



CROSSING
PHYSICAL
BORDERS

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EDITED BY
KARETE JACOBSEN MELAND & KATRINE ØVERLIE SVELA
THE OFFICIAL BOOK OF KNOTEPUNKT 2013



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This book provides a brief glimpse of larps, people, ideas and discussions crossing international borders. What is it like, being a larper in another country, and what difficulties might arise when re-running your game somewhere else? What tools and experiences are available, and what might we learn from each other?

In line with the very first publication from Knutepunkt, *The Book* (2001: 4), we do believe that “openness towards each other, [enabling] new impulses from fellow larpers to cross borders, will take us further”. In view of this, we would also like to focus some attention on the important discussions about what Knutepunkt is, for whom it is intended and what it should encompass. We have gathered some of this year’s quotes from several fora, hoping that they will remind us to continue debating, and continue evolving.

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AIR CASTLES BUILT ON CONCRETE

EVAN TORNER | When Lizzie Stark pitched the United States run of the Norwegian all-woman larp *Mad About the Boy*, the obligatory Facebook responses of those who could not attend the event poured in:

“gonna have to officaly (sic) pull out bc of finances/moving/crazy life attack...but thanks for keeping me in mind and i hope everyone has a blast!”

“Sadly my job rolled out a new payment plan that essentially amounts to a rather large paycut for me. I really don’t think I can make it which really blows cause I’ve been looking forward to this for months :(”

“All the folks I know who I’d suggest this event to live here in the Seattle area, and like me don’t have the time and/or funds to fly cross country for the game. ;)”

Despite Stark's efforts to make the event affordable, many women balked at the financial commitment. Mad About the Boy became primarily accessible to childless women between the ages of 25-40 with semi-predictable incomes. Put in Marxian terms, the other women's labour-power had already been sold,

**MANY WOMEN
BALKED AT THE FINAN-
CIAL COMMITMENT**

denying them opportunities to attend. In Karl Marx's words, "labour-power is a commodity which its possessor, the wage-worker, sells to the capitalist... in order to live" (Marx, 1847). It is therefore unsurprising that the price-tag of a given larp has a consequential impact on the fiction it generates. Material conditions have all-too-obvious impacts on any cultural product. Players' necessity to eat and sleep, along with joint financial and social pressures all have an effect on play. Why do we even have to bring it up?

The answer to the question lies, however, in precisely in the anxiety that it raises: the Almighty Bottom Line structures our play in ways we can only perceive in retrospect. We live in a post-industrial society. Our lives are now controlled through bizarre ecologies of information metrics, service sector employment, and distantly outsourced labor and material-resource harvesting within global networks of power and capital circulation. These all leave bloody footprints on any artwork we create. Larps and other "serious leisure" activities take place at the intersection of a collectively created fictional imaginary (Jones, 2012). Material conditions permit this imaginary to exist. Payment

for the site, provisions, sufficient vacation time from work, and medical care are all factors in letting the fiction unfold. These banalities become increasingly important in a world where scarcity reigns as a means of human control. We as designers and players seek to circumnavigate these scarcities.

Below, I articulate an informal methodology of reflecting on these issues. Then I follow up with a description of different games in which material conditions reared their head in ways that directly or indirectly impacted the fiction of the larp. These anecdotes draw only from my personal experience, forming a diary of sorts that more prompts us for further self-reflection than it impels us to 'take action' against the material privations that humans experience.

SOME WORDS ON POLITICAL ECONOMY

Political economy is the notion that power, structured by material relations, manifests itself in our cultural products. Capital, as wielded by distinct persons and institutions with propertied interests, exerts rhetorical pressure on us to dream a certain way. As game designers, we believe that our systems and environment are primary forces acting upon our larpers. But to some degree, we are in fact unconsciously expressing a non-neutral stance about how the material world works, about how one acquires power and privilege and/or the means to resist it. In classic Marxian discourse, the material relations are what one calls the

**PROMPTS US FOR
FURTHER SELF-
REFLECTION**

OPTION ECONOMY CLASS



base, and the *superstructure* is the culture that rests upon it. The base and superstructure are always acting upon each other. Material relations produce the kind of cultural consciousness they require (not the other way around), which impacts material relations again. What resources are available produces the limits of what can be thought about those resources. If we read our larps as texts to be interpreted in retrospect (as per Stenros, 2004; Ilieva, 2010.), then do they not also reveal the choices made about resources at the time?

WHAT RESOURCES
ARE AVAILABLE PRO-
DUCE THE LIMITS

In the rest of this essay, I examine the material conditions of three larps in order to find their emergent

political valence. I give a brief summary of the local conditions producing the larp, then a fleeting description of the larp. I conclude with my own observations about the conditions impacting the fiction.

CASE STUDY 1: WMILS

On December 1, 2012, Western Massachusetts Interactive Literature Society (WMILS) organized an adaptation of Meguey Baker's *1,001 Nights* as a larp to be held at an art space. This shift in venue forced us to charge \$10 per person, split between the organizers and the venue. Organizers could thus cover their overhead, and the art space was happily occupied and producing revenue. This meant that we could provide food, costumes, and all the affordances of

SOME ARTISTS WHO
JUST WANTED TO
PLAY “DRESS UP”

a high-budget larp at a fraction of the cost. Those players who could make it required some form of car transport to get to the site, which also prohibited the participation of a certain audience. Charging admission meant we had a smaller, self-selected group of players – some seasoned larpers, some tabletoppers, and some artists who just wanted to play “dress up” – who drove their characters’ stories hard enough that we were able to end after 2.5 hours of play. Players were well-fed, well-costumed, and able to freely generate their own storyline. The fictional result was numerous plots to kill the sultan (myself) that did not manage to succeed. Simply playing a smug sultan in an actual larp space full of plenty was more than enough to incite the kind of smoldering, jealous rebellion desired of a 1,001 Nights game. The political economy of this larp produced satisfied players whose goodwill bled into characters who could not quite overthrow the structures that imprisoned them.

CASE 2: INTERCON

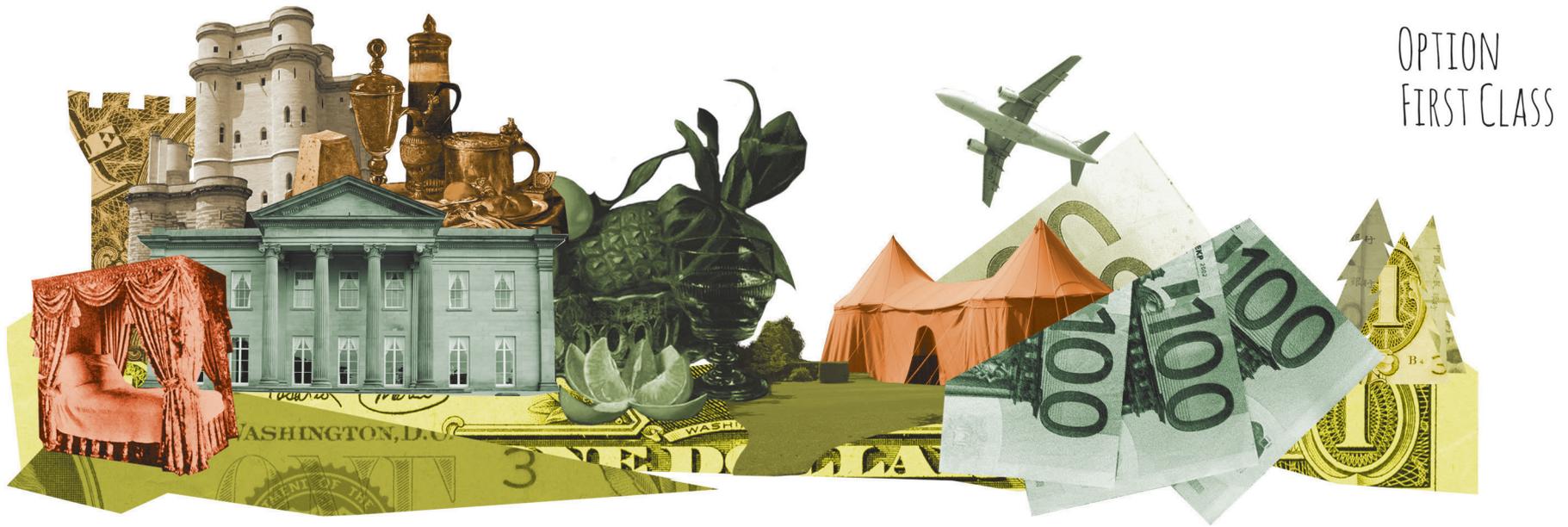
Intercon is a theater-style larp convention held annually over a weekend in Waltham, MA for about 250 participants. They are big enough that they have to deal with expensive hotels, and thus have to leverage their ability to fill rooms with hotel guests against the environment offered by the hotel. Intercon moved from a smaller to a larger hotel in 2010: the expensive hotel Westin Waltham Boston. The hotel was located away from reasonably priced, healthy eating options;

it charged \$7 for a slice of pizza. This did not align with the cultural and economic expectations of the Intercon larp crowd. After the overwhelming complaints about said hotel, the convention switched back to the old (but bursting-at-the-seams) Radisson Hotel in Waltham.

The larp in which I participated at the Westin was a steampunk aethership larp called *Aces over Arkham* (2010), a five-hour extravaganza on the Saturday night of the convention in which two 24-team ship crews in separate rooms fought each other “Battleship”-style. However, due to the difficulty the convention participants experienced in obtaining food, half-dozen larpers never showed up. Others showed up late, and some players left the game because they were hungry. Tension emerged in the game not because of our characters, but because we could not perform all the necessary functions and oversee the action with such a skeleton crew compared with the other team.

