

# lifelike

*Lifelike* is a book on larp. It holds a multitude of tales, stories and academic articles on the fantastic and creative explosion of energy, larp is. The main purpose of the book is to inspire imaginations, and with the help from our authors, we think, we have succeeded. *Lifelike* is serious – but hopefully without being boring.

The book is divided into five chapters. The first chapter on *Character* focuses on the relationship between role, participant and character. The second chapter, called *Game* is about interaction and the entire larp. This is followed by the *Scene*-chapter, in which the texts focus on the people doing larp. The fourth chapter, *Society*, looks at applications of larp in other fields. The Final chapter, *Openings*, is a bit different: Where the rest of the chapters are written by researchers, artists and game designers who are part of the larp community, *Openings* is a series of short interviews with people from outside the larp community.

*Lifelike* is published in conjunction with the Knudepunkt 2007 conference.

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edited by  
jesper donnis  
morten gade  
line thorup

knudepunkt 2007

lifelike

**Lifelike**

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Edited by: Jesper Donnis, Morten Gade & Line Thorup

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# preface

We had been trying to coin a phrase for ages. We wanted a title that told the story of larp in a new way: As the fantastic and creative explosion of energy that it is. Sort of like life it self. Also, we wanted the title of the book to tell a story of representation: One of characters representing people, costumes representing clothes and little kids representing kings and heroines. But we also wanted the title to describe what larp is not: A full representation of life.

We had been trying for ages, but found the inspiration on the bottom of a bottle of red wine. *Lifelike*, Line said. And instantly, we fell in love with the word.

*Lifelike* as title tells all the tales, we love about larp. We believe that a larp is much like life itself. Only it's not. It's a representation of life – much as the doll on the cover of this book is a symbol of something else.

In this book, we collect some of the many personal and academic truths on what larp is. To some, it is magic, to some it is art. To some it is plain entertainment. *Lifelike*, isn't it?

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When we last did a book in Denmark, the challenge of the Nordic Larp scene was about being taken serious. Except a few larpers, no one seemed to take larp and roleplaying serious. So we made a book that intended to take it all very serious.

The results have been exhilarating. Since *As Larp Grows Up* (Denmark, 2003), the Nordic larp community have brought us *Beyond Role and Play* (Finland, 2004), *Dissecting Larp* (Norway, 2005) and *Role, Play, Art* (2006). All very serious – and great – books.

However, these days plenty of people take larp serious – all over the Nordic countries, researchers are studying “our” media. So this time around, we wanted to do things a little different. The main purpose of this book is not to document, what we are doing. It's not to convince people to take us serious – because they already do. The main purpose of this book is to in-spire imaginations, and with the help from our authors, we think, we have succeeded. *Lifelike* is serious – but hopefully without being boring.

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We have divided the texts in this book into five chapters. The first chapter on *Character* focuses on the relationship between role, participant and character. The second chapter, called *Game* is about interaction and the entire larp. This is followed by a third chapter, *Scene*, in which the texts focus on the people doing larp. The fourth chapter, *Society*, looks at applications of larp in other fields. Finally, the fifth chapter, *Openings*, is a bit different: Where the rest of the chapters are written by researchers, artists and game designers who are part of the larp community, *Openings* is a series of short interviews with people from outside the larp community.

∞ There are two ways to read this book. When you are done with this preface, you can flip the page and keep reading till you are done. However, we never read a Knudepunkt-book like that ourselves. We like to go discovering, finding one interesting text after another. If you are a little like us, you may find interest in reading these short introductions to the different articles.

### Character

The chapter (and the book) starts with a short commentary by Gabriel Widing. *Alive and role-playing* asks the simple yet provocative question: If we can do role-playing without liveness, could we do live without role-playing?

Matthijs Holter brings us back to the ground. In his *Stop saying Immersion!* he argues that one of the most popular words of the Nordic larp scene has lost its value. Holter will tell you, that using the term immersion, is like saying “how do you make music that inspires love?”

In his *Immersion Revisited: Role-playing as Interpretation and Narrative*, Tobias Harding proposes to analyze and design larp from a perspective of observing larp as a change in how players interprets the world around them.

Andreas Lieberoth uses his background in cognitive sciences to look at the *Technologies of Experience* from an understanding of the human mind.

*Thomas Duus Henriksen* wonders about the concept of role and in his *Role Conceptions and Role Consequences: Investigating the Different Consequences of Different Role Conceptions* he thoroughly investigates the subject and history of roles and how the differences in the conceptual understanding of roles impacts the game under design.

In *Playing beyond the Facts*, Ari-Pekka Lappi goes into the problems with immersion and the transition

from player to character. It’s a theoretical article that can be useful to players and organizers alike.

### Game

What is larp really? In his article, *Larp Experience Design*, Lars Konzack sets the stage for the *Game* chapter, discussing the basics of larp theory. He covers different game genres, games layers and the building of characters.

In his article *Breaking the Invisible Rules: Borderline Role-playing*, Markus Montola investigates role-playing by looking at surrounding activities and finds three invisible rules and immediately breaks them to see what happens.

J. Tuomas Harviainen continues his testing of larp theories and this year in *Testing Larp Theories and Methods: Results for Year Three*, he explores the Process Model and deconstructs the workings and potential of the model.

How can we apply network theories from physics and mathematics on larp? That’s the main question in focus in *Larp as Complex Networks* by J. Bruun, M. Elf, M. Enghoff and J. Heebøll, which poses some interesting insights on the larp as a network system.

The game “Prosopopeia 2: Momentum” is the main focus of two of this years articles. *Five Weeks of Rebellion* from S. Jonsson, M. Montola, J. Stenros and E. Boss, deals with the design and thoughts behind the game, whereas *Post Mortem Interaction* by J. Stenros, M. Montola and A. Waern is an evaluation of the game, which used a double layered character model. Both articles share a problem though. They will make you regret, that you didn’t participate in Momentum!

While most look forward when trying to push the borders of roleplaying, others seem to think that the future is in the past. That is properly why, Juhana Pettersson and four of his friends set out to re-

conquer their youth dungeon crawls with all their grown-upness. *Castle Caldwell – Redux* is a journey with high casualties and breathtaking dramas, all ending in a dark, dusty basement.

Speaking of drama, The Age of Manifestos hasn't ended. This time around, it isn't from the Nordic countries though. In *The Bristol Manifesto*, Nathan Hook gives us exciting insights on British larp culture.

The chapter ends with two articles on stories. Troels Barkholt and Jonas Trier argues that all parts of a larp should be based on a common denominator, the story of the larp. When the players returns home after a game, they must be able to answer one question: *What was the Story About?*

The article is followed by Ulrik Lehrskovs *My Name is Jimbo the Orc*, an entertaining and thought provoking piece, which gives us a few tricks on how we can look upon a larp as one single story.

### Scene

To start up the *Scene* chapter, Johanna Koljonen takes us on a guided tour of the Nordic larp history in her article *Eye-Witness to the Illusion*. Here, she investigates whether 360° larp is an illusion or a way of life. Appropriately, she starts off at a debate at Knutpunkt '98 and ends her tale at *Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum*.

We're losing people, Claus Raasted tells us in his *The Bigger! Better! More! Problem*, that deals with one of the most important issues for the Nordic larp scene: The volunteers. But Claus has a solution for us...

We all know the story; boy meets girl and sweet music begins. But what happens when they break up and a week later have to larp that they're deeply in love again. In his article *Impact of Relationships on Games*, Gordon Olmstead-Dean investigates the impact that relationship and friendship has on the game world.

What will be left of us, when we're gone? At least, there will be a larp archive in Norway. Ragnhild Hutchisons article, *The Norwegian Larp Archive*, takes us though the construction of the archive, which covers the Norwegian larp scene since the late eighties.

### Society

The children are coming. All over Danish schoolyards, playgrounds and backyards, kids are playing by their own rules. And they don't care about fixed rules, plots or character building. In *Warhammer Freestyle*, Klaus Thestrup takes a look at the very young larpers and the educational aspect of the game.

Larp is good for your kids. Sanne Harder will tell you why (and how it can be applied) in her interesting *Confessions of a Schoolteacher*, that deals on larp as an educational tool, based on her ten years of experience with larp and the school system.

Anne Marit Waade and Kjetil Sandvik set out to place larp in a broader cultural perspective in *I Play Roles, Therefore I am*. They aim both at larp in relation to popular culture and as a tradition within education, theatre and social sciences.

The chapter ends with something big – in every sense of the word. Brian Mortons *Larps and their Cousins through the Ages* isn't a short article, but it's worth every word. The article brings us through about a dozen different larp cousins: From Ancient Rome to Reality TV.

### Openings

In the chapter Openings, we ask a number of interesting people the same questions. How do they see larp and role-playing? What are the strengths and weaknesses? And what direction would like the medium to evolve?

The questions are posed to *Frank Aarebråt*, professor of comparative politics at the University of Bergen, to *Eli Kristine Økland Hausken*, a museum teacher and

to *Sigrid Alvestad*, a school master. Furthermore, to *Johan Peter Paludan*, director of The Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies, to *Martin Rauff*, the host and storywriter of the improvised roleplaying tv-series *Barda* (shown on national Danish tv in 2006), to Anne Mette Thorhauge, who is a computer games researcher.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to say thank you to the Knudepunkt 2007 project group in general and project manager Mikkel in particular for help, support and inspiration. To the former editors of books for Knudepunkt, Knutpunkt, Knutepunkt and Solmukohta. To our very valuable proofreaders and translators, Bjarke, Joost, Lise, Marti, Mike, Ragnhild, Regitze, and 2 x Tobias. To Anita for helping us out on the Openings-chapter. To our AD supervisor, Charlotte. To the moneymen at Dansk Ungdoms Fællesråd and Liveforum. And to all the contributing authors.

But first and foremost, we are grateful to the Nordic and International larp community: For their interest and for keeping Knudepunkt and larp alive and kicking through more than a decade.

“If you think, role-playing is fun”, editor Jaakko Stenros said on his presentation of the 2004 Solmukohta book, *Beyond Role and Play*, “theory is all about explaining the joke *very* carefully.”

We hope this book shows you and Jaakko alike, that explaining the joke can be fun too.

January 11, 2007, Copenhagen

Jesper Donnis  
Morten Gade  
Line Thorup







character



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# gabriel widening

## alive and role-playing

*Live role-playing.* For the last few years we have been talking and writing a lot about the latter part of the concept. The *role-playing* has been the main focus. We say live role-playing developed from talking-heads tabletop role-playing games. That is of course true in a sense. But the active form that we practise also came into being because of the fact that we are alive. So what about the *live* part? What does it imply and signify? What is the *liveness* of live role-playing? If we can do role-playing without liveness, could we do *live* without role-playing? What would be left of the medium?

When the participants were introduced to the scenario *Limbo*<sup>1</sup>, about a “group of people from our own time and society who are hovering between life and death”, the organizer offered a relieving choice:

1. Take one of the pre-written characters *or*
2. Be yourself or a version of yourself

The scenario was set in a “waiting place to reflect on life as it has been so far, before either returning to life

once again or facing the unknown on the other side of death.” For me it was an obvious choice to go for the “be yourself”, because a character would not get me any closer to the themes of the scenario than my own experiences and thoughts.

Martine Svanevik shares her experiences from the scenario in the Norwegian forum laiv.org: “I chose to play myself, something which I realised afterwards was a choice I should not necessarily have made. /.../ On the other hand, I learned a lot about myself and how I view life/death/the afterlife. I came to the game thinking I had all the answers, but I came out of it with a totally different set of answers. /.../ I am not sure if I want to do it again, and definitely not at a game where other participants have characters. /.../ It was one of the strongest experiences in my life.”<sup>2</sup> *Limbo* was set for strong emotional interaction and a sort of close-to-life-experience. It definitely pointed out a potential way of approaching live role-playing with less character and more liveness. I am sure there are others as well. Sometimes we could reduce character to plain social role or function.

I consider the character a tool to get in touch with a story or enter another world. It's our ticket to the diegesis, to the fiction. Sometimes we really need it. When I played *inside:outside*,<sup>3</sup> which placed the character in "a prison where a bunch of normal people are forced to face dilemmas", I loved my character. I wouldn't have survived without it. The game started out with the Wolf's Dilemma and the Prisoner's Dilemmas and after that it only got worse.<sup>4</sup> Being yourself in that situation, in the company of your real friends, could have demolished friendships for ages.

*Futuredrome*<sup>5</sup> is an interesting example of how the role-playing came in conflict with liveness. Assessed as a live role-play, the event was crap. The participants interacted on a sliding scale from hardcore character immersion to hardcore off-game partying. But these two groups, and everyone in between, were definitely alive and kicking. And they actually often managed to co-exist in disharmonic unity. All of the participants were present in their acting, dancing, playful bodies, which created a common ground.

What makes live role-playing really potent is the liveness of it. Everything else is extras. The bodily experience of life, framed by an aesthetic or dramatic context – that's what makes me tick.

### Notes

- 1 Written by Tor Kjetil Edland. Enacted in Oslo and at Knutpunkt in Stockholm, 2006
- 2 [www.laivforum.net/showthread.php?t=12787](http://www.laivforum.net/showthread.php?t=12787), 01-12-2006
- 3 Written by Eirik Fatland & Mike Pojhola, enacted on different locations in the Nordic countries, 2001-2002
- 4 Pojhola, Mike: "School of Flour, Developing methodology through eight experimental larps" in Bøckman & Hutchison (ed.), *Dissecting larp*, 2005
- 5 Organised by Henrik Wallgren et al, Kinnekulle, Sweden, 2003





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# matthijs holter

## stop saying “immersion”!

In this article, I’ll be telling you why the term “immersion” is useless in communicating theory, preferences of play styles, and even actual play experiences. And I’ll be asking you to use other words instead.

I think the first time I heard of the term “immersion” was in an article by Paul Mason, editor of the (now defunct) fanzine *Imazine*. The term immediately had me in its spell. Immersion was exactly what I craved – to immerse myself in the setting, to really *be* there. This was in the early nineties, and I was trying out all sorts of neat new games – *Over the Edge* and *Amber*, for example, which thrilled me with their open systems and interesting settings.

For years and years I called myself an immersionist. When a friend of mine told me that in the GNS model, “immersionism” was simply a subset of “simulationism”, I couldn’t believe it. At the time, I understood “simulationism” to be the same as “detailed and complex rules attempting to mimic reality”. Which, of course, wasn’t what the GNS model said – but still, it made me think: “Those people really have no *idea* what immersion really *means*”.

Then came the years of theory. Reading up on the Big Model, sniffing up the strange smells of the *Turku Manifesto*, and understanding that there were some very different views on immersion: Both how it was

defined by different theorists, and how important it was supposed to be to the play experience.

I’ve always felt like an alien when describing my role-playing experiences. When I’ve said things like “I feel like my character is a semi-conscious, semi-autonomous part of me, living inside my head, being channelled through my rational faculties”, it’s a style of play that many seemed to see as impossible, insane, or undesirable. Even people who claimed to be interested in immersion.

But then, there were people who said immersion was about visualizing the (fictional) environment in play. Which made me go: “Yeah, that’s nice – but it’s not actually *immersion*”. And then there were those who talked about immersion being a state of flow – which made me think “Well, flow is certainly a *by-product* of immersion, but it’s not the same thing”.

And then I started really reading up on what people had been writing on immersion for the last five years.

Oh man.

We have to stop saying “immersion”. And I’ll tell you why.

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Everyone's immersion is different. By that I mean two things. First of all, everyone has a different definition of the term. Second, everyone has a different subjective experience of immersion, even when they agree on the term: Immersion seems to be characterized by its subjective nature.

### Definitions

By "different definitions" I don't mean just subtle differences. I mean people saying: "It's possible to immerse in the game system itself, instead of the character", while others say "Using a game system ruins immersion".

I'm going to provide a short list, with definitions, of the ways the words "immersion" and "immerse" have been used. This list is probably not exhaustive, nor are the definitions comprehensive or authoritative - for more information, visit the links given at the end of the article.

(References given in this article are, necessarily, vague; many points are mentioned and discussed in several of the blog/forum threads & articles linked to, and this is merely an attempt at summarizing several pages of discussion between many authors. I strongly suggest that readers looking for academic-style quotes read the referenced texts).

*Turku*: Immersion is an essential part of role-playing. The goal is to become the character, to experience everything through the character. Most of the expression takes part inside the participants' heads. (Pohjola, 1999).

*Locus of engagement*: Immersion describes what area of the game players choose to engage with. Thus, players can immerse in - engage with - their character; the game world; the system; strategy; story; drama; theme; or social interaction. (Another term, "socket", seems to be equivalent to "locus of engagement"). (Forge debate, 2002b; Sin Aesthetics blog, 2005).

*Internal factors*: Immersion is an internal state of mind, made up of three things: Processes, performance and sensations. Processes are thoughts and decisions that facilitate immersion; performance is what you do while immersed (such as think in character, easily describe aspects of the world etc); and sensations are what you experience - emotionally and physiologically - while immersed. (Forge debate, 2005; This is my blog, 2006; Interview 2 with Moyra Turkington, 2006; Interview with Moyra Turkington, 2006; Musings and Meanderings debate, 2006; Sin Aesthetics blog, 2006)

Examples of "internal factors" definitions of immersion are:

*Flow*: Immersion is the same as flow - the feeling of complete and energized focus in an activity, with a high level of enjoyment and fulfilment. Flow can be experienced during play, sports, music and many other activities. (This is my blog, 2006)

*Channelling*: Immersion is allowing the character to express itself through the player. The character is seen as a semi-autonomous entity residing in the player's mind, with a personality and will of its own. (Forge debate, 2005; This is my blog, 2006)

*Situation immersion*: Feeling as if you're in the story, not necessarily the character. (Forge debate, 2005)

*Trance*: A state where the player is in a suggestible frame of mind. (Forge debate, 2005)

*Character attachment*: Having a personal, emotional attachment to the characters. (Sin Aesthetics blog, 2005)

*Catharsis, kairosis or kenosis*: Adapted from literary theory. In cathartic play, the player feels as if he himself undergoes the trauma of the story, and emerges cleansed after the experience. In kairotic play, the player experiences the same

integrative processes as the character in dramatic moments. In kenosis, the player abandons his ego to transcendently partake in the emotions and sensations of play. (Sin Aesthetics blog, 2006)

### **Subjective experience**

As can be seen from the above definitions, much of the focus is on what players experience during play - what goes on inside their heads. If two players portray the same actions for their characters, but one does so based on a script, and the other because he identifies with the character, a Turku immersionist would probably say there was a great difference between the two: The first isn't immersing, the second is.

In theory, if you're working from a definition of immersion that focuses on the subjective, it's impossible to see from the outside whether someone is immersing or not. You have to ask them how they feel. Not only that - you have to be sure you're talking about the same thing.

Asking if someone is immersing is almost like asking someone whether they're in love; some will confidently say yes!, some will say they've never experienced it, some will say they're not sure, but they think so. Still, we talk about love all the time, as if it's a clearly defined thing and everyone knows what it is. (Forge debate, 2002b; Musings and Meanderings debate, 2006)

### **Making and breaking immersion**

There seems to be some consensus about what can help you immerse, and what will totally break immersion.

Here are some things that seem to help immersion: (Forge debate, 2005; Pohjola, 1999; Interview 2 with Moyra Turkington, 2006; Musings and Meanderings debate, 2006)

- > The setting should be believable and detailed.
- > Characters should be believable and detailed.
- > The flow of the story should be well-paced.

- > Players need time to visualize and think ahead.
- > Mechanics, if any, should be smoothly incorporated into the game.
- > Players should have experience with immersive play.

And some things that may break immersion:

- > Having to pause the game to consult the rules
- > Having to use rules often, especially in tense situations
- > Players talking about things outside the game
- > Having to make snap-second decisions for the character
- > Mechanics that aren't directly translatable into game-world descriptions
- > Fast-paced games
- > Thinking outside the character to make decisions

I can hear all of you 90's immersionists out there thinking: "This is old hat. Everyone knows these things". But every single one of the statements above have been debated at length, several have been disproved by actual play, and some are even contradictory to some definitions of immersion. A few examples from my personal experience:

- > I've run improvised half-hour games in generic settings. The setting and characters were hardly detailed at all before play began. Strong immersion was reported by several players.
- > Some players make decisions for their characters based on what would make a good story, in games such as Prime Time Adventures. Many of these report immersion - even a strengthened feeling of immersion after converting from strict in-character decision-making.
- > Meta-mechanics have been used to great success to enhance immersion. I've used hypnotic, ritual and scene-sharing techniques, in all cases getting reports of increased immersion from several players.

There is no reason whatsoever to take these old claims at face value. I propose that there is no set of techniques that must be present for immersion to occur; nor is there any set of techniques that is guaranteed to break immersion. Techniques should be chosen or designed for each play group, taking into account the preferences, experience and personality of each participant, as well as the group's history and internal dynamics.

### Conclusion

I do believe that immersion exists. I even believe that many people share the same view of what it means. However, in communicating about games or game theory, the term is diffuse and problematic. Advertising a LARP or pen-and-paper RPG as “strongly immersive”, or discussing whether this or that technique fosters immersion, is a bit like saying “how do you make music that inspires love?”

