game, known as the shared fiction or diegesis, is a product of and is subject to the common understanding of the participants"*, the system is made up of all the procedures used by a play group to create the shared fiction. This has two major ramifications: that the informal process of play can be understood to have important impact on play as well as the explicitly written ones, and that what makes up the System that allows the shared fiction to be created are all the aspects of play and rules that actually get put into practice. If rules exist in a rule book but never get put into play, then they are not part of the System as it is applied. This concept is discussed further in the section below on Ephemera.

Another concept associated with how the shared fiction is created is called *Credibility*. If descriptions of events, characters or objects are accepted as occurring or being present in the game world and the shared narrative they are said to have Credibility (Baker 2002). Credibility is defined as *"The degree to which a given statement is adopted into the imaginary events of play, with or without reference to rules"* (Edwards 2004). The ability to which any given person is able to make statements that are accepted by all is referred to as the Authority they hold. The purpose of many rules is to create functional allocations of Authority and to allow for suitable Credibility of things narrated so that the shared imaginary fiction can be formed. The communication of what is imagined is the process by which the participants come to creative consensus. They must reflect and mirror what the others have suggested in order for the concepts to remain in place in the narrative of the game.

Creative Agenda

[Social Contract[Exploration[**Creative Agenda=>**[Techniques[Ephemera]]]]]

3) players have different, sometimes conflicting preferences about desired styles of play

Just as differences in understanding of the Social Contract can cause conflict between players, it is also possible for the creative differences to do so. In observations made since near the beginning of the hobby (see footnote 2), styles of role-playing are thought to cluster around certain variables. Different groupings have been identified over the years. *The Threefold Model* of RGFA describes styles of play known as Gamism, Simulationism and Dramatism (Kim 2003). Following up on these categories, Ron Edwards discussed player emphasis on challenge, story and exploration as Gamism, Narrativism and Simulationism (GNS). These different approaches came to be known as Creative Agendas, or CAs (Edwards, 2001).

> **Creative Agenda:** The aesthetic priorities and any matters of imaginative interest regarding role-playing. Three distinct Creative Agendas are currently recognized: Step On Up (Gamist), The Right to Dream (Simulationist), and Story Now (Narrativist). (Edwards 2004.)

Creative Agenda's place in the model is represented by an arrow which cuts through all of the inner levels, and which is understood to cut through the outer layers as well. It is seen as a skewer or transect of the activity of gaming. An important part of a player's Social Contract of play, from the choice of game system or scenario to how each line of character dialogue is delivered the creative priorities of a player are understood to be informed by their Creative Agenda. Techniques and their application – in other words the System as it exists in play – is the avenue by which a players

choices are enacted and Creative Agenda is realized (or not). An important implication of this concept is that it is intended to apply to specific instances of play rather than to be used to describe hypothetical play. A player's Creative Agenda cannot be identified in isolation from a player's specific decisions and even their interpretations of the events in the shared fiction as they occur.

> **Step On Up (Gamist)** Social assessment of personal strategy and guts among the participants in the face of risk. (Edwards 2004.)

An example of this appears in the 2001 definition in *GNS and Other Matters*, "*Gamism may be expressed by competition among participants (the real people); it includes victory and loss conditions for characters, both short-term and long-term, that reflect on the people's actual play strategies. The elements of Exploration provide an arena for the competition.*" (Edwards 2001.) Players pursuing a Gamist creative agenda may respond to the challenging aspects of the game per se: puzzles, overcoming obstacles, winning conditions.

Two ways for this to be enacted are discussed: Play in which the *character* is facing obstacles and adversity to overcome which is called *Challenge*, and play in which the *player* is facing opposition from puzzles or questions posed by the GM, intrigue or confrontation by other players, or tactical or strategic decisions imposed by rules of a game, is called *Step On Up* (Edwards 2002b). Play prioritizing Step On Up, and the challenge facing the player (whether through the intermediary of character or otherwise) has come to be identified with Gamist play.

> **Story Now (Narrativism)** is expressed by the creation, via role-playing, of a story with a recognizable theme. The characters are formal protagonists in the classic Lit 101 sense, and the players are often considered co-authors. The Elements of Exploration provide the material for narrative conflict (again, in the special sense of literary analysis). (Edwards 2001.)

Players looking for the experience of facing challenge and looking to "win" in the classic sense that one does in games could experience a clash of expectations when playing with others who are focused on having the events of the game provide a set of fictional events that bear the hallmarks of a literary work. Lajos Egri's book, *The Art of Dramatic Story Writing* (1960) is an influential work for thinking on Narrativist play. In it Egri discusses the need for having characters who are "fit" for the story, who care passionately about something, and who face obstacles that force them to make hard choices about compelling human issues. These stories are said to have a premise, which is specifically defined as a statement of one moral or human value being faced off against another. For example,*"Can love win out over greed?"* In the Provisional Glossary, Story Now is defined as a "*Commitment to Addressing (producing, heightening and resolving) Premise through play itself.*" (Edwards 2004.) Grappling with the issues of a premise in Egri's sense is a hallmark of Narrativist play.

Premise alone, however, does not guarantee that play is Narrativist. It is possible for there to be a strong thematic element to a campaign or session, which has been determined by one participant, usually the game master. The others take part in playing out the ramifications of the struggles over this issue, but they have no authorial input over what issues are present, or how the questions they raise are answered. This does not fulfil the definition of Narrativism, player empowerment to create and address premise is required. An example which embodies both aspects of the definition is *Shock:*, a game that provides a framework for players to arrive at themes with which to grapple. In the game, the players choose a real world social issue and a technological change in the world, a "shock". Characters are then created who represent the cross-sections of these factors, and the

world is created around them. The stories crafted around these characters are likely to embody a moral premise because the situation has been crafted out of problematic elements of the players' real world experience or feelings about the world. The characters are created on an axis of change that implies pressing human issues. There are many ways to provide this function, but collaboration among the players to create and address the premise or premises of a game is a requisite element for Narrativist play.

> **The Right to Dream (Simulationist)** Commitment to the imagined events of play, specifically their in-game causes and pre-established thematic elements. (Edwards 2004)

The definition in *GNS and Other Matters* (Edwards 2001) describes this process: "*Simulationism is expressed by enhancing one or more of the listed elements of Exploration; in other words, Simulationism heightens and focuses Exploration as the priority of play. The players may be greatly concerned with the internal logic and experiential consistency of that Exploration.*" (Edwards 2001) In other words, Simulationists seek to explore or celebrate one or more of the components of exploration: character, setting, situation, system, or color. Ron Edwards (2002a) has described various types of Simulationist play: *Purist for System* is supported by games with intricate systems with a strong correlation between mechanics and elements in the games world.

High Concept covers genre based play in which players emulate a known text or type of setting and situation that they enjoy. This sort of play may deal with theme, but the parameters of the issues dealt with correspond to those of the source, and answers are usually known prior to play. *Rules-Lite* or *Character Priorities* is play with simple mechanics that is predicated on a strong situation and character motivation to move forward. It is distinguished from Narrativist play because of the lack of shared authorship available to the players. The players direct their characters, but the game master directs the story and the issues addressed. Finally there are *Setting Creation* and *Universe-Play* mechanisms. Play characterized by these focuses on establishment and embellishment of the setting and world.

These modes of play are based on player choice and priorities and are identified over an instance of play, by which was meant not one exchange, but one long cycle of the game. Sets of rules may support a given Creative Agenda or not, so it is possible for players to experience clashes of expectations based on their desire to play one way or another. This is in contrast with RGFA concepts which were described in terms of rules and procedures used (see Kim 2003). *Drift* is the practice of changing the rules of a game, or adapting them to fit a different Creative Agenda than what the original rules worked best with. The Creative Agendas are seen to be mutually exclusive, a person may not express more than one at a time, and games which try to support more than one will likely end up not pleasing anyone. Games which fall into this category are called Incoherent with respect to Creative Agenda. (Edwards 2004) There is, however, discussion of play in which different agendas are brought together harmoniously, called Omni-Play and a game which successfully supports multiple CAs would be called a Hybrid. (Edwards 2004)

Techniques

[Social Contract[Exploration[Creative Agenda=>[**Techniques**[Ephemera]]]]]

4) rules are all of the methods through which we enact our play

Techniques are the procedures and guidelines used to structure play. They are essentially "the rules", such as the methods included in a game text. They may also be informal procedures adopted by an individual play group as is described in the definition of System in the Lumpley Principle (see Exploration). The processes and written materials used to implement rules, such as game texts, past play, props and dice various other items used in games, are known as *Cues* (Baker, 2005).

Players gain Credibility in the narrative based on their use of Techniques (Baker et al. 2001). For example, in *Dungeons & Dragons*, if I assert that I lop the head off of a kobold without rolling to see if I can do so, the other players would likely not acknowledge that as having occurred. However, having successfully used the agreed upon procedures, I can then make that assertion and be supported in it by the others. Consensus has been achieved. The use of them also helps create procedures that minimize conflict of interest between the players. For example, rolling dice has a similar effect to the use of a lottery for the apportionment of a limited resource such as hunting licenses. Since the different parties have a chance of winning, all can be better reconciled to the final decision as to who gains the advantage.

The use of Techniques and Cues helps coordinate creative collaboration among the players. Cues such as character write-ups or setting materials operate to remind the players of creative agreements such as genre conventions or background information. Given a common understanding of the world and its practices the players can create together a shared fiction that has greater cohesiveness. For example, the Swedish larp *Mellan himmel och hav* took place in an alien setting with gender and social roles widely disparate from real world social norms (see Gerge 2004). Extensive Cues were utilized to bring the players into a common understanding of this alien society such as workshops prior to the game, costuming, a continuous soundscape and the changing of daily light period from 24 to 18 hours. Techniques such as the *Ars Armandi* (a way of representing amorous and sexual contact by touching a players arms) also were used to bring the players into alignment with the strange world they would inhabit during the game.

Through their apportionment of Credibility and organizing of creative collaboration, rules coordinate the *Permissions* and *Expectations* of a game for the players (Baker 2005). Permission refers to the psychological support or framing of an activity required for a person to be able to become fully engaged. For example, the very concept of a role-playing game creates a situation in which it is socially acceptable for grown adults to do a very childlike thing: play pretend. The Expectations framed by rules and other game materials help to focus the players' creative imaginings into shared avenues. For example, for people with knowledge of the background and setting, knowing that the play group is going to play *Vampire: The Masquerade* allows the players to understand how they can fit their character into the world they will imagine together. In Vincent Baker's pirate game *Poison'd*, the players choose from lists of sins suffered and committed by their characters. The lists which include murder, rape and damnation set the bar high for brutal behaviour among the pirates the players will portray. This rule creates both an expectation of horrific violence and provides an agreement that it is acceptable to engage in these activities in the fiction, since they are already present in the characters' pasts.

Techniques may be generalized or specific. Generalized Techniques are, for example, speaking in character or rolling dice to see who goes first in combat. These could appear in any given game. An example of a specific Technique is *Screen Presence* in *Primetime Adventures,* which is a value chosen at the very start of the game which determines how much focus is put on each character in the sessions. In *The Upgrade!*, a Jeepform scenario, different areas of the play space are used to indicate

whether something acted out is a flashback, flash-forward or in the main stream of the narrative.

Techniques may be mechanical procedures or loose guidelines. Mechanical Techniques have defined steps or stages that are used in a reproducible manner triggered by the same conditions whenever they occur. An example is the flashbacks and flash-forwards from *The Upgrade!* Where the action is played out always communicates when it is meant to occur. Loose guidelines are subject to case by case interpretation, such as the above example from *Primetime Adventures*. How the level of focus for Screen Presence is determined is left up to the individual play group to enact – there are no set number of scenes the character must be present in or other ways of ensuring it. Vincent Baker referred to this difference as *principled* and *ad hoc*: the more defined a procedure is the more principled it is, the more the decisions are made on the fly, based on moment to moment negotiation. (Baker, 2005)

Types of Techniques were discussed and defined on the Forge and on other related fora and blogs. Certain areas of game play have been mapped out in great detail including player rewards and motivation, story pacing, narration control, plot and situation creation and resolution of in-game conflicts. Discussion of several Techniques with these functions follows.

Player Rewards refer to processes that give feedback to the players in some way that provides an incentive for doing things in a game. Take for example, a character that is awarded treasure for defeating a monster in combat. The treasure is part of a mechanical reward system if it can be used for some purpose in the game that the player will perceive to be beneficial, such as purchasing better equipment that allows their character to be more effective in combat or can use to travel more quickly and so on. The treasure in this case is functioning as *Currency*. There are many forms of Currency. Hit points, or the right to introduce a scene (if limited in number) are currency. They are Agreements or Cues that allow a player to exchange something for another, or which are utilized and "used up" when certain things transpire. In the game *Primetime Adventures*, Currency called Fan Mail is awarded by players to each other for entertaining play, and then may be used to support a given side in a conflict. Fan mail creates an economy in the game because it originates in a pool of points called the Producer Budget. The terms arise from the use of making a television show as the framing device for play used in *Primetime Adventures*. The Producer's Budget is turned into potential Fan Mail when used for conflicts, and then awarded as Fan Mail and used against the Producer in successive conflicts.

A type of Technique related to Player Reward is called a *Flag*. This term, coined by Chris Chinn on his now defunct blog *Deep in the Game*, refers to character traits, events or other fictional elements that are used to signal to other players and game masters what is important to the player who creates or controls it. It is raised "as a flag" to say that a theme such as poverty and freedom, or betrayal and blood loyalty are of interest to the player. Flags can be general, such as a character's Issue in *Primetime Adventures* (a general issue such as grief or ambition that gets fleshed out during play) or very specific such as the *Kickers* in Ron Edward's game *Sorcerer* (a fictional event said to occur to a character immediately preceding play that has changed the character's life irrevocably and puts the character into play with pressing choices and actions required on the part of the player). Flags often shape play in larger ways than other elements of the shared fiction due to mechanical or other emphasis on what they represent. They may be seen as *strong attractors*, "dynamic pattern[s] of behaviour that a [...] system tries to follow" as discussed by Markus Montola (2004).[5]

5 In this essay, Montola describes role-playing as a chaotic system, in which order is created by elements such as attractors in a dynamic fashion rather than in a static, linear fashion.

Story Pacing is another broad category of Techniques that has been discussed in discussions of Forge Theory. *Scene Framing* is a basic Technique: choosing when a sequence of events in a game begins and ends. How Scene Framing is done varies greatly depending on the type of gaming: larps have minimal framing, since play occurs simultaneously among many players who may be involved in encounters or "scenes" that overlap with each other in time and space. However, in role-playing forms with more linear narratives such as tabletop role-play, freeform or Jeepform, scenes are often framed discretely: one taking place following another, with all those not involved observing the events transpiring in the scene. How scenes are framed in these cases has great effect on the narrative. Beginning a scene long before a climatic event happens changes the emphasis on the scene from framing to the moment just after the event has occurred. Techniques used to frame flashbacks and flash-forwards allow for greater flexibility in a narrative, giving the players the opportunity to comment on events in the present of a game through portrayal of past and future events.

Creation of plot and situation from specific mechanics is another way that story pacing and plotting has been structured. Kickers, discussed above, are one way to create a flow in the narrative from the get go, and *Bangs* are another Technique used to create tension and spur characters into action throughout a game. A Bang[6] is a *"Technique of introducing events into the game which make a thematically-significant or at least evocative choice necessary for a player"* (Edwards 2004). The events are not only of strong importance for the characters, but seize upon the players goals and values, so that the crisis is one that has greater weight and import.