Our ship crashed that night due to sabotage performed by a player-character whom I thought had left the game to get food, but who was actually around the corner whispering poison in a GM’s ear. That is to say: our wicked villain characters were actually in a state of poverty, bleeding feelings of player poverty about the corporate hotel. The game became about how we would most gloriously commit suicide. The high price of the convention led to high expectations from

HOW WE WOULD
MOST GLORIOUSLY
COMMIT SUICIDE



OPTION
FIRST CLASS

the game, and the game itself could not accommodate for the strictures imposed by the hotel.

CASE 3: FASTAVAL

Fastaval is a freeform-heavy convention held in Denmark every year, and its original, high-quality scenarios have recently gained international attention. The 300+ attendee convention is held in a school. One would presume that would give the organizers full autonomy over their event. Not so – the Danish government intervened in the year I attended (2010) to bar the convention from using one-third of the school’s classrooms, because of some plants having died the previous year. The political economy of Fastaval is that it’s subsidized for its basic (and capacious) space needs. On the other hand, it’s subservi-

ent to arbitrary whims of the state. Naturally, this had an impact on play.

At Fastaval, I assisted Julia Ellingboe in running her larp *What to Do About Tam Lin?*, a courtroom drama based around the old faerie ballads. The group that showed up was about twice as big as the space that was available. So Fastaval organizers led one-half of the group down to a new playing space: a small hallway in a basement. Due to the Danish government intervention, we were now playing a larp about a faerie court next to little kids’ jackets and a couple of benches in a hallway. The hallway ensured we had a fairly brief and intense round of negotiations before the court

BECAUSE OF SOME
PLANTS HAVING DIED
THE PREVIOUS YEAR

drama. Space limited diffuse character interaction. The hallway became our context: we were interstitial characters having a tiny spat, rather than main characters holding an epic debate. We of course received profuse apologies from the Fastaval organizers – everyone suffered that year – but the question of money and power came surging into our diegesis as we co-created it.

A BRIEF AFTERTHOUGHT

The above anecdotes illustrate some ways that resource allocation can haunt the play and plot outcomes of larps. Political economy is a mode of discourse about culture, but is by no means a predictor of fulfillment of larp goals. Returning to the US Mad About the Boy example, the play outcome of that game (for those who could make it) saw a women-only community built among the characters that was then torn asunder by the same when the last man entered the play environment. Players had mixed emotions about watching their organically formed community torn asunder by a surprise ending, though such an ending

is not atypical for weekend-long larps trying to lure players back. Was this a result of the time, space and finances allocated to the larp, or simply a generic component

of the larp's design? I have no room to judge, for I was not there. But our investment in our characters is never purely fictional; it's also material. My final word is this: in order for us to politically analyze a medium that emphasizes first-person audience, we

have to both take note of the hard resources required to make a larp happen and then our embodied player experiences as we experience the effects of these resources. We must recognize that there's a man behind the curtain, while also seeing the spectacle of Oz and reacting as our characters. Is it possible?

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A RESULT OF THE
TIME, SPACE AND
FINANCES

DEBATE

What Knutepunkt is and who it should be for will always be a debate. If anyone wants to talk more about the process we had this year, hit me up for a beer at Knutepunkt.

MEDIEVAL FANTASY LARP IN BRAZIL

LOOKING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD

GOSHAI DAIAN & LEONARDO RAMOS | The climate in Brazil is often too hot for heavy clothing, even in the winter. The mixed seasons and the tropical vegetation impose clear difficulties when wanting to recreate the classical landscapes one finds in the heroic, fantasy-inspired Nordic tales – not to mention challenges with racial stereotypes. Additionally, we don't have a high Middle Ages history or a strong culture of historical reenactments. These circumstances aren't uniquely Brazilian and they are not obstacles or problems. Rather, such foreign conditions should be a stimulus to think outside the box and produce original contributions to the genre. So then, how and why do we do it? Is it still really a *medieval* larp?

The answer for *why* is simple: why not? *How* is indeed a more interesting question. It asks for creative adapta-

tions in order to fit a genre to an environment, from the physical and fictional scenarios to the local player's community profile. Medieval fantasy larps have a different accent in Brazil. Our medieval larps are out of time. They are not tied to something from our past; rather, they are set in completely fantastic and fictitious lands for swords, sorcery and epic tales.

The motivation behind making medieval fantasy larps in Brazil came from the same sources as everywhere else: from literature, theater, RPGs, television series, movies, and so on. In 2001, we conducted an *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* larp campaign called *Holy Mount* on a small ranch outside our town. This was the same year as the release of the Portuguese translation of D&D 3.0 and we soon moved over to it. Back then, we were all RPG-players before we became larpers. We used a single wooden box with an acrylic top, where we rolled dice for all the players spread out on the field! It was truly a huge

WE ROLLED DICE FOR
ALL THE PLAYERS
ON THE FIELD!

mess, especially after dark. Combat was played out as “live steel,” with heavy swords and axes of wood or iron, and no physical contact at all. But combat was not really the focus

of the larp. What the players really enjoyed was to eat with their bare hands, walk around for an hour without seeing any houses or electric cables, feel how heavy the equipment they were carrying was, how uncomfortable it was to sleep with complete armor on, how difficult was to be dressed in it, to keep track of time without a clock, and to be awake during the night watch.



Looking back, what we did in the early 2000s was somehow different from what was going on elsewhere in Brazil, and what turned out to happen later. The Graal group from São Paulo introduced boffering in 1999, and this started a lineage of different sword-playing groups organizing outdoors activities that focused more on training and tournament than on the drama. Eventually, some one-shot medieval larps appeared in Brazil, (for example *Triumph and Torment*, 2007; a Spanish IXth century diplomatic drama played indoors), but none of these larps had their primary focus on immersion or the development of dramatic storytelling arcs.

Now, in 2013, we are trying to get back to the good things we experienced together in 2001. March 9th, our pilot-larp *Frontiers of Akitan* will have its debut, and with it we are trying to cut the heavy parts, and rather focus on the simulation and drama. This is our attempt to rediscover how we previously defined medieval larps and continue developing them in a new direction.

MEDIAGRAPHY

For a complete chronology of sword-playing groups in Brazil (nowadays counting around 10-20, mostly located in the region of São Paulo), see: <http://compilacaomedieval.webnode.com.br/esgrima/swordplay/>

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HAPPY

I moved the shooting of my TV-show to make sure I'd be here at exactly the right time to get a ticket for myself. Right now, I'm happy that I did so.

MAKING THE ROADS AS WE GO

ASBJØRN RYDLAND & KRISTIAN SPILHAUG |

The *Veiskille* (Crossroads) larp world has grown to become one of Norway's longest living, most active and revisited larp settings. In 17 years more than 30 organizers have made over 40 larps in the same world. Each larp adding to the work of the others in a collaboration that appears to be unlike anything else on the Norwegian – and possibly Nordic – larp scene.

Originally, the plan was to make a short series of larps building up to *Løgnens Rike* (the Realm of Lies) in 1997. *Løgnens Rike* was a high-fantasy larp with many recognizable elements. It had its own rich mythology and unique background, but from a story and organizing point of view there wasn't much to distinguish it from other Norwegian fantasy larps at the time. There were

lots of magic, the theme was the impending end of the world, and most of the players were somehow involved in plotting to save it. We all know how these stories go.

Except that the organizers set the climax of the larp two days before it ended. Magic all but disappeared from the world, gods and demons died, and the whole world was geographically scrambled. The world as the characters knew it did end, and every role was forced to face the morning after and ponder the question: Now what?

The organizers' intention with this was to show that the world does go on, stories continue and this wasn't the end, but a beginning. They wanted to give others a sandbox to play in, and invited people to make their own larps in this new world. This was the start of one of the important principles of the *Veiskille* larps: Greater and more influential player participation. Just as the climax of *Løgnens Rike* made it clear that the world now belonged to humanity, so the organizers wanted the game setting to belong to the players.

Every step of the way, *Veiskille* has been the brainchild of people who balk at the idea of central administration and organization in general. Every major development has been an organic process rather than dictated from the top down. One core idea sparked new ideas, which again sparked others, and one of the prevailing strengths of the network has been the ability to welcome and adapt to these new ideas.

THE WORLD AS THE
CHARACTERS
KNEW IT DID END



The ability to adapt to changes makes the setting very dynamic. The lack of an overarching plan reaching more than two or three larps into the future makes it even more so. However, not planning too far ahead means changes and innovations will have unintended consequences, which in turn have to be dealt with. And so the world moves forward.

Sadly, people were less interested in taking over than the original organizers had hoped. Three years would pass before anything significant was done to explore the world after the magical apocalypse. Just two smaller larps had been held, and the people behind one of them joined forces with the original organizers of Løgnens Rike to form what would – for good and bad – become the controlling group in the years to come: Veiviserne (the Guides).

The goal was still creative collaboration. To make this new age of the larp world come alive, they invited a handful of people to take ownership of the various cultures and countries that made up the world, and develop and maintain these. The idea was that by dividing focus and responsibility, they would ensure that no culture would be forgotten. The Guides worked to coordinate the different ideas and ensure it all fitted into a holistic setting.

Because few people had shown interest in pitching prior to the invitations, the Guides adopted a more controlling function than they had originally planned. Anticipating a need for them to be the driving force, they kept

much of the story power in their own hands. This left the country owners with less influence than many of them had signed up for.

Despite this the Veiskille world flourished. Country owners and others threw themselves and their creative ideas

LITTLE OR NO
FORMAL STRUCTURE
TO THE NETWORK

into the project, some committing more time and energy than most Guides. This period saw some of the most defining larps of the setting taking place, but one thing gradually

became more and more apparent: Despite the best intentions, influence and story power was not fairly distributed. This led to a growing tension between some of the active contributors and the somewhat less active Guides.