When designing a game event of any sort, the game designer or larpwright should be specific and concrete when thinking and talking about techniques and goals. Saying “this game is about feeling exactly like your character, and therefore, everyone has to speak in character” is okay. Saying “this game is about achieving a trance-like state, and you should use ritual phrasing and strong pacing to achieve this” is also okay.

Saying “this game is about immersion” - that's not okay.

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## immersion revisited: role-playing as interpretation and narrative

Larping has traditionally been interpreted as a situation in which players play characters in a game world. Some work has been done on understanding larp from a narrative point of view, as a story. Larp can also be understood as performance. Academic theories of performance tend however to ignore character immersion, which is a central point of larping, but of only secondary importance in other forms of performance art. To understand immersion we need a different theory. I propose that larp can alternatively be understood as a change in how the player interprets the world. Experiences are now interpreted according to a fictional story that is created when the player interprets his or her surroundings (which may be more or less controlled by the organiser). In traditional fantasy larps the world is re-interpreted to fit in a medieval (or fantasy) framework; plastic sticks become swords, traffic signs are ignored and so on. Understood in this way, immersion is not a change of personality, but a change of interpretative framework, understandable from a hermeneutic perspective. Understanding larp in this way may lead to a change of focus that would

show us new aspects of how role-playing works. Before we look closer on these matters, I should add that there is no empirical study behind the arguments in this text. Neither are they presented in a form that encourages theoretical “testing”. I am simply trying to understand what it means to play a character, based on my own ten years of experience of live action and tabletop role-playing and by (loosely) applying theory. I hope that this essay can help others to do the same.

The word *role-playing* is to a high degree self-explanatory. Someone plays a role (or to put it less individualistically: a role is being played). Convention adds that the play takes place within a game world. Role-playing theorists inspired by semiotics tend to use the word *diegesis* (e.g. Montola 2003). The ethnologist Lotten Gustavsson (2002) has coined the term *play chronotope* (“lekkronotop”) to cover the world in which a fictional time and space in which a game takes place. For practical purposes I will continue to use the word role-players coined in the infancy of their hobby: *game world*, by

which I mean the fictional time and space in which the narrative of a role-playing game takes place. Examples of game worlds are the world of the Society for Creative Anachronism and the World of Darkness of the White Wolf products, or more correctly the adaptations of these that are used in actual role-playing games. The term is also taken to include the un-named and much less explicit worlds that are used in games that focus on different things.

Markus Montola (2003) claim that “larp is role-playing, where physical reality is used to construct diegesis, in addition to communication, both directly and arbitrarily”. Following this definition the difference between larps and other types of role-playing lies in the relationship between the “real” (or material) world and the game world, which are supposed to be relatively similar. In a tabletop game, characters may for example be on a desert island in the game world while the players are sipping tea in the game master’s living room. In a larp, a forest is generally a forest and tea cup is generally a tea cup. An extreme point of this was the *Dogma 99* rule that “No object shall be used to represent another object (all things shall be what they appear to be)” (Fatland & Wingård 2003) although very few larps (if any) have actually gone that far.

The character is traditionally taken to be a “person” different from the player. He or she may have a different background, a different way of looking at the world as well as dress, talk and act differently, depending on what the player focuses on when assuming the character and depending on what the character writer (who may or may not be the player or the game organiser) have focused on at character creation. The character may also change during the game as the player more or less consciously fills in the blanks or adjusts the character by improvisation. Many role-players have testified that characters after a while may start acting on their own. A somewhat static view of this was taken in the Manifesto of the Turku School:

*“Role-playing is immersion (‘eläytyminen’) to an outside consciousness (‘a character’) and interacting with its surroundings. [...] as a role-player I vow to refrain from any personal style of gaming! I do not try to play, but to mould myself after the game master’s wishes. [...] My greatest goal shall be to fulfil the game master’s vision, forcing myself to immerse in the character as truthfully and realistically as possible. I swear to do this in all ways possible to myself, regardless of any concepts of good taste and the convenience of other players”* (Pohjola 2003).

Even more extreme than this was the arguments of the Swedish so-called role-playing critic Diddi Örnstedt (1997) who argued – much as the Turku School – that role-playing is about immersing into a character and follow the lead of a game master. According to Örnstedt most role-players would easily lose the ability to differentiate between themselves and their characters and thus lose all contact with reality. Whether or not this change is seen as a revolution or as a potential childhood trauma, it has been fantastically overrated and misinterpreted. As the Turku School acknowledged, immersion is a difficult goal, one that can only be reached with great difficulty and only temporarily. The idea that someone would “get stuck” is unlikely to the extreme.

Better than as shift from “real identity” to “character”, the larping experience have been described by Martin Ericson as a step into a liminoid space:

*“making the players shed their former selves along with their entire socio-moral luggage before entering the game should be the primary goal. Currently there seems to be a lot of hesitation among players and organisers about going into games naked and head over heels, yet the game will touch deeper if one gives oneself up to it completely and enters the liminoid space as a humble initiate rather than a headstrong actor.”* (Ericsson 2004)

The long-time Swedish larper Elge Larsson (2005) has frequently described this as the magical moment of role-playing, the moment when the game world becomes real and both ones ordinary self and the material world fades before ones eyes. Both Larsson and Ericsson use the language of ritual-induced religious experience to describe this moment, whether as metaphor or not.

In this essay, I use instead the language of academic hermeneutic theory. Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation. Historically this has generally been the study of texts, especially of authoritative texts such as the Bible and legal sources. In more recent years the method has however been used to approach virtually any meaningful contexts. The core idea is that *any text is interpreted by someone within a context*, which composes the interpreter's horizon of understanding. The same text will thus mean different things to different people in different contexts. Yet it is possible to increase ones own understanding of a writer by reading his works. An extreme example from early hermeneutics would be striving to come closer to God by closely reading the Bible. The concept is that by understanding the text (by use of close reading and the study of additional material) one can strive to merge ones own horizon of understanding with that of the writer. This is of course not possible, but the distance can still be shortened and distances between human beings can thus be at least partially overcome. From this perspective reading is a process in which each part of the text is interpreted in relation to the whole. At the same time the whole is reinterpreted according to the new understanding gained from understanding the part. Interpretation is thus a circular process, a kind of spiral in which understanding increases for each circle (Ödman 1994).

A hermeneutic approach to the immersion of role-playing would thus imply that *the main purpose of the character is to conceptualise how I want to change my way of interpreting the world during*

*the larp*. The last part of this sentence is as important as the first: The way we interpret the world changes and it changes within the limits of a specific area in space and time. A role-player who managed to merge the relevant parts of his horizon of understanding with the fictional horizons of his character's understanding could thus be said to view the world through the eyes of the character. This would be immersion.

### **The Narrative**

The larp is interpreted as a *narrative*. This may be a story of a valiant struggle against evil trolls, the scheming of vampires or any other story that the participants agree upon. Generally each player character gets the chance of being the hero of his or her very own version of the story. When this works, larp becomes intensely meaningful. It is in no way unique for the fictional realities of larping to produce a narrative. We all try to understand our lives by interpreting them as narratives in which we are ourselves (to some extent and hopefully) the protagonists (the main characters). It has been argued that the novel is the model for how people in the modern era understand themselves and their relationship to the world as a narrative (Armstrong 2006). The reading of some novels changes how we interpret ourselves and our surrounding. Thus a novel may be the prototype of how we understand life and not merely a description.

I have myself often written down my own experiences of a larp both during and after the larp, that is both "in character" and "out of character". This is a wonderful way of getting in character; it makes explicit how the character views the world and how his view is different from how I view my world. Describing the meaning of texts, the hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur distinguishes between *events*, *plot*, and *narrative*. The plot consists of events that are ordered into a plot when they are narrated by someone – a *narrator* – as a narrative. To further complicate things many narratives include

fictional narrators (Ricoeur 1991, Gunnarsson 2006), as when the fictional character Dr. Watson narrates the adventures of Sherlock Holmes in books written by Conan Doyle. A text written by a larp character is a text written by a fictional character. As a larp is a role-playing game in which the game-world corresponds to the material world this character however corresponds to physical person; me. I argue that this is how we always understand larping as long as our act is not merely an outwards pretence (“theatrical acting” as described by the Turku school): interpreted as a narrative as interpreted by our characters as fictional narrators. While the player character may not always be the protagonist (as argued by Kim 2004) immersion makes it the fictional narrator.

When I tell someone about the larp after it has ended this is something else: the fictional narrator is gone; I am telling the story as told by me. In this way telling each other about what happened during a larp directly afterwards is not only retelling the events, it is also telling them for the first time as oneself, thus re-narrating the experience not as the lived experience of oneself playing a fictional character but the larp as a narrative told by oneself. This may be why telling each other of the events of the larp can be a vehicle to return to oneself. At the same time it is however also a return to the community of fellow larpers: remembering together has always been a certain way to create identification with one another (Ricoeur 1991).

Experience changes us. The more meaningful the experience, the more it influences us. Meaning is however determined by how we interpret the context and the meaningfulness of an event is thus determined by its relationship to the narrative context in which we put it when we interpret it. This is an aspect of the circular relationship between the part and the whole in hermeneutic theory. Unfortunately, our own lives often seem meaningless in a way that a good larp does not. A

good larp is rigged to produce a working narrative and players generally do what they can to help the story envelop. It is thus understandable that larps often feel more meaningful than real-life situations.

This power of narrative meaning is further illustrated by the power that political and religious ideologies can gain by offering people a grand narrative that gives meaning to their lives. There is little doubt that life seemed meaningful for example to the men who forced passenger planes to fly into the World Trade Centre. Making someone believing in a narrative is a certain way to power. Understanding what narratives we make from the events of our lives is thus important to everyone. The influence of a master narrative is in my view among the political phenomena that larps have been most successful in exploring. The Swedish larp *Vreden* aimed directly at this. I was not there but have experienced fanaticism in my own characters in many other fictional worlds. With enough immersion even a fictional ideology may create fanaticism. Luckily this fanaticism is precisely that – fiction – and can thus give the participants an opportunity to gain experience without embracing fanaticism in real life. What then is fiction?

### **Fiction**

Actions in larp are symbolised by actions made by the player. An event that takes place in a larp is thus not necessarily un-real. It is however fiction. This is an important distinction. Fiction is a matter of genre not of ontological status. A novel – or a larp – can sometimes say more of our reality than a biography. Its claims are however different (Ricoeur 1993). The difference lies not simply in the work itself but also in how one reads it. Reading a novel as a biography is different from reading it as a novel. It might even remove important values that we would have appreciated if we had read it as a less literal description of reality. When I hear or see something in a larp, my experience is different from what it would be if I had heard or seen the same thing in a non-fictional context. The difference has

nothing to do with the situation. In a realistic larp, the situation could in fact be indistinguishable from a non-larp situation. Instead, the difference is in how I interpret the situation. Language for example includes what is known as performative statements, i.e. statements that are not descriptions of acts but acts in themselves. Making a promise is an example of this, the proclamation of a gift may be another. If I say that I give you this paper, it is not meant as a description of something that I do. It is the action in itself (Lübcke 1997). If I say the same in a larp this may not be the case. The statement is still performative, it is however not a real act (nor a lie) but a part of the fiction, theatrical acting, not a real act. The act itself takes place only in the game-world. This often makes the border between the real and the game-world highly important.

As the larp-narrative is understood as fictional, players may do things that they would not do with their own lives. They may for example consciously try to create a tragedy, something that is decidedly rare in real life. They may or may not be looking for other qualities in this narrative than in their own life-story. This has a number of important consequences for those who plan a larp, one is that many people will be more inclined to take risks in larps than in reality. Even if their characters are not very different from themselves, they may be more inclined to take the consequences of their beliefs and actions, simply because those consequences are not perceived as real. This may be considered a problem by organisers and writers who want realism. If they do, they should agree with the players to try to avoid this. This may on the other hand be one of the causes behind the sense of freedom that many larpers feel during games, and perhaps not something one should try to overcome.

Larp narratives are fiction. Yet they have other properties in common with the non-fictional narratives through which we understand our own lives. Unlike for example most novels they are created more or

less collectively as well as retroactively. While one is expected to read a novel from beginning to end, it is in fact written and rewritten in a fashion that means that the author have known the end when he wrote the beginning. While the novel is an image (perhaps *the* image) of how life progress through causality and cumulative experience it is in fact created as a whole by the author before we read it. The writers and organisers of a larp have much less control over how the things develop. Even the storyteller or game-master of a tabletop role-playing game has less control than the novelists: he may control the game-world and most of its inhabitants but not the player-characters themselves. In a larp, author-control range from nearly as much as that of a game-master to games in which control ends when the game starts. Turku style larping is an impossibility. Even when game-master control is introduced, the development of a chain of events in a larp remains a product of an interaction between the production team and the players. The larp as a material chain of events will thus be a product of the actions of a collective rather than of the imagination of a single author, much like reality.

### The World

Most larp theory assume that there are limits to larps. I agree. Luckily these limits are generally easy to understand as they are made very clear. Most larps have very explicit limits in both space and time: off-game areas are distinguished from in-game areas, as are the time in which the larp is going on and the time before and after (as well as in between, if one or all players interrupt the larp, something that is often done by leaving the game area and entering an off-zone). Ignoring these lines is generally frowned upon: in the larping community openly acting contrary to the larp within larp-space and larp-time is considered the worst of sins. This is among first things one has to understand as a larper, the very concept that makes larping possible.

The liminal space that lies within these borders is often called the *larp-area*. This area corresponds

to the game-world. Within its borders the player is supposed to interpret their impressions as a part of the game-world and the events in which they take part as parts of the larp narrative. Most larpers usually spend most of their larping time fighting the impulse to instead interpret events within the context and narrative of their own lives. In a fantasy larp (at least as I remember them from a time when larp was young), each player would do their best to pretend that kids painted in gray and black were orcs and that gray plastic sticks were swords and spears. The rules of what to imagine and when makes this effort easier, just as it become much more difficult if it is contradicted. Unfortunately, the rules themselves are contradictions to the narrative as they are not part of the game-world.

The borders of the larp-area are thus often more complex than one would expect at the first glance. This is true especially of two types of larp: (1) larps ruled by formal rules and close to tabletop role-playing (e.g. White Wolf's "Mind's Eye Theatre") and (2) artistic larps in which breaks are introduced to further the narrative. Both types may include breaks in which the larp stops in the whole or parts of the physical larp area. After the break, the larp begins either at the same or a different time and place in the game-world (continuing at a different time or place in the game-world may in fact be the reason for the break). This illustrates the flexibility with which an organiser can actually treat the game-world-larp-area relationship, provided that all participants agree on the changes that are introduced.

In spite of this, many larpers have become almost obsessed with creating perfect resemblance between the material world and game-world, creating for example hand made medieval armoury and clothing. It may however be argued that the most important part of the world that I meet during a larp is the other players, and that the part that I concentrate on is (hopefully) their words and actions. Acting skills have been discussed elsewhere. They are definitely useful

but I am in no way an expert and will leave writing about them to others. Like many other larpers I am however convinced that acting according to how my character interprets the world will (when moderated only slightly by respect for the other players and common sense) produce a style of acting that enforces immersion for the other players, i.e. helps them to interpret what they see as a part of the game-world rather than as a part of the "ordinary world".

If the purpose is to help the players uphold illusion, then the game-world has to be consistent. The most important parts of it is furthermore those that could help interpret the events that will actually appear are during the larp, especially those that could become important parts of the plot. This is *not* to say that events that takes place (in the game-world) before the events of the larp are irrelevant (as the *Dogma 99* argues that they should be). No one interprets the world without reference to previous events. How my character became who he is should be the important parts of the description, not the dates of his history, but the events that formed him, not how he acts, but how he thinks! This is the context in which he should interpret his world. Without it immersion becomes impossible.

### **The Player**

The most complex relationship between the material world and the game-world is arguably that between the character and the player. The character's body is by definition that of the player. The relationship between mind and body is one of the bigger questions in the history of philosophy. Luckily, we do not need to solve this question. The relationship between the character and the player's body is not only that of mind and body. The relationship between character and player is not that of two people in the same body. That would be multiple-personality disorder or possession. The difference between a player who is in-character and one who is out-of-character is instead a matter of how the player interprets reality – not outside the personality, but inside – I am

not another person when I larp. I am me. I may act – and sometimes think – differently but I remain me. The contrary opinion may however not be the result of a misconception of what larp is but instead of the misconception that the I is a constant entity. This is neither the time nor the place to discuss whether there is a constant essence to the human psyche. Regardless of ones opinion on that issue, one could however accept that identity is fleeting, that people change over time, and that we think a little bit differently in different situations. My characters have many of the same limits as I have: they are no smarter than I am; they have the same body et cetera. Some of these limits can be bridged via game mechanics and imagination, while others may not.

The character as a played person is a product of both the player's personality and that of the character as it was originally thought or written (with the intermediary of a spoken or written description if the character was invented by someone else than the player). This is why played characters continue to surprise their inventors. This may of course also be the case when a writer immerses in her work. Many writers have told of how characters of their fictional narratives do things that they had not expected. This is how interpretation by a real person makes a fictive character come alive. Fulfilling the Turkuist player's vow is thus not only impossible; it not only ignores that the character (as it is played) will to a large part be the player, it also ignores that the important thing is how the player experiences the larp, which is in turn as much the result of who the player is as of what the larp is. A book may have millions of readers and be read thousands of years after it was written. A larp-narrative is the product of all participants and organisers. A larp – like life – thus only happen once and the only ones to experience it directly are the players (Kim 2004).

The fictional narrative of the larp is furthermore an event in the player's life. It thus receives much of its meaning from the part it plays in the player's

life-narrative. Generally, it is not the other way around. As larp-narratives are unique to each player it is however possible to include events from the personal life-narrative of the player in the fictional narrative of the larp. As I understand it, the Swedish larp *Prosopopeia* ([www.prosopopeia.se](http://www.prosopopeia.se)) includes the entirety of the players' life as a prehistory of the character's body (which is however possessed by the ghost that is the actual character). It is likely that this would produce the effect of increased realism to the larp-narrative, as well as an increased sense of relevance to the players own life. My guess is however, that increased realism also increases the difficulty for the player to continue to interpret the world within the context of the game, an effort that is difficult already.

### **The Plot**

The narratives of different players in the same larp may diverge violently. Not only does each player experience different plots (as they face different events), they also interpret these within different horizons of interpretation and thus form different narratives. I remember when I tried to write something like a qualitative review of the Swedish larp *Knappnålshuvudet* based on my own experiences. This is far from a review of the larp itself; my character had very little to do with the narratives experienced by most of the other players. In this case, this may have been the experience of many or most players. *Knappnålshuvudet* aimed to abolish the "main plot" to instead concentrate on the many smaller plots that are often more central to player experience. A main plot is only relevant to the player as long as it makes his or her character more meaningful as a part of a larger narrative. One way of dealing with this is to reduce the main plot and instead focus on smaller plots closer to each participant.

Another way of dealing with the problem is to focus on the difference between plot and narrative (as described above). The character sees only certain

events. These are the events that make up the plot. Yet the player may have more information on the general plot and narrative than the character. Such information may make his or her own plot more meaningful as a part of a larger whole. The larp version of *Hamlet* is an excellent example of this. In this larp, the main plot – the play by Shakespeare – was already known to everyone. Like at *Knappnålshuvudet* the larp was composed of a number of sub-plots with the player characters as protagonists. As narratives, these were however designed to correspond to the main narrative so that they progressed more or less simultaneously towards their ultimate tragic end. The vast majority of the characters in fact died in the last act (my own character emptied a crystal glass of poison). This would have been parodic rather than tragic to an audience, and many in fact saw the comic side when they told the tale afterwards (the narrative as told by the player). Within the larp itself, the narrative as seen by the character was however (at least to me) given intense meaning as a part of a larger narrative, one that even happened to be among the greatest narratives of our culture.

The meaningfulness of the larp to the player thus depend the relationship between player, character and narrative. Many larp writers start with the narrative and produce the characters that the narrative would need, maybe in the false belief that the characteristics of the played characters and the narrative meaningfulness of their actions can be predicted. As I learned from *Knappnålshuvudet* – as I experienced it through the eyes of a character written by Karin Tidbeck – one solution is that the player and a writer create each character together,

while the writers develop the plot simultaneously. Only by creating a character that is meaningful to the player can the larp become meaningful. The reason for this is simple: the meaning of the larp is a product of the narrative that the player creates when experiencing the larp through the eyes of the character. Narratives in a larp are individual to each player. From the perspective of the organiser very little can be known of what a played character will be like without taking the player into account. The certain way to produce a meaningful narrative is thus to take the player into account, not only the character and the larp-world. This is unfortunately the most time-consuming way to do it, but then one should perhaps not consider it unfortunate that true art is created by effort rather than manufactured in a way that can be rationalised.

### **Change**

The leaking of character traits into the player personality is not unheard of. Neither should this phenomenon be unexpected from the perspective described above. The mistake made by Örnstedt and others is instead that of the Turku Manifesto: to believe in the character as a fixed entity, possibly even identical to a character description written by a game-master or other writer. This level of control is however impossible. Immersion is a change created by the player, even though organisers, writers, and fellow player may provide help. When it works larping is to experience the world somewhat differently from how one usually experiences it. As all experiences worth having, it may change how one will experience the world afterwards.