By far the greatest emphasis in Forge theory discussion of Techniques is on *Resolution* of conflicts within a game. Resolution is defined as *"establishing fictional events into the time-sequence of the Shared Imagined Space"* (Edwards 2004). According to this definition Resolution then applies to all words or actions taken by players that create fictional elements, provided they are accepted into play. A statement of character dialogue, or describing a peasant's hut would be examples of Resolution. However, the term is generally used in specific to describe contests regarding establishing events (as well as descriptions and so on) as part of the shared fiction. In many tabletop games, mechanical procedures using Cues such as dice are often utilized in this process. In larps, simple procedures such as paper-rock-scissors are at times used to streamline the process.

The process of contested Resolution has been analysed in Forge Theory as a multistage process involving *Intent*, *Initiation*, *Execution* and *Effect* (IIEE). These stages correspond with character action and the stages of fictional events occurring. Intent is statement of the intent of a character action or other additions to the shared fiction. Initiation is the beginning of the actions or events occurring. Execution is when the action has been taken, and Effect is when the consequences come into play. (Edwards 2002a) Given the example of a character shooting a flaming arrow at a straw target: cocking the bow is the Intent stage, loosing the bow is the Initiation, the arrow striking the target is the Execution and the flames lighting the target on fire would be the Effect.

Resolution may occur at any of the junctures between the stages. When and where in this process opposing players get to take their stand about possible outcomes matters greatly. If my character lives in a house with a thatched roof in the above example, it matters to me when I get to differ with the player of the archer character. If I can intervene between Intent and Initiation, I can cut off the action before it threatens my character's home. If on the other hand, I have no say until after the end of Execution, all I can do is try to mitigate the Effect. There are specific types of mechanical Resolution that address these differences.

6 Also originally from Sorcerer.

Fortune in the Middle (FitM) and *Fortune at the End* (FatE) are two types of mechanical resolution which allow different types of outcomes in the shared fiction based on where in the IIEE stages the mechanical resolution procedures occur. Fortune refers to the use of randomized factors in the resolution process. This term comes from Jonathan Tweet's game *Everway*.

> **Fortune in the Middle (FitM):** Employing a Fortune Resolution technique (dice, cards, etc.) prior to fully describing the specific actions of, physical placement of, and communication among characters. The Fortune outcome is employed in establishing these elements retroactively. (Edwards 2004)
>
> **Fortune at the End (FatE):** Employing a Fortune Resolution technique (dice, cards, etc.) *following* the full descriptions of actions, physical placement, and communication among characters. (Edwards 2004)

With FitM, the final outcome is determined when the fictional events are still underway. With FatE, a full description of the action has been given, even up to the perceived outcomes and consequences of the narrated actions. However, a problematic aspect of FatE is that if a full failure is arrived at through the mechanic, it undermines all that has been described in play. The players may have committed to their course of action and felt a connection with the implied success from narrating it to the outcome, when the mechanics reverse what has occurred. In cases where the game mechanics make a failure of this sort occur more often than the players may think is appropriate given a character's level or perceived ability, this may have a detrimental psychological effect, referred to as the *Whiff Factor*.[7]

Two other forms of resolution mechanics have been discussed at length in Forge theory: *Conflict Resolution* and *Task Resolution*. Again, these refer to non-trivial, contested resolution of outcomes, usually using mechanical procedures.

> **Conflict Resolution:** A Technique in which the mechanisms of play focus on conflicts of interest, rather than on the component tasks within that conflict. When using this Technique, inanimate objects are conceived to have "interests" at odds with the character, if necessary. Contrast with Task resolution. (Edwards 2004)
>
> **Task Resolution:** A Technique in which the Resolution mechanisms of play focus on within game-cause, in linear in-game time, in terms of whether the acting character is competent to perform a task. Contrast with Conflict resolution. (Edwards 2004)

In Task Resolution, the outcomes at stake correspond one-to-one with character actions: for example, sneaking past guards and breaking into a heavy security safe vault in order to steal secret plans. What is in question is, how do the characters accomplish these goals? And the concerns would be with whether the characters have the requisite skills and tools to overcome any obstacles. However, within this type of situation, the overall goal of the characters, and players may be lost. The characters can succeed in all of the individual tasks, but not gain their intended object. The Task Resolution addresses whether the characters accomplish the steps, but do not necessarily address whether they accomplish their goal.

The players in a game with Task Resolution might go through all of the security obstacles and then

7 Whiff refers to a strikeout in baseball, when a player may swing a bat, investing all their strength and speed, only to fail and end their team's turn.

find that the game master has determined that the secret plans had been moved the night before. This situation could be just fine, a reversal and turn of affairs that keeps the game going longer, causing the players to have to adjust and keeping the characters on their toes. However, it also may be a cause of frustration or be caused by poor communication on the part of the desires or intentions of either party in a game.

Conflict Resolution introduces communication between participants about the larger goals and issues in a contested situation. Rules that utilize Conflict Resolution put on the table what it is that is the larger intent in a situation, letting important aspects of the outcomes be negotiated between players and game masters rather than leaving the decision in one party's hands or another. Many rules using Conflict Resolution do so by allocating who has control over the narration after the Execution stage. This idea was pioneered by James V. West's game, *The Pool*. In use with Conflict Resolution, people commonly talk about *Stakes*:

> **Stakes:** What stands to be lost and/or gained during Gamist play; the term may be applied at either or both Step on Up (participants) or Challenge (characters) level of play. (Edwards 2004)

This term is used very differently in current discussion. It has since come to mean the differing outcomes of a conflict which are held or hoped for by competing players, or the game master and a player. A player may have Stakes and the opposition merely contend for the success or failure of that desired goal, or *Counter-Stakes* may be present, which is a differing outcome above and beyond failure by the other. Stakes may be mutually compatible or mutually exclusive.

Ephemeral Ephemera

[Social Contract[Exploration[Creative Agenda=>[Techniques[**Ephemera**]]]]]

5) system is the sum total of rules used *as they are put into play* in a particular game session and includes non-formalized interactions between participants

Ephemera is role-playing in action. This level of the model has gotten relatively the least amount of attention, which is ironic since this is the very activity that everything else refers to. Edwards (2004) defines Ephemera as the "moment-to-moment and sentence-to-sentence actions during play." Ephemera are the actions that make up the Exploration. They are applications of the rules and Techniques as dictated by the rules set used, the social contract and the abilities and styles of the individuals in the game. The "system" as defined by the Lumpley Principle – the sum of all procedures actually used in play – is made up of Ephemera.

As can be well imagined, Ephemera come in all shapes and sizes. Examples of Ephemera are in-character dialogue, rolling a die for resolution or initiative, internal monologue, writing information down on a character sheet, and signalling that your character is invisible through a gesture. The use of Ephemera may be obvious and significant, like rolling the Skull die in the game *Steal Away Jordan* which gives a character the ability to overcome a failure, while putting their life on the line, or the fall of the Jenga tower (made of balanced wooden blocks from which players draw and risk unbalancing for Resolution) in *Dread* (2005) which means that a character has just lost its life or gone out of play. However, Ephemera also take place in subtle, minute fashions that may be internal to a player and not easily observed by anyone, such as an internal struggle over a choice made in a

larp. Player stance with respect to the game is an example of Ephemera that may shift moment to moment in very fine, difficult to discern ways.

Stance refers to the attitude or mental positioning a player takes with respect to their character and the other elements of the Shared Imagined Space. This concept was coined on RGFA (Hardwick 1995). *Actor* stance is what one commonly refers to as "being in character". Decisions about what the character does or says are made with reference to what the character could reasonably be expected to do. Using a character as an avatar of the player's desires without necessarily making reference to logical expectations of the character or the world is called *Pawn* stance. This does not mean that the player does not respect the integrity of the game world, but that the character is seen as a vehicle for the will of the player to be expressed in the world as opposed to as a representative of the world whom the player is trying to represent.

Two other Stances broaden the scope of the actions. *Author* Stance is a cognitive outlook in which the player chooses actions based not solely on what the character would be inclined to do, but also with an eye to what would make the most satisfying story. Decisions made that are less than advantageous for the character can sometimes lead to very interesting play. However, character integrity is important. If the world or the character's believability is destroyed for the players, that undermines everyone's ability to engage with the game. The last stance is *Director* Stance. In this players may affect situation or world elements as well as character actions. For example, I may narrate that my character is thirsty and looking for shelter and water in the desert. If I do so from Director Stance, I could narrate that the character smells a fresh green smell lifting on a wind crossing the burning desert sands.

Shifting between several of these Stances could be hard to detect by an outside observer. The line between Actor and Author may be completely invisible. The player is the only one who knows why they are choosing their character's actions. Both Author and Director Stances introduce a meta element to play. Author stance involves the players crossing the fourth wall[8] and perhaps taking into account things that their character does not know. Director Stance gives the player control over elements of the game outside of the character, broadening the scope of their involvement in the game. A game master would likely use Director Stance, as well as Author stance, frequently. Director stance seems the most obvious to be able to note, since it involves more than the just the player's character.

Problems and Issues

Forge theory began as a way to analyze problematic play – the perceived conflicts occurring at the table between players with different goals that was addressed through discussion of the Creative Agendas. There are other issues and problems of play that the body of theory had focussed on over time. One set of issues clusters around the concept of *Adversity*.

Adversity is a fundamental concept that has been addressed in Forge discussion and presented as a necessary part of engaging play. It is often the case that the game master has the role of providing adversity to the other players. However, collaborative games such as *Polaris* and *1001 Nights* rotate

8 The fourth wall refers metaphorically to the fourth side of a stage beyond which an audience sits. Breaking the fourth wall means having characters in a play address the viewers or become aware of their status as fictional entities.

and decentralize this responsibility (Boss 2006). In *Polaris*, each player has a main character they portray who functions as a protagonist in the story. For each main character, another player takes the role of the Demons who threaten the character internally and externally, giving each player the role of providing adversity for another rather than one person (i.e. a game master) doing so. In *1001 Nights*, the players take turns being the game master, whose responsibility in this game is to create a story such as Scheharazade might have told in the *Arabian Nights*, into which they incorporate ideas suggested by the other players and cast the other players to play roles.

Having balanced Adversity is an issue seen as important especially in Gamist supporting play. Undue levels of opposition make it impossible for players to be able to gain ground. Game masters often have full access to a world's worth of resources while the players have much more modest amounts of in-game effectiveness, which may increase over time but which must be worked for. These facts make it an issue of design and attention while in play to be sure that players are neither overwhelmed nor underwhelmed with opposition and adversity. The Producer's Budget in *Primetime Adventures*, which is a limited pool of resources the game master draws on to oppose the players in conflicts, and the game master's set of resources in *Agon* which function similarly, are examples of mechanically enforced balance of adversity in published games.

A side effect of unbalanced Adversity is *Deprotagonization*, coined by Paul Czege. (Edwards 2004) "*To limit or devalue another person's opportunity to establish their character as a protagonist during Narrativist play.*" With limited access to mechanical effectiveness, a player may be unable to accomplish tasks or keep their character involved in events. Alternatively, a character may be presented in a light that is contrary to what the player intends. Due to these issues, the character may become a supporting character, or be put in contexts that are separate from the issues and challenges of a thematic nature that the player had had in mind when they created the character to play. An interesting note is that given the current greater diversity of game structures, such as collaborative ones with no single game master, it is more likely that other players may take narrative control over other people's characters, creating new ways that Deprotagonization may be effected.

Conclusion

The concepts of Forge Theory are a lens through which one may look at role-playing with an analytical eye.[9] Like all models, it reveals aspects of the activity, which are of prime importance to those who formed them. The discussions on the Forge and in communities spun off from it focus on procedures as used in published and publishable games, with a strong focus on structured tabletop play with a literary or thematic bent. However, the breakdown of the activity, and the commonsense categories put into common usage, such as the elements of Exploration and the impact of scene framing, have broad reaching application beyond the aesthetic boundaries of this community.

The lens of Forge Theory shines a light on the real people participating in the activity and asks the observer to look at all the formal and informal structures that are involved in order to gain a full picture of how the creative collaboration of role-playing occurs. In fact, this view point may be only a beginning, with a world of other methods and agreements to be discovered and explored in the many forms that role-playing now takes: online, live action, all types of freeform, Jeepform, improvisational theatre and more. The take away lessons of Forge thought, that *play informs theory*

9 From a personal communication with Epidiah Ravachol.

and design and that *games are fundamentally about the people who play them*, can be usefully brought to bear in any venue.

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Broadcast Culture Meets Role-Playing Culture

Marie Denward & Annika Waern

The production Sanningen om Marika is a rare example of a production that combines traditional broadcast culture with the participative culture fostered primarily within the larp community in the Nordic countries. Swedish television collaborated with The Company P to produce this alternate reality multiplatform media production. The result was a spectacular and controversial production offering online and live action role-playing experiences in parallel with traditional TV drama. This article focuses on the differences between the production cultures of two companies, and how it affected the experience they produced together.

On October 29th, 2007, one of the major tabloid newspapers in Sweden, *Expressen*[1], topped its first page with the heading *"Sanningen om Marika – Irresponsible by SVT."* In the article, the TV reviewer Britta Svensson dealt judgement on the first airing of *Sanningen om Marika* – a drama series and a faked real-time debate sent in Swedish broadcast television the evening before. Criticising in particular the claim that Swedish Security Service (Säpo) covers up the fact that a lot of people disappear in Sweden, she forcibly expressed the opinion that *"it is completely irresponsible by Swedish Television to blur the border between fiction and reality".* But *Sanningen om Marika* was not only a television series, it was also a reality game that lasted over a month, played both on the net and in the real world. A month later one of the participants wrote, in reviewing the experience: *"A wonderful experience on the borderline between fiction and reality. I see an underlying message that is true, but written in through the fiction to create a context and a complete picture. A creative way to tell a story, to get through with a message."*

Sanningen om Marika[2] was one of very few experiments to marry traditional broadcast culture with

1 News item published by Expressen (2007): "Sanningen om Marika – Oansvarigt?" www.expressen.se/noje/tvsajten/1.902787/sanningen-om-marika-oansvarig (Accessed on 22nd of January 2008)

2 The Sanningen om Marika (2007) production had two teams, one working at The Company P and the other at the SVT. The Company P: Martin Ericsson (creative director), Andie Nordgren (producer, technical lead), Christopher Sandberg (executive producer), Adriana Skarped (lead actor, designer), Martin Brodén (run-time actor), Åke Lindén (avatar actor), Elge Larsson (artist, writer, actor), Emil Boss (assistant actor), Alexander Graff (lead art design), Victoria Henriksson (lead artist), Anders Muammar (scenography), Ludvig Moritz (comic art), Karim Muammar and Jesper Berglund (design, writing), Staffan Jonsson (technical lead), Johan Persson (mobile tech lead developer), Jonas Henriksson (developer), Andreas Dahlström (technical advisor). Kindergarten, strike team Stockholm: Tom Olsson Liljehom, Ki Henriksson, Johan Nilsson, Joakim Sandström, and Torbjörn Öberg Strike team Göteborg: Petter Karlsson, Marcus Brissman and Jon Back. Moderators: Tomb Svalborg, Herman Ferner, SVT: Jonas Sjöqvist, Sasha Becker, Mirja Thurestedt, Lennart Jäkel, Niklas Fransson and Moa Millgård (actors), Anders Weidemann (screenplay), Martin Schmidt (director), Niclas Karpenty (filming), Kurt Bergren (filming), Per Norberg (filming), Peter Bergström and Christian Gyllensten (sound), John Carlsson (debate host), Eva Rados (web editor in chief),Martin Brundin, Marcus Purens and Marianne Lindekranz (editing), Krister Lindell (scenography), Tobias Marberger (music), Christina Åberg (graphics), Hans G Andersson (web producer), Magnus Johansson (web), Sanna Verner-Carlsson (press), Jenny Rådelöv Harrysson (script continuity), Sussi Johnsson (image producer), Richard Jarnhed (director), Susanna Boonyai , Richard Jarnhed and Helena Stjärnström (script editors), Pär Brundin (casting), Daniel Lägersten (project manager), Christian Wikander (publisher). Swedish Institute for Computer Science / Interactive Institute: Jonas Söderberg (actor), Daniel Sundström and Henrik Berggren (developers). Eng. "The Truth About Marika".

the participation culture fostered in the Nordic countries, primarily within the larp community. The production was made in collaboration between Sveriges television (SVT) and the Company P, which also produced the *Prosopopeia* larps - *Prosopopeia Bardo 1: Där vi föll* and *Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum* (Montola & Stenros 2006; Jonsson, Montola et al 2006; Jonsson, Montola et al 2007; Stenros, Montola et al 2007). The cultural differences could not have been larger – SVT being the oldest and most prestigious television media in Sweden with a reputation of objective reporting and civic education, and P a very young, small, and quite anarchistic company relying partially on volunteers in their productions. The result was a spectacular and controversial production that offered larp experiences in parallel with traditional TV viewing.