The conflict never really got out of hand, but it had two major consequences: Firstly, the Guides retired. Seeing that the role they had set out to play wasn't needed, they officially declared themselves disbanded in 2005, a decision that was met with general cheer and applause. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly in the long run, the conflict about who had the right to define the setting, and its resolution made one thing clear: Defining power of the Veiskille world belongs to those who stage the larps, and those who play in them.

Since then there has been little or no formal structure to the network involved in the Veiskille world. To maintain some continuity and make sure ideas don't get left behind, one of the original guides still maintains a coordinating function. Other than that, each person with

ownership to a country or culture is the final arbiter on ideas or developments that involve their area of responsibility. Where areas overlap, agreement is usually reached fairly quickly. Mutual respect for each other's ideas and a common understanding of the flavour of the game world make it a dynamic collaboration. Ideas regularly spark new ones and events and conflicts in the world appear in response to perceived needs or happenings in other larps. From one perspective, the goal of an open, collaborative larp setting has been met.

With one or two exceptions, all Veiskille larps are made in chronological order. History is not defined beyond what is needed to lay the groundwork for the next larp, and everything builds on what has happened before. This means that the way forward at all times is staked out by the most active and committed contributors. The fact that there are no predetermined political or metaphysical lines to follow also makes the whole thing more real and believable. No one actually knows what the future will bring.

There is a far greater focus on cultural play than on more traditional plot structures. This is caused by emphasis on player participation, making the road as we go and strong cultural differences between the various nations and factions of the game world. In-game conflicts more often arise from culturally predetermined differences of opinion than from any resource based conflict of interest, gamist or otherwise.

NO ONE ACTUALLY
KNOWS WHAT THE
FUTURE WILL BRING



This has led to Veiskille larps getting a reputation for little action. What has been known in the network as *a day in the life of*-style larps are particularly good examples. These larps typically, but not always, take place in a tavern, with travelling characters stopping by and spending a day or two before moving on. There are no plots, very few relations outside of each player group, and the only drama is caused by the various character encounters. It is a form of larping that demands strong and uncompromising culturally based roleplay, and the intense and lasting experiences happen on a small scale. Consequently, there are no big scenes, and it is even more boring to watch than the average larp, which in turn may have had an adverse effect on recruiting.

Another factor influencing recruitment is the amount of information. Veiskille has been shaped by a large num-

ber of people's ideas and visions, which was the intention ever since Løgnens Rike. However, over the years as each larp brought with it new thoughts and additions to the game world, the setting became so diverse it got hard to keep track of all the information. Even veterans found it difficult to stay on top of everything, and for first timers it became almost impossible.

The first attempt to gather all available written information was to put it on a web page. Information was also shared on LaivForum.net. A restricted forum was established shortly after the Guides were disbanded, with the intention of creating a tool that the network could use to exchange information and discuss options. The forums worked more or less as intended but the web page was static and slow to update. It did not inspire participants to create more documentation, and worked mostly as a bulletin board.

The solution was a wiki, a web page which could be edited by any registered user. The *VeiskilleWiki* was established in 2006, and most of the available information was added by the initiator. Contributors quickly joined in, and soon the wiki became the primary online

THERE ARE 959
ARTICLES AND 144
REGISTERED USERS

source of information for the setting. Everyone who had ever been to a Veiskille larp were encouraged to write up an article of their own character, the area he or she was

from, particular events or cultures they had knowledge of, and so on. The country representatives naturally had a responsibility for making their country information available, and slowly but surely the setting details were all gathered in one place.

Choosing a wiki as the tool for documentation brought with it the question of copyright. The creator of a text (or any intellectual property) automatically owns the copyright to it, as in “All rights reserved”, thus legally preventing others to modify it. To enable people to work on any text submitted a more open license was chosen, and later replaced. The license issues were treated perhaps a little more formally than strictly necessary, given the informal context, but respect for each other’s work is an important factor in a collaborative work like a larp setting. Sharing texts, images and other media like this required some conscious thoughts and decisions about copyright.

The wiki still is a mammoth undertaking, which has brought with it a few challenges of its own. At the time

of writing there are 959 articles and 144 registered users on the VeiskilleWiki. It is hardly surprising that many new larpers and would-be participants find the amount of information daunting. The challenge with this amount of information is not only to keep it up to date with recent developments in the setting, but also to enable both players and organizers to easily find relevant information when participating in and organizing larps.

The challenge has become not so much the amount and accessibility of information, as the quality. Because the story of the game world isn’t set in advance, most of the information is written from a present day viewpoint. The challenge is that this present day changes with every larp, leading to a backlog of confusing wiki articles, each with their own sense of *now*. This has not yet proven to be a hindrance for new larps, but it is something that needs to be addressed at some point.

The last few years we have seen an influx of dedicated players and new organizers, some from outside of Veiskille’s home region of Oslo. The first Veiskille larp in the Trondheim area is scheduled for the summer of 2014, and the need for updated, quality-assured information is greater than ever. As the setting continues to grow both in contents and reach, it must continue to evolve and meet new challenges. This flexibility and capacity to adapt, combined with the will to take chances, is what makes the Veiskille network unique on the Norwegian larp scene. And if the interest and activity level in the last few years is anything to go by, we’ll see many more Veiskille larps in the years to come.

DOUBLE D'S AND DRAGONS

ANDREA GIARGIARI | The larp community in America tends to be a very male-dominated sub-culture. However, it is not one characterized by masculinity; role-playing is neither masculine nor feminine. This creates a very unique gender paradox. To men, it isn't manly enough; there's nothing tough about sitting around a table imagining yourself as a powerful hero, or worse, dressing up in wizard's robes. Male larp participants often find an image of weakness imposed upon them by the mainstream. At the same time, there's really nothing feminine about rolling dice with a group of guys all night, or suiting up in a full set of leather armor and sparring with latex weapons. Larp is outside the feminine norm, and often calls for female participants to act strong and masculine. Role-playing is a geeks' hobby, and is ridiculed as such by

the mainstream. This leaves everyone involved feeling that it says something about the inadequacy of their identity, and what aspect of identity is easier to attack than gender? I have lived this paradox for much of my life, and I find that the identities we invent in-game and perpetuate off-game have a lot to say about the gender norms of American culture.

It takes a certain level of self-confidence, or at least self-acceptance, to openly talk about larp with non-gamers in everyday life, as there is understood to be a stigma attached to such hobbies by most people. It certainly sounds like a child's game of make-believe by description, and it tends not to help that the archetypal fantasy geek is a socially-awkward, intellectual, young man. "[Guys larping] tend to be intellectuals, and less [...]overtly hegemonic than in general populace," one male player observed, "There are fewer *jocks* involved in the larps that I have been a part of, and typically, intellectual superiority reigns over physical dominance." The primary larps that I participate in have a reputation for being particularly combat heavy, which has created a healthy respect for the most skilled fighters in that branch of the community, but I find that elsewhere in the American larp culture this remains true.

IT CERTAINLY SOUNDS
LIKE A CHILD'S GAME
OF MAKE-BELIEVE

On one end of the spectrum, this has led to the birth of the *closet nerd*, usually a man who keeps up a mainstream façade while hiding the fact that he partakes in these hobbies to secure his place in the world. I've

heard excuses such as “If people know I larp, I’ll never get laid.” This usually stems from pre-existing insecurity, which can also inspire these people to play the most masculine character they can create within the bounds of these games. No matter whom they may be in the real world, at a larp they can become a personalized Hercules or Beowulf. It is an escape that allows them to be, for a short time, something that they feel they should, but never can, be in real life. This is not to say that every male player seeks the hyper-masculine experience; many participants are secure enough in their own gender identity to play more seemingly effeminate characters. There is no shortage of studious gown-wearing wizards or well-accessorized noble politicians. However, in our culture, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is a powerful social force, which every man must come to terms with in his own way, in his own time. For many, this means embracing *macho* performance.

This setting can also have the opposite effect. There are a number of stereotypes surrounding girl culture that are often seen as degrading or scorn-worthy, and as I have already mentioned, larp culture tends to be very male-dominated. It seems to me that, particularly among younger groups, many of the girls who would otherwise have taken an interest in role-playing are instead sucked into the Japanese animation or anime clique, thereby dividing potential geeks by gender. Thus, the mentality that girls don’t understand larp culture is quite pervasive.

THEY CAN BECOME
A PERSONALIZED
HERCULES OR BEOWULF

This leaves many of us females who do get involved with a strong desire to disprove our affiliation with these stereotypes and be seen as “one of the guys.” To me, earning the title “the man, without the man parts” was an honor. Since larp is a game, and thus has a responsibility to reward each of its players regardless of gender, there is no real glass ceiling. I believe many of the women who participate feel a self-imposed pressure or desire to make the most of their experience as equals. “I think that the females tend to take on more positions of power and are more assertive than the societal norm,” another female player told me, “Whether or not they are playing a more feminine role, I feel that they are more likely to push forward than take a back seat.”

TO BE ABLE TO EXPERI-
MENT WITH MY OWN
PERSONAL FEMININITY

But despite all this, I am still a woman. While I used to abhor the idea of wearing a dress in public, a medieval-era gown felt entirely acceptable, even empowering. Importantly, I do not mean this in the sense of objectifying oneself as a means of sexual empowerment, an idea that has become disturbingly pervasive in our country at the hands of “enlightened” sexism. In a way, it almost feels empowering to be able to experiment with my own personal femininity in a way that does not affiliate me with mainstream femininity. Even though I wanted to be seen as a tomboy in real life, I chose to be a fragile healer rather than a warrior at my first larp. These fantasy games provide a unique outlet to me, and to others like me; a place where we can actually embrace the part of us that is female, safe in knowing that we’re play-

ing characters and not acting as ourselves. My young adult life has been a struggle to distinguish myself from the common idea of what femininity should encompass, and to suppress any tendencies from within myself that I find to be too feminine, so it is almost refreshing to let out that steam by playing a very dependent, feminine character.