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## technologies of experience

The mind was developed as an extension of our organism's needs for interaction with the environment. Therefore, the body, bodily states and emotions play a crucial part of human cognition, and in the creation of 'technologies for experience', such as those employed in role-playing.

This article deals with three 'minds': The embodied mind, the extended mind, and decoupled thinking, and how they interact in role-playing.

### **Introduction**

*"Scientific activity is both cognitively and socially very unlikely"*

- Pascal Boyer

Part of creating a role-playing game is influencing the way in which people perceive the environment and act in it. By using language, props, certain modes of action and all sorts of more or less subtle effects, players and officials generate a fiction in which they can all immerse. Role-playing experience may take place in the brain, but emotions and cognition is inexorably linked to the body and bodily states. This means that using the body and the mind in conjunction modifies the game experience. Physical action is one thing. Mental pretence and reality-negotiation is another. Put together, they give the unique cocktail, which is so popular in live-action role-playing.

Role-playing games differ in technique and scope, and since participants seem to get very different payoffs from different forms of play, it is about time that someone takes up the mantle of explaining the role of the body, emotions and language in the processing of experience.

"Technologies of experience" are ways of ordering the world around us (including human actors) to influence the embodied, extended or decoupled mind. This is basically achieved by giving the mind inputs, which causes the brain to act in a certain way. A firecracker can be a technology of experience, because it stimulates senses, and thus makes the mind go through electrical and hormonal changes which might translate into "panic". Written text or spoken word can be technologies of experience as well, since language prompts your brain to activate certain structures of meaning and association, which change the 'representations' in your mind's eye (or ear). Try not thinking about an elephant, and you'll see how semantics work on the conscious mind.

My personal experience with role-playing (both live, around the table and in between) has been in Denmark, and my field studies have been in tabletop (or verbal/descriptive) role-playing only. Much is done differently in varying traditions across the world, about which I can claim no special knowledge.

I will therefore let this chapter stand for itself as a theoretical offer; a posy of different nuggets which might aid interpretation of various types of game. Role-playing is nowhere absent from the heart of the text, but I will leave it to readers, to apply different insights from this chapter to his or her experience and favourite areas. Therefore, I will once again offer a guided *tour de force* through some areas of cognitive science, rather than of role-playing *per se*.

Technologies of experience can be directed at thought, action or feeling only, but still influence the other two. We will look at the interplay between especially mind and body, in creating experience and meaning, and how this can be manipulated in imagination and role-immersion.

### Outside and inside the skull

The brain as part of the organism is often called “the embodied mind”. This view on cognitive function focuses on the role of the body as vessel for the self, and the whole organism as an important influence on mental processes through neurochemistry and somato-sensory inputs. Therefore thoughts, emotions and bodily states go hand in hand. Many of central insights on the embodied mind should be old news to those interested in cognition and neuroscience, since they are taken from Antonio Damasio’s celebrated “Descartes’ Error”, which was published in the mid-90s.

The brain as part of culture, on the other hand, has resulted in the notion of the “extended mind”. Humans are not reared in a vacuum, and thus abstract social conventions and tailored environmental features influence the way we think. This applies to learned generalities which we carry around with us, or artefacts (such as language, cave-paintings or red lines on a hospital-floor) which influence the way we react to a given situation. The collected mind of humanity is projected ‘out there’ in culture, and not isolated in each skull.

Finally, our advanced ‘higher order’ consciousness allows us to think beyond the immediate present, and thus ponder possibilities, daydream or allow that for the duration of a game, a banana might be a gun. This ability to pull the mind away from the here-and-now is called “decoupling” (Leslie 1994).

### Neural selves and embodied minds

*“The present is never here. We are hopelessly late for consciousness.”*

- Antonio Damasio (1994:240)

*“To pretend, I actually do the thing: I have therefore only pretended to pretend.”*

- Jacques Derrida

Can you imagine your mind without a body? ...Your body without a mind? Creatures of this kind figure in the mythologies of many cultures, but are regarded as completely alien, and often believed to be very evil and dangerous. If you can role-play a disembodied ghost or a completely blank-minded zombie for a sustained period of time, and keep up believing in it, you have either partly disproved some of the most influential theories of cognitive science, or managed an extraordinary feat of imagination, ignoring a large amount of the basic building blocks, that form your experience of identity, time and space.

Many basic metaphors are derived from encounters with the physical world (Lakoff & Johnson 1999). Varieties of containers and forces are especially prominent, and the primordial container from which we derive much language and thought, may be the body. The body is often seen as a vessel for the mind, the Self or Psyche if you will; a vessel which mystics, ascetics and escapists across the world have sought to flee for millennia. When role-playing, you may be said to escape your mortal shell to visit far and fabulous worlds, but your mind will never be free of influence from the body. Not just because your head is lodged firmly atop your shoulders, but because bodily states influence thought in a fundamental and often unnoticeable way.

In the transition from reptile to bird and mammal, respectively, something happened to the brain. The expanses of human reasoning were still some way off, but higher animals experience the here-and-now in much the same way that we humans do, and can remember and discriminate many features of the world from one encounter to the next. Through electrical connections between certain areas of the brain, emerged a sort of continuant consciousness of “being in the world”, which has been called “the remembered present” (Edelman & Tononi 2000) or “naïve realism” (Sperber 2000).

Further up the evolutionary path, the descendants of apes started developing a primitive language – we know monkey-speak from macaques and humanised chimps – and when these signs and concepts started having a life and meaning of their own, a new form of consciousness dawned (Edelman & Tononi 2000). This new “higher order consciousness” allowed the thinking organism to start conceptualising past and future, self and other, word and meaning, and *this* capacity afforded the reasoning and fictions which now penetrate the world – and role-playing in particular.

### **Imagination and the decoupled mind**

The sane mind can separate imagined “decoupled” experiences from the here-and-now, which is probably linked to understanding mental states and attitudes in other people, such as to [pretend], [mistake] or [believe] (Leslie 1994). This type of insight is called ‘Theory of Mind’, and separates pretence from the simpler definition of just ‘acting as if’, by adding a conscious component continuously telling the mind: “this isn’t real” (Friedman & Leslie 2006). Understanding other minds might have been the first step toward self-realisation in higher primates, which finally led to imagination about other things as well. Because the modern brain has achieved connections between language, memory and bodily experience, we can effortlessly think away from the here-and-now (Edelman & Tononi 2000): But because our mind was developed as a tool for the body, the organism still

plays a role in all mental processes – no matter how decoupled (Damasio 1994).

One of the reasons, that our brain is able to work with stuff and scenarios that are not ‘really here’, is the fact, that neural activation is more complex than a mere scattering of electric activity through neurons, like a surge of water might spread through a river-delta. Certain processes are *inhibitory*, which means that they create neurochemical “dams” that restrain neurons and nuclei from activating. This is of particular interest, because motor-structures (such as the basal ganglia and brainstem) are always engaged in conscious processing, but the brain knows how to ‘hold back’ signals which would otherwise be speeding down the spinal cord and into muscles (Edelman 2004). This means, that when you imagine climbing, your brain actually uses the areas of the brain which generate movement: It just doesn’t let them unfold their potential for bodily action. This is called “simulation”, because the brain itself only simulates doing something, while the experience might seem quite real (Barsalou et al. 2003). Simulation of this kind is also at play when you understand feelings in others, and can be activated by simple facial expressions in a nearby person; your mind is instinctively ‘tuned in’ to the mental states of others. Simulation is an important part of my theory of imagination, which derives its main points from Gerald Edelman (2000, 2004). Although some parts of the brain are crucial to all consciousness, they work with a lot of other systems to generate a variety of experiences: face-recognition for empathy, visual areas for mental imagery, and so forth. The entire brain may be used for pretence and imagination, because this “dynamic core” can “latch on” to most other parts of the cortex – and areas that do not take part of the process may get influenced by it.

### **Embodied fantasy**

So, can this be applied to character-immersion, or just ‘regular pretence’? Gregory Currie, a philosopher of mind and arts, proposed a very interesting thesis

in the 90's, when cognitive science was dawning on the wider scientific horizon. To immerse in fictions such as books or movies, Currie argued, one must identify with the characters, and this is done by 'going through the motions' with the brain. Drawing on the fledgling literature on Theory of Mind and simulation-theory, he reasoned that a reader can't help but run a copy of the feelings and motions at play in protagonists. If we simulate in order to understand real people, why not to understand fictive characters and their actions as well? Let us draw a short example from George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* for illustrative purposes. Read it and try to empathise:

*"But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle had finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother."* (Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: 240)

When you read this, you decode the letters into semantic and conceptual meaning, and further draw on your own knowledge of emotions, and concepts such as struggle. Your mind needs to feel the emotions itself, for you to 'get into the text', unless they are understood as words only. Now, your interpretation will never be that envisioned by Orwell: Your life and situation is different from his, but your mind will still do its best to make sense of the situation depicted. As the text plainly refers to inner states of a person (the protagonist Winston) through the narrated struggle-relief sequence, and explicitly states a feeling of "love" to-wards Big Brother, your brain will go through the motions of exertion, relief and affection. This is almost inevitable, because you evoke the concepts from words, and need to make sense of them. If you really immerse yourself in the predicaments of the unknown protagonist, these feelings should be emphasised and kept active in consciousness. Simulation of both action and emotion does seem to apply to character immersion. This effect is most likely derived from our sophisticated abilities to empathise with others in our

environment. Humans are social animals, and our brain might have developed some of its complexity precisely to negotiate social situations, by guessing what is on others' minds. This has been shown to relate directly to simulation and sympathetic activation of emotions, even if the 'input' is artificial - such as a picture, verbal description or pretend emotion.

The easiest way to illustrate the direct influence of language on the organism by way of the embodied mind, would be through example of a saucy passage, but unfortunately my resident copy of Flaubert's "Madame Bovary" is in Danish, so you will have to make do with the point: The brain was developed as part of the organism, and the two are linked in both directions. Whenever you immerse into fiction, you need your brain-body connection to realise identification with characters.

### **Feeling your way**

*"Acting is not being emotional, but being able to express emotion"*

- Kate Reid

In the modern west, there is a tendency to view thinking as something cool and collected. Descartes dislodged the rational mind from the body, in an erroneous credo which still haunts common sense in the 21st century. In truth, the mind was made for the body, and the two are inseparable. In role-playing, participants attempt to get into the skin of an alien persona, and an important criterion of success is when that persona's feelings start becoming your own. In other types of game, the goal might be to flee the physical anchoring of time and place altogether. According to one of the most influential theorists in neuroscience, however, you will never be able to think without the aid of the body. There are two 'paths' for perception to reach consciousness, and one goes by way of the structure called the amygdala. This pathway is by far (even if measured in milliseconds) the fastest, and generates

immediate physical responses. This is very handy in evolutionary terms, because it preferable to get startled, move for the hills, and then later realise that there is no danger, than staring at a wild snarling beast in the eyes, while trying to decide whether it's a lion or a hyena. Because of this “feelings first, meaning later” effect, the brain is usually running an emotional backdrop on thoughts before the ‘higher order consciousness’ realises that you’re having them at all.

Antonio Damasio studied people with damage to their frontal lobes – the part of the brain directly beneath the forehead and intimately linked to the amygdala – and found that many such patients, who seemed completely normal in other respects, suffered severe problems with making decisions and attributing emotional value to situations. The archetypal example of prefrontal damage was the nineteenth century railway-worker Phineas Gage. While setting charges to blast way for an American railroad, an accidental detonation hurled an iron rod through Gage’s cranium, causing severe damage to the forebrain only. Gage was able to sit upright and describe the accident to his attending physician, even though a substantial part of his brain was destroyed, but in the months and years to come, he lost the ability to hold up a steady job. He was gradually bereaved his status in the community, and died impoverished at a relatively young age, after drifting through jobs and relationships which the formerly conscientious man would have scorned. He was reported to have lost his ability for critical judgement and even ‘his soul’: “Gage was no longer Gage” (Damasio 1994). From studies of cases like Gage’s, Damasio coined the theory of “somatic markers”. Basically, “somatic markers” are gut-feelings which help us make snap-judgements in our day-to-day lives. The area damaged in Gage appears to be where the emotional response (from the ‘amygdala-path’) is hooked up with thought.

Markers are very relevant to role-playing, because they govern actions, and thereby what would be

the ‘natural response’ of a character in a given situation. Markers are learned through personal experience, and so every person’s Self-image and action-repertoires are governed by what *feels* good or bad; not just conceptual knowledge. For instance, most decision-making appears to be done by running imagined scenarios(!) of outcomes, and then acting dependant of whether it feels right (Damasio 1994). In other words, the mind feels reality much more than it ponders it rationally – and somatic feelings are generated in the body.

When the body, or feeling of the body at the very least, is so important to experiencing the moment, physical exaltation works up more emotion, and thus more cognitive awareness. This means, that immersing cognitively into a role, should be easier if the body is ‘let into the picture’. Not just because adrenaline will make you more jumpy – being scared or aggressive can actually overrule other emotions which could be useful making sense of the situation – but because the body makes you feel the world around you. Theatre-enthusiasts have known this for ages, but Damasio’s theory places imagination in the body too.

If emotion governs thinking, and other cognitive processes (derived from the situation and memory) in turn govern emotion, then the most complete immersion into an alien character, could be achieved by *either* feeling *or* thinking like that person would, and then letting the two bootstrap each other. Alternatively, it could be said that immersion will never be complete without both thinking and feeling like the character, because thoughts or emotions from the ‘real you’ can throw rubble into the cogs. It would be next to impossible to achieve perfect immersion without feeling shameful or angry for whatever would blow the character’s whistle, because those feelings help govern thoughts; and thereby your acting to others.

The quotation of actress Kate Reid is wrong neurologically speaking. Your brain needs to feel to

act and think - 'for real' or in imagination. When you pretend, your mind and body pretends too.

### **The embodied self**

*“At each moment the state of self is constructed, from the ground up. It is an evanescent reference state, so continually and consistently reconstructed, that the owner never knows it is being remade unless something goes wrong in the remaking.”*

- Antonio Damasio (1994: 240)

An experience isn't confined to the exact moment in which it is first experienced. It is integrated into the sum of the person, and might be mobilised later to make sense of similar events, or to be recalled and relayed via language. Because memories can be recalled and modified with further information, experiences and the emotional value placed on them are dynamic entities which shape further cognition. Thus, the self is always present in time and space, but continually modified in both pro- and retrospect, through the changing of intentions and memory. Further, language (part of the extended mind, since it transcends the individual) is used by the brain to make sense of the world.

As seen in the case of Phineas Gage, damage to the prefrontal cortex can be devastating to the fundamental attributes which makes a person him- or herself. This personality-loss comes from lacking emotions in respect to things which should be important to the self. Studies have shown prefrontal-damaged patients to describe their own memories in a very detached fashion, including highly salient life-turning events. Being yourself (or adapting to a socially determined role) is largely based on experience, and emotions help to decode these memories, and apply experience to new situations.

Two important aspects of the self-in-the-body, comes from continuous (re-)representation of the individual's body, and key events in autobiography. The feeling of having a single consistent self may

come from this 'relatively stable, endlessly repeated biological state' (Damasio 1994: 238). In other words, your mind is used to its body, and uses it as a point of referral every waking moment.

The conscious experience of self is linked to having a personal history, and a sense of time and space. Further, language is employed to make a special conceptual sort of sense of the world. This means, that language helps generating a narrative meaning of all experiences, using whatever concepts might be at its disposal through memory. Higher primates, who have no natural language, appear to do something like this too, but with non-linguistical concepts. In other words, your self is constructed from a feeling of "being in my body in this moment", and conceptual machinery which places that moment in a greater context of the time, place and the extended mind.

Feelings towards memories, people and things are an important bridge between the embodied and extended minds. Things in the world – like people or speeding low-riders – have an emotional 'value' attached to them, and so feelings coin immediate reactions to the environment. If a role-playing character had no past, he would have only a very limited cognitive horizon, and be unable to react emotionally to people and situations.

Since somatic markers – gut-feelings which govern thought and action – are learned through each person's unique trajectory through time, space and culture, each self has a completely personal pattern of emotions to the world around it. These emotions may be scaffolded by the various masks we wear in different situations, but this is a form of culturally acquired neural reactions as well. Thus, it might be completely normal for you to feel different towards a call from the local police-station at your job and at home.

In this sense, a role-playing experience is very much dependent on the way you 'feel' about reality, and

how your mind process first impressions. This is a core part of self and identity, which players should strive to emulate. Immersion can be reached by either adapting your own gut-feelings to fit the character – that is, feeling like the character would – or by repressing your own natural somatic responses. A role might not ‘feel right’, because your ‘feel’ of the world is tied too much to the values of your normal ‘core self’.

### **Technology of experience**

*“The aims of art constitute an extension of the functions of the brain”*

- Semir Zeki

*“Situational variables can exert powerful influences over human behaviour, more so that we recognize or acknowledge.”*

- Philip Zimbardo

Role-playing are artificial ways of generating fantasy in participants. Sometimes this includes verbally instructing players on what to ‘see in their mind’s eye’, sometimes simulating a chosen reality, and sometimes activating the whole body to create a sense of presence in the moment. All of this involves mobilising the whole mind-body complex, and the feelings and actions that go with various inputs.

When it comes to engaging fictions, our daily life and culture offers no shortage of opportunities. Reading a book, dreaming, playing a computer-game and performing theatre constitute some examples of the human mind being wisped away into something ‘less real than reality’, and gradients of seriousness and immersion may apply to all of them. Dreaming or hallucination is usually an entirely personal and inward-faced experience, while performing a play is mostly directed outwards, relying on cues from other players and aimed at the audience. In the same way, role-playing games of various sorts seem to place themselves along a spectrum of autistic experience and intense social world-awareness. “Table-top” role-

playing games (exemplified by Dungeons & Dragons and presently products of The Forge) can be engaging and socially complex, although they have a reputation for being geeky and confined to dark attics and dorm-rooms, while live-action role-playing (basically free-form theatre with no audience) can be deeply antisocial, although it is usually rich on interaction and cues ‘in the world’. The two activities seem very different, but also have many things in common; the most important being manipulation and generation of fantasy, including attuning emotions to the fiction, and suspending identities of persons and objects.

Experience is immensely influenced by contexts, and good fantasy usually spawns situations of emotion and/or vivid imagery. Therefore, ‘technologies’ for creating fictions – from printed text (in a novel) to intrinsic rules of engagement (in role-playing) – would seem to determine the nature of fantasy-experience.

Quite so, but some fundamental architectures follow us all our lives, transcending situations. These ‘basic components’ include the biological basis for thought, experience and emotion (mainly neural and endocrine in nature), and cultural frames of meaning and value carried are employed in day-to-day life. These are the buttons, which fantasy-technologies both press and conform to; like a piano with a limited number of keys, but virtually infinite possibilities for new combination. All western music must relate to the octave-range, just like role-playing must respect the makeup of the human mind. Although neurobiological aspects of thought seem fixed from birth, and social construction largely appears artificial, both vary according to situation, positioning and motivational trajectory. The basic technology stays the same, but tuning may vary according to musical tradition (that is, situation). Thus, role-playing has a lot of different ways to arrange and influence perceptual inputs, and thereby personal experience, but when it comes down to it, they are limited to whatever seems to fit with the way the human mind works.

### **Loading the game-world**

We humans have wrought our influence on this world for tens of thousands of years. It is highly improbable that the human mind would look like it does today, if it did not develop in a world of man and his creations. We form the planet around us to meet our physical needs, and to please our senses. Look at the clothes you wear or the room around you. Everything in the modern lifeworld, and thereby every encounter with reality is artificial to some extent, and role-playing is just one more such ‘technology of experience’: Ways in which we humans tailor our surroundings, and the situations by which we arrange our existence, to fit our needs and fancies.

In the cognitive study of culture, cultural entities which exist independently individuals– like language, narrative, and even names – are (potentially) part of each person’s “extended mind”. This means, that many features of our ‘self’, ‘cognitive landscape’ and ‘repertoire of generalities’ exist both as part of the world around us, and in our own private brains. For instance, your identity is registered and cemented in tons of public archives. Books like the Hebrew Bible or Communist Manifesto collect narratives, proverbs and ethereal ideals, which large groups identify with. A character-sheet in role-playing help you act properly within the game. Such “hard representations” are solidly available in time and space, and their content is stable. Humans can only ‘juggle’ so many thoughts at each moment, and memories may change and be distorted over time. Books, signs, language and computers, on the other hand, can help the brain to think and remember, or impose themselves on the senses to create meaning, action and association in a complex environment.