With the support of both SVT and P, we have had the opportunity to study this production closely. Through participatory studies, interviews with the participants as well as the organisers, and an online survey, we are in the process of creating a picture of how this production came about, what its goals were, and how this came through in the final result and the participants' experiences. In this article we peek behind the curtain, focusing on the meeting between SVT and P and the differences in the production cultures of the two companies. Other factors, which are not addressed here, but which probably also affected the interaction are the prototypical technology used, the width of the targeted audience, and the quality of the drama series. We are still in the process of evaluating the participant experience, and that work will be reported at a later stage. As researchers not involved in the actual production, our ambition is to provide an outsider's view.

Background

Sanningen om Marika drew primarily on the experiences from *alternate reality games*. According to Jane McGonigal, an ARG is

> an interactive drama played out in online and real spaces, taking place over several weeks or months, in which dozens, hundreds or thousands of players come together online, form collaborative social networks, and work together to solve a mystery or problem [...] that would be absolutely impossible to solve alone. (McGonigal 2004).

An ARG uses techniques such as fake websites, phone calls from game characters, and staged events in the real world to create a fictive game story that looks and feels very much like reality, and invites the participants to take active part in the story, causing them to feel more capable, confident, expressive, engaged and connected in their real lives (McGonigal 2004; McGonigal 2006; IGDA ARG SIG 2006). By using real-world historic facts, rumours, and events within the game story an ARG can become an immensely rich experience even with limited resources – at least compared to computer games where every single part of the world needs to be modelled or historical larps where costumes have to be sewn and castles built.

ARGs have often been used as advertisement campaigns. Examples include the archetypical ARG *The Beast*[3] used to market the movie *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001) and the more recent *The Art of the Heist*[4] used to market a new Audio A3 model.

3 Also known as The A.I. Web Game. The game was a promotion for A.I. The film was Stanley Kubrick's unfinished project, and was directed by Steven Spielberg for DreamWorks.

4 The Art of the Heist was an advertising campaign for Audi which merged adverts with online gaming elements, in which people had to actively search for content across several media formats to piece together clues regarding a fictional robbery. www.mckinney silver.com/A3_H3ist

The main inspiration for SVT (Lägersten 2007) in the case of *Sanningen om Marika* was the television show *ReGenesis*, a Canadian television production that was combined with an ARG. This production centred on the scientists of a fictional biotechnical scientific organisation. The game was primarily an online clue hunt, in which the fictional characters sometimes contacted the players through email and phone, but players were also sent on missions in the real world. Originally broadcasted in Canada, it has since also been produced for European and American television audiences.

The main inspiration for P was their two previous pervasive larp productions, *Prosopopeia Bardo 1: Där vi föll* and *Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum*. They were staged in Stockholm as part of the IPerG[5] project. In contrast to *ReGenesis*, these games were primarily staged in the real world and required intense involvement by the participants. The participants took on roles as ghosts that re-entered the world of the living through possessing the participants. This model of role-taking required participants to role-play on multiple levels; they had to both role-play versions of themselves that believed that it was possible to be possessed, as well as the ghost.

A common strand between these two productions was that both had a serious theme and a certain ideological and political depth. *ReGenesis* often addressed social, political and ethical topics related to the science at hand. In *Momentum*, the central theme dealt with the meaning of activism in a conformist society and its motivations and cost. The ghost characters of the participants were all dead revolutionaries; their motivations and goals varied, but they all shared a strong desire for change. Consequently, the narrative and the gameplay were in both cases complex and multi-faceted, demanding much from the spectators and participants alike.

But apart from this, the differences were vast. Where *ReGenesis* was largely based on fictional content fabricated by the game designers and sought out by the participants, the *Prosopopeia* productions relied to a very large extent on real-world history and events. Where *ReGenesis* was largely played online, the *Prosopopeia* larps were primarily physical real-world events. Where *ReGenesis* primarily relied on the puppet masters staging the game for the participants, the *Prosopopeia* games were an interactive role-play experience where both game masters and participants took part, and both could influence the development of the storyline. Finally, where *ReGenesis* was a massive game tailored to support millions of participants, the *Prosopopeia* games had only 12 and 30 participants, respectively.

Sanningen om Marika

Sanningen om Marika could be described as a trans-medial production – a production spanning several media types. The creators called it a "*participation drama*" (SVT, 2007a), indicating the intent to get the audience to actively participate in the storyline. In many ways it was a unique attempt at pervasive entertainment, encouraging the participants to imagine and *immerse into the fiction as if it was reality* rather than just engage in a game.

The game showed its kinship with both *ReGenesis* and *Prosopopeia*. As in *ReGenesis*, a televised drama series provided the hub for the storyline, explaining the background and developing the fictional world of the story. As in the *Prosopopeia* productions, the participants were encouraged to *"pretend that it was real"*; offering a role-play experience in which you played a subset of yourself with a slightly different view of reality. To make it possible to at the same time watch *Sanningen om*

5 Integrated Project on Pervasive Gaming. www.pervasive-gaming.org

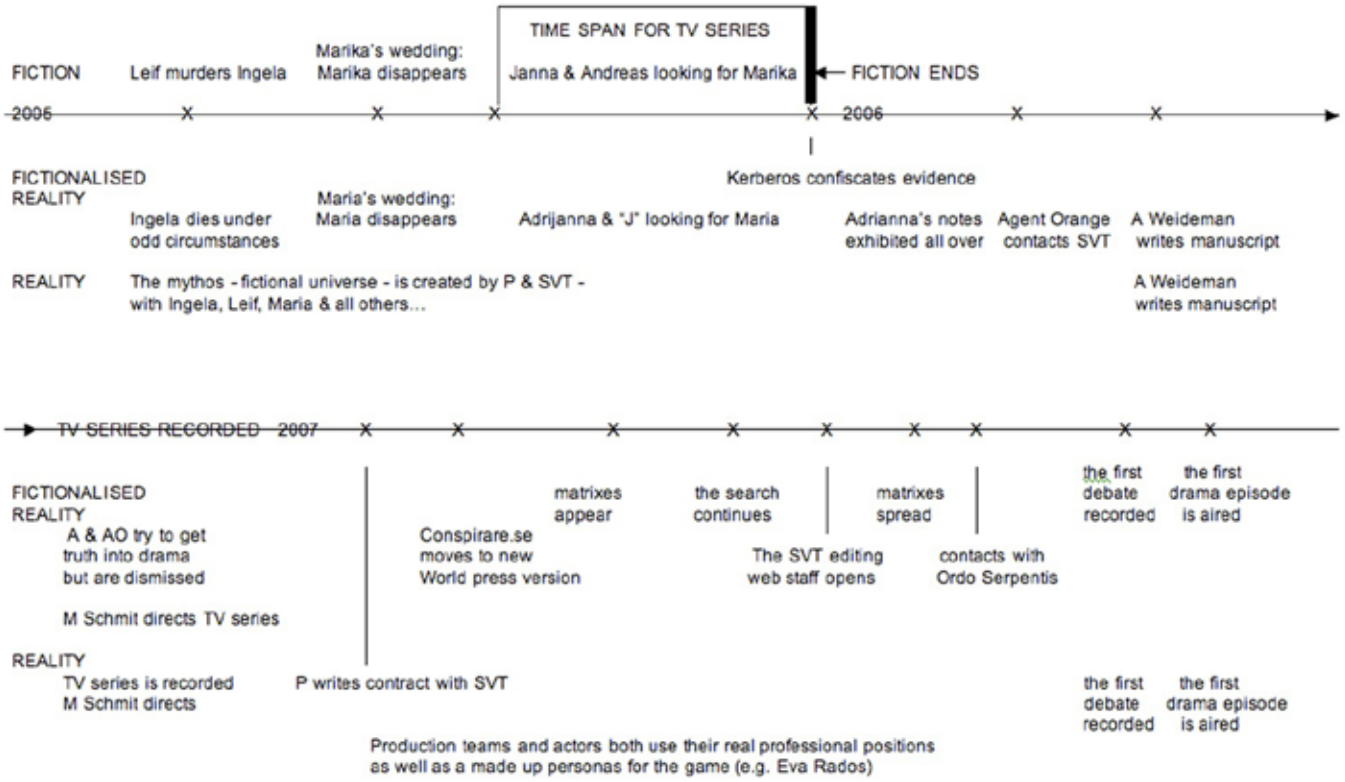

Figure 1. Timeline. Timeline for fiction and fictionalised reality presented at conspirare.se in October 2007. Translations and reality timeline added by the author.

Marika as a TV viewer and participate in an intense role-play experience, the game offered multiple layers of participation with gradually intensifying immersion and influence over the storyline. The *Conspirare* website (www.conspirare.se) offered the hub for participation. It consisted of a forum, a chat, and a blog. The third core component of the production was a debate program aired weekly directly after the drama series. This program, which was recorded a day before it was aired, served as a means to connect the fictional drama series (recorded a year in advance) to the ongoing game.

The real world participation in the game was primarily organised through a separate website for a fictional secret society named Ordo Serpentis. The participants were encouraged to enlist in the society, which would send them on different missions and tasks in order to rise in rank within the society. The game also contained on-line puzzles and scheduled events in the real world as well as in an on-line virtual world.

In the line of *ReGenesis* and the *Prosopopeia* productions, *Sanningen om Marika* took on a serious theme. In this production, the focus was on people who disappear and the potential explanations why. A theme throughout the television series – and the game – was the possibility that people actually may choose to disappear, to live a secret life outside a society that they have begun to experience as oppressive.

Fictional universe

The diegetic fictional universe in *Sanningen om Marika* consisted of two back stories – a fictional drama and a fictionalised reality – with several sub-stories and fictional conflicts (see figure 1).

The drama series was an outspoken fiction, a five-episode television series. The fictionalised reality was communicated as reality – in the beginning only by Adrijanna, Agent Orange and Anty, but as part of the unfolding story, SVT became convinced that Maria had existed and disappeared so towards the end of the series SVT also communicated this as reality. Both of these back stories were part of the diegesis and in fact fictional. Apart from the fictional disappearance of Maria, the fictionalised reality used the real background of the production, such as including the recording of the drama series and the true names of the directors and several other central characters.

The fictionalised reality centred on 'Maria', an allegedly real person who had disappeared. Her childhood friend Adrijanna started to look for her, suspecting that she had disappeared voluntarily, but with help from an underground organisation that Adrijanna mistrusted. As part of her search, she created a website and put up posters with a photo of her friend, trying to recruit help. Her efforts were spotted by the SVT production team, who were in the process of planning a drama series around missing people. They contacted Adrijanna to learn more about her story, and to use some of it as inspiration for their production.

When the drama series had been filmed, Adrijanna got to see the result and became very upset. SVT clearly believed that she had made the story up, but they had still used very much of it in the TV series (even the names were only slightly changed). Adrijanna started to tour Sweden, telling people that the planned TV series actually was based on Maria's disappearance. SVT denied this, claiming that Adrijanna was making it all up and that Maria had never existed.

This conflict formed the background for the game – the participants were recruited by Adrijanna to help her in her search and to prove SVT wrong. The first participants were recruited during the summer of 2007. They signed up at conspirare.se, and became the Conspirare crew; participants

of an ARG who sought out, as well as placed, clues on the Internet and in the real world. One week before the TV series stared, the crew uncovered the Ordo Serpentis website and decided to infiltrate the secret society.

When the TV show was aired, SVT had started to become unsure about the "truth" – was Adrijanna really making it all up, or was there a grain of truth in her story? To address the controversy, they publicly announced that the TV series would be accompanied by a debate program, in which this issue would be discussed. The debate was created to tie the TV drama and the real time game events together and was very authentically staged. Some actors were recruited to "play themselves" in their official roles (as a psychologist, dentist and even as a police spokesperson, for example). Starting from the first airing of the drama series and debate, SVT started to investigate the case on their own and reporting their own findings, as well as those done by the Conspirare crew in the debate. Eventually, the participants, Adrijanna and SVT managed to uncover the "truth".

In addition to this main storyline, the story had several subplots, such as the story of Maria's dead mother who had been mentally ill, and her friend Mr. E from her younger days. One subplot that became very important was the Kerberos surveillance company that opposed Adrijanna's and the Conspirare crew's investigations, and the semi-public welfare organisation Cityinitiativet in Gothenburg. Both were exposed as having committed serious crimes as part of the debate programs. This subplot was very realistic and included faked company websites and logotypes, and representatives from both companies were interviewed in the debate program. Again, it should be stressed that all of this content was fictional; neither Kerberos nor Cityinitiativet were genuine.

Modes of Participation

Sanningen om Marika offered multiple modes of participation. The SVT versus Adrijanna conflict was staged by parallel web sites and chats that communicated the different views of the "truth". On conspirare.se, the participants were expected to stay within the fiction, to "pretend that it was real" and to discuss the game's storyline and mysteries. By contrast, the SVT chat offered a certain degree of off-game discussion, even though the site as such was kept entirely within the fictional context.

Game activities in the real world were organised in two different ways. Conspirare was used to invite to and organise larger events (such as the final demonstration outside the TV building in Gothenburg). Some events were also staged in the online virtual world *Entropia Universe*.

Ordo Serpentis focused on self-organised play in smaller groups. When participants signed up to become part of this secret society, they were asked to form cells and carry out missions together. This part was also technology-supported; the participants were encouraged to download a mobile phone application, which enabled them to read two-dimensional bar codes, "matrixes", with their camera. In return, the participants would get a mission to perform and document. The documentation (video and photos) were uploaded to Flickr or YouTube and announced on conspirare.se. Parts were also re-used in the Conspirare blog. Participants could also submit their documentation to SVT, which put it on their web site and selected some of it to show in the debate program. The plot and storylines were held open to a certain extent, so that participants could initiate and influence the story through online role-play and larping.