I am fortunate in that most of my larp experience has been within games that are considerably less male-dominated than normal; that is, the ratio of women to men is significantly higher, though still not even. In most larp communities, however, there is a shortage of female participation and thus a sense of female idolization around those who do show up. This means that geeky girls, not just at larp games but also in many geeky subcultures across the country, are put on a pedestal. This can lead to favoritism by other, mainly male players, but in ways that many men probably do not think about because such favoritisms are normalized in mainstream culture. Examples of this would include “pampering” female players by giving them in-game items and other loot, being protective of them in combat, or “going easy on them”. Recognition of this behavior varies from player to player; some see it clear as day, and some normalize it to the point of invisibility. “I’ve heard complaints about female favoritism,” one says, “But I do not believe I have ever witnessed it, and I suspect it is just an urban legend based on externalizing failure.”

Interestingly, though he may be overlooking favoritism, he is also not wrong. Externalizing failure is one of



the many factors that play into the opposite social phenomenon; gendered discrimination. Whereas both men and women are often oblivious to favoritism, women who have experienced discrimination are acutely aware of its presence. “Polite means you’re a pushover, asser-

TO BECOME
COMFORTABLE IN
OUR OWN SKIN

tive means you’re a bitch, attractive means you’re a slut or ditz, not attractive means you’re butch or ugly,” one girl reflects, “It’s hard to separate people from the real world, which is

sexist.” This description of female social challenges quite clearly mirrors the backlash that feminist movements in the last few decades have seen in America: the idea that now that women can “have it all,” they are held accountable for every standard, even those that conflict with one another. For example, a girl is expected to be both sexually pleasing and chaste, but too far in either direction indicates that she is either a *prude* or a *slut*. This is seen to some degree in the larp community, where even though strong and self-serving females are supposed to be respected, one who is too promiscuous and attention-seeking tends to be ridiculed.

I find it quite interesting to examine the variations of gender identity that are practiced in the larp community, both in- and off-game, because they often bring to light ideas about gender that are so dominant in the mainstream that we do not even stop to think about them. The struggle to meet the unnatural standards of the macho man, the idolization (though as an object) of females, and the impossible need for equilibrium between all of the conflicting feminine standards are all

very deep-seated concepts in our culture. Yet, I also believe that larp provides a unique treatment opportunity for the symptoms of hegemonic gender identity. A man can get away with wearing a gown, and a woman can be said to have more balls than most guys. Larp gives us a place to experiment with our gender identity in a way that also distances our true identities from any impressions we might make, giving us a chance to try and become comfortable in our own skin. I study the way that hegemonic gender is portrayed in the media, but I find that these moments outside of the mainstream experience give me hope for a true equilibrium to be reached.

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This article is a reduction of my research essay “The Gender Paradox of Live Action Role-Playing,” written in May 2012, which can be found at <http://agiargia.blogspot.com/> or by e-mailing me at agiargia@student.umass.edu.

MAGIC

What Knutepunkt was originally meant to be isn't necessarily straightforward or even relevant. There seems to be a common viewpoint that Knutepunkt would lose some of its magic if it was larger, while my viewpoint is that we could let more people in to create even more magic.

THE HORSE AS A REVELATION

JUHANA PETERSSON | I'm in a Turkish bath, clapping my hands along with everybody else. The groom gets the traditional scrubbing from the bathhouse attendant, who doesn't know that we're playing a larp. To him, we're a wedding party. A small, weird wedding party. We're on the West Bank, and the larp is *Till Death Do Us Part*, the first serious, big game organized in Palestine.

The game was about the wedding of a Norwegian man and a Palestinian woman. The game venue was a music school masquerading as a hotel, but sometimes we had to go out among the non-playing population. In the bathhouse, the border between larp and reality became very blurred. Palestinian players told me that the game was only an approximation of a real Palestinian wed-

ding with its hundreds of guests. But for me, the bathhouse was very real. I had never been in Palestine before, and didn't know enough to say what was realistic and what was not.

I've found that the closest experience to larp in my life has been tourism in places that I'm unfamiliar with. I was in North Korea in 2009 on my honeymoon, and while it wasn't a larp, it was very larplike. The environment felt subtly fictional. I played a character, the "dumb, inoffensive tourist". There were a lot of arbitrary rules, and a game master (also known as the tour guide) who discreetly corrected me when I was about to break them.

The reality of visiting Palestine for the first time and the experience of the larp were hard to separate from each other. Does it matter if I'm in the bathhouse in-game or off-game?

The whole trip was very emotionally affecting, and untangling the emotions that arise from fictional contexts from those springing out of real events was not easy. Both the fiction and the reality were equally new to me.

TRIP TO BIR ZEIT

Susan Sontag has a book called *Trip to Hanoi* in which she writes about her visit to North Vietnam. Instead of writing about Vietnam or the Vietnamese, she writes about her own reactions and experiences. When I read her book, I thought Sontag focused on the inessential. My approach will be much the same as Sontag's, and I

will write about *Till Death Do Us Part* from my own perspective as a Finnish participant.

I've followed news and read about what's happening in Palestine and Israel for a long time. Mainstream media reporting on Israel and Palestine in Finland tends to be uninformed and excessively accepting of various Israeli claims, but there are enough other voices making it possible to educate yourself.

However, the issue with almost all politically progressive reporting about Palestine is that it's news about crisis and catastrophe. And there's plenty of crisis and catastrophe to go around. Nevertheless, this doesn't prepare you for the simple reality of Palestine as a place where normal people live their lives. I'm not sure what I expected, but it was disorienting to see the Hello Kitty store on the same street as our hotel in East Jerusalem. You don't see normal in crisis news.

The larp itself was very grounded, much to its advantage. The wedding concept gave it a simple, understandable structure, and the cultural exchange between Nordic and Palestinian players was reflected by the division of the characters into Nordic and Palestinian wedding guests. Thus, a lot of off-game confusion translated directly into in-game content.

I played Sven, a Finnish former journalist and current labor organizer and NGO representative living in Jeru-

PALESTINE AS A PLACE
WHERE NORMAL PEOPLE
LIVE THEIR LIVES



salem. Sometimes I had to ask to understand the cultural references. Nader, my co-worker at our two-person NGO branch, had the title of “Gaza man”. I asked people at the pre-game party what this meant, and they burst out laughing. Travel to and from Gaza has been restricted by the Israeli army since 2006. Palestinians from Gaza who happened to be outside as the blockade went into effect are stranded from their families. The stereotype of the “Gaza man” was twofold: he’s a party animal because there’s no family to hold him in check, but the drinking and late nights also masked the pain of separation from loved ones.

SPECTATOR LARP

I never thought of larp as much of a spectator sport, but some of my favorite moments happened during the pre-

paratory workshops on the day before the game.

The workshops involved acting out key scenes from the shared history of the wedding couple. Those with characters involved in the scenes played, and the rest watched. One of the scenes featured the bride telling her father and the family that she intended to marry. The Palestinian players did the scene in Arabic. While I didn’t understand the language, the emotional back-and-forth was wonderful to watch.

In a later scene, the Norwegian father of the groom visited the father of the bride, and I was there with Nader supporting him. Normally, the father of the groom should be accompanied by relatives, but when those were not available, the bride’s Finnish former boss and

I WAS STARING AT THE
GLASS, ALMOST NOT
DARING TO BREATHE

his local colleague had to pitch in. The father of the groom had to do things according to unfamiliar Palestinian custom, and one of the rules involved the placing of a glass on the table. The scene, like many of the workshop scenes we did, was funny but also surprisingly intense. I was staring at the glass, almost not daring to breathe, thinking: “Please don’t make a mistake with the glass, it would be so embarrassing.”

The two-day wedding started on Saturday morning and ran until Sunday night. We spent the whole time in character. But of course sometimes the game is more in-game and sometimes less. Often the moments where my character immersion was at its weakest were the ones where the flow of the wedding tradition was the strongest, such as in the bathhouse. During the wedding dinner on Sunday, the players of older female relatives of the groom did such a perfect parody of the classic guilt-tripping, passive aggressive, territorial wedding speech of the mother (in the form of a sing-along, no less) that I completely dropped out of character. I couldn’t process the painful awesomeness and be Sven the NGO man at the same time.

THE HORSE

The line between fact and fiction began to blur even before my trip to Palestine. In Finland when I go to a wedding, I never wear a tie, but with a fictional Palestinian wedding, I experienced surprising clothes-related anxiety. I needed two fancy dress shirts and two ties

that went with them, so I went to an upscale department store and asked the clerk: “What kind of a shirt would you recommend to a Palestinian wedding in the summer?”

To her credit, the clerk immediately came up with several choices.

Often immersion was limited by my cultural comprehension. Sven the NGO man had been in Israel and in Palestine for years, but Juhana the player had not. In front of the other Nordic characters, I bluffed that I knew what was going on, and then tried to figure it out myself later. My character understands even if I don’t.

At one point, we were in a minibus, driving towards the Turkish bath. A drinking song started, and was quickly hushed up. I didn’t understand what happened at the time, but I know that the driver didn’t know we were playing a game, so I assumed that perhaps the song had been offensive in some way. I was told only later that the problem had been one of politeness: we didn’t know if the driver was Muslim or Christian, and singing drinking songs in front of a man fasting on Ramadan would have been a dick move.

IN FRONT OF OTHERS,
I BLUFFED THAT I KNEW
WHAT WAS GOING ON

Sometimes when I asked Nader why people were shouting to each other in Arabic, and the explanation would have taken too long, he replied: “It’s Arab stuff.”