More distressing – or encouraging to those who write and conduct role-playing events – however, is the fact that a minority of people work to influence the ‘cognitive landscapes’ of the many. These people work in such avenues as city-planning, advertisement

and politics. Billboards, street-signs, monuments and all sorts of other architectural modifications of the scenery influence the way we humans think and act. A very basic but immensely salient example is the way in which city-planning manipulates us to behave in certain ways, when we move about the urban landscape of roads, stop-lights, sidewalks, bicycle-lanes, etc. The placement of certain types of paving, levelling and other sorts of signs help us all conform to certain traditions of traffic, which are entirely conventional, however natural they might seem in everyday life. Steven Mithen calls such artefacts “cognitive anchors”, because they cement abstract ideas into the physical world. More colourful examples include the way décors of certain nightclubs will never let you loose the sense of sexuality and glamour (even in toilet-booths), and how communist states tend to fill every major square and building with images of revolutionary heroes such as Lenin or Kim Il Sung. I like to call “loading the life-world” with “hard public representations”, as opposed to soft ones (like verbal utterances) which are ethereal, very open to interpretation and can be forgotten in an instant. This goes to show, that circumstances are constantly manipulated for different ends, ultimately aimed to influence the naturally “lazy” way, in which humans act in response to the world:

*“...critics fear that advertising and the media may be contributing to our immersion into an environment which is in fact becoming increasingly manipulative. Someone (or several someones) – the media, the government, or pick your pet bugbear – is setting agendas for us, dictating not what we think, but what we think about.”*

(Taylor 2004 pp. 54)

This might be a distressing prospect, but as noted, role-playing officials strive to create environments for such immersion. In other words; the environment is manipulated to influence the mind, or help immersion into a fiction.

Since we are a symbolic species, attuned to ascribing meaning to more or less abstract signs in the world (including spoken language), the emotions which are so intricately linked with our thoughts, can be influenced by signs as well. As we have seen, written content can influence emotions by creating simulations in the brain, but in the “Pavlov’s dogs syndrome”, simple images such as a swastika or symbol laced with imagistic religious meaning, can generate emotion as well; Either by their sheer sign-value as “nasty”, or because of unpleasant associations.

Of course, certain strata of the lifeworld are doctored to afford specific action and thinking. It makes no sense to call attention to street-traffic in, say, a gymnasium, where lines on the parquet-floor might instead call attention to the rules of ball-games. The situation warrants the signs and affordances built into the ‘action-space’.

### **Ritual and cognition**

In the relatively short history of theories on role-playing, ritual has been examined with great curiosity. The similarities between ritual and role-playing has been noted (Ericsson 2004, Rhode Hansen & Krone 2006), but only the structural similarities have been addressed in depth. How ritual actually works and influences the mind, is only now becoming apparent to scholars in religion and anthropology, and so it is no wonder that role-playing theory has only scratched randomly at the tip of the iceberg. Ritual is not just religious tomfoolery, blowing off of social steam, extreme behaviours needing to be contained by rules and boundaries, or compulsive group behaviour; it influences our cognitive systems, using technologies very much like those employed in role-playing. In particular, rituals serve to transmit and replicate themselves and their content in culture, and individual minds. Recent advances in psychology and (cultural) cognitive (neuro) science allow us to venture a bit deeper into the workings of ritual, and why it seems to take such prevalence in mind and culture.

Ritual is a chance to bring the mind and chosen aspects culture together under very controlled circumstances, under which certain technologies of experience can be employed. Role-playing places the mind in the frame of a fiction, while shared religious action seats the mind in a context of urgency involving myths, meanings and salient cultural values. Rituals are isolated instances of time, action and meaning, which is commonly labelled “liminal” or “liminoid” space (Turner 1982, see Ericsson 2004 for a review in relation to role-playing). This includes a myriad of practices such as Sunday-services, college hazing-weeks, reciting an Oath of Allegiance in the army, and public circumcisions in North-Africa. When entering into ritual ‘space’, normal conventions and meanings are suspended, and certain elements are brought to the forefront of experience. Adolescent circumcision-ceremonies in Moslem North Africa have little to do with genital hygiene or sexual sensitivity (even though they might also serve this purpose), but is instead connected to meanings of cultural ethos, tribal identity, and adulthood. Actions come to mean something beyond their basic function. In religious ritual, mythical narratives or magical action usually take centre-stage, while non-religious ritual – such as a doctoral dissertation – might focus academic values, meanings, and status. In the setting of a ritual, the world behaves as usual, but some elements in it are perceived with greater consequence and changed sign-value. A kiwi might not just be a kiwi, but a special ritualised kiwi signifying fertility. In this way, the ritual-like context of role-playing signifies that identities of persons, objects and actions are to be understood within a particular fictional framework, and that some factors supporting this must be viewed as important, while others (like telephone poles on the setting of a medieval game) are to be disregarded.

Rituals in themselves are relatively inconsequential, but the memories carried over into the rest of life might have great significance to the individual: Group-loyalty, tribal identity and obscure personal

insight may play a role in every strata of existence from the ritual on. Some rituals achieve this by imprinting single low-frequency high-arousal impressions on the mind (so-called flashbulb memories which will never be forgotten), and others by repetitious learning of dogma, actions and narratives, such as the dreary but consistent liturgy of the Lutheran church. Anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse suggests that high-excitement rituals may contain no explicit meaning, and that the taboos surrounding certain theological concepts might stem from the fact, that some sorts of ritual work best when standing for themselves. That is, without explicit meaning. Making rituals highly unique and even distressing experiences, claims Whitehouse, causes individuals and groups to search for meaning afterwards (2004). This gives rise to what he calls “spontaneous exegetical reflection” (SER). As we know, experiences get tossed about and modified quite a bit after they are first encountered, and the more emotional, the greater is the need for meaning. This is why a meta-plot in a role-playing game, which was in no way apparent to players during the event, may later be used as a key to understanding what went on. Especially if the event itself was physically or mentally exhausting (for instance cold, clammy and boring), will players need to attach reason for being part of it. This might be why debriefings seem so important to many – not because they denote re-integration into the “normal world”, as fans of Turner and Van Gennep would have us think.

Role-playing events are more likely to be remembered if they challenge the ontological, moral or social sensibilities of participants, than because they are “good role-playing scenarios”. Some events, including really bad ones, simply differ so much from all other experiences (including other role-play), that they leave a unique mnemonic imprint called “flashbulb memory”. A ritual might for instance include a real fear of death, or painful experiences such as prolonged physical ordeals or scarification. In this way, if a “successful” role-playing event is

characterized as one which garners attention and social capital for the author, then the event must give rise to lots of post-game negotiation, and lodge itself in the memory of individual participants. Thus, some might be drawn more to novel experience than to good craftsmanship. Perhaps this is why some authors constantly strive to re-invent role-playing. Not because the formula doesn’t work, but because they need to do something new to be recognised in the myriad of other events.

Many rituals employ certain types of experience-management, such as engaging the senses to evoke certain states of thought and emotion, which is found in role-playing games also. By bringing up the subject, I only wish to exemplify the manipulation of human experience. The work of E. Thomas Lawson & Robert McCauley (2002) and Harvey Whitehouse (2004) explains how the interplay between imagination, emotions, and semantics create salient experiences, which can be doctored to fit whatever context and meaning one wishes to promote. I can only encourage a step towards these views, instead of the tired old Turner-based analysis.

### **Negotiating reality<sup>1</sup>**

*“He who has the bigger stick has the better chance of imposing his definitions of reality”*

- Berger & Luckmann (1966)

A lot of the experience-management that goes on in role-playing is entirely hung up on verbal, or other semiotic, cues. Understanding imagination makes it clear that each participant in a role-playing game is only partly in charge of his or her own private imagery. Each player has a ‘version’ of shared information in his head, but traced and coloured on a personal level. Players only need to concede on the outlines, and can help each other furnish the rest out as they go.

Mental imagery is a shifting affair, and highly susceptible to outside manipulation (Lieberoth

2007, Edelman & Tononi 2000). Not all details are conscious in role-playing imagery – much like you usually don't notice the colours of cars passing on the street – and therefore they are created as attention are drawn to them. When different representations meet and clash, social mechanisms have a great influence on what is accepted, and private representations are adjusted accordingly.

An example taken from an observed table-top role-playing situation runs something like this (World of Darkness game, spring 2003, roughly translated from Danish):

**GM:** Okay, you arrive at Professor Hamley's house in Cambridge. It's an old Victorian structure with a well-tended garden and a low hedge bordering the sidewalk.

**Zeb:** Is anyone at home, judging by the look of things?

**GM:** Well, there are no lights on anywhere in the front of the house.

**Zeb:** I'll try to sneak into the yard. It's, like, 10 in the evening and the sun's down by now, right?

**Others:** Right...

**Jakob:** I clamber up a lamppost directly in front of the house, and try to get a glimpse in the first-floor windows. Do I see anything? Remember that Sean (Jakob's character) has excellent darkvision.

**GM:** Okay, I guess... You get up into the street-light, and get a look inside. [dice are rolled for "perception+alertness" with moderate success] ... The 1st-floor study, which you look into, seems to be empty. You can, however, see that there seems to be a light on further inside the house.

**Zeb:** But...but...!!! I specifically stated that I wanted to sneak into the yard under cover of darkness! I didn't think there was a streetlight right in front!

**GM:** Uh...

In the example, Jakob and Zeb's internal representations of the setting clearly do not fit together. Whether any of them had actually imagined street lights before the episode isn't clear, but as soon as Jakob

introduces the idea of a lamp post, and the GM goes along, their visions of things clash with that of Zeb, who assumed that everything was dark. Normally, when a participant introduces an element in the role-playing scenery, all others adjust their internal representations accordingly. A lamppost, blind beggar or whatever immediately manifests on each "inner screen". Above, however, two representations clash, and a negotiation must ensue.

Again, it is worth noticing how role-playing games differ little from less institutionalised walks of reality. Meaning is constantly negotiated between people, and we all encounter situations that clashes with our normal perception of things. In these cases humans regularly engage in a reduction of cognitive dissonance (first identified by Leon Festinger and colleagues in "When Prophecy fails" 1964) by positioning oneself in relation to the new information through denial, internalisation, or re-interpretation of facts in a way that better fits ones current world view.

Negotiation, as defined by Berger & Luckmann (1966) is the ongoing discursive approximation of world views, that occur in human communication. Gross and general facets of a game-setting are socially constructed, but personal representation-levels remains largely at the mercy of the individual mind, and need not square off with all others. For instance, colours and makes of cars in the paracosmic<sup>2</sup> scene are usually utterly unimportant, and do not need to be shared through public representation, unless, of course, the players are taking part in a car-chase. This can be translated into a tentative definition of social generative role-playing practice (not the phenomenon itself): the consolidation of separate imaginative entities into a whole that is coherent, acceptable and meaningful for all stakeholders at a given time in the game (Lieberoth 2006a, 2006b).

Negotiation is largely employed to describe or add concrete diegetic elements, but must also be utilised in situations of paracosmic dissonance. When two

separate mental representations of paracosmic facts clash, negotiation (often in the literal sense of arguing for and against) must ensue and an agreement be reached, so the game can go on as a coherent and shared entity. Authority or expertise may also be used as a basic argumentative leverage to quench dissonance. If one side of things (that is, one personal version of private representation) resonates better with the rest of the stakeholder-group than the other, that view is usually chosen for. This makes keeping track of other people's representations – a theory of mind – an important skill in role-playing, although boys with Asperger's syndrome can play quite well. Only through common understanding and consideration can a generally coherent and resonant exchange be maintained. Theory of Mind is the reason why role-playing sessions do not need to stop at every turn to re-negotiate. Role-players do not have a shared vision, but rather a vision of what is shared.

In the example with the lamppost (above), negotiation ensued like so:

**GM:** Well, um, there are lights in the street.

**Tomas:** Yeah, Cambridge is a nice neighbourhood as far as I know – really well-tended old colonial style

**Zeb:** Could the lamppost in front of Hamley's house be broken?

**Tomas:** I think they would tend to a thing like that in a nice neighbourhood...

**GM:** Yeah, but It's probably blown the bulb just recently. They haven't gotten 'round to it yet. It's a well-lit street, but quite dark around the house. That's why Jakob could get such a good look and see the light inside in the first place...

Gambits (bids for expertise) are made by both Tomas and Zeb, but the GM eventually caves to Zeb's vision because it offers an easy way out of the dissonance. Tomas tries to deploy an argument of expertise, but is overbid by the situational factors in-game (the bulb has blown recently) and authority of the GM. Socially,

the GM might be back-peddalling a bit, because he realises that he betrayed Zebs initial utterance, which was accepted at the time, by allowing Jakob's lamppost to be there. All the representations in the example are public and soft, and most of the negotiation actually takes place between the players and not characters.

"Hard" public representations, such as written signs identifying a corridor as a certain street, can be the subject of negotiation as well, but their concrete nature usually makes them more resilient to being overbid. More often than not, negotiating hard representations results in either absolute adherence or complete abolishment – this might be one reason for the movement toward free-forms role-playing in the 90's.

### **Varieties of role-playing experience**

*"Action seems to follow feeling, but really action and feeling go together; and by regulating the action, which is under the more direct control of the will, we can indirectly regulate the feeling, which is not."*

- William James

*"To you be your way, and to me mine"*

- The holy Qur'an 109:6

All these considerations about the social, malleable and imaginative mind in the body, in culture and in the world leads us up a well-trodden garden-path: The differences and merits of table-top role-playing and live-role playing. This discussion is age old in Denmark, and never seems to get anywhere; mainly because those who participate are usually advocating one form of role-playing above the other.

With our knowledge of the connection between cognition, artefacts in the world and bodily states, we should be able to elaborate a little bit on the differences between RPGs and LARPs. There is no doubt, that the body is needed for cognitive processing. The body activates various

neuroendocrine states, so using the body actively will give a different pattern of representations, than just imagining using it. Visual inputs and activity in a 'real life' social environment, will also stimulate the mind in different ways; not only is it pleasurable to interact with other humans, but the brain also gets activated by simulating the feelings of others. Thus, a wide variety of players with different actions and attitudes, will generate an extensive array of different emotional states, for the brain to latch on to. On the other hand, it is wrong to think that the body is entirely passive in table-top role-playing, where almost all representations are decoupled from the here-and-now. Thought processes influence the body, and uses the embodied mind to simulate all sorts of actions and mental states. The brain is part of the body too, and even though the body is partly paralyzed during sleep and some hallucinatory states, it will never cease influencing experience.

It is a well established fact that the brain seems to use the parts normally engaged in action to simulate behaviour, by activating them in a 'lower gear' and damming up any outputs that might result in movement. This is done both in verbal role-playing, and in 'mirroring' somebody else's thinking and feeling. In particular, Gregory Currie's assessment that the brain needs to simulate characters of a fiction, raises the issue of how many 'selves' or 'metarepresentations' are at play, when one immerses into a role-playing character. Does one act and think so much like the character, that there is no simulation – just 'true' thoughts, feelings and actions, or does one need to simulate one or even more hypothetical 'minds' to play a role? The truth is probably that in live-action role-playing, where you actually do things and talk to real people, most thoughts and actions are 'real'; but even in such a situation you need to run a few hypothetical simulations in your mind, to guess what the character might be most likely to think, feel or do, and to understand other players' minds. In table-top, actions are of course only simulated, or so hypothetical that almost no simulation is necessary to

envision them. Brain-activity may differ little between a RPG-character and a protagonist in a movie or book (being an external personality), while stronger immersion or activation of the body, might elicit a more full activation of the whole simulation-feeling-action repertoire. It is 'costly' to retain decoupled representation of identity, because the 'regular self' will constantly intrude on the fiction, and therefore technologies are employed to quench it momentarily. Shamans and mystics sometimes do the same thing when employing psychotropic drugs.

When looking for the differences between live and table-top role-playing, it becomes obvious that many differences are structural, not cognitive. This means, that the technologies of experience employed may differ greatly, and have important differences in angle of approach to the psyche, but that the feeling of being in someone else's shoes, is generated by much the same mental faculties.

Language might be the first step in table-top role-playing, and 'feeling the moment' can follow as a consequence of that, unless the fiction remains entirely semantic. In live-role-playing, on the other hand, the moment and 'feeling in the flesh' may come first, achieve meaning and narrative significance only after the whole experience is processed by the mind. The technologies employed, in other words, engage the semantic extended mind or the embodied mind, and depending on how the player relate to these experiences, the whole thing translates into immersive and meaningful role-playing.

### **Final words**

*"Science may set limits to knowledge, but should never set limits to imagination"*

- Bertrand Russell

The scope of this chapter has not been to explore different sorts of role playing, and their concrete techniques. In stead, I have chosen to present a barrage of more or less directly applicable ideas

and theories from my studies of cognitive science, imagination and psychology. I hope that there is a little novelty to this chapter, although I wrote on the same topic in the last “Knudepunkt”-book, and have given many talks on the subject of imagination in the past year.

I have yanked the terms “extended mind” and “embodied mind” from an immense body of literature, which might not all reflect the understanding presented here. The concepts, however, are very useful, and you may consider them my gift to you. In many respects, they are instalments of the debate between nature and nurture – the biological vs. cultural basis of the human mind – but both views are equally valid. Neither the personal human mind nor role-playing is possible without both a neurophysical backdrop and a basis in culture, learning and social relation.

Of course the body is present in table-top role playing! The head is fused to the rest of the organism, and thoughts can influence the body, just like physical exaltation can influence thinking. In fact, the mind may stimulate feelings in the body to ‘help’ decoupled thinking and decision-making, as we have learned from Antonio Damasio’s “somatic marker”-hypothesis.

We always carry our identity around, and get reminded of it by both our self-referential memory, feeling of the body, and many relational signs in the world around us. Decoupling is a way of thinking

“as if...”, but the world and our body constantly try to drag us ‘back to normal’. Loading the game-world with cues to the game-identity and situation is one way of overcoming this overpowering self-awareness, and trying to feel in a novel way towards well known things. This attempt to suspend our personal cognitive dispositions, I think, is at the core of role-playing.

In brief conclusion, the technologies of experience are different in different sorts of games (and all other fictions for that matter), as are the experiences. The goal, however, may very well be the same, and it seems that neither the mind, body or signs in the world can really be done away with in role-playing.

Mind, body and culture seem to be inseparable, no matter how hard we try to escape either. Role-players, however, seem to have unique skills for overwriting these fundamental premises for existence for a short while, and that makes gamers a truly unique people. Keep attempting escapes: sometime in the future, with new technologies at our disposal, we might succeed.

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## Notes

- 1 Parts of this section previously appeared in the unpublished paper "Drawing on the canvas of imagination", Lieberoth 2006b
- 2 Paracosm (Hoff 2005): the world of a pretend game – including general tenets of the setting and diegetic components



thomas duus henriksen

# role conceptions and role consequences: investigating the different consequences of different role conceptions

'Role' is a commonly used, but rarely addressed concept, and are often discussed in respect to quality, content and application, as well as how they were experienced during a game. Less attention is however paid to how they affect the game, and especially on how different conceptions of roles affect a role-playing game.

Several attempts have been made to define the activity of role-play, both among leisure-time role-players, but also within theatre and the social sciences. As within the social sciences, attempts of defining role-play often assumes a shared understanding of the concept of roles (Yardley-Matwiejczuk, 1997), thereby failing to address what is actually meant by the use of roles.

When a game-designer sets out to build a game, regardless whether it is for educational, entertainment or political purposes, the game is used as a mean for

providing the participant with a specific experience. In order to do so, the game is designed in a way that stages certain lines of thinking and acting, thereby providing the participant with an opportunity to try out and take part in a specific experience. When adding roles, the participant is provided with a specific perspective, allowing the game-designer to stage a meeting between a specific, role-provided perspective and a specific game-provided problem. This opportunity allows designers to give their participants the opportunity to experience (and participate) in situations of social interaction, that are educationally beneficial, entertaining for a specific segment, or politically persuasive.

Such an approach may provide a view on how to use roles, but it fails in communicating what is meant by the term roles, or what expectations the use might carry. From the approach, several readings of the term role can be made, dependent on the perspective

and intention of the reader, as well as the prior understanding of roles employed. In this article, I will investigate how different conceptual understandings of roles are employed, and how they affect the game in terms of providing and preventing certain lines of acting and thinking among the participants. The aim is to provide a view on how roles are understood differently, and how these differences provide the game with some options while preventing others, as well as the expectations that are embedded in the different role-conceptions.

Previous writings have presented differing views on how to understand role-play (see Gade, et. al, 2003), each presenting their embedded understanding of roles as a theoretical concept. When roles are being thought of as they were traditionally in theatre or the social sciences, roles become something that has to be enacted in a worn-and-carried manner. If the game-designer's understanding of roles is limited to such, the game becomes a programmed experience without allowing the participant any agency<sup>1</sup> within the game. My claim would be that the game-designer's approach to designing role-play is determined by his understanding of roles, as the approach both opens and closes the mind of the designer. It encourages a discussion on how are roles to be considered and what impact are they to have in a game. As different approaches provide the designer with different options, the discussion might help qualifying the choice of approach for a specific task, regardless of whether the aim is to entertain, to educate or to communicate politically.

### **MOVING EMPHASIS FROM ROLES TO SOCIAL INTERACTION**

Role-play is commonly defined or described in respect to its emphasis on the role-element (see e.g. Mann & Mann, 1956; Pohjola, 2003; Wingård & Fatland, 2003), which is then played or enacted in a specific social setting. Such approach emphasises the element of role as essential to role-play, making roles an obvious approach for analysing the processes of role-play.

According to positioning theory (see e.g. Harré & van Langenhove 1999), role theory can be criticised for emphasising a static and formal element. Additionally, the role-based approach can be considered a very limiting perspective to approaching the processes of role-play.