A final component of the production consisted of a puzzle-solving quest. In the drama series, an SVT character had put in hidden "subliminal messages" that were not visible to the eye, and then

they made a special tool available that allowed the participants to watch the entire TV series, step by step, and find these messages. These were puzzles that, when solved, gave a password for yet another site where a subplot could be explored. The purpose of this part of the production was to invite and offer television viewers an easier form of participation through online puzzle-solving, in addition to the physical play offered by Ordo Serpentis and the role-play offered at conspirare.se.

Production Cultures of Participation Drama

The project was initiated by SVT, who contracted The Company P as experts in participatory culture. SVT aimed to create a novel format that took off in a television drama that invited *"the audience [...] to step in to the fiction and take part in it in new ways"*(Lägersten 2007) by exploiting the prospects of interweaving pervasive game components.

But P had an outspoken goal to create a *reality game* where the reality outside the game started to effect and intervene with the game. P also had ideological and political goals to develop methods that would assist in the participants' personal development processes and enable them to question today's society.

The differences were acknowledged by both parties and created a strong motivation to understand each other's cultures and languages. They were the focus for many meetings, especially in the beginning of the production process. The target groups ranged from television viewers to experienced role-players aged 17 to 40 years.

Two Cultures – Two Methods

SVT is the oldest Swedish television company with a history reaching back to the 1950's, when television were a novelty. During recent years, the organisation has undergone major changes. Today, a part of its public service remit is to guarantee a broad range of programs and services via television, Internet and other forms of publication (SVT 2007b). Programs can be watched on the Internet, and the usage of new media (games, chats, program web sites) has increased. The *Sanningen om Marika* team part ofthe Gothenburg division, one of the seven program production departments throughout Sweden that serve both the regional audience and the national scene. SVT recently moved into a large glass building with modern working areas, located in the old harbour of Gothenburg, on the west coast of Sweden.

During the production, SVT was responsible for the drama series, studio debates, trailers and other marketing activities. SVT also ran a web editorial staff linked to a program webpage. In many respects, the production was uncontroversial and followed ordinary production processes. However, in some respects it was very unusual and unique. Professionals from different departments worked tightly together, and high-level managers took part in the on-the-fly decisions usually carried out at lower levels (Engblom 2007; Lägersten 2007; Wikander 2007).

By comparison, the Company P is a small, newly founded pervasive entertainment company, staffed by professionals experienced in organising larps and other similar productions[6]. P comprised a small flexible organisation employing less than twenty people with overlapping design and production teams. P's three-room office is situated in a back street in central Stockholm, with black walls and white chalked wooden flooring. The first thing that you notice is a big brown leather suitcase

6 www.thecompanyp.com.

filled with handwritten pieces of papers, small watercolour paintings, ripped out pages from old books and other interesting pieces of props like electric cords, dice, dolls, feathers used during the *Prosopopeia* larps.

P was in charge of the game design and game mastering, managed interactive actors and forum editorial staff, as well as produced the real life installations and online puzzles. P also produced props, sounds and choreography and subliminal images for key scenes of the drama series, and edited the script for both the series and debates. In a joint research venture with the Swedish Institute of Computer Science and The Interactive Institute, the Company P developed the technology platform that enabled participation on all available media (web sites, forum, chat, mobile application, game) and the orchestration the larp. Two groups of participants also served as volunteer game masters, one in Stockholm and one in Gothenburg.

The teams thus differed not only in their physical environment and size, but also in societal context and history. As discussed previously, they also had quite different goals for the production.

The two teams cooperated primarily through weekly phone meetings. Due to the geographical distance between the teams, only a few physical meetings were held. The original aim was to move together during the intense phase of the production (when the TV series was aired), but this could not be realised for economical reasons. An online web portal was used in the early phase of the project, but technical problems made it less useful in the end. As all team members could not participate in all meetings, information was sometimes lost or did not reach all people involved (Rados 2007).

Two Production Cultures – Two Views of the Audience

The processes of broadcasting and role-playing are quite different. Figure 2 illustrates the differences in the main work processes. A broadcasted show is a one-way communicative activity, and differs a great deal from the multi-directional activity of role-playing. Broadcast ingrains a view of the audience as *spectators*. The television viewer is limited in influence and interaction with the storyline. The program is seen as a performance, with a set narrative and plot. A director uses a written manuscript to direct and stage employed actors to implement the show. The performance is recorded and broadcasted to an audience. The result is a controlled, one-directional and easily broadcasted product.

On the other hand, in role-playing culture the individuals taking part are seen as *participants* and co-creators. Role-playing games, like other forms of interactive narrative, represent a fundamental blurring of the distinction between producer and consumer, creator and audience, and storyteller and viewer. Within the rules, the participants may improvise freely; their choices shape the direction and outcome of the games (Rilstone 2000).

The role-playing producer stages the scene, crafts the rules, and plans the core narratives, plots and characters. The producer is prepared for anything; participants often respond in surprising ways that can interfere with plans for later scenes, causing a demand for narratives, plots or characters to be changed, developed and carried out in unforeseen directions. This enables the creation of a planned but open-ended, interactive and multi-directional experience, played out online in chats, forums and in the physical world by larping in streets, parks, and forests.

These differences made cooperation complicated, as there was not a full agreement on what the

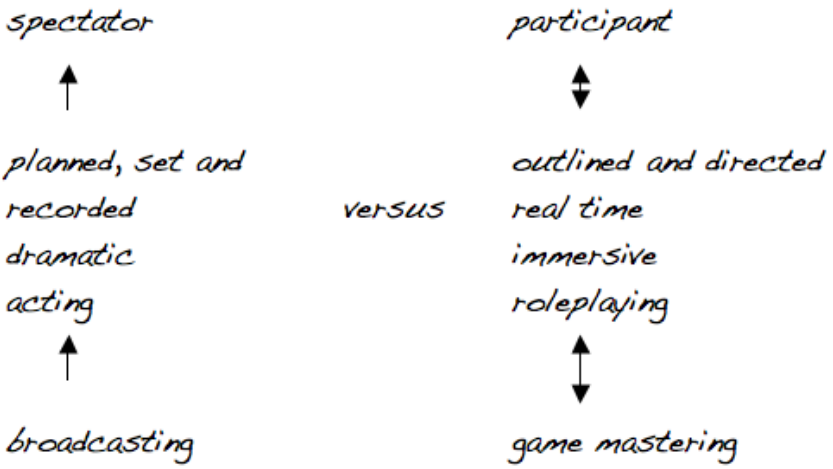

Figure 2: Broadcast and role-playing production.

production was – a recorded performance with Swedish television's quality requirements, or an open role-playing game, in which immersion in the game and a good player experience were the most important things.

Case Example: The Debates

The televised debates staged after each show are a very good example of the conflicts between the two production cultures. Early on, the companies had agreed on the goals of the debate. The intent was to exhibit and contextualise the game for television viewers and to give the game participants the chance to appear on national television. However, when it was time to start producing the debate SVT recruited a director internally, who had other ideas for the debate. From P's point of view, this had a negative impact on the participatory elements of the game.

He would not bring in participants into the studio, and selected only a few video clips and photos from the participants. He had an explicit goal to produce "good television", which demanded a degree of quality he didn't feel the participant material had. Still, the original idea of creating a real-time debate was retained, and his re-planning of the debate made it a highly realistic side story to the television drama. He used his role-playing experience and game mastered the actors separately, which strongly contributed to create a convincing fictionalised reality. This was a masterful move, and made the debate one of the most novel parts in the production, but it also lessened its relevance as a connection between the game and the TV show.

P worked very actively to include participants, following the design of the game but also partly to cover up for the debate´s low ambitions on participation. They quickly published participant material on Conspirare: video clips, pictures, and photos that the participants themselves made available through YouTube, Flickr and other well known media applications. This made participation quick, relevant and easily accessible, though with very varied quality.

Interaction with the Audience

The term *user generated content* is widely used throughout Swedish Television due to an internal policy that has for several years pushed for "interactivity". The term implies a view of the audience as users and consumers, and as a source of material, such as pictures, text and audio. An active selection, editing and transformation process of this source material enables the TV broadcaster to maintain full control over the overall quality and plot narrative as it is broadcast back to the audience.

By contrast, P aimed to foster *participatory culture*[7]. Although the game part of *Sanningen om Marika* had a clear producer, the participants were expected to co-create the game and storyline together with the game designers. The main mechanism worked to create a joint role-playing experience in which both the participants and organisers took part, and in which the roles were by no means were fixed – as the participants got more involved in the game, they also gradually took on more and more of an organisers' role. The differences in attitudes between SVT and P showed up even in the details such as the wordings in blogs and the selection of tools.

The Blogs

Both companies used text and video blogs to encourage the audience to interact. However, a deeper examination shows large differences in *how* these blogs were used. At the SVT site, the audience was asked to interact by sending in material to certain addresses. An example of the encouragements at the SVT site:

> EDITORIAL DIRECTOR RADOS
> I am the editorial director on this site and actively searching for the truth about what happened to Maria Klingbohm. The editorial staff investigates this in cooperation with *Conspirare,* and my blog will keep you updated. By sending e-mail to marika@svt.se or putting your own material in the "inbox" you will give us access to your records and information that could help us in our search.[8]

At conspirare.se, participants could follow and actively participate in online discussions in real time chats and a web forum, try to solve clues and mysteries together, as well as plan and prepare larp events. They were encouraged in a much more concrete way to go to the chat and keep a log, come to the headquarters of the television channel, read matrixes using the mobile phone, pray, and create rituals:

> How can I help? Tomorrow we are reaching the end of our journey. You can help us whether you are a Conspirite or a rookie:
>
> 1) Go to the chat and stay in touch.
>
> 2) Come to the television building at 7 PM, Pump Street, Gothenburg and show everybody that WE are The Others.

7 Here, we use this term in vaguely the same meaning as Interacting Arts does in Haggren, Kristoffer, Larsson, Elge & al forthcoming and less as defined by Jenkins 2006a & 2006b).

8 All excerpts translated from Swedish to English by the authors.

3) If already a member, read Matrixes using Urim[9] to strengthen our anti system.

4) Think about, pray for, or create a ritual for The Others that we do not take seriously and dismiss in the name of "normality".

The end is close. The future starts now.

The Chats

The chat applications exhibit a similar pattern. What SVT called a "chat" at the SVT site was, in fact, an FAQ. No dates or times were shown and it was not possible to chat live. Instead, you had to send in your question and it would (possibly) appear later together with an answer. The SVT production management reflected on this during the production, but the application could not be changed at that stage. Examples:

> Question: You do not know if Ingela Klingbohm is alive or not?
>
> Answer: As far as we know she has not existed.
>
> Question: But then she is a character in your telly series? (I mean, it IS "based on a true story")] [...]
>
> Answer: The drama is not based on a true story. It is based on notes the authors found in town. If Adrijanna says it is the truth then that is up to her.

The chat application at conspirare.se was a freeware chat system designed to display who was online in real time. Participants could choose to use their game characters like, "mattlo", "Tomb" or "markzpot", choose a different character, or lurk. The application showed the dates and times of contributions, allowed private conversations between participants while chatting, and so forth. It was an immediate and easy-to-use real-time chat. Participants could easily include URLs and photos in their comments, which appeared in less than a second on the screen. This chat required instant moderation and hence P spent approximately 20 hours a day game mastering it.

Consequences

During the initial phase of the project, the *Sanningen om Marika* production was met with a certain degree of internal scepticism at SVT. The complex game design and narrative puzzled the upper management. The production also planned to encourage its audience to get involved in activities outside the control of SVT, threatening its policies and regulations. The production team had the challenging task of convincing the decision-making bodies at SVT that the show should, could and would be aired and openly marketed. This also served as a "common enemy" that united the two teams.

The management-level attitude at SVT radically changed after an internal workshop six weeks prior to the premiere of the series. At this workshop, an international expert reviewed the planned production and complimented its uniqueness. However, some damage had already been done. The production's marketing was late, small and muddled.

9 The mobile phone application.

The joy of this success soon faded, as the underlying conflict in interests between the SVT and P teams surfaced. The most obvious consequence of it was the reshaping of the debates discussed above. After a few weeks on the air, the production fractured, which became visible on the websites. Very different stories were being told, and references between the two sites became sparse. Around the halfway point of the series the two teams had a follow-up meeting and identified the problem, resulting in better integration between the sites during the last few weeks. During the final week of the production, SVT also sent a team to film game action and aired these as part of the debate.

These differences in approach had a large impact. Interaction and contributions from participants were low on anything that looked a part of SVT and high at conspirare.se. SVT's expectations had been high, and there was considerable disappointment at the apparent lack of participant films and photos, as well as the low activity at the SVT chat and discussion forum. Conspirare.se experienced the exact opposite – the forum grew quickly and constant discussions took place.

Still, not all of the activities coordinated by P were successful. Ordo Serpentis did not gather as many participants as hoped, even though it was constructed to scale. The threshold for participating in Ordo Serpentis was high. The story behind the game was complex, the participants were required to self-organise into groups, the missions were advanced, and on top of this, at least one participant in each group had to download and install a special mobile phone application that would only run on certain types of phones. In addition, the high level of interactive game mastering done at the real-time chat on conspirare.se required the game masters' undivided attention. As a result, the participants at Ordo Serpentis got little reward for the completion of their missions. The effect was that the participants of Ordo Serpentis were mostly the same as the crew that formed the core of Conspirare participants. The game failed to scale above the 100 to 300 players that could be effectively game mastered by more direct means.

Conclusions

Sanningen om Marika can be considered a success in many ways. It managed to create a win-win situation for the dedicated participants, for Swedish Television, and for the Company P. Our early analysis of the participants' experience speaks of a totally new and unexpected experience, irrespective of whether the participants were television viewers, experienced online role-players or live action role-players. Swedish Television expanded and challenged their traditional production methods, as well as experimented with traditional formats in new ways to create something novel. P managed to force their ideological and political demands to a great extent and to shake and challenge SVT's norms and rules to design a game that enabled immersive participation. Both had to take bold steps. P had to scale up their design, organisation, and work methods in order to create a large-scale production, and the Swedish Television had to challenge its own production framework as well as the mainstream audience.

The result was not the blockbuster they had hoped for, at least compared to *ReGenesis* which has been aired for several seasons and won prizes. Some of the explicit goals of P and SVT, in particular the goal of creating a very large group of active participants, were not met. There are many and complex reasons for this. In this paper, we have chosen to focus on the production methods, the friction between the two production teams and the effects these had on the result. Other factors that affected the result were the game design, the prototype technology used, and the quality of the drama series. We shall continue our analysis of the production by concentrating on the participant responses to the experience, which will shred more light on these factors.

When we presented this research to the production teams in December 2007, the response was immediate and frank. One of the team members expressed their own view of the production as follows:

> A learning process does not start *after* a production like this; it is an ongoing process during the whole production. Of course we have learned a lot from our mistakes and we have already reflected and discussed a lot. The question of production methods was all the time the most difficult of the conditions to relate to. At least we will form only *one* team next time!

Acknowledgements

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We Lost Our World and Made New Ones: Live Role-Playing in Modern Times

Gabriel Widing

The aims and aesthetics of live-action role-playing are rooted in modernity. This article contextualizes larp as a strategy of distancing oneself from the boundaries of modern society. Larps produce autonomous spaces where the social relation of capital and the laws of the nation-state cannot apply. This theory of larp as exile from modernity explains why conservative and revolutionary impulses coexist within the subcultural practice of larp; both encompass a wish to escape the alienation of modernity. My thoughts derive from continental philosophy of the 20th century when the dark sides of modernity were more obvious than they seem today.