One of the ways to make a larp feel unpredictable and bring the world of the game to life is to bring in a surprising new element after the halfway point. In this case, a horse. This was probably obvious to all the Palestinian players, but I didn't know that horses played an essential role in the ceremony. The groom rides in on a horse, and for that purpose, a wedding horse was employed for the game.

For me, the horse was magic. We don't have many horses in Finnish larp.

PROVINCIAL ME

Many players, both Palestinians and Nordic, played characters who were slightly (or a lot) more provincial than themselves. This had much to recommend itself

as a way of overcoming cultural differences. We can locate and deal with cultural issues, and afterwards share a laugh safe in the knowledge that we're not actually this silly.

My character was too serious for me to have been able to get really into it, but some of the other Nordic characters were worthy of a Ricky Gervais comedy, such as the groom's childhood friend who put on a dress to crash the women's henna party. Sometimes, from the way the Palestinian players reacted, I could see that they were also playing with caricatures, but my cultural literacy was not enough to understand the joke.

One of the most immersive moments in my game involved being shouted at. Almost at the end of the game,

I got into a discussion about labor practices with a group of Palestinian hotel entrepreneurs. They accused me and our NGO of fomenting discontent among the employees. One of them told me that the next time he saw me on the street, he'd break my head. I started shouting back, accusing them of all kinds of things.

Afterwards, I had a bizarre, spaced out feeling. It felt really stupid to have been so aggressive in the face of a violent threat. After the game was over, I talked with the Palestinian players who had been in that scene. They told me that they found my reaction plausible, and also wanted to assure me that in reality they were all nice guys.

I already knew that, of course. On that point, it was easy to separate fiction from reality.

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FINALLY HAPPENING

Let's face it, it's hard to put a price on a conference that has both unemployed people, workers with well-paid jobs and students as a target group, and where you want to keep them all. I think the price differentiation is the key, and I'm happy that it is finally happening, and happening more than before.

DOING SELF-DISSECTION

FATIMA ABDULKARIM | Weddings can be fun, marriages are complicated. But isn't this life? Aren't we all undergoing a journey of change and maturation? This was the question my partner and I drove back home with the first night we heard of a new role playing game. A game that was being used to build both international and internal bridges amongst people and their own selves.

The irony seemed to be that we were already living the dual reality, simply by living under the constant threat of occupation; a threat of existence, even though we constantly fall in love and hold weddings.

We were three friends, and then the idea of live action role-playing went viral in weeks. Friends, and friends

of friends caught the potential of internal change that larp could bring about. In a few more weeks we tasted the fun. We bled, we captured special moments in blackboxes, we went in- and off- game in a split of a second, we bonded and we were eager to larp more. All this had laid grounds for a perfect atmosphere for a mixed marriage game we named *Till Death Do Us Part* where eighteen Palestinians larped next to seventeen Scandinavians.

Discussing tradition was doing self-dissection. From both ends, there was a discussion of the collective ideas inherent in our reality today, including those that go without saying; which are the toughest to articulate, let alone explain. The sophistication in the organization phase revealed the many layers that families and lovers go through in much differently oriented societies. In many cases the lust, love, and pride was very much present in the discussions that shaped the characters and the groups in which they interacted and had to tolerate. It was even clear within the sphere of the Palestinian family itself.

GROUPS IN WHICH
THEY INTERACTED AND
HAD TO TOLERATE

Negotiating the positions of the family members of the young lovers, for example, was a thorny path. So was identifying the positions of the weak and strong, the expressive and the introvert. But, playing into those intricate details and the unspoken image of intimacy was the key to either the eternal bond of the bride and groom and their families, or to the bond falling apart.



The couple did get through the wedding ceremony, and almost all 35 characters arrived and found their safe place. It was a very realistic larp that allowed an easy flow of information and feelings. The larp succeeded in putting forward an open platform of genuine discussions and understanding at very deep humane levels without the formalities of other “bridging attempts” that get lost in interpretation rather than arrive at concrete results.

One important result of *Till Death Do Us Part*, besides the depth of meaning and the understanding, was the strong foundations for a larp community in Palestine. A larp scene in Palestine has been created, and today, there is a localized dialogue in which Finnish, Swedish, Danish and Norwegian larpers are also involved. Many are involved in designing larps and larp schools, and are competing in large scale competitions. Today, Palestinian larpers are preparing for a two-day larp set in ancient times for at least 30 local players.

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BOTTOM LINE

Of course we can take out the alcohol, beds, Nordic countries etc., to make a nicer, cheaper, bigger, whatever, event - but how much can we take and still really call it Knutepunkt?

LIFE AFTER DEATH

ALEXEY FEDOSEEV & DIANA TRUBETSKAYA |

When done the right way, dwelling on death itself can provide the strongest experience in a larp. In Russian larps, The Land of Death (LoD, *mertvyatnik*), is a location reserved for players continuing their play after the death of their characters. Used as a tool, larp organizers now also have a place where they can help players focus on the meanings and ideas considered essential for the larp. Today, one can see examples of a unique art-house LoD integrated into large mainstream larps, and we hope this paper will help to merge these interesting techniques with different larp cultures.

Almost every large larp (more than 100 players) in Russia allows competitiveness, a common practice since early days. Challenges, wars, and adventures with fighting, killing, and the death of one's characters were

frequent events in all larp cultures. Eventually, some cultures (for instance, the Nordic one) took steps to remove some aspects of traditional larp such as gaming and competition, and also went on to remove character death. Russian larps took another path: playing out life after death became a universal practice. Mortality plays an important part in our larps, and the first LoD appeared as a reply to the question, “Now that I’m dead, what am I supposed to do?”. Nowadays, rules for a traditional combat larp include at least one paragraph devoted to the situation around a character’s death (what to do, where to go, what to expect).

At first, we only wanted to play and didn’t really care how or why. All “dead” players were usually gathered at a specially allocated place – the Land of Death – close to the organizer’s camp, where they were to spend some certain

period of time out of the game. To reduce this waiting period, it became common practice to help the organizers, for instance, by playing an NPC for a certain period of time. Usually

there were a wide range of opportunities, from the partially railroaded character, to a full-time NPC intended for a particular task. Such characters may perform tasks like putting new information into play, introducing some characters to one another, gathering information, attacking civilians as abstract monsters (e.g. zombies), and so on.

As time passed and games became more profound, organizers began to think about the philosophical and cultural issues of the larp, and not only about the con-

flicts in players’ plots. Around the middle of the 1990s, a new idea emerged: one could use the Land of Death as a layer of play, too.

RELAXATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECT

Sometimes, a game technique greatly impacts a player’s experiences, perhaps especially in the case of a character’s death. Such a situation might require special psychological relaxation, and so organizers use LoDs for debriefing purposes: to talk with players about their characters, to alleviate some potentially agitated reactions, and to try to start players’ reflection.

Some organizers choose to speak to their players, and some use methods from psychodrama. For example, during the larp, *On the Civil War* (2008), devoted to the Civil War in Russia in 1919, the dead players went to a LoD that looked like a jail. They ended up in a prison cell with dead characters from both sides of the front – ex-comrades and ex-enemies. They had some time to talk, confess military secrets which were of no use anymore, leave signs and signatures on the walls, and so on. After some time the players were taken from the cell one by one and asked some questions under the pretext of the final interrogation. Later on they were condemned to execution. As a last favor, they were allowed to write a letter to their loved ones. After the end of the game all the letters were returned to the authors, so the players could re-read them any time they liked and, maybe, to trigger player reflection.

NOW THAT I'M
DEAD, WHAT AM I
SUPPOSED TO DO?

THEY WERE PUT IN A
PRISON CELL WITH
DEAD CHARACTERS



Of course, if a larp was challenging from both a psychological and a physical point of view, the players might not want to reflect, think, or feel anything right after the character's death – they just want to rest. For instance, after some exhausting and stressful larping at *Cost of Living* (2011), people could sit quietly for a while in a LoD decorated as an airport bar: they could order some food and drinks, relax and, if they wanted to, have a chat with the barman and discuss the game with him.

Sometimes an organizer's goal is to create a clear distinction between the player and the character, and he or she uses rather harsh methods to accomplish this. For instance, at the larp *The Raven's Nest* (2007), devoted to the story of Dracula and medieval vampire legends, the



players whose characters died were actually nailed up in a coffin and covered up with soil for some time.

A PART OF THE DIEGESIS

There are many game worlds and settings in which life and afterlife hold equal importance. A good example is the world of Middle-earth, as rendered in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series; most of the first large-scale Russian larps were based on his books. They describe in detail what happens to elves leaving the mortal world. After death they go to Mandos where they can, if they'd like, keep interacting with the Valar, the creators of the world, or with the elves who are still alive and come to visit them. This approach to afterlife makes Mandos a mandatory LoD in every Tolkien-based larp, with varying implementation details.

DESCEND TO HADES
IN ORDER TO RESCUE
THEIR LOVED ONES

There are many other examples. For instance, in larps based on mythology (such as the myths of ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, and Scandinavia) a character can end up in the world of the dead and continue playing there. The world of mythological ancient Greece features gods, titans, and heroes wandering around

Hellas, and this was simulated at the larp *Greece* (2012). Dead characters went to Hades where they continued playing until the end of game. The living characters could try their

luck and descend to Hades in order to rescue their loved ones. This fitted the game world perfectly (remember Orpheus who went to Hades to rescue Eurydice) and presented an interactive dungeon where other, living characters could come, play and look for adventures.

DISCUSSING THE INHERENT MEANINGS IN THE LARP

In the middle of the 1990s Russian larps changed significantly. Some organizers began to discuss philosophical and cultural issues with the players and created larps filled with such meanings, messages and ideas. The LoD became a good place to examine these with the players.