A different approach can be inspired from Stenros & Hakkarainen (2003), who defines role-play as the construction that takes place between participants in a diegetic frame. Although very inclusive, such an approach is interesting, as it turns focus away from the role and towards the taking place within the game. Rather than considering the crucial element of role-play to be a game of roles, emphasis can be placed upon the element of social interaction by framing role-play as a staged and facilitated social interaction, framed within a simulated practice that encourages certain lines of participation, while restricting others.

According to Stormhøj (2006) such change of emphasis from roles to the staging of social interaction allows us to readdress the phenomenon, as well as to challenge current approaches. By deploying such an archaeological approach, the current and implicit understanding of roles can be addressed and unsettled, allowing new understandings to be formulated. By emphasising the social interaction and its staging, the contribution and effect of different means becomes central to the analysis. This allows different role-conceptions to be explored in regard to their effect on the social interaction, rather than having to choose between them. Such an approach does however not exclude the concept of roles, rather it can be included e.g. as a perspective on how structural issues<sup>2</sup> are embedded and represented in the social interaction.

A major consequence of this change of emphasis is that it undermines the conception of roles as essential, thus allowing a more critical and challenging stance towards the concept. Rather than e.g. considering the

immersion into a role as the key issue of role-play (as proposed by Pohjola, 2003), roles can be considered means to facilitate the desired social interaction in competition with other means. By framing roles as non-essential, the question on whether they are desirable to the? process planned becomes a legitimate question to ask.

By hanging on to the essentialistic approach to roles, it would be impossible to question whether they should be there or not.

Seeing a vision rather than starting from the role transforms the role to simply a tool for getting somewhere. This can lead to the realisation that it is not a hammer that you are currently looking for to do the job. For analytical purposes, emphasis will be moved from the role to the staged social interaction. In doing so, the staging of the social interaction becomes central, reducing the role to one of several means for staging the social interaction.

### UNDERSTANDING ROLES

In this article, the question of roles is investigated from two major approaches; first, the view on roles employed by the classic role theories of the social sciences is explored; second, the understandings of roles employed by the more recent contributions to role-play theory are investigated.

### The classic approaches of the social sciences

#### *Linton and the Structural approach*

Linton (1936) is broadly considered to be one of the first to introduce the concept of roles to the social sciences, and his structuralist approach is still considered quite influential. According to Linton, roles represent an operationalised extension of the underlying social structure and social status. The social structure is here considered to be the discursive lines of thinking, rights, duties, values and norms, which are embedded in the social interaction, and have a deterministic effect on it. From Linton's

perspective, roles become representations of the structural issues, thereby providing a top-down approach to understanding social interaction. Yardley-Matwiejczuk (1997) indicates a general support to Linton's view on roles as being highly socially determined and determining to the individual in the social interaction.

From Linton's perspective, roles provide an interesting perspective on how to understand the relationship between structure and interaction as mediated by roles. By considering roles as representations of macro-social structures (issues), which can be enacted in the social interaction, Linton provides a framework for addressing and analysing the relationship between underlying social structures and enactments in the social interaction.

Linton's structural-deterministic approach has had a major impact by foreshadowing certain lines within the functionalist tradition within sociology, which has been taken up by theorists like Parsons and Merton (see e.g. Lee & Newby, 1983). The approach has also been criticised widely within both social psychology and sociology. One major critique of the structural-deterministic concept of role is provided by Turner (1968), who argues that the structurally deterministic approach leaves only little room for individual action, a critique that later has been elaborated within positioning theory, which criticises the structural-deterministic approach to roles for not seeing the finer grains of social interaction (see eg. Harré & van Langenhoven, 1999; Harré & Moghaddam, 2003).

From this critique, structural determinism provides the social interaction with a sluggish repetition of predetermined issues, which from Turner's critique only provides very little room for changing individual action in the social interaction. Although the critique is valid, Linton's concept of roles is much in line with the original conception; which according to Banton (1965) has its origins from *roll* or *scroll*, which represented the scripts that actors on the ancient Greek stages were to recite, and which leaves even less room for personal agency.

From this line of thinking, roles would describe the relationship to structural issues in respect to rights, duties, values and norms. This relationship would have a deterministic effect on the participation by resembling a list of social resources. Such a list would include both what the participant could demand during the game, as well as what would be expected or demanded of the participant.

Due to the deterministic element of the theory, the participant would be expected to take a 'worn-and-carried' approach to the role; the participant would be expected to take on the perspectives of the role and carry them throughout the participation. From such perspective, *not* enacting a perspective of the role would be considered poor role-playing. When designing roles from Linton's structural-deterministic approach, participants are expected to enact the role throughout the game. From this approach, the enactment of the role-embedded social issues is central in order to bring forth the underlying social issues.

Using Linton's approach to roles for designing social interaction allows the designer to think in lines of social programming; as participants are provided with perspectives and are expected to enact them, complex social interactions can be staged through the programming of roles and role relations. Such designs can be very successful in staging interesting lines of social interaction, but can also be very fragile, as it builds upon the designer's expectation on participant behaviour. In line with Turner's (1968) critique on a socially determining understanding of roles, the approach leaves very little room for the participant's own interpretations. As the approach attempts to provide the participant with a discursive recipe for participating, a) role-exceeding participant initiative and b) role-exceeding situations in the game could throw the game off its tracks.

Linton's approach allows us to think of roles as means for determining social interaction, as well as

something that is expected to be worn-and-carried by the participant. The approach is interesting for addressing for addressing the level of expectations embedded with the role, as well as for taking a structural, top-down approach to designing roles that are socially integrated into a context, encouraging a coherent relationship between roles and social structure.

The approach is however limiting when it comes to designing roles in respect to other factors than social relations, structural placement, etc. In respect to understanding social interaction, Turner (1968) criticised the structural-deterministic approach for not being able to grasp the personal actions that were not determined by structure. When it comes to design, the approach is limited in respect to staging (and eventually also in allowing) social interaction that is unrelated to the social structures. Additionally, due to the deterministic element and the demand for structural enactment, the approach does not encourage the participant to make a personal interpretation of the provided role, or in any other manner bring personal contributions to the game, limiting the participant's opportunity to personally tone the role.

When using Linton's approach as an analytical strategy, a number of issues are raised on how roles are being thought of, and as a consequence, on what expectations they embed in the game-design. Although Linton's approach opens the concept of roles to including the social element, it prevents the designer from including the participant's personal contributions to the staged social interaction. Rather than seeing them as contributions to the game, they are considered missteps and eventually harmful to the game.

A key issue in a structural-deterministic approach is that roles are given by structure (they are not taken), and that the occupation of a role provides the occupant with certain rights and duties, thereby allowing it to draw upon a structurally legitimated

source of power. A very different approach to roles was provided by Mead, which is presented below.

*Mead and the symbolic interactionist approach*

The other of the two early introductions of roles to the social sciences was provided by Mead (1934), who in his interactionist sociology considered roles as intimately bound to the formation of a social identity. Mead considered the formation of a personal role as a mean for exploring the social; by occupying a certain role, it provided the means (although often limited) for participating in a social context. The role here became a tool for reducing social complexity. Rather than seeing the role as something entirely given by structure, he wanted to distinguish his theory from the deterministic line of thinking of his time by stating that the role was preoccupied on basis of the individual understanding of that role. On basis of a presumed understanding of a social role, or what Mead termed ‘the generalised other’, the individual was given a basis for exploring and developing different approaches to participating in the social.

Whereas Linton (1936) provided a top-down approach to role-definition, Mead provided an approach, which encompassed an interaction between structure and participant. Instead of seeing roles as entirely determined by structure, Mead’s approach allows the participant to take part in the definition through personal interpretation. Structure may be able to provide a defined role, but the participant cannot be expected to step directly into it. This may be due to a lack of comprehension, communication or the comprehensive aspects of the role may simply not be available (or legible) to the participant up front.

Mead’s symbolic interactionism can, along with Linton’s approach, be criticised from contemporary psychology for being too static for grasping the finer grains of social interaction (see. eg. Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), but between the two of them, Mead clearly represents the dynamic aspect. Mead has also been criticised for paying limited

attention to the span of social interaction. Whereas positional theory considers social interaction to be a conjunction of storylines (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999), the symbolic interaction can be criticised for only addressing the situation of one participant.

When designing roles on basis of Mead’s understanding, the key contribution becomes the element of personal interpretation done by the participant, as well as the opportunity to develop the role as the game goes along. Instead of seeing a role as something that is to be performed strictly as written, the participant is allowed to see the provided material as a proposal or draft, which is then to be interpreted by the participant, both prior to the enactment as well as during. Such invitation to co-author the role is much in line with the interpretive model (Henriksen, 2004), in which the participant interprets a character proposal into a personalised role. Another contribution is that it grasps the inconclusive access that the participant has to the social world. Whereas Linton’s approach required an extensive up-front understanding of the role, Mead’s approach allows (or almost requires) the participant to start without such luxury.

To the game-designer, this approach is a likely time-saver. As the participant doesn’t need to have all information up-front, but is expected to develop an understanding during the game, less preparation can be done. The participant is thereby forced to form and test hypotheses during the game, allowing the participant to interpret game-information as it moves along. In such a line of thinking, the opportunity to re-think and re-interpret initial ideas and conclusions becomes vital, as the participant otherwise would require more information up front. By allowing the participant to interpret, and thereby contribute to the material, the game is likely to become more nuanced to the participants. That adds one dimension to the agency in the game. Another is allowed by letting the participant’s understanding of the role evolve during the game. This again allows the participant to avoid

the rigidity of having to enact something that no longer is interesting or relevant to the participant. The key contribution of Mead's approach is the legitimisation of the personalised contribution to the role-enactment. Rather than seeing roles as something completely provided, roles can be considered as half-baked proposals, which not only call for a personal interpretation, but also allows for in-game developments and improvements. Compared to the structuralist approach, it increases the degrees of freedom (Henriksen, 2004), thereby providing the participant with more opportunities for acting within the game. As with the structural-deterministic approach, the symbolic interactionist approach both provides opportunities and limitations to how game-designers can think of roles. The most striking element of this line of thinking roles lies in recognising the participant as a co-author, and roles as something that is developed after they leave the game-designer. By allowing the participant to draw upon personal knowledge for reinterpreting calls for a lot of trust with the game-designer, eventually resulting in a laissez-faire or intervention-based model for running games. Whatever the model, the approach constitutes a line of thinking that emphasises the participant's contribution over the staging of specific lines of acting and thinking. Roles are then considered more as an invitation than something to be work and carried.

#### *Kelly and the immanentistic approach*

During the times of the functionalistic sociology, Kelly (1955) presented an even more immanentistic approach to understanding social interaction. She suggested the use of 'part' rather than using roles, thereby trying to undermine the element of structural determination. Kelly's project was about seeing social interaction as independent to structural determination, thereby allowing focus to be placed on the interaction itself.

Although Kelly's approach may have met its critique from the structurally orientated, functionalistic

sociology of its time, its emphasis on the interaction represents some of the lines of thinking of contemporary social psychology.

To the game-designer, emphasising the element of interaction rather than having to include (and design) social structures, holds an interesting opportunity to stage social interaction that uses itself as reference. Rather than allowing participants to draw upon the power of structural issues, they are forced to draw upon what is provided in the game, rather than on what is imagined to be surrounding it. Kelly's approach encourages the participant to step into a situation that is already in progress, but without providing the participant much of an introduction to the background of the situation.

Kelly's approach to understanding roles provides an emphasis on the interaction that takes place, which completely undermines the impact of structural issues. Roles can therefore be thought of as independent of social issues, as isolated islands of knowledge and perspectives that meet in a given situation. Such situational approach largely prevents the game-designer from thinking in lines of staging specific lines of thinking, *and eventually in thinking further than basing the game on one or more independent social situations to be enacted. This would eventually lead to an abrupt, rather than a coherent game.*

As the participants are expected to participate in a social situation without emphasis on structural issues, it raises the question of the span and validity of the participant's constructions. What should be allowed to be invented becomes a current issue if structural relations are not clarified beforehand. Especially the negotiational impact of such constructs is likely to become a challenge to the integrity of such game-design. The general question raised from Kelly's approach is what should be included in a role in order to make deployable in a game, as well as what its negotiational argumentation should be based upon.

*Goffman and the combined approach*

Another interactionist that followed Mead's lead was Goffman (1961). Drawing upon theatre, he embedded theatrical concepts in his understanding of social interaction, and challenged the sociology of his time by focussing on the operationalised content of the face-to-face interaction. He largely accepted the structural element, and thereby understanding roles as deterministic representations of structure, or as Yardley-Matwiejczuk (1997) puts it, considering roles as "... constitutive and prior to the individual" (p.62). Goffman's contribution to understanding roles can be considered a step towards bridging the two extremes; he accepts the element of structural determination, but only in a semi-scripting manner, which allows some opportunity for personal interpretation and construction.

When designing roles on basis of Goffman, the key contributions would be the combination of roles and interaction. The role may be prior to the participant, but the participant is allowed to move beyond the role through personal styling and interpretation, as well as role-reinterpretation during a game. Goffman's approach emphasises both the individual reinterpretation and the structural representation, allowing the game-designer both to see the participant as a co-author of the role and at the same time stage specific lines of acting and thinking. The approach thereby opens the opportunity for participant agency within the game, while staging a specific story in the game.

By providing a fixed frame, the participants (are likely to) do what they are told to. Within the interactionist frame, the participants are likely to come up with unexpected solutions to problems, allowing the interaction to move in directions that were not foreseen by the designer. This would allow the participants to produce situations which were different from the intended situations. Goffman's combined approach allows agency to be enacted within the determined frame. Such an approach allows the design of games that both stages certain lines of acting and thinking,

but also provides the participant with the opportunity for drawing upon personal, game-external knowledge.

Although Goffman's approach in many respects may resemble the role-plays that are being staged today, the approach may be criticised for trying to do both the provided structure and the personal interpretation, thereby not doing any of them entirely. This may be of particular interest when it comes to using role-play as a communicative tool in order to present a specific point. In designing educational games or political communication the element of personal interpretation may put a twist to the communication that may hamper the result. Using this approach allows the participants to think creatively within a given frame. This would be interesting within the educational frame when trying to move from general theories to the particular and practical. It would also be interesting for the political deployment to allow participants to explore a problem from perspectives that could include personal perspectives.

The final benefit could be considered the game-mechanical benefit from helping the game in succeeding; if the participants merely are to enact certain perspectives, the interaction becomes very programmed and rigid. If the participants are given too loose lines, the inter-role integration is likely to be challenged. If the roles do not receive the expected input, the participants are less likely to enact the role-perspectives. From the combined perspective, the participants both enact the cues for other roles (e.g. by providing a part in a conflict) as well as providing their own contributions. Such approach provides both the opportunity to creatively apply role and personal knowledge, as well as providing the cues for other roles to build upon.

**Defining roles**

The main contribution seems to be coming from Linton, who presented roles as a representation of structural issues, thereby providing the social

interaction with values, norms, etc. This points our attention towards seeing roles as something given by structure, as well as something that makes certain lines of action available to the participant through the definition of a collection of rights and duties associated with each role.

The second contribution is provided by Mead, who addresses taking a role as the assumption of the generalised other. By the notion of assuming a role, Mead paves the way for including an individual interpretation of the role to be enacted. Although both reside firmly within the symbolic interactionism, this perspective is countered by Goffman's concept of considering a role to be something constitutive and prior to the individual, thereby accepting a larger degree of social determination than Mead. The antagonist to Linton and Goffman is provided by Kelly, who attempts to remove or minimize the element of structural determination though an immanist approach, but at the same time removes himself from the concept of role. On basis of Mead, Linton, Goffman and Kelly, the following definition of roles is proposed:

A role consists of a structurally determined collection of perspectives, including legitimate rights, duties, norms and values, which apply to a social situation within the determining structure according to the interpretation of the enactor.

Apart from the importance of the deterministic element of structure, it is important to notice that the social interaction must take place within the structure of the role to be able to provide the situation and interaction with legitimate means, as the legitimacy is bound to the context of the role.. Under these circumstances, the role allows and prevents certain lines of action. The concept of role-assumption is considered less relevant to the definition itself as the theorists largely agree upon the role as something given, whereas the element of personal interpretation seems less prominent.

### **PROVIDING ROLES WITH AN ACTIVE COMPONENT**

The use of roles in understanding social interaction has been criticised widely, both for not encompassing an element of agency (Turner, 1968), for overemphasising the structural influence (Kelly, 1955), but also for deploying a static approach to social interaction (see Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Harré, 2000). The concept of roles may in itself be static, but several attempts have been made to provide it with an active component. In the following, I will pursue the concepts of role-enactment and that of role-playing.

The difference between role-enactment and -playing has been rather unclear. Coutu (1951) tried, on basis of what must have been a very orthodox reading of Mead, to define and separate the two concepts. In effect, he managed to define the two as the precise opposite of how they are considered today. Playing the later Dungeons and Dragons would from Coutu's terminology be role-enactment, whereas taking on the role of being a boss would be termed role-playing. In this article, I consider performing social roles as enactments, whereas the deliberate and playful use of roles are termed as role-playing.

### **Enacting roles**

The concept of role-enactment is termed by Sarbin (1954), who used the concept to address the active component of structural issues in the social interaction. With this concept, emphasis was moved from roles as a static representation of structural issues, to the active performance of these issues in the social interaction. According to Sarbin (1954), role-enactment refers to the application of a otherwise passive role in a social context. Such performance of a role implied the enactment of the role's perspectives onto the issues that were in the social context. With this concept, Sarbin referred widely to the enactment of roles in social interaction, making role-play a sub-category to enactment.

Although not embraced by functionalistic social science of the time, role-enactment has been picked up by later studies. Forward et. al. (1976) picked up the term without much elaboration, probably in attempt to avoid the contemporary discussions on role-play. A more contemporary study (see e.g. Fitzgerald et. al. 2006) has used the term to add an active component to the otherwise passive roles. A reason that this conception has been re-enacted is probably due to the performative element of enactment, which is prominent within contemporary social psychology. The main contribution of role-enactment is to consider how the otherwise static, structural representations embedded in a role are brought to life by being enacted in the social interaction.

By addressing the process of role-enactment, the performance of a given role is emphasised. The role is considered irrelevant to that respect it is not enacted in a social practice. To the game-designer, thinking roles as something to be enacted provides an attention towards what and how issues of the role, regardless on whether they are representations of structural issues, or they are participant interpretations, are presented and present in the social context of the game.

A key issue of the enactment line of thinking roles is the question of to whom the role is performed. If the aim is to create personal experiences, extensive perspectives can be written into the role without regards to how they are performed (these can eventually be shared as incentives and stories after the game), but if the aim is to stage social interaction, regards must be paid to how the perspectives can be performed, and therefore be brought to life in the social interaction of the game. By providing an enactment based understanding of roles, the value provided by the role is dependent on its performability. According to Butler (1990), only the perspectives that are brought forward in the social interaction have a relevance to it, which pretty well illustrates the attitude of the enactment-based approach to thinking roles.

### Playing roles

As with the attempt to address the concept of roles, there is little consensus on the concept. According to Yardley-Matwiejczuk (1997), a common trait among the classic approaches to role-play is that they all assume a shared concept of roles, rather than providing a definition of roles. In general, very little was done to challenge the early definitions (although Movahedi (1977) tried sorting out the pieces). Despite these problems, the theories each provide an interesting view on how to think about role-play. Starting with the more classic approaches, I will present some of the more striking definitions and their lines of thinking, before moving on to the more contemporary writings on role-play.

### THE CLASSIC APPROACHES TO ROLE-PLAY

One early, and often quoted definition on role-play is provided by Mann & Mann (1956), who proposes the following definition:

“A role-playing situation is here defined as a situation in which an individual is *explicitly* asked to take a role not normally his own, or if his own in a setting not normal for the enactment of the role.” (Mann & Mann, 1956, p. 227).

Mann & Mann addresses the elaboration of the roles taken, *asking* a person to take on an explicit role, which is an interesting contribution to understanding role-playing as it implies an element of conscious, and thereby voluntary participation. Mann & Mann’s emphasis on the conscious and voluntary element is considered key elements in understanding role-play, but not to role-enactment in general. According to a post-structuralist approach to understanding social interaction, the enactor is not necessarily aware of the enacted discourses, nor is the enactment voluntary. Mann & Mann’s early definition thereby addresses a key distinction between role-enactment and -playing. Mann’s definition is interesting as it appoints the question of agency in role-play as to what degree the participant has an opportunity to

move within the deterministic frame. Instead of considering the role as deterministic, it can be framed as constitutive, which both determines certain lines of participation, as well as providing the participant with the opportunity to choose.

Another key issue addressed by Mann & Mann is the early inclusion of an “as-if” or element of pretending embedded in the definition. By asking an individual to take on “... a role not normally his own, or if his own in a setting not normal ..” encompasses an element of pretending, thereby accepting what would be an already invalidated discourse, and to apply it onto a setting.