Larp can be considered as an aesthetizised form of social communion that involves people (most often youths) in the industrialised parts of the world.[1] The participants of a larp create a temporary reality in which they enter through an immersive act of role-playing. Through the means of improvised character interaction, the participants sustain these temporary worlds for a few hours or several days. There are no passive spectators; all participants share the responsibility of enacting the world they have agreed upon. Most often, the inspiration for these worlds is collected through genre media such as fantasy, horror and science fiction, although alternative settings are continually explored as well. Larp is considered to be a derivation of American 1970's verbal tabletop pen-and-paper role-playing, but in Scandinavia, the influences from the scout movement and improvised theatre have probably been of similar importance.

This essay is a meditation on larp from a standpoint based on continental philosophy. It takes its stance from the theories of the exiled Jewish-German theorist Hannah Arendt, as well as my own experiences as a participant and organizer of larps in the Nordic community for the last ten years.

Arendt uses her extensive understanding of classical Greek and Roman philosophers to create a theory on modernity. My essay uses the numerous basic concepts presented in her work *The Human Condition*, in which the central theme is "what we do when we are active" (Arendt 1958, 5). Among the more important ones are the differentiations of *labor*, *work* and *action*, alongside the concepts of *private*, *public*, *social* and *intimate*, and futhermore between the principles of *mortality* and *natality*. This is not a critical reading of these concepts but rather an experiment in applying them to the contemporary phenomenon of larp – in other words, an imaginative approach to her thinking.

The Human Condition

The philosophy of Arendt is confident and optimistic in its approach to the conditions and potentials of human activity. She writes:

1 One could define live-action role-playing as a kind of hobby, which is an activity that Hannah Arendt considers conditioned by the modern work-oriented societies, but also has the potential to transcend it: "The role of the hobby in modern labor society is quite striking and may be the root of experience in the labor-play theories. What is especially noteworthy in this context is that Marx, who had no inkling of this development, expected that in his utopian, laborless society all activities would be performed in a manner which very closely resembles the manner of hobby activities." (Arendt 1958, 128)

> The human condition comprehends more than the conditions under which life has been given to man. Men are conditioned beings because everything they come in contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence. The world in which *vita activa* spends itself consists of things produced by human activities; but the things that owe their existence exclusively to men nevertheless constantly condition their human makers. In addition to the conditions under which life is given to man on earth, and partly out of them, men constantly create their own, self-made conditions, which, their human origin and their variability notwithstanding, possess the same conditioning power as natural things. (Arendt 1958, 9)

The world at hand is the world we have created. Everything around us conditions, not determines, our actions. This also implies that all our actions condition other people's actions and vice versa.

Arendt's philosophy is relevant for the understanding of the philosophical aspects and possibilities of larp considering her understanding of man as an acting and communicating being, rather than as the reflecting/rational/isolated creature that most philosophers seem to be interested in. Philosophy on contemplation and sensory input can naturally be easily applied to the consumption of traditional mass media as well as to artistic expressions such as painting or music. However, when it comes to the communicating, acting, interacting, and bodily activity in general, many western philosophers leave us in the dark. Arendt labels these aspects of man *vita activa* in contrast to *vita contemplativa* (1958, 12-17).

For Arendt, communication is not characterised by striving towards a final goal, but rather by the possibility of creating something new, something that we do not necessarily expect when we take action. This human potential is the principle of *natality*, a principle founded in our human condition; "the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting." (Arendt 1958, 9) This line of thinking could be contrasted viewing the human condition in terms of its *mortality*, represented by Sigmund Freud's death instinct and Martin Heidegger's existential underlining of the mortality of man. Larpers create new conditions for their own lives, as well as new social agreements and commitments. This could be interpreted as a radical praxis of Arendt's thoughts on natality, a praxis that aims for another world. This must be considered a utopian aspect of larp.

Arendt defines three aspects of human activity: *work*, *labor* and *action*, that she considers fundamental "because each of them corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man" (Arendt 1958, 7). In the introducing chapter of *The Human Condition* she summarizes:

> Labor assures not only individual survival, but the life of the species. Work and its product, the human artifact, bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time. Action, in so far as it engages in founding preserving political bodies, creates the condition for remembrance, that is, for history. (Arendt 1958, 8-9)

Larp could be excluded from domains of *labor* since it is an unproductive activity. It has no importance for the continuation of human existence as biological life, neither concerning the species nor the individual. However, it contains the activity of *work*, through the creation of a physical world of objects and milieus, which is an important method to sustain the temporary permanence of the world, especially when an event spans over several days. The objects could also be brought back from the other world loaded with memories. Most importantly, there is *action*,

through the communicative act of social interaction, between characters as well as between players. The participants produce a world in which they can live and act (and sometimes work), but seldom or never labor within. Labor only happens in terms of cooking and cleaning, not in terms of wage labor or any production of commodities or services aimed for the real world.

Modernity and Alienation

The affinity between the praxis of larp and the theory of Arendt becomes even clearer when put in relation to her critique of modernity and capitalism. Her critique of capitalism is critical to – but deeply influenced by – Karl Marx. Her analysis is completely uninterested in any liberating potential of labor, but focuses instead on what kind of human beings a society of laboring men seems to generate. She seldom uses the concepts of class or class struggle, but her critique of capitalism is entirely in line with Marx's writings on alienation. Alienation is what happens in a time of industrialization, when we become laboring men, which ultimately means that we become separated from what we produce. The result of our labor or work is made into a commodity and sold on a market, most often distanced from us. Arendt considers capitalism problematic as it undermines the possibilities we used to have as humans to produce a world for ourselves, a world of our own. The world of today is someone else's world. Marx already had a notion of this in 1844:

> The product of labour is labour embodied and made material in an object, it is the *objectification* of labour. The realization of labour is its objectification. In the sphere of political economy, this realization of labour appears as a *loss of reality* for the worker, objectification as loss of and bondage to the object, and appropriation as estrangement, as *alienation*. (Marx 1844)

Ironically, similar problems appeared in the socialist states of the 20th century, but I'll stick to the problems of capitalism given that it is the system at hand. The capitalist mode of production promotes the making of objects meant for consumption rather than to form a common world (Arendt 1958, 126-135). Industrialization shaped a labor-consumption oriented mass society. The mass production of commodities generates conformism and a feeling of loneliness that Arendt considered a genuine threat as it unintentionally laid ground for the totalitarian societies of mid-20th century, including Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia.[2] Modern societies face a considerable risk of shaping citizens who no longer consider themselves as part of a plurality, which Arendt finds catastrophic. For her, plurality is a key concept – a condition for action. When people do not understand their part in creating our world (due to alienation), and they are no longer individual subjects in a multitude (due to mass society), they have lost something significantly human. They have lost their world.

Larp must, with these definitions in mind, be considered as a vehemently anti-modern activity. It is an expression for a will to be the active producer and narrator of one's own life. If we have lost our everyday world, we compensate through the co-production of new worlds. These new worlds are created by the same people who populate them. When we larp, we are as far from alienation as we can get within a modern capitalist society.

2 "Loneliness, the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government, and for ideology or logicality, the preparation of its executioners and victims, is closely connected with uprootedness and superfluousness which have been the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution and have become acute with the rise of imperialism at the end of the last century and the break-down of political institutions and social traditions in our own time." (Arendt 1951, 475)

Social Contracts and Biopowers

In this sense Arendt's critique of capitalism is ontological rather than ideological. Consumption of prefabricated commodities literally devastates the world. Capitalism consumes the public space and invades the private sphere. Arendt characterises what is left in a world with neither private nor public as the *social*, in a rather specific sense: The social is notably defined by the political organisation through nation states. Arendt traces the ambitions of the nation state to Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jaques Rousseau, who in his influential political essay *The Social Contract* (1762) proclaims that the individual should be subject to the social contract manifested in the state. This would, according to Rousseau, in long terms enable freedom. But it also means that the state makes the individual body part of the society's body. Arendt considers this a fatal mistake, since it merges the private biological body with the political public body.

> If we compare the modern world with that of the past, the loss of human experience involved in this development is extraordinary. [...] The last stage of laboring society, the society of jobholders, demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning, as though individual life had actually been submerged in the over-all life process of the species and the only active decision still required of the individual were to let go, so to speak, to abandon his individuality, the still individually sensed pain or trouble of living, and acquiesce in a dazed, "tranquilized," functional type of behavior. (Arendt 1958, 322)

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri reactivates this thought in *Empire*. They call it biopower, a concept lended by Michel Foucault:

> Biopower is a form of power that regulates social life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it and rearticulating it. Power can achieve an effective command over the entire life of the population only when it becomes an integral, vital function that every individual embraces and reactivates of his or her own accord. (Hardt & Negri, 23-24)

Our everyday reality has insisted on a certain physical, bodily, and political agreement full of conventions on how social relations should be handled. The nation states order and influence all aspects of life, including our bodies.

Larpers make similar "social contracts" relatively autonomous from the biopower of the reproduced by the symbiotic relationship between state and citizen. The process of reactivation that Hardt and Negri descibe is thus abrupted. We reclaim the power of our own experiences and bodies for some time. Mike Pohjola (2004) has examined the theme in *Autonomous identities*, influenced by anarchist essayist Hakim Bey, who proclaimed the concept of temporary autonomous zones (TAZ):

> The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, *before* the State can crush it. (Bey 1985)

Pohjola claims that larps "*provide their participants with a chance to be independent of their everyday reality by providing methods for creating other realities inside and on top of the assumed objective reality*" (Pohjola 2004, 94). We sign on to voluntary collective agreements on a reality that temporarily escapes the confinements predefined by the labor-capital relation and state jurisdictions. By stepping out of the consensus reality, the social contract proclaimed by Rousseau is exposed and

the possibility of a biopolitical counter-contract hopefully revealed. But this possibility can, within the frames of capitalism, only be realized in a state of excess.

A State of Excess

The realities of larp must be unproductive in order to stay autonomous. They cannot contain any elements of productive labor; as soon as there is labor, there will be capital. Entering a larp requires the escape from the labor-oriented modern society. If larp was a necessity for sustaining human life, it would, according to Arendt, be related to the biological aspects of human life rather than the aspects of action.

Excess is the principle of what Georges Bataille, contemporary with Arendt, named "the general economy" as opposed to the "restricted economy" determined by lack and needs. Excess does not imply that there is no economy or transactions in active in the social interaction. However, it is not a market economy but rather, in terms of Bataille, a gift economy realised through gifts, receipts, debts and sacrifices (Bataille 1949).

The social economy of larp (along with parties, festivals, rituals and other unproductive events) works within the logic of gift rather than the logic of the market, which is why Bataille comes into use. The connection between ritual, play and larp has been effectively described by Martin Ericsson (2004) through the work of anthropologist Victor Turner in general and specifically his concept of *communitas* (Turner 1982). Ericsson stresses the implications of this connection:

> Within our liminoid games, we are starting to discover ways of acting and being together that are ultimately more human and humane than the order that surrounds us. Play itself is becoming a valid ideology as a vision of a constantly renewable co-creation of meaning is emerging. (Ericsson 2004)

Inspired by Bataille, I have earlier described the result of the gift economy to the subculture of larp in *Collective realities*:

> Among the potlatch cultures, the loss should be as large as possible for the deed to have real meaning. Taking injury gave honour and glory. It works the same way in the live role-playing community, but fortunately not as much blood is spilled.
>
> A desperate expression of the will to make a sacrifice is what we call "hardcore". It is often about a waste of assets. Buying the cloth for the expensive costume, spending hundreds of man-hours to make armour or to carve a harp. Almost as often the aim is to push and risk one's physical boundaries in and out of character; eating poorly, cutting oneself, jumping into ice cold water or in some other manner proving oneself ready to sacrifice everything for the game. (Widing 2006, 31-32)

The excess does not only provide us with an autonomous space, but also influence the aesthetics and themes of our scenarios. The economy of excess encourages certain behaviours from the participants. This is most often an implicit consequence, although some organizers state it explicitly. Tova Gerge (2004) describes the agreement of the Swedish larp *Mellan himmel och hav*: "*The agreement said everyone would give everything and give it honestly. But receiving may be just as hard as giving.*"

This notion activates different questions concerning giving and receiving that unfortunately cannot

be developed here. But what is clear is that excess, which is the condition of autonomy, is not a neutral one, but an active agent in the preproduction, enactment and aftermaths of every larp.

Spaces and Actions

Where are we when we participate in larp? The playground is neither private nor public. It is not public because it is closed and it lacks the political intentions of an organization or a party meeting (that are closed but in the end aims for public influence). There are no intentions to change everyday reality. On the contrary, the participants imagine that their actions within the frame of the role-play have no consequences to the real world at all, which obviously is an illusion because all actions echo throughout history; "*these activities, despite their material futility, possess an enduring quality of their own because they create their own remembrance*" (Arendt 1958, 207-208). If the actions of our characters have no effect on our real life, it is because we enact unaffectedness.[3] The aesthetics of larp usually aim to sustain this autonomy, this private state of exception; that is how we disrupt the continual social sphere of reality.

Arendt considers the organization of human lives in nation states a catastrophe. Contemporary philosophers, like Giorgio Agamben, agrees and stresses the importance of liberating the emancipatory project of Enlightenment from the ties of nation states (Agamben 1995). Maybe this is what happens through larp in its most utopian forms. We form a *nomos* – a law or a border that refuses and keeps out the social organization of the real world. Within this border, we enact a communal disappearance, an exile, a collectivity outside the sphere of the bourgeois family. A place where intimacy can be shared and multiplied. A place to go when public as well as private sphere has been invaded by capital. The space of larp is, in the terms of Arendt, a "space of appearance" since it

> comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public real and the various forms of governments, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized. (Arendt 1958, 199)

When we role-play and enact someone, we change our name, qualities and social relations, and leave our everyday identities. This experience has similarities to the positive parts of the experiences of exile. In *We refugees*, Arendt (1943, 75) states: "*A man who wants to lose his self discovers, indeed, the possibilities of human existence, which are infinite, as infinite as creation*."

Arendt underlines that exile is not just a political escape, but also an escape into the sphere of intimacy, which also means an escape from politics, since politics are tied to the public sphere. This "disappearance" into the intimate could be manifested through literature and philosophy as in the case of many authors and intellectuals of the 20th century forced to escape totalitarian regimes. Larp could be viewed as a voluntary exile, a communal disappearance. It can hardly be invaded by the logic of labor and consumption because it demands action from the participants. It

> transcends both the sheer functionalism of things produced for consumption and the sheer

3 In The Character, the Player and Their Shared Body, which I wrote with Tova Gerge we tried to show "how game mechanics with a real physical effect on the participants can be used to manipulate/change standpoints and living patterns" for example by interconnecting "... language, politics and bodily memories to each other." (Gerge & Widing, 2006)

> utility of objects produced for use. Life in its non-biological sense, the span of time each man has between birth and death, manifests itself in action and speech, both which share with life its essential futility. (Arendt 1958, 173).

Only an acting person can appreciate larp. The reality of larp is produced through the dialectics between the acting individuals and the space of appearance, where they perform.