The first implementation of such a form of LoD, was at the larp *Conquest of Paradise* (1994). The game was devoted to the crusades and was not just a historical larp, but rather, a mystical one rich with Christian symbols. Players whose characters were dead could come to the LoD location and as usual have some rest, drink a cup of tea and then return to the larp with a new role.

Thus the idea of a purgatory was built into the larp. If the organizers judged that characters were ready for the next step, those characters could enter the completely different space of the Celestial Paradise. This complex space included the Seven Heavens. The characters could continue playing at one of the heavens depending on their life, bravery, and faith. The greater the character's life was considered to be, the higher he or she could rise. The First Heaven (Ethereal) provided endless pleasures, including food, wine, dancing hours, etc. The Second (Astral) tested the feelings of the people who got there. At the next Heaven the characters could learn and exchange wisdom; further on there was the Casualis Heaven where the characters played dice with angels, putting parts of their own selves at stake (including body parts, senses, fate, etc.). Finally, there was the Philosophical Heaven where the characters sought truthful answers to eternal questions from angels. The characters who reached the top heaven could return to the historical part of the larp, playing the role of saints, including both St. Francis and St. Dominic. In doing so, the LoD embodied the Christian message of the larp "the Gospel says, the Kingdom of Heaven suddenly sprang, like a mustard seed, in the rough real world, full of blood, pain and filth."

THUS THE IDEA OF
A PURGATORY WAS
BUILT INTO THE LARP

The Black Company (2005) used LoD in a similar way. The larp was based on the books of Glen Cook and combined the themes of a pointless war, and the lust for power and immortality. The two fighting parties – the



servants of the Lady and the followers of the Circle of Eighteen – destroyed each other ruthlessly during the game, making the death rates very high. After a short rest at the anteroom of the LoD, the players were taken to a specially arranged space where they were placed as chess pieces on a large chessboard; an eternal game of chess was going on. The players had to obey two NPCs impersonating chess-players and could do nothing but try to speak with the masters and influence their decisions. In the end, all the pieces ended up either sacrificed or exchanged. Thus, through the LoD, the organizers once again underlined the pointlessness and perpetuity of such a war.

AN ART TECHNIQUE

Finally, we would like to present perhaps the most ambitious LoD in the history of larping, a unique project in Russian larps – *Verona* (2008). The larp is of particular interest because it blended larp and theatre.

The game scene included three reconstructed Veronas at once: a historical one, hosting the conflict between Guelphs and Ghibellines; Shakespeare's *Verona* as he portrays it in *Romeo and Juliet*; and, finally, the modern *Verona* as a contemporary interpretation of the artistic work, influenced by the movie *Romeo + Juliet*, directed by Baz Luhrmann. In the LoD, all these three layers were joined together, which is why the larp organizers raised the death rate at the larp up to almost 100% and made the process of taking on new roles very simple.

THE ORGANIZERS
RAISED THE DEATH RATE
UP TO ALMOST 100%

THE FOCUS POINT FOR
THE CREATION OF
SUCH AN AWARENESS

The organizers expressed the idea of the LoD through the following phrase: “When a character dies, his soul starts its own journey, and we follow the memory of the person.” The dead character was sent to a game area that contained a replica of the historical Globe Theater, equipped with a stage and scenery, and alive with actors rehearsing. There, William Shakespeare and a team of specially trained NPC actors staged the play *Romeo and Juliet* as an interpretation of the original work that also included the game events described by the dead characters. The characters could take part in the rehearsal and stay at the theater until the game ended, or just tell their stories and return to the main game with a new role.

When the larp was over, all the players gathered at the theater to see the final show. This show was an important conclusion, as the play was, in fact, based on the game events. For instance, during the play the Prince of Verona was killed; thus Shakespeare’s story changed through the larp. Unlike the previous rehearsals, and as an unsuspected twist for the watching players, the performance setting featured the modern style of *Romeo + Juliet* film. This way the organizers managed to highlight the third layer that was incorporated into the larp. This larp tried to touch the specter of Shakespeare’s works that have reached us through the centuries; and the LoD, which may have consumed just as much energy as the larp itself, became the focus point for the creation of such an awareness.

A PLACE FOR EXPERIMENTING

Evidently, the purpose of the LoD in Russian larps has been changing with the course of time. Initially this place was used only as a rest place for players whose character died. Now it might not only be a place to chat with other dead people, but also a place to rinse out from the character or complete the character’s fate in a proper way. It might also be a tool for game regulation, or even the final place where the inherent idea of the larp can be revealed. Larp organizers like to use the LoD as a place for experimenting, and a way of creating serious, meaningful larps. In spite of the fact that LoDs are slightly outmoded nowadays, they still remain one of Russian larp’s most brilliant features.

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The *Verona* afterword is available here: <http://ksrg.livejournal.com/399775.html>

MAD ABOUT THE YANKEE

ELEANOR SAIITA | In October of 2012, the Norwegian game *Mad About the Boy* (MAtB) was run in New Haven, Connecticut. This game can claim being the first Nordic larp run in the US, not to diminish Brody Condon's work with Level Five and similar pieces in an art context. Based on feedback from players, MAtB represented a great leap in emotional depth and complexity and a giant shift in cultural context.

To recap for those unfamiliar with the game from its original runs in 2010, MAtB is about women surviving in a world where all men have died, set "three years from tomorrow". The women have come together from separate households and communities in trios to apply to the government for the sperm in the remaining

sperm banks, to decide who among them should become a mother, to decide what family configurations should look like, and, implicitly, to decide what being a mother means now. The game is intended to explore sexuality, power, and relationships between women, separate from men.

I played Lisa, the oldest of a trio of artist characters in the game, who was not eligible to be a birth mother herself for reason of age. Lisa had the most tenuous reasons to want a child of all the characters; her trio was there to make a child into a movie – the last, greatest piece of art the world would see.

As the first Nordic game in the US, MAtB has much to tell us about both the American and Nordic larp scenes, and what games that want to make the leap must take into account. Like this run of the game, I live halfway between worlds – I grew up in the US with immigrant parents who never quite settled and live mostly in Europe now. I'm also a woman of trans experience who's never considered having kids of her own.

HER TRIO WAS
THERE TO MAKE A
CHILD INTO A MOVIE

The game ran twice in Norway, once with all-female players (except the last man) and once mixed (playing the same characters). Afterwards, the organizers found the emphasis on relationships between women was stronger when the entire cast had lived female experience. In the US run, all players (again, except the last man) were women, but the game emphasized the



backstory, framing narrative, and individual character actions, and had notably more violence.

As is standard in more philosophical Nordic games, the backstory existed mostly to motivate exploration of women's relationships, provide a platform for play, and give players enough to relate to so they could immerse in their characters. Details were considered largely unimportant except where they were established as real by play or contributed to the collective story, and could be changed or invented by players as needed.

During online preparation for the US run and in pre-game workshops, the organizers emphasized the notion of playing to lose and for dramatic effect and talked about co-creating the story. In the Nordic runs (es-

pecially the all-women run), the first act of the game centered on the process of characters becoming a collective to make decisions in the second act. In the US runs, this didn't happen. While the characters formed functional work relationships and separate family units became group identities, these group identities were what interacted, a dozen separate teams. During the first act, most player engagement was spent networking – trading putative favors, weaving details irrelevant to the nature of the world inside the room. By contrast, in the Nordic runs, the players spent more time building a shared story.

This primacy of the collective story above individual stories is the most distinct difference between the Nordic and US runs of MATB. Much (but not all) of the

US larp tradition has come from a lower-middle class and escapist background – players with just enough money to have time to play but not enough agency in the world to not need the escape, as described in Lizzie Stark’s “We Hold These Rules to be Self-Evident: Larp as a Metaphor for American Identity” in *States of Play*.

AMERICAN GAMES
USUALLY RUN AS
“PURE” COMPETITIONS

American games usually run as “pure” competitions, divorced from player skill and on a nominally fair playing field. Game balance means ensuring equality of starting point.

Playing to lose is foreign, as gaming is seen, in part, as a chance to exercise agency in the world one otherwise doesn’t have. Here, authorial access to backstory must be policed because it represents unequal agency in the world’s structure. By contrast, in a Nordic game, emphasis is likely to be on equality of outcome, ensuring players have equally interesting experiences. How much agency each character takes is less relevant, to the point that higher status characters often have less effective agency as their actions could prevent the collective story from functioning as all parties intend.

The nature of collectivity in each country may have been the core difference between the runs, but the logistics of staging likely shifted the outcomes too. As the US scene is more fragmented, most players didn’t know each other before the game and definitely didn’t have a history of playing games like this together. Due to logistical and cost considerations, both the workshops and first act of the game were cut short. This is likely to be a continual issue in running Nordic games in the US.

Relatively long (three or four day) Nordic games with workshops set weeks prior to the game are hard when most of a game’s player base is flying cross-country and when vacation time is rare and expensive for players. In the US, most larps (excepting those on holiday weekends) run Saturday morning or Friday night through Sunday evening with no in-person preparation, a box we squeezed MAtB into. The limited time meant characters had less time to become a community.

Still, more time wouldn’t have allayed the basic suspicion with which most characters approached the government and each other. This, combined with the shift in how backstory was used, meant many characters approached the government representatives as peers with whom they’d come to fight for a scarce resource. Without a collective identity, we fell back on a romanticized notion of apocalypse as a reversion to the freedom of an imagined frontier. Coming with the expectations of a Nordic game, this dynamic was surprising, but hard not to play into.

CHARACTERS HAD
LESS TIME TO BECOME
A COMMUNITY

Organizers of Nordic games being translated to the US may find they need to recalibrate to account for greater friction in forming collective identities and less friction for more individualist play.