When thinking game-design in line with Mann’s approach, the difference between the mundane and the game-role is essential. From such line of thinking, the game (or play) element would arise from the fictional recentering (see Henriksen 2004), in which a difference between the mundane and that of the game are explicated. The other element would be that of being asked, which both indicates an element of structural determinism, as well as the voluntary element. When thinking role play from such perspective, the participant takes part in the game on a voluntary and informed basis. Such approach would not allow political or educational games to ‘play something past the filters of consciousness’. Rather, when thinking such games, the political or educational payload would be explicit to the participant thorough the game and not a surprise in the end.

When thinking games in line with Mann’s approach, building surprises would be prohibited, as would be changing the setting or the terms or conditions during the game. This may make the game rigid, but the approach is fruitful due to its understanding of what it means to play a role.

With Mann, the element of as-ifness was addressed without further elaboration. This line of thinking was

picked up by Forward et al. (1976), who defined role play as:

“the common feature that subjects are asked to act ‘as-if’ they were engaged in specified social contexts that are largely outside of the specific social context of the experimental situation” (Forward, et. al 1976; in Yardley-Matwiejczuk 1997:72).

In the definition, Forward et. al. explicates the fictional element of the role-playing situation, stating that there is a difference between the context, in which the role-play takes place, and the situation that takes place within the role-play. The shared discursive understanding employed by the participants is presented as the key element of role-play, putting less emphasis on the displacement of personal perspectives, which were the focal points with Mann & Mann (1956). Such difference is attributed to Forward et. al.’s emphasis on conducting social experiments, whereas Mann & Mann were concerned with conducting personal change. It is relevant to notice that Forward, et. al. were concerned with laboratory experiments. Although social psychology has moved away from this form, their findings remain relevant to this article. Whereas lab-experiments attempted to learn about social processes through the experiment, eRPG seeks to produce certain social processes in order to teach its participants. Although the learning process is aimed differently, the two contexts seem very alike.

The different emphasis employed by Mann & Mann and Forward, et. al. can be recognized in the *structural recentering model* (Henriksen, 2000; 2004:110), which appoints three levels of as-if or fictional recentering element; a contextual or structural level, an individual level and a relational level. The point of this model was to consider several dimensions of discourse displacement, creating the basis for a multi-dimensional ‘as-if’ experience.

To the game-designer, Forward, et. al.'s emphasis on role-play as an experimental situation provides us with a question of the limits of a role-play in respect to time, social, and geographical surroundings, as well as how to address the level of pretending that the game-content is real. Emphasis is placed upon acting, as well as basing that acting on the real situation that is represented by the game. Emphasis is thereby placed on the realism of the enactments, as well as legitimating the use of knowledge about the contexts that the role-play is based upon. In this respect, background knowledge is considered a legitimate source of power, much in contrast to Kelly's (1955) approach, from which the game-designer would try to avoid (or at least question the impact of) such knowledge.

The element of fiction is central to Forward, et.al.'s approach, as would the as-if element be to several other attempts of defining role-play during the 1970-1980s, although the element was rarely addressed in itself. One more explicit approach to the as-if element is provided by Hamilton (1976), who defines role play as the situation where "the experimenter asks a subject to act 'as-if' some condition or conditions obtained which in fact do not." (Hamilton; in Yardley-Matwiejczuk 1997:72), thereby addressing the element of fiction embedded in role-playing.

When thinking in lines of fiction and fictional re-centering, the displacement not only provides a particular setting that is different from the mundane one, it also protects the participants from getting real consequences. By adding an imaginary layer, effects, relations, consequences and resources can be provided, more or less unrelated to the mundane reality. By including the as-if element, the participant is provided access to a situation and a perspective in that situation, under a fictional contract that defines the real consequences of taking part in the game. The as-ifness element thereby raises a question on the openness of such contract. From this line of thinking, educational and political games that try to slip something past the participant's consciousness

would not be possible, but the approach would be able to provide access to fictional contexts, as well as providing ways of participating in such context that would not normally be available to the participant.

### **THE RECENT CONTRIBUTIONS ON ROLE-PLAY**

Some of more recent theoretical contributions to role-play is provided by the Nordic role-play society, where different sorts of role-play has had good conditions for evolving both within theory and practice, thus without a widespread explicitness about the definitions of neither role nor role-play. In this article, I will address the approaches of role-play collected in the "As Larp Grows Up" anthology (Gade, et. al., 2003); the interactionist approach provided by Meilahti and the educational approach; the minimalist approach provided by Dogme 99, and the immersive approach provided by the Turku perspective. These were all published in respect to making better live-action-role-playing (larp), and has an implicit attention towards the entertaining side of role-play.

#### **The Dogma 99 approach**

The aim of the Dogma 99 approach was to provide a minimalist approach to designing games, and was a protest against the 'more is better' approach of the time. Consisting of 10 vows of chastity, Fatland & Wingård (2003a) presents 9 prohibitions or exclusions from what can be considered as a good role-play, and a tenth stating the accountability of the designers. Although the rules have been considered as a mere expression of the authors' irritations (Gade, 2003)(Thorup, 2003), as well as being too restrictive for practical application, they provide an interesting approach for trying to create creativity by excluding the obvious. By attempting to exclude designers from the usual tools for designing, they force designers to rethink what they are doing and why. The approach can be criticised for attempting to find an essence of role-play or the perfect role-play, representing a very realistic approach to the media.

Fatland & Wingård's approach is illustrated in their approach: "A larp is a meeting between people who, in through their roles, relate to each other in a fictional world" (2003b, p. 24). In this definition, focus is placed on the participation in a fictional world, using the role as a tool for interaction. The authors furthermore explicitly de-emphasises the background story (*ibid*), thereby removing itself from the line of thinking provided by the structuralist determination, and towards the underlying role-concept provided by Kelly (1955). In doing so, the structural emphasis is removed in favour of the social interaction taking place in the role mediated meeting between the participants.

In the first row, the authors clearly distance themselves from the structural-determination perspective by stating that "1. It is forbidden to create action by writing it into the past history of a character<sup>3</sup> or the event" (Fatland & Wingård, 2003a, p. 20). However, in the descriptive document, it is stated that it would be false to assume that the mere provision of good background information will incite action in the role-play (Fatland & Wingård, 2003b), stating that the mere representation of structural issues are not likely to create action. Rather than stating that structural issues represented through background material would be irrelevant if not enacted, the authors state that "static conflicts (*ibid*, p. 25) can be used in the static backgrounds for providing action. In respect to its relationship to the structuralist perspective, the Dogma 99 is a bit unclear on how the two are related, as well as what effect structural issues are to have on the role-play.

In respect to roles, the Dogma 99 is rather unclear on how it understands roles and how they are related to characters. As with the classic theories, the Dogma 99 attempts to unsettle current tendencies and approaches to thinking and creating role-play, but it emphasises the use of roles, rather than the nature or essence of roles. The Dogma 99 assumes a shared understanding of roles and characters with the reader, but does frame roles as means for interacting within the fictional frame of the game. Despite its very perspective exclu-

sive approach, the Dogma 99 seeks to include the width of participants in the core of the game. Despite the lack of attention towards roles, the Dogma 99 is interesting to this article, as it attempts to make game-designers aware of their own conceptions by preventing them from doing game design the way they are used to. By thinking roles as a mean of interaction and as something that the participant can co-write (*ibid*, p. 25), Dogma 99 clearly draws upon the interactionist perspective provided by Mead, but it also bears a resemblance to Goffman's approach due to the unclear relationship to the influence of the structural issues. To the game-designer, Dogma 99 may seem more of a hindrance than a tool at first glance, but it provides the designer with tools for unsettling and reconsidering current approaches. As for the entertaining, educational and political deployment, one should bear in mind that the purpose isn't to obey the Dogma 99, but to communicate a perspective. Dogma 99 then becomes more of a tool for change than a game-design recipe.

The Dogma 99 encourages an essentialistic approach to roles and role-play by thinking games as having a core-plot and supporting characters, stating that all participants should be included in this core. It thereby allows the designer to think in core processes, main events and key roles, and in particular helps the designer in asking the essential question on how all participants can be included in such.

### **The Turku Approach**

Whereas the Dogma 99 took on the game-designer's perspective, the Turku Manifesto from 2000 considers role-play from the participant perspective, and was put forward as a critique against the previously defined categories of participation, presented with Bøckman (2003). Rather than seeing role-play as either a matter of playing a game, performing a role or simulating an event, Turku emphasises the immersion as the key element of role playing; "Role-playing is immersion ("eläytyminen") into an outside consciousness ("a character") and interacting with

its surroundings” (Pohjola, 2003a, p. 24). Whereas Dogma 99 sought to stage a meeting between participants, Turku is only concerned with the immersion and the interaction with the surroundings. Despite this difference, they are both unclear on their conceptions of roles.

In line with the Dogma 99, Turku emphasises that the role-playing experience occurs in the contributing interaction in the game. This may resemble the interactionist approach, but there is less emphasis on what is being interacted with. As with the structural recentring model (Henriksen, 2000;2004), the other participants are considered as part of the surroundings, but the Turku doesn’t pay any particular attention towards them. From the structuralistic-deterministic approach, the structural issues became influential though their enactment or representations in the social interaction. This is less of the case with the Turku approach, as it emphasises the immersion, which according to Pohjola (2003a, p. 34) mostly takes place within the participant’s head. While claiming that it is not possible to tell predetermined stories through role-play, due to the subjective element of the medium, the Turku Manifesto clearly adopts the structuralist-deterministic line of thinking as it bans action that is not predetermined or pre-approved. Another indication lies in the use of the term character, rather than referring to a role, thereby undertoning the element of participant interpretation; the character is to be performed in strict accordance with the game-designer, not to be interpreted in respect to prior knowledge possessed by the enacting participant.

From this line of thinking, Turku clearly utilises the means of the structuralist-deterministic, and is therefore also subject to its critique. As Turner (1968) criticised the approach for not leaving room for personal agency, Turku bans such agency if it is not in strict accordance with the provided character. From such a perspective, going beyond the role would be poor role-playing (or cheating), as well as a threat to the game as a whole as it may not be able to provide

the means for constituting the immersion, or simply by making the game inconsistent. As participants are assumed to accept the provided experience as a whole (Pohjola, 2003b), inconsistent cues may provide an experience that is very different from the intended by the game-designer.

The Turku Manifesto does not provide an explicit definition on either character or role, but it provides as number of cues on how they are understood from the Turku approach. As Pohjola (2003b) states it, the participant is expected to mold his participation to the character, assuming that the role is closely associated with the enactment of predefined issues, as with the structuralist-deterministic approach. Such approach can be both a blessing and a curse to the game designer; assuming that participants are willing and able to play a certain part of a game can be a time-saver to the game-designer, but assuming that it will happen the way it was planned can be a risky business. As Pohjola (2003a) states, role-plays are not very likely to take the exactly planned course.

The Turku Manifesto allows the game-designer to think in personalised experiences and, as the main immersion takes place within the participants head, that the personal experience may differ from the expression or enactment. While thinking in lines of staging, *Turku states that participants are to (and will) follow their roles to the best of their experience.* From the critique of contemporary social psychology, as with the foreshadowing provided by Turner (1968), the approach limits the game-designer to consider, plan or stage action not in correspondence to the role, thereby providing a very static role-conception. It does however help the designer in asking questions in regard to what can be expected by the participant, as well as framing the experiences as something that is taking place within the participant, in contrast to Dogma 99, that emphasises the processes that takes place between the participants. It also raises a question on what is desired by the participant; the determined experience based on character immersion, or

the element of perceived autonomy and inclusion of participant perspectives in the game.

The approach to roles presented by the Turku Manifesto is less informative in respect to how to understand a role, but very informative in regard to what to do with it. By addressing the character as an external consciousness, rather than addressing the role, the element of personal co-authoring is disregarded in favour of the vision of the game-designer, as is the opportunity to develop the role throughout the game limited. The approach is very deterministic, which would be relevant to consider in respect to any entertaining, educational or political perspective.

### **The Meilahti approach**

In 2002, the Meilahti School presented its descriptive view on role-play. The approach emphasised the diegetic frame of the game, rather than adopting the emphasis on roles and characters that Dogma 99 and Turku deployed. The approach is carried by the following definition: “A role-playing game is what is created in the interaction between players or between player(s) and gamemaster(s) within a specified diegetic framework.” (Stenros & Hakkarainen, 2003, p. 56). Roles are explicitly defined as “.. a subject position within the diegetic frame, approached by the gamemaster.” (ibid. p. 56), providing the tools for interacting within certain situations. The Meilahti approach is mainly known for its descriptive element, as well as for its emphasis on the diegetic element of the game. Thus Meilahti provides a very inclusive definition to role-play, thereby allowing a very wide array of activities to be understood as a part of a role-play. Although it excludes activities on basis of non-diegesis criteria, the definition has to draw upon a game-master concept in order to distinguish role-play from other games, and is still problematic in respect to judge-moderated team sports. Such inclusive line of thinking may be problematic when trying to distinguish role-play from other activities, but on the other hand allows a wide variety of activities to be included.

In contrast to the previous attempts of defining role-play, Stenros & Hakkarainen addresses the issue of role by providing an explicit definition. This definition does however not define the relationship between roles and characters; characters can be understood as the subjects within the diegetic frame, whereas a role can be considered a character played by a participant. In respect to role theory, the Meilahti approach has a non-distinctive approach to the relationship between roles and positions. Within contemporary social psychology, positions are considered as something temporary that is negotiated through the social interaction (see Davies & Harré, 1999)(van Langenhove & Harré, 1999)(Harré & Moghaddam, 2003), whereas roles according to Linton (1936) and Goffmann (1961) are considered as something defined by social issues and given by structure, rather than negotiated in practice<sup>4</sup>. Whereas roles can be considered as privileged positions, provided and legitimated by structure, positions are obtained as a product of the continuous negotiation that is taking place in the game.

Despite the unclarities regarding prelimitation and the relationship between roles, characters and positions, the Meilahti School takes an interesting approach to role-play through its emphasis on the interactive element. In doing so, Stenros & Hakkarainen allows game-designers to re-think role-play as something that is not necessarily based on roles. In doing so, they incite a non-essential approach, allowing other means for staging the social interaction of a role-play, thereby encouraging new tools to be investigated. To the game-designer, and especially to those involved in staging educational and political games, the Meilahti School allows emphasis to be placed on the specific interaction that would be the most beneficial to the project, rather than being limited to staging the lines of action and thinking that could be achieved through the use of roles. By unsettling the essentialistic understanding of roles, the Meilahti approach allows the current understandings of roles to be innovated. According to Stenros & Hakkarainen, the interaction is constantly

approved by the game-master, who has the power to legitimate specific lines of acting and thinking over others. This provides the game with an element of structure as the game master's approval has a determining effect on both the participant's interpretations and actions available in the game. The Meilahti School does on the other hand de-emphasise the element of rules as a mean for such moderation. The relationship between the participant and the game-master is on the other hand described as an interaction, in which the game-master surrenders parts of the authority to define the game content to the participant. This allows the participant to co-write the game, as well as making space for personal interpretation.

The Meilahti does in many respects resemble the approach provided by Goffman; it both provides a frame for the interaction, as well as an opportunity to enact the character, while at the same time allowing the participant to employ personal interpretations and knowledge within the frame. In order to understand the conception of roles provided by the Meilahti approach, it can largely be understood as a deterministic frame, provided by the enforcing structure (the game-master). The game provides a structure through its diegetic frame and characters, whereas the game-master provides the opportunity for the participants to interpret these conditions throughout the game. This interaction provides the game-designer with the opportunity to understand roles as something to be interpreted within a frame, but in contrast to Turku, not in a manner that is totally determining to the participation, but still in line with the originally proposed character. A similar approach to facilitating agency with the participant is proposed by conceptualising the role as a too short discourse (Henriksen, 2004); the role provides the participant with the answers to certain questions and challenges in the game, but leaving the participant short of others. The participant is thereby forced to interpret the character, within the diegetic frame, in order to provide an answer. Both approaches allow roles to

evolve during the game by allowing the participant to fill the discursive gap between the provided and required perspectives.

To the game-designer, the Meilahti approach provides the tools for designing a deterministically orientated game, but at the same time allows the designer to think in lines of agency and participant co-writing. Stenros & Hakkarainen states the release of game-master power as a prerequisite for creating interaction in the game, requiring the designer to add holes in the nicely determined story. Rather than allowing the participants to determine where the agency is to appear, the Meilahti approach allows the designer in some degree to plan and place the rise of participant agency. It also allows the game-designer to think in other means than roles for staging interaction; by addressing the interaction rather than the role, a question is asked on what is considered as the desired interaction and what lines of acting and thinking are desired to the game-objective. How are the participants to interact, and what other means can be used for staging such interaction are among the valuable contributions provided by the Meilahti approach.

### **THE POSITIONAL ALTERNATIVE**

On basis of the Meilahti approach, it becomes interesting to question the necessity and relevance of roles; if the aim is to stage a social interaction, based on specific lines of thinking and acting, are roles then the best approach for such staging, or could other approaches provide a more fruitful staging of the desired social interaction?

Within the social sciences, the concept of roles has been criticised for providing a static approach to understanding social interaction. Although the aim of this article is to stage social interaction rather than try to analyse it, the different perspectives on understanding social interaction provided by roles have been beneficial in order to understand what impact the different understandings have to the game-designer in respect to design opportunities

and limitations. Whereas the classic approaches provided a foundation for analysing and understanding roles, as well as providing different perspectives for staging social interaction, the contemporary contributions each deploy their opportunities and limitations in respect to staging social interaction. A common trait for the presented theories would be that they all depend on the presence of a role for staging social interaction; from the classics, Linton considered roles to be a representation of social issues that were enacted in the social practice, Mead saw the role as a mean for interacting with a social practice through the reduction of social complexity, and Goffman saw roles as a matter of social representation, which was to be interpreted by the enactor; the Dogma 99 saw the role as a mean for participants to interact through, whereas Turku saw the immersion into a role as the primary purpose of the game, and the social interaction as a product of this immersion. With the Meilahti School, a step was taken back towards the staging of social interaction as the role-play was considered the staged social interaction on basis of player assumed roles. Each of the theories provides a view on how to think of roles, and thereby a view on how roles can be used for staging social interaction.

If roles merely are considered to be a mean to stage social interaction, it would be interesting to pursue some of the critique that the social sciences have provided against using roles as an analytical perspective on social interaction. The essence of the critique provided is that roles are representations, but are passive in respect to the social interaction. Roles are furthermore criticised for being passive, as roles in line with Linton's approach are representations of structurally legitimated social issues, they can be enacted, but not altered in the social interaction. Roles are fixed concepts, given by structure, and therefore not to be altered in their enactment. They are, in other words, worn and carried throughout the participation. Positions are on the other hand of

a more temporary nature (see e.g. Davies & Harré, 1999); they are taken, held, abandoned and reconquered through the mutual negotiation of values, norms, rights and duties in the social interaction. Whereas roles are concerned with defining the points of departure for the social interaction, and thereby setting the prerequisites straight, the positional theory addresses how the social interaction (of a game) is taking place.

Positioning theory considers roles as a structural approach to understanding social interaction, emphasising the person-external factors as determinate, or at least constitutive to the situation. Instead, it seeks to address the interaction itself as a co-constructed game of power, taking place between the participants. A main concept of positional theory is the categorical distinction, through which the participants define positions of self and others, as well as the relationship between them (Harré & van Langenhove 1999b, p. 2). Through the social interaction, distinctions are drawn in order to create distinctions between the perspectives, power or values employed by the participants, as well as defining the relationship between them. These performative actions or expressions are called the acts of positioning, and are continuously used as a tool for defining the social interaction among the participants.

One is the conceptual distinction between the different positions; the second is defining the relationship between the distincted parts. Such distinction can be viewed from Austin's (see Stormhøj, 2006) distinction between performative and descriptive language, seeing some acts as mere descriptions and others as perspective changing acts, but can also be challenged from Deleuze's (1994) perspective, stating that we are unable to describe anything discourse-externally, by which any description would either seek to manifest or challenge a discourse. From such point of view all acts must be considered performative (see also Butler 1990), and thereby acts of positioning.

According to Haré & Moghaddam (2003), positioning theory consists of three interrelated main components; positions, acts and storylines, to which they propose the following definitions:

Position:

“[A] cluster of certain rights and duties to perform certain action with a certain significance as acts, but may also include prohibitions and denials of access to some of the local repertoire of meaningful acts. In a certain sense in each social milieu there is a certain kind of Platonic realm of positions, realised in current practices, which people can adopt, strive to locate themselves in, be pushed into, be displaced from or be refused access, recess themselves from, and so on, in a highly mobile and dynamic way” (Ibid. pp. 5-6)

Speech and other acts:

“[E]very socially significant action, intended movement, or speech must be interpreted as an act, a socially meaningful and significant performance. A handshake is an intended action. Does it express a greeting, farewell, congratulations, seal a bet, or what? It is only significant as far as it is given a meaning in the unfolding episode of which it forms a part. Once interpreted it falls under rules of propriety and standards of correctness, not only in itself but also in what are its proper precursors and consequences.” (ibid, p. 6)

Storyline:

“[W]e have emphasised the enormous importance of the dynamics of social episode, how they unfold as this or that person contributes to the pattern. Episodes do not unfold in any random way. They tend to follow already established patterns of development, which for convenience have come to be called story lines. Each story line is expressible in a loose cluster of narrative conventions.” (ibid. p. 6)

An important difference between roles and positions is their emergence; roles are provided by structure as representations, whereas positions emerge from the distinctions made in the social interaction.