Since our concepts of reality and truth are created through human action and interaction, all participants of a larp must share and affirm a new worldview to make a new world possible. All objects and all characters must be interpreted under certain conditions, most often formulated beforehand. On the other hand, as this world must be approached with different perspectives; plurality is not a threat to the creation of a world – rather, it is a condition. Arendt is deeply utopian in her belief of human beings' possibility to produce new conditions for themselves. This vision of life on another planet illustrates her belief on the perpetual potential of mankind:

> The most radical change in the human condition we can imagine would be the emigration of men to some other planet. Such an event, no longer totally impossible, would imply that man would have to live under man-made conditions, radically different from those the earth offers him (Arendt 1958, 10)

When the psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theorist Julia Kristeva picks up Arendt's concept of the intimate, she tries to explore how the man of the 20th century started to investigate sensory and bodily experiences. But contrary to Arendt, Kristeva reads modern man's obsession with the intimate as an expression for a revolt rather than an escape. Kristeva describes this revolt as an aim for the overcoming of the division of body and soul proclaimed by western philosophy. One seeks to deepen the understanding of the body and make bodily experiences into signifying and meaningful practices. All these aspects are strongly present within larp. Kristeva also differs from Arendt by approaching the intimate as a political sphere, although both of them consider it separate from the private. Kristeva considers the exile to the intimate as a new kind of revolt tied to the conditions of the modern man. The intimate is not something private, since it can be shared, a sort of counter-culture present in art, philosophy and psychoanalysis (Kristeva 1997).

I would add larp to that list. Larp is about sharing feelings, emotions, and experiences, but not necessarily about going public with them. The sphere of intimacy can be made public by a secondary mediated process through art or literature, but it cannot be sold or promoted in itself. Through these thoughts, Kristeva grounds her theory in Arendt, who has stated that the

> stories [of our lives] may then be recorded in documents and monuments they may be visible in use objects or art works, they may be told and retold and worked into all kinds of material. They themselves, in their living reality, are of an altogether different nature than these reifications. (Arendt 1958, 184)

Against Modernity

What I have tried to show through this essay is how modern society has conditioned the practice and aesthetics of larp, and how a reading of modernity and capitalism is crucial to any understanding of larp as a phenomenon. In my opinion, larp has emerged as an anti-modern activity inspired by other anti-modern tendencies – conservative as well as revolutionary ones – that strive to overcome the alienated everyday reality at hand.

In the beginning of this essay, I mentioned the immense influence of fantasy and science fiction to larp. Such genres come forward as obvious choices of alternative worlds if we consider them as reactions or strategies in relation to modernity. Fantasy scenarios seek the presumed originality of feudal, pre-modern times. Science fiction brings us further, past and post modernity, to an imagined unknown future. Both of these genres are structured to enable heroes to walk among us and great deeds to be accomplished. They make outstanding actions possible within the diegetic frame (through our characters) as well as outside of it (through exceptional character interpretation). Action, in terms of Arendt,

> can be judged only by the criterion of greatness because it is in its nature to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary, where whatever is true in common and everyday life no longer applies. (Arendt 1958, 205)

The power of larp is of a peculiar kind, and we use this power to produce anti-modernity. It is the power of biopolitic as well as bioaesthetic reconstitutions.

> Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities. (Arendt 1958, 200)

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Fantasy and Medievalism in Role-Playing Games

Lars Konzack & Ian Dall

This article examines how medievalism has influenced fantasy and fantasy role-playing, and how medievalism relates to the historical Medieval Times. The starting point is to define fantasy and get a better comprehension of the Medieval Times and medievalism. This is then compared to well-known medievalist fantasy tabletop role-playing games. The aim is to create a solid foundation for improving the sub-creation process of designing fantasy role-playing games in general.

Whether in tabletop, live action or computer role-playing, role-players tend to choose fantasy as their main genre. This does not mean that fantasy would be the only appropriate genre for role-playing; lots of other genres have been introduced and used. Nonetheless, it seems that fantasy remains the most important literary genre for role-playing. One can either celebrate or regret the fact, but such approaches do not really help an understanding of *why* fantasy has this immense impact and what it actually offers to role-players.

We do not intend to discuss the subject of fantasy role-playing in terms of psychological escapism or sociological historicism. A lot of work has been done to find out psycho-sociological explanations to fantasy and the desire to play, and since we are neither sociologists nor psychologists, we have nothing to add in this respect – although we often find these explanation attempts to be based on reductionism or scepticism. Our approach to fantasy role-playing is based on media historical considerations and as conscious or at least semi-conscious cultural choices made by the role-players themselves.

What Is Fantasy?

There has been much confusion about the terminology of fantasy. One the one hand the supposedly qualified to formulate theory on academic level have either completely ignored the field or only been able to relate to it by jettisoning all categories whatsoever. This has left those actually involved in the field to what amounts to folk practices and verbal traditions, resulting in a directly misleading terminology. One of the goals in writing this paper is creating the tools to express ourselves clearly on this increasingly important subject.

There are at least three different answers to the question what is fantasy within the role-playing community. The first includes all kinds of fiction that are not realistic, from horror and weird fiction to fairy-tales and science fiction. This comprehension of fantasy shall be referred to as Fantasy A, or *fantastic fiction*. Another answer is that it is a genre based on literary historical sources such as Robert E. Howard's Conan-stories, J. R. R. Tolkien's world of Arda, and J. K. Rowling's magical school. This kind of fantasy is particularly focused on creating magical worlds with an alternative history. Fantasy based on these literary conventions is referred to as Fantasy B, *sub-created fantasy*. Sub-creation is professor J. R. R. Tolkien's term for the creation of secondary worlds (Tolkien 1997). Finally, a lot of role-players use the term fantasy to describe a role-playing experience in the *Dungeons & Dragons* tradition created by Gary Gygax and David Arneson in 1974. This approach to fantasy is referred to as Fantasy C, or *Gygaxian fantasy*. It also covers many online fantasy games, and literature that are based on fantasy game experiences, such as the *Dragonlance* paperback

series.

Furthermore, there are at least three traditional subgenres within Fantasy B. Firstly, *sword and sorcery*, an action-based subgenre with muscular barbarians, women in chainmail bikini, and evil warlocks. The aim of this sub-genre is to worship heroic vitalism (Carlyle 1966), claiming that uncivilised action surpasses civilised thought. Within sword and sorcery we find dark fantasy, which mixes fantasy with horror elements. Secondly, the subgenre of *epic fantasy*, in which the fiction is based on historical expertise and moral dilemmas among characters. The subgenre aims to bring about alternative ways to aesthetically present cosmological and meta-physical thought, and to discuss religious and philosophical questions. And thirdly, there is *children's fantasy* with its own distinctive tradition. In this subgenre, the heroes are children who are introduced to magical worlds of make-believe. The aims of this particular subgenre are manifold but incidentally most of these fictions are concerned with the theme of growing up.

As for Gygaxian fantasy, there are two well-known subgenres: *low fantasy* and *high fantasy*. They could be also characterised as modes of play, because they are based on game mechanics rather than genre conventions. Low fantasy is fantasy role-playing with low level characters, while high fantasy is fantasy role-playing with high level characters. They are regrettably often confused with sword and sorcery and epic fantasy. It is, however, possible to make either with low and high level characters. It must be added that even though Fantasy C has obvious Tolkienist influences, the main influence from Fantasy B is not epic fantasy but sword and sorcery. It is mostly hack'n'slash role-playing with no consequential cosmological and metaphysical thought put into it; it ponders no idea of consequence as regards to philosophy and religion. One could say that *Dungeons & Dragons* is more of a state of mind rather than thoughts in transition. However, it should be noted that it is possible to let cosmological and metaphysical thought into the game and allow the scenarios be based on philosophical and religious questions. It is hard and not very likely to happen, but it can be done if sufficient effort is put into such a project.

Medieval Times Revisited

Medievalism is a central part of fantasy fiction. The Medieval Times are an epoch dating back to approximately 500 A.D. to 1500 A.D. (Eco 1986a). One could only think of an epoch like 1000 A. D. to 2000 A. D. to get an impression of the vast time frame contained in the period: vikings, crusaders, musketeers, and Nazi soldiers would exist in the same environment. This is exactly how the Medieval Times are treated in role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. It is full scale anachronism. The game has druids from around 100 A. D., paladins from 800 A. D., and alchemist wizards inspired by Renaissance neo-Platonism.

One could assume that if the Medieval Times were a period of technological and political stability, this would be less of a problem. In earlier centuries this perspective was thought to be valid, but the research of the 21st century tells quite another story. It is a history of transition as regards to innovation and intellectual development. It is a history of political instability and newly reformed political stability based on theories about culture and society, ending in new political instability due to epidemic disease, decadence and arrogance.

The Medieval Times can be divided into three epochs: the Dark Ages (500-800), the High Medieval (800-1350) sometimes referred to as merely the Middle Ages, and the Late Medieval/ Renaissance (1350-1500). Furthermore, the High Medieval may be further divided into the Early

High Medieval (800-1100) and the Scholastic Period (1100-1350). This classification is necessary to fully understand the implications of using medieval folklore and myths in role-playing.

The Dark Ages was an age of migration, and the reason the era is known as dark is that there are few written sources of Western European culture as to what happened compared to earlier and later times. It was a time of barbarism sweeping across Western Europe, turned into a province of the Roman Catholic Empire because the capital had moved from Rome to Constantinople. The fall of Rome in 453 (though not the entire Empire) marks the beginning of the Dark Ages.

In the High Medieval period, Western Europe changed drastically due to more political stability introduced by Charles the Great, the King of France and the new Roman Emperor. Western Europe transformed rapidly from a margin of the Roman Catholic Empire to a thought producing, innovative centre. In the following centuries there came a period of intellectual development both technological and otherwise.

The population increase was overwhelming thanks to a revolution in agriculture. Old cities grew and new were founded, and slavery came to an end. It was a time of ingenious inventions ranging from mechanical clocks and gunpowder to wearable eyeglasses and high vault architecture. Moreover, new paper from Toledo was invented in 1085 for rapid mass production, replacing animal skin, which was the much more toilsome to write on; : the reasons why United Kingdom still has to write every law on paper from animal skin is that otherwise new laws would be made too hastily (Hunter 1970).

The common intellectual language was Latin. Old knowledge in other languages such as Greek and Arabic was translated into Latin, and Latin texts were reproduced constantly and were readily available in monasteries, libraries, and universities.

During the High Medieval period, scholastic reading was introduced as a way to discuss text-based knowledge. Scholasticism, contrary to common belief, is not a philosophy but a method to ensure the validity of arguments, and it is basically used to this day in serious research. As for research, the first universities of Europe were introduced: Bologna (1088), Paris (1150), Oxford (1167), Cambridge (1209), Salamanca (1218) and so forth. At least fifteen new universities were built during this period.

Accordingly, being part of the Christian world meant to be part of the intellectual world. When Scandinavia was converted to Christianity in the High Medieval period, the countries did not only get a new religion, but they also became part of intellectual Europe with stores of anciently accumulated knowledge. Christianity was not the anti-intellectual version known today as the Evangelist movement. On the contrary, it was the high peak of civilised knowledge, rejecting superstition and paganism though it must be added they thoroughly documented and wrote about pagan beliefs, folklore and heroic tales of the barbarian days. That said the forceful and violent conversion to Christianity in e.g. Norway was by no means justified (Lidén 1995). Nevertheless, the Christian realm was expanding into unknown territory, and even the barbarians were able to become part of the Christian intellectual world. In addition, connections and trade links were made as far away as to China.

New ways of ruling a country were introduced. In addition to the feudal society, the parliament of modern democracy based on a constitution (Magna Carta) is of medieval design as well.

Finally, from a fantasy role-playing perspective it is interesting that romance literature was contrived. The Medieval readers were particularly fond of episodic narratives such as the numerous stories about the royal court of King Arthur. Furthermore, in 1223, John of Ibelin, Lord of Beirut, held a Round Table Tournament, thereby in a sense organising the first fantasy larp event (Riley-Smith 1973, Edbury 1997). This initiated the custom of Round Table tournaments in which various participants took the role of the knights of the Round Table.

The High Medieval period was a time of change and optimism. The epoch came to an end in the 1340's when a terrible plague hit Europe. The Black Death swept all of Europe in successive waves up until the early 18th century. The epoch of the Black Death is usually referred to as the Renaissance.

The Renaissance or Late Medieval period was the hangover of the High Medieval period. Conservativism was dominant as the Ciceronians conjured up an illusory Empire a thousand years earlier before sickness and despair. They no longer cared for scholasticism and innovation. Instead, they wanted to create a dream world in which everyone spoke proper Latin instead of Scholastic Latin with all of its neologisms introduced in order to convey new ways of thinking and innovative experiences. Rhetoric became the most influential academic strategy, dismissing detailed studies and contemplative thought. The aim was to live by the ideals of Cicero. Sadly, Cicero did not care for science, but only the humanities and mainly from a rhetorical perspective, and because the Ciceronians did not care for other languages than Ciceronian Latin, they neglected romance novels written in local tongue or in Scholastic Latin (Lewis 1959, Stephenson 1962, Kristeller & Mooney 1980). Who knows what was lost. In the 16th century. Christiern Pedersen managed to save *Gesta Danorum* by Saxo Grammaticus and *La Chevalerie d'Ogier de Danemarche* (Jørgensen 2007), which were highly influential for Danish cultural history.[1]

Due to the plague, the rulers could no longer afford the work force to build high vault architecture; instead they began to paint in a photorealistic style, making the buildings look larger than they actually were. This style of perspective painting was copied from the High Medieval painter Giotto di Bondone, who died in 1337 (Eirmerl 1967). While the paintings of the High Medieval period mainly focused on symbolic values, the Renaissance paintings were also made as depictive speeches. For this reason, the painters took much effort in composition – just as if they would compose a speech. The most famous example is the painter Leonardo da Vinci, who studied the human body only in order to paint more precisely. Though da Vinci had ingenious, exceptional ideas for the time period, they were exceptions, and da Vinci was an exception to the norm in those days. To say that he was the typical Renaissance man is not only wrong - he was not even seen as an ideal since he did not speak and write proper Latin.

The Inquisition was a dreadful innovation of the High Medieval period. However, in the Renaissance, the institution came to new proportions when it was used in Spain for the persecution of Jews and Moslems in order to construct a new Spanish national identity. In the late Renaissance, when Spain discovered America, it was not because they suddenly found out that the Earth was round, as that was known in during the Dark Ages (Steven 1980), but rather because Columbus wilfully ignored how big the Earth actually was. Had Columbus not stumbled upon an almost unknown continent (and certainly unknown to him), he and his crewmen would have died from starvation.

The big cities in Italy decreased in population with the exception of Rome, which was reinstated as

1 Gesta Danorum deals with the history of the legendary Danish kings right up until the beginning of the historical period. La Chevalerie d'Ogier de Danemarche tells an account of the life of the legendary Danish knight and king Ogier.

the capital of the Roman Catholic Empire, with the Pope now gaining imperial political power. Seen from the Ciceronian Pope's perspective, this was close to the greatest time in history. Rebuilding Rome became first priority: This was not done cheaply and money was collected for example by selling pardons.

The Ciceronians fooled themselves into believing that indeed the classical virtues were reborn and even managed in some way to fool later scholars into believing that the Italian Renaissance was the high point of civilisation after a thousand years of suffering. Fairly recent studies have shown that this is certainly not the case (Stephenson 1962). The true point of departure from the Dark Ages was in fact more than five hundred years earlier than the beginning of the Renaissance. This is sometimes referred to as the Carolingian Renaissance even though they had no ideology of turning back time (Cantor 1993).