The individualist perspective may have been a defense mechanism for some players. For all but a half-dozen players, this was the first game they’d played that asked them to take on this much emotional weight. Playing the story as an adventure provided an escape valve,



turning internal tension into adrenalin, and was also the perspective supported in the tradition most players were used to. This isn't to say that some – or even many – players weren't heavily emotionally engaged with play.

I was expecting a complicated relationship with the subject matter and my character. As a woman of trans experience, playing a cisgendered character (whose internal and performed gender identity

THE ACCESSIBILITY
OF MATB CAME UP
AFTER THE GAME

matches their medically assigned-at-birth sex) means simultaneously negating and validating things that are formative for me; likewise, separate

from that identity, I've never considered being a mother. Initially, I wasn't sure if this game was for me – I've considered and decided against other high-profile games

(like *Kapo*) because they covered subjects too close to home. This is standard in the Nordic tradition – not every game is for everyone.

In the US, there's a notion of accessibility – if you can afford to play and want to, you can. The accessibility of MATB came up after the game.

The narrative assumed, loosely, that the Event killed everyone with a Y-chromosome, including almost all trans women. While chromosomal selection is epidemiologically implausible and does not represent the (lack of a simple) biological basis for sex, it's no more implausible than the basic premise. The authors state that this was a significant, but intentional simplification given the areas they wanted to explore. A more com-

plex notion of who lived would be no less contrived and would shift focus toward how gender is defined or sex constructed. By using naïve categories, a more focused but still somewhat inclusive story could be told. Playing with emotional depth requires picking one story, and that means excluding others.

I wasn't the only trans woman player, but all characters were cisgendered except for one trans man. There was feedback after the US game – in part from trans members of the community – that this was transphobic. I thought beforehand about whether I wanted to play in a world where I'd be dead and decided it didn't matter for me this time.

Exclusion comes with real costs when some stories are always selected, and it was unfortunate that the first game Nordic game to come to the US left players feeling outside. The Nordic scene is homogenous, even compared with the society it grew from. It's telling that in the fifteen plus years Nordic games have run, the larp *Just a Little Lovin'* was the first specifically gay larp – and this in a community with many respected gay members. Even in that game, the racial dynamics of the New York gay scene were abbreviated at best. I understand why; in part, they're complex even for New Yorkers and - as in MATB – they weren't the focus. In the interests of a stronger collective story, if your identity isn't important to the story, there often isn't room for it. If you, the player, are left-handed, no one questions your charac-

WHETHER I WANTED
TO PLAY IN A WORLD
WHERE I'D BE DEAD

ter's left-handedness – it's hard for a player to change and rarely gets in the way. If you as a player are queer and it's not a game about queer identities, you may be seen as hijacking the story if you don't normalize your character into a straight identity.

The stereotypical outcome for a Nordic game, especially a post-apocalyptic one, is *larp democracy* – the recapitulation of an idealized Scandinavian society. As an outcome, this avoids the hard work of seeing where the cracks are in that society, of understanding how it breaks. In the US, the equivalent stereotypical outcome may be a perfectly harmonious, but multicultural market, where everyone gets along despite massive differences, lives side by side without tension, and starts out even. In the second act, when the last man showed up out of the woods, the other players acted to ensure that he, like everyone, had agency, to the point of forcing him against his will to make decisions and express preferences.

THE STEREOTYPICAL
OUTCOME OF A
NORDIC GAME IS
“LARP DEMOCRACY”

When he showed up, there was no larp democracy, but rather many different factions bidding with what they had, trying to see who could make a solution to the problem stick. The second act ended hours earlier than the organizers planned – it turns out that markets are faster than social democracies at making decisions if you're not worried about outcome equality.

As a player and theorist, I'm interested in larp as a political tool, not just as art. From that perspective, this was

a wakeup call about limits for politics in larps. Much of the message of Nordic larp that I see as important is embedded in the organizational structure and the way games are run, in the act of telling a story as an equal and autonomous collective, and in the ability of deep embodied emotional play to help people understand a social structure. All of these may not translate outside of the Nordic context as easily as it first seemed.

They say perspective is worth 40 points of IQ, and there's no perspective as useful for teaching as seeing what a story you thought you understood means somewhere else. As happened within the Nordic context, with time and care we'll learn how to tell stories that cross borders. Both sides will be richer for it.

LUDOGRAPHY

Just a Little Lovin', 2011. Tor Kjetil Edland, Hanne Grasmo; Norway.

Kapo, 2011. Anders Berner, Jakob Hedegaard, Kim Holm, Juliane Mikelsen, Peter Munthe-Kaas, Frederik Nylev, Rasmus Petersen; Denmark.

Mad about the Boy, 2012. Lizzie Stark, Tor Kjetil Edland, Trine Lise Lindahl, Margrete Raaum, A. A. George, Jeremy Merritt, Sarah Miles; Orange, Connecticut, USA.

WHY?

I'm not even sure *why* costs have to be so high. What do you guys do at KP anyway?

CROSSING THE ALPS

THOMAS B. | International larp conventions can be fun and inspiring, but these benefits are often reaped by a minority of well-traveled international larpers. So after attending GNiales in France, Knudepunkt in Denmark and Solmukohta in Finland, I thought the local Swiss larping scene, with its game diversity and local talent, also could benefit from such an event. The one thing about the Swiss larp scene is probably its division into two highly segregated linguistic and larp-style zones. In the western part of the country, the larp scene is influenced by France, while there are more German influences in the center and the east (for more, see my talk at Knudepunkt, 2011). Therefore, as a French speaker I didn't even bother checking whether the German-speakers had a con and just decided to create a local one. With a 15+ years tradition of discussing, experimenting

and documenting, Knutepunkt felt like the ideal inspiration. But after a few informal discussions with Swiss larpers, the concept of talking instead of doing met with some resistance. Why would anyone want to meet and talk about larp, instead of, you know... actually play?

PROBING THE WATER: THE 2011 ROUNDTABLE

These reactions meant I needed to start small, and not even aim for a full-day convention. I needed a hook, some sort of immediate benefit to convince both organizations and unaffiliated larpers to attend. Since there is no Swiss larp federation, and the main online portal was pretty much dead at the time, larpers needed to either be friends with organizers or go to each group's website/Facebook page separately to find out about upcoming events.

WHY WOULD ANYONE WANT TO MEET AND TALK ABOUT LARP?

This fosters inbreeding, and so the idea was to get all local larp groups in one room to introduce themselves, their creative agenda and present their games. This way, local larpers could learn about the groups, shop around for games, discuss differences live and hopefully cross-fertilize. Some groups were very positive to the idea, other less so.

“Those who feel a passion for doing, yet have a dislike of studying, tend to also dislike all analysis and theory relating to what they do. It is seen as someone else trying to impose rules on their art and craft” (Harviainen, 2013). The most extreme version of this type of reaction came from one of the leaders of the largest fantasy larp group. Upon receiving my invite, he opened his e-mail

reply with direct threats to the person who gave me his contact info. He then turned his written anger towards me, with choice sentences like “thanks in advance for never contacting me again for sterile debates or the mental masturbation you seem to like so much” and “I don’t have time to waste with such bullshit”. While this was not representative of his group as a whole (they did attend the event), to this day I still wonder what prompted so much hatred considering we barely knew each other.

As organizing the event proved work-intensive for a one-man show, I borrowed the cafe area of the local gaming convention, since most local larpers also play tabletop roleplaying games. While this meant conflicting schedules for some attendees, it would ensure enough of a draw to the location to motivate skeptics to drop by.

The meeting was divided into three one-hour sessions. The first was “Larp in Western Switzerland”, i.e. the actual roundtable, the next two were a soft introduction to Knutepunkt-like elements. After a presentation of larp outside of Western Switzerland, I offered two options: either a screening of larp videos or a debate on a controversial topic. I felt the latter would be more interactive and offered a topic suggestion: “With the combined influence of mass battle larps and MMORPGs, is Swiss larp turning into live-action video gaming?”. Several individual larpers commented against the debate, saying that it would degenerate into a flame war, and that flame wars were one of the causes of the coma of the larp online portal. This was the first hint that



unlike France, my country of origin, consensus in Switzerland is not reached through fiery public debates, but rather through series of one-to-one meetings in smaller, private settings. So videos it was.

The lineup of presenters for “Larp in Western Switzerland” confirmed that, while everyone knew the big organizations, several smaller groups only played among themselves, and thus were basically unable to distinguish themselves from the others – or they just never discussed differing standards. It was fascinating to observe the crowd’s reaction when one presenter described a historical medieval game as realistic ...even though it ended with an orc attack.

As planned, the last two items included a soft introduction to the Knutepunkt spirit, opening local larpers to the diversity and weirdness of the larp world. Few had heard of Nordic-style bleed or seen its more

THE VIDEO SESSION
SHOWED ALL OF
THIS WAS REAL

literal Russian re-enactment combat equivalent. Sharing experiences from their scenes of origin, an American Vampire larper explained some of the more gamist motivations, and a Belgian larper explained that her scene was not only about Avatar, even though it got the most exposure due to sheer size. After so much talking, the video session showed all of this was real. Local Swiss videos provided some fun regional team spirit and past Knutepunkt events were great sources for shock value (from the Russian video saloon at KP2011 to the *Delirium* documentary).

Written and verbal feedback received from most of the thirty-ish attendees was overwhelmingly positive, eager to do it again the following year, some volunteering to add more program items. But unofficial feedback gathered through word of mouth and free beers revealed that the topics covered were not what the large fantasy organizations were interested in. They would have liked it more about practical matters, from insurance to legal aspects to how to obtain large outdoors wooded sites, a recurring problem in Switzerland. They already had a yearly meeting reserved for group leaders to align calendars and were less excited about this larger, more open version. Bottom line: just like the 2011 roundtable, the 2012 convention could happen but as a one-man organization, so it needed to be small.