Although positional theory has clear lines back to symbolic interaction (see e.g. Stryker & Statham, 1985), positional theory maintains a concept of multi-contextuality through the concept of storyline. Positioning always takes place within an organising storyline, which provides the interaction with structural issues, but in contrast to symbolic interaction, which can be criticised for only bearing the immediate context in mind, positional theory recognizes the immediate context as a conjunction of the collective storylines that are provided by the participants.

Another important difference between the two is the difference in permanence; whereas roles are given, and therefore maintained (worn and carried), positions are taken, occupied and abandoned, not due to a structural issue, but to factors that arise during the social interaction.

### **The application of positional theory**

To the role-play game-designer, it may seem a bit absurd to take on an approach that seeks to replace role-theory, but it may prove to be as beneficial as moving emphasis from roles to social interaction. Positional theory provides several contributions to the design process; addressing the element of social interaction, addressing the question of power, as well as questioning the necessity and prudence of using roles for staging social interaction in games.

#### *Addressing the interactive element*

Positional theory clearly represents a powerful tool for understanding the social interaction in general, but is also directly applicable to the processes of staging role-play. In the three main perspectives on role-play provided by Dogma 99, Turku and Meilahti, they all presented an emphasis on the interaction, either through roles, with the surroundings, or the mere interaction that is taking place within the diegetic frame. Although Stenros & Hakkarainen (2003) addressed the issue of definitorial power and participant action, the issue (and meaning) of

interaction is largely left untouched within the three theories<sup>5</sup>. As positional theory addresses the finer grains of social interaction, the perspective may be able to provide an interesting tool for staging social interaction as well.

From the positional perspective, a role-play is considered a social interaction that is taking place within a given storyline. The action taking place within the social interaction can be understood as a mutual game of perspective positioning taking place among the participants, while trying to negotiate the turn and events of the game. Each participant would be participating from a perspective, either a position that could evolve during the game, or from a privileged position that could not be altered though the game (the role).

To the game-designer, the positional approach provides an opportunity for addressing the interactive element of role-play in order to consider how the participants can interact with each other and with the game, as well as what opportunities the different participants are given for interacting within the game, as well as how participants are prevented from interacting with certain elements of the game.

Within positional theory, the element of interaction is intimately related to how power is conducted in the game, and is therefore addressed below.

#### *Positional and role power*

Throughout the game, the participants could draw upon two sources of power for legitimating their arguments, either they could draw upon the situation and base argumentation on the values and norms established in the situation, or power could be drawn from the structurally defined privileges provided, defined and legitimated by structure (drawing upon the role). Both sources of power and argumentation are employed and enacted in order to continuously define and redefine the relationship between the different positions held by the different participants

of the game. If a participant was e.g. defined as chief through the role, that position would be socially defined, legitimated and privileged in comparison to other roles, providing certain means of interaction, whereas the participant who got elected during the game would be able to establish a similar position. The main difference would be in the way power was established – here either through a top-down or a bottom-up based process. In some games, power would be defined in respect to social positions, whereas other games would utilise game-mechanics to privilege roles and positions in respect to power. To the game-designer, the attention towards power provides an opportunity to shape and mold the interaction by privileging some positions with, while robbing others of legitimate means of power. By adding attention to the dimension of power, the personal traits of the participant can be countered or reinforced through the game-design. Through the attention paid to power structures, legitimate means and arguments can be defined for the interaction, thereby shaping the lines of thinking and acting deployed in the game. Whereas roles can provide explicit power to certain subjects of the game, the positional approach can be used for defining arguments, lines of acting and thinking, as well as values, rights, duties and norms that can be both shared and powerful in the interaction.

#### *Providing power or powerlessness*

If there is a desire to make a role powerful, this can be produced through role-representations of underlying structures, allowing the participant to draw upon the structurally legitimated power throughout the game. This provides the participant with a privileged position, a position that is very hard to challenge. If there, on the other hand is a desire to make a role powerless, it is deprived of its relations to the underlying structure. As the participant would then lack the role-based legitimation to draw upon structural power, the participant would be forced to negotiate his way through each and every situation without external means or help.

The underlying structures could in the above cases be the game mechanics, or it could be the social structure embedded in the game. If a participant is able to draw upon a social position (class, job, title, etc.), the participant is allowed to draw upon the beneficial rights of this role, but is also expected to fulfil its duties. A participant who is privileged according to the rules is in a similar way capable of getting the upper hand during the positional negotiation that takes place within the game.

### **Is the concept of roles becoming obsolete?**

From positional theory, as well as from other lines of contemporary psychology, the concept of roles is being framed as inefficient for understanding the fine grains of social interaction. When attempting to go the other way around and stage social interaction, the question on whether roles can be used for staging the desired lines of social interaction becomes relevant to ask, both in regards to entertainment, educational application and political communication. In respect to some staging, the use of roles may, dependent of the approach and objective, be quite suitable for the job, whereas it may prove to be a rather cumbersome tool for meeting other objects. As roles are considered structural representations, they are usually framed as something to be maintained – worn and carried – throughout the game. According to some approaches, participants are allowed to develop their understanding of the role during the game, but there seems to be less acceptance of changing the role, at least without the game-master's approval. When it comes to positions, these are considered mere points of departure, as something to be occupied, abandoned, forced onto others or positioned in respect to positions that are occupied by other participants. The positional approach thereby invites the participant into a much more dynamic process, allowing the participant not only to meet the game-staged situation with one role-defined perspective, but start with one perspective, and then develop new perspectives to participate from.

Such approach would be less suitable for a Turku-based attempt to produce the sensation of an uncomfortable perspective, whereas it would be highly beneficial to educational or political games seeking to allow participants to develop new perspectives or approaches to a given situation. Here, the positional approach would provide the game-designer with an attention to how roles could evolve during the game, as well as appointing that roles may evolve during the game.

### **Combining roles and positions**

As with the previously presented perspectives on roles, the different perspectives do not seek to replace each other, rather, they provide supplementing perspectives on how to consider roles, as well as how they affect the design. As with the positional thinking, the aim is not to present a replacing alternative, but to present a perspective that may help to qualify the staging of social interaction. Rather than to see roles and positions as separate, they can provide a shared perspective, using roles to define and legitimate perspectives and power through structural determination, and positioning in order to add a dynamic aspect of interacting, abandoning, evolving and integrating. Whereas roles can provide the game with an element of conflict, the positional approach can provide the opportunities for interacting with, and eventually solving the staged conflict<sup>6</sup>.

To the game-designer, the combination of roles and positions allows a more elaborate staging, both in respect to providing means of interaction, as well as in respect to defining power in the game.

### **CONCLUSION - IS A ROLE SOMETHING TO BE WORN AND CARRIED?**

The good answer would be that it depends on the purpose of the game. Not on whether it was for educative, entertaining or political purposes, but on the nature of the experience it wanted to provide. In most cases, the answer would be no, because there are plenty of reasons to allow participants to evolve

from the point of departure. In such cases, it may, according to the purpose of the game, be beneficial to provide the participant with a point of departure that includes both a static element of structural representation, as well as norms, values, rights and duties that are not structurally legitimated, providing an opportunity to evolve within boundaries, but to evolve beyond the point of departure.

Throughout the article, I have shown a number of perspectives on how different conceptions of roles have an impact on how lines of thinking and acting can be staged in role-play. Whereas the different approaches each provide their conception of roles, they also provide a conception on how to stage the social interaction of a role-play, and as a consequence, what interaction can be staged. An influential critique against role theory was provided by positional theory, implying that the main parts of social interaction took place beyond the scope of role determination, and should therefore be addressed through other means. Positional theory provides a fresh view on how social interaction takes place in the game, as well as providing a view on the limits of roles and their influence.

Rather than sticking to one conception of roles, the purpose of the specific game should be allowed to determine what role-conception the game should build upon. As a consequence, the roles and the underlying structure may supplement each other in accordance to the vision of the designer.

On whether the concept of roles should be abandoned in favour of a new approach is an interesting question. When moving emphasis to the staging of social interaction, roles are reduced as one of many means for staging such, and alternatives should be investigated in respect to how entertainment is best achieved, educational benefits facilitated or politics communicated. But under all circumstances, the role of the role is an issue for further discussion.

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**Notes**

- 1 Agency – a gap between the problems encountered and the structural determination of the role. By providing the participant with a role that contains a too short discourse to provide the participant with a solution to a given problem, the participant is allowed to analyse the problem in it self and create a personal approach to it. Agency can be considered the behaviour that looks more upon the situation than the role. Agency can be perceived as breaking a role by other participants.
- 2 Structural issues are considered the lines of thinking (values, norms, rights and duties) that have a determinate effect on the cause of action within a social context. The structure is not considered as something in itself, but is performed by the participants in the social interaction, and may eventually be supported by physical cues in the context.
- 3 Character is here understood as the role-proposal provided by the game designer that is interpreted by the participant (see Henriksen, 2004).
- 4 For further discussion on the relationship between roles and positions, see Henriksen (2007).
- 5 In the same anthology (Gade, et.al, 2003), I presented role play as "a media, where a person, through immersion into a role and the world of this role, is given the oppportunity to participate in and interact with the contents of this world, and its participants.", employing a similar lack of attention towards the nature of the interactive element.
- 6 The relationship between roles and positions, as well as the transition between them is further elaborated in Henriksen (2007).

CHARACTER



# ari-pekka lappi

## playing beyond facts: immersion as a transformation of everydayness

### Abstract

This paper presents the concept of immersion as a transformation of everydayness. The paper is critique toward theories that rationalise immersion in terms of identity, diegesis and/or shared imagined space. The starting point of this paper is similarity between the character and the player, not the difference between the character and the player that we have to overcome somehow, as usual. The key question is, how can a player achieve the state of everydayness in which her character lives, as everydayness is something we cannot be fully aware of due the lack of analytical distance?

### INTRODUCTION

Immersion means feeling, thinking of and perceiving the world as a character would if she was real. In other words, immersion is a subjective experience of being a *part* of an imagined reality instead of being only in a *relation* to the imaged reality. Unfortunately these characterizations are far from being a univocal and clear definition of immersion.

Every theory of immersion aims – or should aim – to elucidate, (1) what immersion requires from player, (2) how it affects to player and (3) what player have to *do* to reach it. For these questions could be answered, we first had to define immersion in more specific and univocal terms.

Traditionally theories of immersion seem to contain three key aspects:

- 1 *Subjectivity*. Immersion is commonly seen as a *purely* subjective phenomenon (Holter, 2007). In this article I am going to argue that the non-subjective core of immersion is concealed by the purely subjective surface.
- 2 *A transformation of the experience of self*. Immersion is seen as a transformation of the primordial standpoint of the reality, fiction and oneself (e.g. as per Harviainen, 2007). However, it is not clear at all, what this actually means. For instance should we understand “*the experience of self*” through the concept of *action* or does it mean an inner *image* of oneself. In the first case, immersion is almost the same thing as

flow, if not the same. In the second case it is a form of trance or a transformation of the (primary) identity of a player. (Holter, 2007. See also Pohjola, 2004 and Harviainen, 2006). In this article I will try to clarify the meaning of “self” and “the experience of self” from a phenomenological point of view. My approach is, in essence, based on the hermeneutic methodology J. Tuomas Harviainen (2007) introduces in his paper “Core Hermeneutic of Role-Playing”.

- 3 *Imagined space*. Usually, *imagined space* is defined (a) as a totality of what is considered true within the reality of the game (i.e. as “diegesis”, see Lojonen & Montola, 2004) or (b) as set of shared premises of the fiction; i.e. as “shared imaged space” (Mäkelä et al., 2005) or “exploration” (Edwards, 2004).

In this paper I define “imagined space” as follows: *Imagined space* is an interpretation of all texts (from the written ones to images, music and discussions with other participants) that player conceives as relevant for her game.

In most cases, the terms “diegesis”, “shared imagined space” and “exploration” reflect well what I mean by “imagined space”. I suggest this more general definition to *imagined space* for following reasons:

- A Imagined space is usually ambiguous. This is, all parts of it are not always clearly articulated or conceptualised. To be considered as true, an entity in game reality cannot be ambiguous, ill-defined or totally metaphorical. Therefore the concept of diegesis does not cover all entities in the imaged space. Take (the interpretation of) atmosphere as an example of an ill-defined and ambiguous entity.
- B Imagined spaces of players are not necessarily *shared* at all. This is absolutely obvious and no one denies it. The actual question to be answered is, “should players’ interpretations be alike?”<sup>1</sup> With no doubt, as the discrepancy of interpretations increases, the *risk* of unentertaining play rises as

well. However, the discrepancies may also turn out to be very inspiring, for instance in the form of surprises. Since this is an aspect I want to elucidate in this paper, I do not define imagined space as no more shared than non-shared.

## IMMERSION AND EVERYDAYNESS

### Nature of Everydayness

Everydayness is something we do not usually pay any attention to, not to mention doubting it. If I doubt that no one could see *a chair* I see, I am probably hallucinating and well aware of it. This is, anyone could see the chair as I do. Anyone could touch it as I do. Anyone could think that the chair is made of wood – as I do. And finally as I say, “this chair is made of wood”, I expect others to agree with me, because anyone could have said it exactly as I did. Thus, after all, there is only little subjective in the visual sensation of a chair. The way the world exists to me is, mostly, the way it exists to anyone. It is easier to see small differences instead of big similarities. Similarly, it is a lot more difficult to understand how non-subjective our living is, than to grasp the subjective side of being. I call this primordial non-subjectivity to *everydayness*.

Everydayness is not objective or collective; it just lacks subjectivity and the sense of individuality. It is non-subjective, non-objective, non-special and almost unconscious. Everydayness reveals to us as obvious, certain and/or undeniable requirements of knowledge and acting. It is the basis of every belief, value and behaviour pattern.

A more detailed analysis of the concept of everydayness can be found in Heidegger’s masterpiece *Being and Time* (1927). Another relevant reference for further investigations is Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), since Wittgenstein seems mean pretty much the same thing by his term ‘the form of life’.

### Definition of Immersion

Everydayness is the canvas on which our identity and subjectivity is drawn. In the character immersion we just project a fictional story to it instead of the story of our personal history – at least we make an attempt. My initial definitions of immersion is:

*Immersion* means that a player takes temporarily things included in (her) *imagined space* for a part of everydayness.

To be accurate, immersion is a continuum from light immersion to deep immersion:

*Deep immersion* means that a player is able to take *all* parts of (her) imagined space for a part of everydayness.

*Light immersion* means that a player had to exclude some parts of (her) imagined space from the area of everydayness but some immersion is still possible.

### Mutual Trust and Shared Premises

“To be a part of everydayness”, means only that the very ground of every element in the imagined space must be in the area of everydayness. In practice, this means only that there should be no facts the player must swallow only because game master states so or because otherwise she will ruin someone else’s game etc. Everything in the game must base on those things that the player conceives as most obvious and certain in the imagined space.

Usually players are not aware of the most obvious and certain things in her imagined space until someone violates them. However, this does not imply that players’ conceptions must be coherent, not even on the most primordial level. Contradictions in players’ imagined spaces – as such – are not crucial. Problems rise only if a player is unable to overcome the contradiction without making unwilling compromises. This is the case (1) if players do not trust enough each other’s or (2) if players do not have enough coherent conceptions of the game.

The lack of trust implies a need for shared premises and vice versa. Usually there must be a shared set of coherent or, as Lopenen and Montola (2004) put it, equifinal premises concerning especially content of fiction, style of the game and question on realism. However, some amount of mutual trust is necessary no matter how many premises players share, but shared premises are not necessary if players can trust one another blindly.

### REQUIREMENTS OF IMMERSION

#### Relation between Player and Character

Immersion is possible if and only if (1) the player is not too different from the character and (2) the player understands and accepts the meaning of the difference. If the character is too different from player, a player cannot understand the character in terms of everydayness and therefore she cannot immerse deeply in the character. If the character is too similar to a player, she will fail to understand the meaning of difference.

The player has two different attitudes toward a character: Understanding and acceptance.

*Understanding* is related to knowing and beliefs. It is achieved via a hermeneutic analysis (see Harviainen, 2007). Player does not need to understand completely, why her character feels as she feels, thinks as she thinks and so on. She just needs to understand *enough to accept* the difference between her and the character and to consider that the character is “one of us” instead of “one of them”.

*Acceptance* is related to values and the way of thinking. It is a kind of leap of faith. Adapting Wittgenstein (1919), the player has to throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it (cf. Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, §6.54). A player cannot immerse deeply in a character she hates or considers totally insane. Nor can most of us immerse in a fully rationalised

and analysed character. In these cases, the character will be emotionally *inaccessible*, no matter how well we *understand* motives, feelings, beliefs, values and thought patterns of the character.

In the phase of understanding a player identifies all relevant facts concerning the game (as a social event *and* a piece of fiction) and during the act of acceptance she goes beyond these facts.

### Requirements of Acceptance

Acceptance is, by its very nature, a radical and extreme act. It requires extensive experience of life and it will take time to understand, what it really means to accept a character in this sense. A player may immerse deeply in a character if and only if she is able to really value all choices character had made without judging them at any level.

For example a player cannot immerse deeply in a character, who had murdered someone cruelly, if she cannot see the cruel murder as an obvious act that anyone would have done in a similar situation. If a player has to think that a character had totally different values and beliefs than her, before she can grasp the motives of murder and *deceitfully* accept it, the everyday life of the character remains inaccessible. Or, at least, the murder is not seen as a very part of the character. This is to say, that everydayness does not contain abstractions like values and beliefs, because they are not usually so obvious and certain for they would be nearly unconscious and outside the range of doubt. They can reflect something from the everydayness, but definitely they are just cold abstractions of it.

Light immersion is of course always possible, no matter how distant the character and the player are, but deep immersion requires absolute acceptance of all what is obvious and undeniable to the character. The ethical thought experiment I have sketched above is a good way to test whether my experience of life is extensive enough for the character.

### Requirements of Understanding

A player has to be able to use the character document as a map *to* the character immersion. The road to the understanding is not necessarily analytical. Rather it is poetic and non-rational. This is why long and detailed character documents are every now and then seen as impractical: To understand, ‘what kind of a character I should immerse in’, a player does not need cold facts but interpretative hints or guides *to* the best possible interpretation of her character.

These hints or guides can of course be facts, but at the best case they help player to find *correct atmosphere* and *passion to get into an imagined world*. In other words, the best hints and guides are rather poetic and rhetorical than descriptive and argumentative.

This requirement is to be understood in two ways: At first, it states that playwrights should try to conduct a player to the best possible interpretation of the game world and her character. They should not try to give just a detailed description of a character or an imagined world. At second, player should not read the character as an image that represents most relevant features of the character but as a map that describes the path to the proper interpretation<sup>2</sup>.

### CONCLUSION

My argument contains three phases:

- 1 Deep immersion transforms the almost unconscious and non-subjective basis of being, so that player conceives herself as a part of imagined reality instead of seeing herself in a relation to it. I have called this nearly unconscious and non-subjective basis to everydayness.
- 2 The social basis of immersion is (1) mutual trust and (2) a shared set of premises. First one is necessary at some degree, second one is not necessary but, in practice, easier to achieve than first one. They are complementary and in real exist as a pair.

3 Immersion requires two acts from player: understanding and acceptance. Understanding means a hermeneutic interpretation of game texts. Acceptance is an act of rejecting all own prejudices, beliefs and values after player has understood characters prejudices, values and beliefs via (or through) them. In the phase of understanding player identifies all relevant facts concerning the game and during to act of acceptance she goes beyond these facts.

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### Notes

- 1 E.g. Harvainen (2007), Loponen & Montola (2004), Edwards (2004) and Mäkelä et al. (2005) would probably reply that players’ interpretations concerning the game reality *should* be alike at least on the most fundamental level. I will question this normative assertion.
- 2 This is a coarse characterisation of hermeneutic analysis that Harvainen (2007) introduces with more details.



game



# lars konzack

## larp experience design

Experience design is an approach or method to create experiences for humans in all kinds of media (Shedroff 2001). In this case the medium is, of course, larp. Consequently, we need an understanding of how larp works in order to unveil an approach or method for larp experience design.

Larp is actually a variety of different forms and styles. It may consist of only a few players or hundreds of players playing at the same time. It may be situated in a room indoors or in a field or forest outdoors. It may be played with physical or symbolic combat or no combat at all. It may range from realistic genres to a diversity of fantastic genres. And it may last from one afternoon to several days. Therefore one may wonder if it is possible to say anything in general about designing such an experience as larp. What we need to know is what all of these different kinds of larp experiences have in common.

### **Understanding larp**

First of all, larp is about role-playing a character in a fictional frame among other role-played characters by other role-players. Secondly, larp has no external audience. One could say that the role-players involved in the experience are the audience of their own activities, but actually there is no audience, only participants. This is fascinating because Nathan Shedroff says: *Experience designers must regard their audi-*

*ence as active participants – not passive viewers. Many real-space experiences (such as parties and other events versus art displays or theatre) require participation in order to be successful. These are the most satisfying experiences for us (Shedroff 2001: 148).* Well of course whether or not a party is a more satisfying experience than a stage play comes down to the actual party and the actual stage play. What can be said though is the fact that participation matters.