Another problem of history writing of the Renaissance/Late Medieval period is that whenever negative subjects (persecution of Joan of Arc, the Black Death) are discussed, they are described as belonging to the Late Medieval period, and whenever something is perceived as positive (visual arts, the discovery of America), it is described as belonging to Renaissance. Sometimes even inventions made in the High Medieval period are redefined as belonging to the Early Renaissance. As for the more ambiguous circumstances of the era, this strategy becomes even more problematic. The Renaissance is known for the potent power of the Pope in Rome. Seen from a Catholic perspective, this fact is typical of the Renaissance, but seen from a Protestant perspective it is suddenly typical of the Late Medieval period. Using such a questionable strategy helps the Renaissance become everything for everyone (Franklin 1982, Lewis 1994).

To make it even worse, the era that was to follow the Italian Renaissance period is named the Northern European Renaissance, or simply the Renaissance, even though it did not in any way try to restore the Ciceronian Roman Empire. On the contrary, the Reformation was a counter-reaction to Ciceronianism. N. S. F. Grundtvig made sense of this by saying it was a Renaissance of the Viking Era, rejecting the centuries of Catholic reign as a medieval period in which Scandinavia in general and Denmark in particular was kept in obscurity by non-Scandinavian Europeans (Vind 1999). This does not naturally make any real sense, as Scandinavia in general and Denmark in particular blossomed during the Medieval Times, and even more importantly, the 16th century Reformation did not try to turn the focus back towards the Viking Era.

The Northern European painters of the 16th century are commonly classified as Renaissance painters. Having seen a lot of these paintings, one has to disagree. They share the exact perspective only to some extent: while the Italian Renaissance painters glorified the Catholic Church and the long gone reborn past with a harmonious and static style, the Northern European painters were forerunners of the Reformation by taking the best part of the new Ciceronian art techniques to create something close to its opposite. As a matter of fact, they were a revolutionary counter-reaction in opposition to Renaissance art, mocking the Pope and worldly authority that the Ciceronians exalted (Pinson 2007, Franklin 1982).

In view of the fact that the Renaissance is obviously a wrong term to use for the Reformation and Post-Reformation epoch, the term the Baroque (1500-1700 A. D.) shall be used to describe this period. It surely was a baroque time. On one hand there were long-lasting wars between Christians, the plague still ravaged, and there was mass witch hunt hysteria due to the lack of control from the Catholic Church (Cohn 1976), and on the other hand it was a time of theological reform, scientific revolution, and the rediscovery of the Americas.

The Renaissance ended with the fall of two great cities: the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the second fall of Rome (the Sack of Rome) when the troops of the Duke of Bourbon burned and plundered the city in 1527, thus putting a final end to the Ciceronian dream (Guicciardini 1993). At the same time, due to the Reformation, the Roman Church lost half of its empire. On the positive side, America was discovered in 1492, and more than twenty new universities were established during the Renaissance period all over Europe.

The Northern European Universities were not afflicted by Ciceronianism unlike their Southern European counterparts, and consequently they were able to return to the academics of the Scholastic Period a couple of hundred years earlier and develop science and the humanities further in that direction. The success of the scientific revolution arose from combining empirical experiments with the scholastic method. Because of the fall of Constantinople, Greek refugees were all over Europe, influencing the Humanities to focus more on old Greek texts than old Latin texts (Yiannias 1991). This unforeseen development was co-responsible for the ending of the Ciceronian movement.

In conjunction, these developments gave rise to the scientific revolution that was much more successful in Northern Europe than in Southern Europe, due to the fact that the intellectuals of the Northern European reformed Protestant Church were far more eager to leave Ciceronianism and the Renaissance project of re-establishing the Ciceronian Roman Empire.

Still to this day and age, French philosophy is generally more focused on rhetoric arguments compared to the German school of philosophy, which has been more influenced by scholastic detailed studies. In a sense we are still fighting the academic battle of rhetorical style versus serious detailed research.

Medievalism

There have been four waves of medievalism. Medievalism is the study of the Middle Ages as a characteristic period.

The first medievalist wave was in the High Medieval times when the Arthurian legends were written and the knights were playing Arthurian tournaments. They actually tried to live out the fantasy tales they had made about their fantasy king and his court from the Dark Ages. But in this process, they projected their own medieval present onto the Dark Ages, creating a fantasy universe with beautiful ladies and heroic knights in full plate armour. Furthermore, several other heroic romances were written about Dark Age barbarians (Frye 1957). Maybe that is the reason why the Dark Ages is often confused with the High Medieval period by later historians.

It is important to note that the medievalism of the High Medieval period was meant to be neither National Romantic or idealistic, (neither the national Romantic Movement nor Hegel having had come into existence yet). It was meant to portray a past in which the world was not as complex as in the High Medieval period and a tribute to a past when people were larger than life in the sense that they achieved glorious deeds while at the same time making equally epic mistakes. This wave of medievalism was ended by the Renaissance, in which there was a return to obsolete forms of literature.

For several centuries, Europeans did not care much for the Medieval Times. In the 19th century, the High Medieval period was mistakenly seen as the backwards, emotional time before the return of Reason in the Renaissance. In this way, the Age of Enlightenment was mirrored in the Renaissance,

creating a mythology of the return of enlightenment and reason. This projection had, needless to say, nothing to do with the actual Renaissance (Lewis 1959).

What happened was that in the 19th century, some people were getting bored with mere enlightenment and reason. They wanted to have the right to be emotional, and they were looking for a time to project these feelings onto. The High Medieval age seemed as if it had all these qualities. By focusing mainly on romance novels, Arthurian legends, and only the *Inferno* of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, they were able to construct a new National Romantic medievalist movement. Intellectuals such as John Ruskin and N. F. S. Grundtvig were the frontrunners, John Ruskin being the instigator of the medievalist arts and crafts movement (Hilton 2002).

The Castle of Otranto (1764) by Horace Walpole may have been a catalyst novel for the medievalist movement. But it was authors like William Morris and George MacDonald who articulated the Romantic medieval fantasy literature.

It must be added that the there are similarities between the High Medieval medievalism and 18th century National Romantic medievalism in that they are both occupied with a world of less complexity and in creating a national identity. The difference is that the High Medieval medievalists only focused on the lesser complexity of the Dark Ages – obviously not the High Medieval period, and the national identity was not a National Romantic project, making up medievalist traditions as they went along.

Later, national identity was replaced by racial identity and perverted into what should be known as Nazism, reestablishing the leading to the formation of the Third Reich, the first and second Reich being the Holy Roman Empire (843-1806) and the Prussian Empire (1871-1918) (Evans 2005). Because they believed the High Medieval to be identical with the Dark Ages, anti-intellectual and emotional, the Nazis were able to create a medievalist ideal of brute force and wild power. This sentiment had evidently nothing to do with the ideals of the real Medieval Times or even that of the Dark Ages.

The sad tale of Nazi Germany tells us about the dangers of the third wave of medievalism: idealistic medievalism. One of the most famous literary achievements of the idealistic medievalism is of course the sword and sorcery stories about *Conan the Barbarian* by Robert E. Howard. This American wave of idealistic fantasy was inspired by colonial adventure writers such as Lord Dunsany, Sir Rider Haggard, and Rudyard Kipling. Lacking the historical tradition of the European counter-parts, the American idealistic medievalists did not care much for internal consistency, concentrating mostly on mood and dramatic action, and creating speculative fantasy universes.

A later versions of the idealistic medieval wave have been *Dungeons & Dragons*, promising the ideal of the maximum level adventurer; Feminist sword and sorcery such as the works of Anne McCaffrey, Katharine Kerr, and Tamora Pierce, insisting on the ideal of e.g. the emotional sorceress or the female barbarian inspired by Robert E. Howard's fictional character Red Sonja; and the New Weird style, which is in fact politically correct dark fantasy based on post-Marxist doctrines, since China Miéville is an openly confessed Marxist, and even has academic background based on Marxist theory which has been central to the movements methodology.

Neo-medievalism, a term popularized by Umberto Eco (Eco 1986b), can be traced back to Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, who inspired the architect Antoni Gaudí, Johan Huizinga's works on medieval cultural history, and it is certainly influenced by the literary and cultural historical works of C.

S. Lewis. At least the realistic neo-medievalist movement that strives towards realizing what the medieval period was all about and not just sees the time as a projection of our own beliefs and recent past. In this context, the Medieval Times are interesting due to the different mentality compared to that ours, helping to put our own thoughts and believes into perspective. It is especially interesting because contrary to earlier medievalist prejudice, the medieval people did not approach the world in a naïve way. The medieval man actually tried to make sense of the world through complex systematic thought systems, some of which we still use to this day.

There is, however, another neo-medievalist movement, which to some degree is a misapprehension of Umberto Eco's approach to the Medieval Times. It is the postmodern attitude towards the Medieval Times. This movement acknowledges the complexity of the Medieval Times as greater than commonly assumed. Likewise the movement has recognized that our understandings of Medieval Times are largely projections of our own time and recent past. However, the movement still tends to think of the Medieval Times as a naïve period. The real jeopardy with this approach is that it accepts the Medieval Times as a projection of our own time and recent past. The postmodern neo-medievalist approach is not really interested in finding out the truths about the Medieval Times (Plisiewicz, Utz & Swann 2005), but instead of taking pleasure in creating a false mythology by projecting postmodern beliefs onto the time period. This could not be a problem if applied to writing fiction, but being postmodern, the followers of he approach cannot see the difference between their own fictions and the historical truths to be found. The postmodern medievalist movement is a fallacy, trying to mediate between the idealistic medievalism and the realistic neo-medievalism.

Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* is a very good example of how realistic neo-medievalist literature works. Dan Brown's *The da Vinci Code* is on the other hand a popular example of how postmodern neo-medievalist literature works. What is interesting in a fantasy context is that J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* may likewise be read as a realistic neo-medievalist approach even though it is not presenting the Medieval Times as they actually were. However, Tolkien was in fact trying to take the Medieval Times (the Dark Ages and the beginning of the High Medieval) seriously, based on what he professionally knew about cultural history, literary studies and philological studies. This makes it very different from idealistic medievalist fantasy, which most of those mediocre writers that have tried to copy Tolkien's works seems to prefer (Shippey 2000).

Medievalist Fantasy Role-Playing Games

Having a better understanding of not only Medieval Times but medievalism as well, it becomes important to stress how all of this influence affects well-known tabletop role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Warhammer Fantasy*, *Ars Magica*, and *King Arthur Pendragon*, all of which have influenced the larp scene and the videogame industry.

Without doubt, *Dungeons & Dragons* has had the greatest impact on medieval fantasy role-playing. This Gygaxian role-playing phenomenon is far-reaching and suggests that any sort of fantasy literature may be played using this game system, even though it is actually quite different from any other fantastic fiction and sub-creations. By trying to cover all mythologies and technology, they end up with loads of monster descriptions, player character races, and a vast array of weapons, armors and miscellaneous magical items. It becomes not only anachronistic in its approach but also incoherent and absurd.

Even so, it seems to work, mainly because what you are told to do in the game is fairly simple. The player is playing a character, which is supposed to develop by gaining levels through killing monsters. The higher the level, the easier it becomes to slay these monsters. However, more experience points are needed to advance to higher levels, and the most dangerous monsters give the most experience points. Thus it turns into an ever-accelerating race to become more powerful. This game mechanical concept is straightly put hack 'n' slash monster-bashing. Moreover, to make it more fun to play, spell-casting magic-users are turned into mundane parts of everyday life within the game. This makes it even more radically different from non-Gygaxian fantasy.

In *Dungeons & Dragons*, the monsters and magic are disconnected from their original mythology without creating a new coherent mythology. The characters have no consistent place in the game world either, since as "adventurers" they are disconnected from any worldly dealings. Accordingly, all actions taken in these Gygaxian fantasy experiences become superficial without any actual consequence other than to kill or be killed.

Regretfully, not much deep thought has been applied to this fantasy world system and as it seems there is not much to be gained from it either other than escapist behaviour, deserting the real world. Gygaxian fantasy is based on suspension of disbelief. Whenever the anachronisms and inconsistencies occur, the users of the game system are advised merely to suspend some more.

This criticism isn't fair in all respects. *Dungeons & Dragons* does help us to get some sort of notion on how to relate to interactive fiction, which due to the coming of the global computerised world is of great importance. Even so, it is vital to develop the concepts further than the limits of Gygaxian fantasy in order to allow for a more complex and fulfilling comprehension of what interactive fiction in all its forms could grow into becoming in the future.

One such interesting development is *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* by Graeme Davis, Richard Halliwell, Rick Priestley, Jim Bambra, and Phil Gallagher (1986), because it is an attempt to combine the ideas of Gygaxian fantasy with a more sub-creative Tolkienistic approach to fantasy. It must be added that it is not a medieval fantasy game in the strictest sense, because technologically and ideologically it is based on the Baroque period. In this setting, we find massive witch-hunt hysteria, plague-ravaged countries, and a German-like Empire on the brink of falling apart due to inner religious conflicts and outer enemies coming from the East. Furthermore, there is a nascent scientific revolution going on. However, Norsca (the equivalent of Scandinavia) is still in the Dark Ages, and Bretonnia (the Normanno-Celtic country) is caught in a stereotypical version of the High Medieval period.

The fantasy races such as high elves, dwarves and hobbits used in *Warhammer* are closer to those of Tolkien's epic fantasy than *Dungeons & Dragons*. The elves are highly intelligent and inventive, the dwarves are appropriately traditional, and the hobbits do have a peaceful society and are not just seen as thief classes. On the other hand, the wood elves and orcs are closer to how they are presented in *Dungeons & Dragons*. It is interesting that this role-playing game actually succeeds in combining epic fantasy and dark fantasy.

The dark fantasy world of *Warhammer* is more than just a lot of fantastic elements put together. On the contrary, it is a meaningful and purposeful, coherent and internally consistent fantasy world. The main theme of this game world is that player characters are connected to the world through careers. They are not just rootless wanderers, and every career move actually influences how the character is played and gives the character a fulfilling background story. Another central point is

the game world's striking description of the Baroque period's confusion and maniacal complexity, personified in the gods of chaos.

Jonathan Tweet's and Mark Rein·Hagen's (1987) *Ars Magica* is an attempt to create a quasi-historical role-playing game set in the 13th century High Medieval times. It is a game that on one hand wants to present the High Medieval period in a serious manner, and on the other hand wants to create a Mythic Europe game world in which the player characters are supposed to be sword and sorcery magicians. Bridging between these two approaches cannot have been easy.

Contrary to popular belief, the magicians did not fit in nicely with the High Medieval period, and the sword and sorcery magic system is used in contrast to the setting, but it is without doubt one of the most versatile yet strongly themed magic systems ever created. The game designers had no choice but to portray these magicians as disliked eccentrics, almost outsiders to society, in order to make the Mythic Europe work properly. Nevertheless, *Ars Magica* presents a game world which has an internally consistent reality and does achieve an authentic feel with a fascinating mix between National Romantic medievalism and sword and sorcery.

The gem of all medievalist role-playing games is Greg Stafford's (1985) *King Arthur Pendragon*. The setting is the High Medieval medievalism of the Dark Ages, in which King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table live out chivalric quests and romances. The game does not try to describe the Medieval Times as they really were, but consciously presents a literary genre of medievalism through role-playing game mechanisms. In other words, the game is not about getting experience points by killing monsters but to gain honour points by accomplishing honourable deeds. Moreover, the knights and ladies are not outsiders or adventurers, but people with strong social connections to the game world.