WHERE IT'S PERFECTLY
OK TO BRAG ABOUT
YOUR OWN GAME

RELEASING THE KRAKEN: GN'IDÉE 2012

I benefited again from the local tabletop gaming convention Orc'Idée (a pun with ork, orchid and idea) and created GN'Idée. To keep the dubious pun theme, GN means larp in French, idée means idea and its French pronunciation roughly sounds like “I have an idea”. The larp con was embedded in the tabletop con, so if it sucked people could still leave and go for a pickup game of D&D next door. The format was expanded to a full day with two tracks, one practical, and the other theoretical. I wanted to keep the KP spirit where it's perfectly ok to brag about your own game and go on crazy brainstorm or rants. However, I knew that if the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, a way to



a Swiss larper's heart is through her or his gear, from props to makeup. For this part, the GNiales French con was a great inspiration, as its technical workshops are more numerous and hands-on than KP's.

The con opened with short presentations of new games for the 2012-2013 larp season, with mostly returning groups, some new ones and minus a couple who didn't like the format. Then the program items started properly, and participants made custom vampire teeth, aged themselves with makeup and learned techniques for wounds and boils makeup. In *Nerf vs. LazerTag* the same fight was played twice in and around the convention building, once with foam dart toy guns, the other time with infrared toy guns. The goal was to test for which types of larps which system was most appropriate but it was also a fun physical exercise and convinced a visiting journalist's kids that larping was cool. A social anthropology master's thesis on larp was presented, a rare event in a scene where larp academia is non-existent. International larp videos provided shock value again, the best audience reaction came during excerpts of the *Mad about the boy* documentary; "damn, this is the first time I see a larper in a larp video who can act!". Practical things ended with free online tools to write and organize larps, and I still use the Google tricks I learned that day.

The original plan for the evening was to have a mini larpwriter masterclass, with experienced larpwrights explaining tricks of the trade to the next generation, but no young larpers signed up. This item thus turned

into a roundtable where organizers just shared how they created games, from the original idea to scenario writing. The debate went in all directions, including an impromptu introduction of the Gamist-Narrativist-Simulationist (GNS) theory by visiting French larpers. Considering this was the first time locals sat down to discuss larp writing, discovering each other's priorities, I'd call it a success.

MANY BORDERS TO CROSS

GN'Idée 2012 definitely enabled some border-crossing. It took two years and did not convince everyone, but now a sizable chunk of the local larp scene knows the benefit of just talking about larp for a day, without actually larping. Sixty participants for a region that boasts less than two million inhabitants is a pretty good turnout. Of the attendees who provided written feedback, 83% found

WITHOUT PANDERING
TO OR TRASHING
ORGANIZERS IN PUBLIC

the con very good, 17% good. Several larpers who were suspicious of the concept had fun, and some volunteered to provide a much needed help in logistics. Even pure tabletop roleplayers were inspired, now wanting to do a similar thing for their hobby during Orc'Idée.

GN'Idée 2012 was not perfect: not enough time was given for discussion, meaning people had to rush from one item to the other. Some workshops filled up very fast. Speakers are still overwhelmingly male and experienced larp organizers. I would love more gender balance, and more player feedback. I am still looking for a way for players to talk about their experiences and

hopes for local games, without either pandering to or trashing organizers in public.

Finally, if GN'Idée keeps on growing, the language division will become a challenge: in true Western Switzerland tradition, much more people were comfortable with the idea of speaking English with visitors than speaking German. But as explained, there is not much inherently Swiss about Swiss larp, so GN'Idée's value add to the European convention circuit is still unclear. In the meantime, proposals for 2013 are flowing in, from writing characters using cinema techniques to sewing or first aid classes, and a messier crafting workshop. I am not sure what borders will be crossed with this last item, but I have already secured fifty square meters of tarp.

MEDIAGRAPHY

My talk at Knudepunkt, 2011: <http://www.thomasbe.com/2012/07/02/larp-in-switzerland/>

Official page for GN'Idée on the Orc'Idée website (in French): <http://www.gnidee.org>

The *Delirium* documentary: <http://vimeo.com/20204733>

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A MEET-UP

People meeting across borders is naturally the great thing on Knutepunkt. It's a meet-up in so many ways.

THE MISSING LINK

JOHANNES AXNER | The Nordic larp community has a big strength in that it is full of magnificent and interesting ideas. On the other hand, it also has a big weakness in that the ideas and knowledge spread out through the scene aren't well documented, and little discussion is done between subcultures and groups. There have been great efforts made to rectify this before, the most prominent one being Knutepunkt and its books, but something has been missing. There has been a need for something acting as an adhesive, a space for discussion and documentation that goes beyond the restrictions of space and time that conferences and books offer.

Nordiclarp.org is meant to be this missing link, the glue to fill the spaces between the different parts of the community and complement the Knutepunkt confer-



Blog



Wiki



Forum

ence, its books and other physical meeting places and publications.

I want to share the history of the project, the ideas behind it, and my hopes for its' future: An online meeting place and central node for the Nordic larp scene.

HOW IT CAME TO BE

After Solmukohta 2012, it became clear that it was too hard to take in the collective knowledge of the Nordic larp scene. Reading the Knutepunkt books is quite tedious, and they don't provide the complete picture. Frustrated with the lack of a central online knowledge base about Nordic larp, I decided to start it myself. So, on April 20th, 2012 I set up the first version of the *Nor-*

dic Larp Wiki and started inviting my friends from the Nordic larp scene to edit it. Since then, it has grown to become a lot more.

WHAT IT IS

The site is meant as an online complement to the physical meeting places centered around Nordic larp. In particular, Knutepunkt and Nordic Larp Talks, but of course also the games themselves and other gatherings like Prolog, Grenselandet, Fastaval, and Forum.

The first part is a blog where we report news, opinion pieces and re-publish interesting writings about Nordic larp from around the web. Ideally, you should be able to keep track of news, what games are coming up and what

people are saying about them, without having to look around at dozens of other websites, forums and blogs.

The second part is the wiki, used to document as objectively as possible. It's both a historic record and a documentation of games and game design techniques. Where the blog, forum and Knutepunkt books are more opinionated and have specific angles, the wiki aims to be an encyclopedia for Nordic larp. Anyone should, regardless of prior knowledge, be able to find what they're looking for and become informed on the subject.

Third and last is the forum. Here we can discuss and have a less controlled tone than in the blog and wiki. Where the blog is the newspaper and the wiki the library, the forum is the clubhouse. It is meant to be more akin to an online version of Knutepunkt; a place to meet, talk, discuss and evolve new ideas.

HOW IT'S DONE

I act as a technical editor, making sure that all the tools are in place for those who want to contribute. There is no board of advisors; Nordiclarp.org is what the community wants it to be. If you're missing any content from the site, just join in and help out.

We're organizing everything in a Facebook group, talking about what and how we want to do things. The blog is really the only part with any sort of editorial work, as the wiki and forums are controlled by those who choose

to contribute to them. The idea is not to be a centrally controlled entity but to let the scene decide what comes forth.

The blog is taking shape and is run in a very organic way. We are two editors at the moment, hoping to eventually have editors from all the Nordic countries.

HOW TO CONTRIBUTE

We really want more contributors and editors for all parts of the site, and no addition is too small. You can write texts for the wiki, edit spelling or formatting, write texts for the blog, discuss on the forum and many other things.

If you want to help out, check out the site for contact information or just send us an email:
contribute@nordiclarp.org

BIBLIOGRAPHY

<http://www.nordiclarp.org>

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THOMAS B. is a 30-something French larper living in Switzerland. A scientist by day and larpwright/player by night, he travels to international events as much as work allows. To bring the fun home, he created GN'Idée (<http://www.gnidee.org>), the French-speaking Swiss larp convention. His next project is Afroasiatik, a kung-fu hip-hop larp.

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ALEXEY FEDOSEEV is a game master, larp critic and theorist from Moscow, Russia. 30 years old, with more than 10 year experience of larp playing and writing. Today his main interests lie in the field of educational activity - he researches and designs educational larps in Lomonosov Moscow State University.

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JUHANA PETERSSON (b. 1980) is a Finnish novelist, journalist, tv producer and game designer. His best known larp is Luminescence, with Mike Pohjola in 2005. He is the designer of the roleplaying game Ikuisuuden laakso (2009), also published in English and in Danish, and the producer of the videogame tv show Tilt.

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ELEANOR SAITTA is a hacker, designer, artist, writer and barbarian with a vocation of understanding how complex systems fail and redesigning them to fail better. She's interested in larp theory and embodied play for social change. Eleanor is nomadic, living in airports and occasionally in New York, London, Stockholm, and Berlin.

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KRISTIAN SPILHAUG, 35, is a player and larp organizer from Oslo, Norway. His primary focus for the last decade has been on the Veiskille world, though he has also worked to promote and facilitate all types of larp activities all over Norway..

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EVAN TORNER, age 30, is a larpwright, game studies scholar, and German film scholar based out of Northampton, Massachusetts, USA. He co-edited the book Immersive Gameplay (McFarland, 2012) with William J. White and writes freeform scenarios for Fastaval and Intercon, including the scenario Metropolis.

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DIANA TRUBETSKAYA is a larp player and game master from Moscow, Russia. She started playing in 2000 and writing larps in 2005. Usually she specializes on the technical but essential aspects of game mastering, e.g. NPC coordination. She likes larps for the opportunities of easy self-expression and versatility. Diana can be easily found on Facebook and Twitter (@dtrub).



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