To do this properly, the game system supports any activity that chivalric knights and ladies would be likely to encounter, from adventure to courtly affairs and from jousting to questing and romance. Its most interesting new game mechanic was unquestionably the personality trait and passion system. This measures not only the personality of the character, but it also reflects the character's degree of chivalry. In our experience, this system supports dramatic and literary role-playing in a way that hadn't been seen since the sanity system of Sandy Petersen's (1981) *Call of Cthulhu*. The personality trait system has not ever been equalled as regards to game mechanical simplicity, orchestrating the complexity of player choices, and simulating the variety of player character personalities.

King Arthur Pendragon succeeds in presenting medievalist fantasy. The purpose of the game was not to represent the Medieval Times as they really were but to create an internally consistent Arthurian legend. To do this appropriately, the game designer has to know how the Medieval Times really were, yet at the same time realize that he is not simulating the Medieval Times but a medievalist fantasy, and every game mechanical feature has to support this specific internally consistent sub-creation.

In Perspective

Medievalism in role-playing has many faces, the most common being that of *Dungeons & Dragons*. This is unfortunate as such approach to medievalism and mythology is at best clueless and at worst ignorant. Games like *Warhammer*, *Ars Magica*, and *King Arthur Pendragon*, though not quite as popular, take medievalist role-playing to a new level. Firstly, they put forward medieval worlds

that are internally consistent, and secondly, they actually manage to take the Medieval Times and medievalism seriously.

This is not trivial. European role-players often get their own National Romantic tradition mixed up with sword and sorcery or even Gygaxian fantasy. If this is done consciously, something interesting and aesthetically rewarding may come out of it. However, most of the time it becomes a hideous monster.

When designing fantasy games, the designer should be aware that epic fantasy is distinctly different from sword and sorcery, and that historical novels of the Medieval Times are not to be confused with either epic fantasy or sword and sorcery. Furthermore, the game designer ought to be aware of the difference between the nationalistic or idealistic projected medievalism and the real Medieval Times. The realistic neo-medievalistic trend ought to help in that direction, but even supposedly serious text books on the subject fail to deliver truthful insights to the whereabouts of this epoch, instead telling ridiculous statements such as that the great witch hunt took place in the Medieval Times, or that the medieval people did not know that the Earth was shaped like a sphere.

If all of this is done rightly, many medieval style fantasy games would be likely to improve vastly. What the Medieval Times offer to the designers, the game masters and the players is a different perspective on our own world. Needless to say, such a perspective is only fascinating if based on an honest search for truth. In conclusion, we do not need to travel to another planet to put our thoughts into perspective – we just have to set up a serious fantasy game world in the Medieval Times.

Ludography

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Authors

Jussi Ahlroth is a staff journalist and critic at the national newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* in Finland. He has been playing role-playing games since the 1980's. He has written several articles for *Helsingin Sanomat* about role-playing games and the Nordic larp scene.

Troels Barkholt-Spangsbo lives and works in Copenhagen, Denmark. He studies Humanities at Roskilde University Centre and works for Landsforeningen for Levende Rollespil, the national organisation for larp in Denmark. He has role-played for the better part of his life and has organised, played and debated larp for over 10 years.

Emily Care Boss (M.S.For.) is an independent role-playing game designer/publisher and forestry consultant living in western Massachusetts, USA. She has been involved with running and playing tabletop role-playing games for 15 years, and organizes regional mini-cons in her area to showcase independently published games. Influenced by discussions on rec.games. frp.advocacy and a participant on *The Forge*, she is especially interested in collaborative and experimental games. She has recently begun to branch out into live form play, design and analysis. *www.blackgreengames.com*

Ian Dall (MA) is a freelance theologian, C. S. Lewis and H. P. Lovecraft scholar, and a writer. His Master thesis from the department of theology at University of Aarhus was about the great witch hunts in the Reformation period Europe. He has co-written some academic articles about role-playing games with Lars Konzack, and has been an avid role-player since the late 1980's. While he is a professional lecturer on the occult, his interests also include theology, mythology, history and aesthetics.

Marie Denward (B.Soc.Sc. & MA) is a PhD Student in Media & Communication Studies at Malmö University, Sweden, and a researcher in Game group at the Interactive Institute, Stockholm. Her interest lies in the area of participatory culture and young people's participation in media design and production. Her dissertation work focuses on the pervasive game *Sanningen om Marika*. She has worked with The Interactive Institute since 2001. Her working experience includes building engineering and fifteen years of teaching and lecturing in the educational field in Sweden and abroad.

J. Tuomas Harviainen is a master of theology from the University of Helsinki, with over 20 years' worth of tabletop role-playing and a decade of larp design experience. Since 2004, he has been running a volunteer program that does basic field testing on role-playing methods and theories. Harviainen is currently writing his doctoral dissertation at the University of Tampere, on the subject of information behavior in larp environments, and is a reviewer on the *International Journal of Role-Playing*. He works as an academic librarian-in-chief in Turku, Finland. *jushar@utu.fi*

Matthijs Holter is a game developer for aPlay Motivation, Norway. He is line developer for Lærelyst, an educational motivational role-playing game. He has recently finished work on *We All Had Names*, a role-playing piece about the Holocaust for which he received an artists' grant from the Norwegian Council of Culture (Kulturrådet). In 2004 his role-playing game *Draug* was published by the Norwegian publisher Spartacus. He has been active in role-playing and related activities for more than 20 years.

Nathan Hook is a Computer Science postgraduate from the University of the West of England

currently studying Psychology with the Open University. He has been published in supplements for the tabletop role-playing games *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Ars Magica*. He has larped for over ten years and organised over thirty larps. He was a major organiser on the international *Dragonbane* project. *hook_nathan@hotmail.com*

Heidi Hopeametsä is a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Helsinki, majoring in Folklore. She is working on her Master's Thesis on live action role-playing game experiences. Her research interests include different forms of games and playing, from digital games to capoeira. *heidi.hopeametsa@helsinki.fi*

Anders Hultman is a management consultant focusing on non-government organisations, with wide professional experience from the European youth NGO sector. His involvement in many of the major larps in Sweden has mainly been in the role of a legal and financial advisor. His 20 years as active gamer in mainly role-playing and larping has taken him through most positions within the Swedish gamers' organisation Sverok were he is at the moment examining how to bring democracy into the online gaming communities of Sverok. *www.quickfix.se*

Malik Hyltoft (MA) is one of the two principals of Østerskov Efterskole, a school which uses a pedagogy based on role-playing. Through his affiliation with the company, Dansk SpilDesign, he has produced a dozen learning-games, half of which are based on role-playing principles. He is the self-proclaimed founder of Danish larp, having participated in all kinds of non-digital role-playing since 1982. He is a regular contributor of scenarios for Danish game conventions and has published two different role-playing systems and a range of supplementary material in Danish.

Kåre Murmann Kjær (M.Eng) works as a consultant in the Netherlands for a small Danish software company. He has organised a few larps in 2002 and 2003, and intend to organise again in the future. Through his industrial management education and professional career he has acquired an interest in the producing and designing larps, and he is trying to handle this with tools similar to those that are being used in the production industry. *mail@kaaremkjaer.dk*

John Kim (PhD) has been writing analyses of role-playing games since 1992. He has a PhD in physics from Columbia University, and did two years of post-doctoral work before leaving academia for a career in software engineering. He has varied credits in tabletop role-playing games and maintains an extensive website on role-playing games and theory. *www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg*

Johanna Koljonen is a journalist, critic and television presenter, and as one half of manga studio Ms. Mandu, a comic book script writer. She has been a role-player since 1994 and was the founding editor of the larp culture fanzine *Panclou*. Concurrently with the media career, she has pioneered the field of role-playing criticism in the Nordic larp community. She is currently a Finalist in English Language and Literature at Oxford University.

Lars Konzack (MA, PhD) is a freelance game researcher and long-time role-player. His master's thesis was on videogame genres, and his doctoral dissertation was about edutainment games, both at the department of media and information science at the University of Aarhus. Lately, he has been working as assistant professor at the University of Aalborg and has in that context co-founded and taught game design at the National Academy of Digital Interactive Entertainment. He has written a large number of articles concerning topics such as ludology and game criticism, game design and sub-creation. *www.konzack.blogspot.com*

Katri Lassila (BA) is photographic artist who's working with her MA thesis in the University of Art and Design Helsinki. She started role-playing in 1994 in the oldest role-playing club in Finland, Kaksi Kuuta ry, and wrote her first larp in 1998. Since then she's been active player and writer. She developed a new larp style called Adventurous Romanticism with Laura Kalli in 2003. She is a photographer and writer for *Roolipelaaja* magazine. *www.uiah.fi/~klassila*

Andreas Lieberoth resides in Copenhagen, Denmark, where he studies cognition, neuroscience and the psychology of religion. He is a well-known face in both role-playing studies and his own field of culture and cognition, where his interests in imagination, games and the sharing of elaborate meanings and fantasies overlap neatly. Andreas holds a bachelor's degree in religion and psychology, and expects to have his master's in hand later this year.

Markus Montola (M.Soc.Sc.) is a game researcher and a doctoral candidate in University of Tampere, Finland. After working for 3.5 years in the EU-funded Integrated Project on Pervasive Gaming, he is now funded by the Finnish Cultural Foundation and focuses on his doctoral dissertation on role-playing and pervasive gaming. During the last 20 years, he has tried out most of the various forms of role-playing. He's a regular writer for *Roolipelaaja* magazine, and in 2004 he co-edited *Beyond Role and Play* with Jaakko Stenros. *www.iki.fi/montola*

Lars Munck is a free agent illustrator with a masters degree in fine arts. In the Nordic larp scene he is mostly known to be an experienced larper and a skilful networker. In the recent years he has co-organized the first known larp for deaf youngsters and the pervasive larp *The White Road*.

Andie Nordgren is a reality game producer and computer science student currently writing her Masters thesis about tools for game mastering large scale pervasive games, at the Interactive Institute in Sweden. She is a member of the Interacting Arts collective and co-editor of *Interacting Arts Magazine*. She has about 7 years of experience with the Nordic larp scene, and is the founder and a contributing author of a news blog for the Nordic larp scene. *nordgren@interactingarts.org*

Justin Parsler has worked professionally in larp and play-by-mail games for twenty years. He is presently still running games, and also a postgraduate researcher at Brunel University where he teaches game design at master level. *justinparsler@tiscali.co.uk*

Bjarke Pedersen has played, designed and organised larps for more than 10 years. He has made everything from 300+ children-larps to an elaborate simulation of life aboard a Soviet submarine in 1963. He is currently working on making a larp as a living sculpture piece for Sonsbeek2008 sculpture exhibition in Arnhem, Holland, and Projekt Føniks, an attempt to make players of larps into organizers of larps.

Juhana Pettersson is a writer and artist living and working in Helsinki, Finland. He studied in France at Studio international des arts contemporains le Fresnoy. He has written a book about role-playing games called *Roolipelimanifesti* and is the editor-in-chief of *Roolipelaaja* magazine. He has worked as a journalist, made video art, installations, performances, larp and tabletop games. *www.juhanapettersson.com*

Erling Rognli is currently in training as a clinical psychologist. He has been a part of the Norwegian larp scene since 1997, both as an organizer and participant. He is particularly interested in designing short, easily reproducible larps with low demands for preparation, and has co-founded the *Chamber Games* website to promote this type of game. *erognli@gmail.com*

Jaakko Stenros is a game researcher at the University of Tampere Game Research Lab. For the past few years he has been specialicing in Pervasive Games and is writing a book on the subject with Markus Montola. He has role-played for 20 years, and has been writing on the subject in numerous places for over a decade. *jaakko.stenros@iki.fi*

Jonas Trier-Knudsen is a BA in literature and journalism. In connection with his studies of Arts and Cultural Studies at the University of Copenhagen, he is currently writing a paper on the historical aspects of Urban Exploration. A long-time member of the Danish larp scene, he has produced a couple of larps, most notably *Agerbørn*, which experimented with the narrativist ideas he earlier presented in *Lifelike*. Jonas is also a freelance writer for various cultural magazines. *jonastrier@gmail.com*

Annika Waern, research leader and studio director at Interactive Institute and Mobile Life, has been researching pervasive games for more than four years. With a background in computer science and human-computer interaction, her research has focused on the design and evaluation of technology-supported games. She headed the Integrated Project on Pervasive Gaming (IPerG), in which *Prosopopeia Bardo 1: Där vi föll* and *Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum* were produced, and where she recently co-authored the pervasive game *Interference*.

Anna Westerling is a last year student for a Master of Engineering in industrial management at the Royal institute of technology, Stockholm. She has been larping for over 10 years and has been very active in the larp movement. She has worked with the Swedish role- and conflict-games organization Sverok, been the editor-in-chief of the Swedish larp magazine *Fëa Livia* (2000-2005) and was the main organizer for Knutpunkt 2006. Most recently she was the main organizer of *A Nice Evening with the Family*.

Gabriel Widing studies and teaches contemporary aesthetics. He is co-editor of *Interacting Arts Magazine* since 2001, a publication that aims to promote participatory artistic practices and discuss its political implications. He organizes larps and reality games. During 2007 he explored the potential of combining role-playing with dance, experimented with mask play in public environments, and produced an interactive exhibition for children together with Interacting Arts. *editor@interactingarts.org*

Tobias Wrigstad (Phd) started role-playing at the tender age of 6. Today he is an international man of freeform and jeepform, currently operating out of West Lafayette, IN, where he is pursuing a postdoc on programming language design in the shadow of his role-playing career. He is a founding *Vi åker jeep* member, the author of more than 20 con games and a silent partner or writer for a handfull of Swedish art-house larps. *http://jeepen.org* and *blog.wrigstad.com*

Solmukohta Book Series

This is the 6th book in the Solmukohta book series covering Nordic role-play tradition. Solmukohta is the annual Nordic role-playing convention with a strong emphasis on larp. It is a strange crossbreed of a convention, a festival and a conference, where hobbyists and professionals ranging from players and educators to researchers and game developers meet in order to exchange ideas about role-playing. Solmukohta 2008 had 250 participants representing 17 countries.

All Solmukohta books are accessible in the Internet:

- *Lifelike* (2007) in www.liveforum.dk/kp07book
- *Role, Play, Art* (2006) in http://jeepen.org/kpbook
- *Dissecting Larp* (2005) in http://knutepunkt.laiv.org
- *Beyond Role and Play* (2004) in www.ropecon.fi/brap
- *As Larp Grows Up* (2003) in www.liveforum.dk/kp03_book

Solmukohta 2008 was organized in Finland by Henri Hakkarainen, Atte Iiskola, Mika Loponen, Emi Maeda, Markus Montola, Maria Pettersson, Aarne Saarinen, Jukka Seppänen, Jaakko Stenros, Ville Takanen, Heidi Westerlund and a number of other volunteers, under the banner of Ropecon ry, in cooperation with the FreeFall Festival.

The first Knutepunkt was organized in Oslo, Norway in 1997, and since then the convention has circulated annually between Norway (Knutepunkt), Sweden (Knutpunkt), Denmark (Knudepunkt) and Finland (Solmukohta).

Playground Worlds is a collection of articles on role-playing games by leading researchers, artists and other experts. The book documents the theory and practice of the Nordic role-playing scene – one of the most vibrant in the world – and presents numerous methods and techniques that are directly applicable to larp design and production. It also offers a peek into some Anglo-American role-playing cultures.

The book is divided into three sections. *Community and Journalism* includes articles on role-player communities written particularly with an eye for approachability. *Art and Design* covers role-play as the product of a creative process, exposing philosophies and intentions behind specific role-playing works while providing advice and guidance for prospective designers. The *Research and Theory* section focuses on recent advances in analytic and academic thought on role-play.

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