Thirdly, all larp derives directly or indirectly from pen-and-paper role-playing games, which means larp has a tradition – and that's a good thing. One could argue that if larp ever lost its link to this tradition it would simply turn into improvisational theatre or historical re-enactment, or to put it more bluntly, then larp would indeed lose its hallmark. More than that larp is a new medium. It is hard to recognise larp as a new medium compared to e.g. videogames that use the computer as a medium, because there is nothing in larp that could not have been done hundreds of years ago. They just did not do it. Larp is not a technological innovation based on technological ideas. Larp, on the other hand, is an artistic and aesthetic innovation based on artistic and aesthetic ideas. The larp experience is established on larp as a new medium about the behaviour of role-played characters in a setting. It resembles traditional drama in the fact that there is acting involved.

However, larp has something important in common with many computer games, traditional pen-and-paper role-playing games, and collectible card games: it combines narrative fiction with ludic activities such as playing and gaming.

In that respect larp is part of a new paradigm of how to represent narrative fiction (Konzack 2006). It's not a shifting paradigm in the strongest sense of the word because the shift has already taken place back in 1974 when *Dungeons & Dragons* was introduced (Fannon 1999). Nonetheless, it becomes obvious that there has been a paradigm shift when one encounters people who have not yet become part of this new way of thinking. Especially, older people (not always though) have trouble relating to a phenomenon such as larp not to mention taking it seriously (Ljungberg & Michaelis 1991, Beck & Wade 2004). It is not because they necessarily have anything against it, believe it to be dangerous, or something similar, they just don't know how to connect to it in any thinkable way. They don't 'get it'. It feels like sharing the experience of reading a novel with someone who has never read a book in his entire life and can't see why that should be necessary. Well, strictly speaking it isn't necessary but then again you might have an awesome experience.

### Larp criticism

If you want to create an awesome first-rate larp experience design then it's a high-quality approach to have a well functioning criticism. The term criticism originates from the Old Greek word *críteion* that means to distinguish. By larp criticism I mean the ability to distinguish between styles and forms in larp.

First, I want to distinguish between larp and traditional pen-and-paper role-playing games. The obvious would be to say that in traditional pen-and-paper role-playing games the players say what their character is doing while in larp the player acts out what the character is doing. This is true to some extent although some actions in pen-and-paper role-playing games (e.g. gestures) are in fact acted out and some

actions in larp (e.g. killing) are only said to be acted out – not in fact done, which in the case of killing people is of course a good thing.

Anyway, to go beyond this immediate understanding, I would like to argue that indeed larp is closer to *drama* and that pen-and-paper role-playing is closer to *epics*. For that very reason it's easier in a pen-and-paper role-playing game to take the role of any character. The player describes what the character does, and speaks in the voice of that character. Furthermore, it's much easier to make an illusion of an imaginary world, because the gamemaster may in fact just describe what the world looks like. The player's imagination makes it work wonders. This is more difficult to make convincingly in a larp. However, larp has drama and what the world looks like is revealed with all of its props and scenery, like it's the real thing. It is as if they have stepped into the imaginary world. The players, using make-up and costumes resemble the characters they are supposed to be. The setting is right here, right now, creating a space for immersive emotional experiences.

Whether or not one prefers dramas to epics, larp to pen-and-paper role-playing games is obviously a matter of personal taste. What we can say is, that if you want to design an immense larp experience, you'll have to think of it as drama. Likewise, if you want to design a traditional pen-and-paper role-playing game, then think of it as a narrative epic genre. There is more to it of course but at least you'll have the right toolbox and therefore quite possibly the means to create the experience.

Secondly, I want to differentiate between In Character (IC) and Out Of Character (OOC). When In Character, the player is actually playing as if s/he exists in the game world, while if s/he otherwise is playing Out Of Character s/he is outside the game world. To get the full experience of the larp the player has to play IC. OOC play is necessary if the game worlds break down or there has to be some kind of meta-play explanations like the rules of play or non-game socialising (Fine 1983). In Gregory Bateson's terms, as

we shall see later, it's about communicating whether the player is situated inside the frame or outside the frame (Bateson 2000).

Thirdly, I want to address two styles of play: physical contact versus non-contact scenarios. In physical contact scenarios the larp is mainly focused on physical interaction and combat, while non-contact gameplay is mainly focused on intrigue and how the characters interact through diplomacy and social role-play. This question of larp style has immense impact on how the larp is being played, and consequently the sort of players who want to play. In general physical contact larp targets people who want to use fighting and other kinds of physical action as a problem-solving method. Non-contact, on the other hand, targets role-playing players that want to play social drama and find their way out of trouble through negotiation or fast-talk.

Finally, I want to distinguish between two kinds of settings: a realistic setting and a fantastic setting. There are a lot of different realistic genres that make use of realistic settings from historical fictions and detective stories to social realism and psychological dramas. The advantage of this setting is that it offers an easy way into a fiction without many considerations about how the world functions. A lot of people find it difficult to relate to a fantastic setting and can't find the relevance. To assist these people in using their imagination, a realistic setting might help. Furthermore, the realistic setting may be all you need or exactly what you need to set up the experience.

The fantastic settings are likewise used in lots of genres from science fiction and fantasy to horror and weird fiction. What makes the fantastic settings special is the fact that they make use of an imaginary, make-believe world. The advantage of a fantastic setting is that it is possible to give a whole new perspective on how to perceive the world through metaphysical and cosmological considerations. Additionally, it gives the player the freedom of using their imagination.

By combining style and setting of a larp experience we end up with four possibilities:

- 1) Physical contact playing style in realistic setting,
- 2) Physical contact playing style in fantastic setting,
- 3) Non-contact playing style in realistic setting, and
- 4) Non-contact playing style in fantastic setting.

In the following table #1, one can see some typical examples:

	<i>Phys. contact style</i>	<i>Non-contact style</i>
<i>Realistic setting</i>	Airsoft/ Paintball	How to Host a Murder
<i>Fantastic setting</i>	Hack'n'Slash Fantasy	Mind's Eye Theatre

Table #1: LARP settings and Styles

Physical contact style in a realistic setting often turns towards airsoft/paintball combat of some sort with players dressed up as modern soldiers. It is of course possible to play airsoft/paintball combat in a futuristic sci-fi setting in which case it becomes a fantastic setting larp experience. The most well-known kind of larp is the hack 'n' slash fantasy experience with people dressed up as fantasy characters like orcs and elves and armed with latex swords. These kinds of larps are close to child's play like *cops and robbers*. Still, physical contact larp often has more advanced rules and schemes than this old game.

Nonetheless, non-contact styles are often more sophisticated, since it's based much more on intrigue and character-based role-playing. A typical realistic game would be the *How to Host a Murder* series. In this case the larp is a murder mystery that should be solved during the evening. Everyone dresses up for the occasion, and hopefully the murderer will be caught. Realistic games are often used as an educational tool too (Henriksen 2003, Henriksen

2004). The typical non-contact fantastic larp is *Mind's Eye Theatre*. It's a game of intrigue and dark powers set in the *World of Darkness* setting in which vampires, werewolves, and mages are believed to exist. It is of course possible to create non-contact style in any fantastic setting ranging from fantasy and science fiction to horror and weird fiction. It's important to note that the quality of the larp experience isn't defined by setting and style – only by the content of the specific larp experience. This particular larp criticism is not necessarily the only approach to larp criticism. The main point though, is that the analyst must be able to bring about a critical analysis that aids the experience design process.

### **Framing the experience**

Larp is about the social interaction between players. But it is a simulated social interaction. It's not necessarily simulating social interaction of our primary world. A lot of larps are about simulating social interaction of a secondary world. Even so, social interaction as simulation is a central key to comprehending the dynamics of larp. Social interaction is best understood from a socio-cultural or psychological point of view. Yet, larp is an aesthetic experience and consequently, the simulated social interaction must be thought of in terms of aesthetics, which again means that the use of socio-cultural and psychological theory in larp experience design are in fact subordinate to the aesthetic experience. This would of course not be the case if the purpose of the larp were indeed educational or therapeutic. In any case, knowledge from these fields of socio-cultural or psychological theory may add tools to the toolbox when designing the larp experience. Therefore, I propose an experience design theory based on Gregory Bateson's comprehension of socio-cultural, and psychological experiences. Not only because he has some thoughts about socio-culture and psychology, but because he explains these in terms of play and fantasy, which are central key features of the larp as an aesthetic experience.

Gregory Bateson explains that indeed it is possible for mammals to play because they are able to frame a situation in which certain rules exist within this frame, knowing that other rules exist outside the frame (Bateson 2000). By framing an experience, it's possible for humans not only to play but also to imagine creating a make-believe fantasy. Without this ability to frame a situation, fantasy and play would be impossible.

To do so requires the ability to make second order cybernetics. Not only are we relating to the world around us, but we are relating to ourselves as well. Accordingly, we are usually able to distinguish the real from the fantastic – or as J. R. R. Tolkien puts it: *Fantasy is a natural human activity* (Tolkien 1997: 144). Tolkien was, needless to say, discussing how to sub-create a fantasy thereby referring to the ability to create a secondary world within the primary world. This is an interesting concept to have in mind when designing a larp experience, especially if we comprehend the larp experience as a world building activity. *Games*, Erving Goffman says, *are world-building activities* (Goffman 1972: 25), thereby implying that indeed a game is a cosmos of its own.

### **Larp design method**

To design such a frame as a larp experience the world-building activity is much more complicated than the average children's game. That's why the game designer requires more than putting up a frame, and is in need of a design strategy to create successful experiences.

The suggestion is to organize the experience design into three frame levels: 1) The strategic world frame, 2) The tactical group frame, and 3) The operational character frames. It is crucial that there is functional coherence between these three frame levels, because otherwise the experience becomes unmotivated, and it is important that each of the three frame levels is motivated – if not the experience will suffer from this lack of cohesive force. In addition this motivation aids the experience in having a direction. According

to Sid Meier *a game is a series of interesting choices* (Rollings & Morris 2004, p. 68). Following this line of thought, it is evident that a motivated choice is much more interesting than an unmotivated choice, generating superior gameplay.

The strategic world frame is about designing a game world. It could be either a realistic or a fantastic game world. In any case it is an imagined world in which the players can interact. With this strategic world frame it is possible for the game designer (even though many game designers forget this possibility) to create a message with the world design. The cosmology of a larp contains a world-view or different kinds of world-views and the game designer needs to be aware of this in order to produce a meaningful larp experience. This counts for realistic world design as well as fantastic world design.

Making a world-view requires a philosophy or probably some philosophies and almost certainly some metaphysical considerations that are not just plain interesting but exciting and fascinating to examine and explore. One way to do this is to build a world with cultures that compete and inspire one another. Think of each culture as having motivations regarding the ultimate questions concerning life and death based on either religion or ideology. But below this, within each culture there should be subcultures that again compete and inspire each other. The subcultures relate to the same questions concerning life and death, but may have their own explanations rooted in their own ideologies and religious beliefs. Furthermore the game designer should work with these cultures as if they were really thinking about the cultural history of these cultures. This requires a lot of thought and a lot of work to be done. By taking these steps, the game world becomes more believable to the player. Poor game worlds are often based on the notion of *willing suspension of disbelief*. The player is asked to believe in anything because the game world isn't real anyway and as a result anything might as well happen. This way of thinking lacks co-

herence. Another approach subsists in relying on *the power of giving to ideal creations the inner consistency of reality* (Tolkien 1997: 138). By believing in these game worlds as if they were as real as our own, the experience of the world becomes coherent and worth exploring in its own right. It is, on the other hand, much more difficult to create a believable game world based on the inner consistency of reality than a superficial game world based on the willing suspension of disbelief. Be that as it may, the believable game world turns into a deeper motivated world rather than a simple excuse for mindless escapism and dull entertainment. In short it grows to become a fuller experience.

The next step is to get the tactical group frame working, where the most important elements are the possible social narratives that may arise. The game designer has to explore how all of the characters in the larp relate to one another. Each character usually only interacts with a few of the other characters. But at some point all the characters should in some way be linked together within this frame. To do so in a believable fashion, it's important to know how social interaction works.

One way to do this is to create interpretation communities. These interpretation communities of course have to fit in with the overall structure of the strategic game world frame. To do it the easy way, the game designer simply builds each interpretation community around a motivation principle. This motivation principle could be e.g. money, power, ethics, law, trust, truth, love, art, education etc. The character will then have to relate in some way or another to the chosen motivation principles. Each character does not have to participate in just one interpretation community, and may have relations to different communities. In this way the game designer makes it more appealing to experience the larp social relationship, because the player is given an interesting choice between various motivation principles.

To create an even more intriguing experience, the game designer should not only design interpretation communities that are officially known in the game world, but also secret interpretation communities with covert goals and motivations. By doing so the players gain an opportunity for discovering hidden social frames within the game world frame, thereby enhancing the experience of curious exploration, and what's more, it is truly fun and exciting to play a character involved in a secret society or covert operation agency upholding a confidential agenda. The player characters should all have equal opportunities to be a part of the experience, but this is not the same as to say, the characters have to be at the same social level. Experiencing social inequality in a larp is interesting because a lot of social play is based upon social inequality (Goffman 1959). The social inequality may be formal or informal. The formal social inequality is based on the more or less rigid social hierarchy while the informal is based on unwritten rules, situational norms, and personal charisma. In any case, one part sustains the social order due to his motivations like power and prestige or some other motivating factor, and the other part is either submitting to the social structure or trying to undermine it in some way. These social dynamics give rise to a lot of feasible narratives for the game designer to work with. It takes time to design the tactical group frames. But since role-playing is essentially a social experience, it's worth the trouble.

The operational character frames call for work too. This is the point of view from which the player experiences the larp. So even though the game designer has put a lot of thought into the world design and social constructions, the player may feel left behind if his character is not interesting to play. The player needs to frame himself into the character and accordingly the player is in need of actions and tasks for the character to do.

The point is that the character should have some ways to influence the larp. Remember, the player acts in the game world with the tools the character

has at its disposal. So if you give the player a long latex sword then you must expect the player to use it as a problem-solving device. These things are not just mood-creating props, they are game mechanical instruments as well. The game mechanics influence player behaviour (Fullerton, Swain & Hoffman 2004, Costikyan 2006). As a result, the game designer should think of how each character has a chance to influence the larp through their actions, and how these actions influence player behaviour within the larp. This may be anything from a costume showing the character's social position to an appointment book leading the character towards social interaction, or to physical interaction in arranged sword fights. Moreover, each character needs motivations. Not just a single *leitmotif*. The character needs several motivations – especially if it is long-lasting larp. Because what happens if the character accomplishes the goals too easily? Then all of a sudden the player (playing the character) has nothing more to do for the rest of the game. But if there is a list of motivations, there are lots of ways for a player to develop the character, and in addition, the player may choose different motivational factors. Suddenly, there are many interesting choices to be made. These choices become even more interesting if the motivational factors create dilemmas – especially moral dilemmas, because these make for intriguing gameplay (Fullerton, Swain & Hoffman 2004). The more interesting choices the player has to make through the character, the more exciting the larp experience becomes. That is why it should never be easy to fulfil the motivations. The game designer has to think about how the player may struggle towards the goal initiating conflicts and opposition (Costikyan 2006). Conflicting interest and oppositional goals are the building blocks of high quality narratives and exciting gameplay.

To experience a character is not just about getting an array of props, costumes and motivations. It is about character psychology too. Distinguishing between character psychology and player psychology

is essential since it need not be the same. Actually, it should not be the same thing. The character may cry out in pain while the player, enjoys playing the character, and may joyfully love the scene. The character is in this case just a frame for role-playing emotions. Petri Lankoski suggests that a character is described through physical appearance, sociology, and psychology. A part of the psychology is of course the goals and ambitions. But there is a lot more to it than that. He suggests that characters should have moral standards, temperaments and attitudes (Lankoski 2004). Anyhow, the characteristics of the character psychology should fit into the overall purpose of the larp. The psychology of the character is just as much a game mechanical instrument as a latex sword. It points the larp in a certain direction, influencing the social structures in the game world. Additionally, an interesting part of a character psychology is secrets. It is exciting to play a character with secrets, it is exciting to discover the secrets of other player characters, and it is a fantastic tool for the game designer to create interesting narratives. Always give characters some fascinating secrets to work with and remember there are lots of emotions contained in these secrets if someone else finds out about it.

Players will play mostly IC; that means framing the player inside the game world. But every now and then the player may get out of character, playing OOC framed outside the game world. This is perfectly legal and normal. As long as this behaviour does not destroy the experience, it's actually healthy for the players to be able to cope with this behaviour because in any game, each player should be aware that it is only a game frame from one point of view, and yet at the same time, deadly serious from within the game frame. If this paradoxical understanding of the game itself breaks down, the player may have a psychologically unhealthy experience. That is why some really tense larps take precautions like stop words and non-game territories. Necessary to say though, these problems are very rare. Normally

problems like this are solved on the spot without any difficulties

.  
When all this framing of world, social structures, and characters are designed properly, the game designer should work from the operational level up to the tactical and strategic level in order to work motivations and game world coherence from below. The characters should fit into the interpretation communities that again fit into subcultures fitting into the overall cultural structures. The cosmology based on philosophies, metaphysics, and cultural history must have consequences right down through the social structures to each particular character. By putting this extra effort into the game design, the larp experience achieves coherence and consistency. First the designer creates the experience design with a top-down approach and secondly the designer makes all the bits and pieces fit by using a bottom-up approach.

### **Organisers and Non-Player Characters**

Organisers should always think of themselves as organisers – never as players in the larp. An organiser may be part of the game as a non-player character (NPC) but never as player. The organisers are the game designers and the game design assistants of the larp experience. They know all of the secrets of the larp and therefore exclude themselves as players. Instead they should focus on make-up, production design, and being the moderators of the game. They should facilitate the larp experience from outside the game frame unless of course they take the role of an NPC.

By NPC I mean a character that is not as interesting as a player character. An NPC has no or little motivation to be part of the intrigues in the game. The worst NPCs are often the powerful NPCs that are allowed to show their powers. Such a character is an exciting character to play and should be turned into a player character immediately. As an alternative I suggest that the NPCs ought to be the non-powerful non-interesting characters that facilitate the larp

experience. As I see it there are three main NPC types: 1) the mood-establishing NPC, 2) the functional NPC, and 3) the story-facilitating NPC.

The mood-establishing NPC is very easy. It's simply an NPC that is there to give the players a sense of place. Often these NPCs have an artistic way to express the mood. It could be dancing, playing music, or quoting poems. The NPC may be a man sitting in the bar playing poker or the fortune-teller as long as the NPC helps to establish the right larp atmosphere. They appear to know nothing of what's really going on.

The functional NPC may of course be mood establishing too and probably will. However, it has a function in the larp scenario. It may be to point player characters in the right direction or to prepare and distribute items that are critical to the larp. These NPCs are normally officials or craftsmen that have some limited authority within the game frame. The story-facilitating NPCs are the most interesting and the hardest to play. It's their job to help the player characters have an exciting experience if by chance the larp fails in some way. They have to guide the larp back on track and help the players to get hooked on the story potentials of the game. Many larp game designers put up a frame in the beginning of the game and wait to see what happens. They may influence a bit through some NPCs and that is about it. But what if the game designer uses NPCs to gradually, dynamically change the larp experience. A player character may get a letter from an NPC in which his goals and ambitions are suddenly all gone, giving the character new clues as to what motivates the character from now on. New story elements may be introduced and so on. By using story-facilitating NPCs the larp becomes an even more dynamic experience. Characters that are useful as story-facilitating NPCs are all sorts of messengers from bards and postmen to journalists and lawyers. Finding the right troupe of NPCs is a challenge to the game designer, and needs to be done carefully and with much consideration. The NPC must of course be understood within each frame with focus on how to

improve the player experience, but also in context of how many and what kind of NPCs are needed to get the job done properly.

### **In Perspective**

A larp is an interesting kind of experience that requires a lot of effort to be done properly. Based on a critical platform and framing the experience, it is possible to create larps that are not only basically entertaining but also have a message. The player characters should always be the central part of the larp experience. Yet, building up several frames from the basic character frame over the social frames to the cultural game world frame must be done to make it work. To support this structure, the organisers may function as moderators of the larp experience and as NPCs trying to strengthen the experience of the larp. Having a method or an approach helps the game designer to make the right choices. This is not to say that this method is the only thinkable method. But the advantage of framing the experience is obvious. The game designers know exactly how to frame the world, the social constructions, and character psychology. Moreover the designers will hopefully create an inspiring world with motivated cultures, subcultures, and communities of interests, and last but not least, motivated characters to play within these frames thereby enhancing the player experience.

I put my faith in the development of even more exciting live action role-playings in the time to come. The game designers ought to work hard to make it the most moving experience mentally as well as emotionally each time. I would like to see role-playing as an art form grow into becoming a whole new way of experiencing drama, changing how we perceive the world.

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# markus montola

## breaking the invisible rules: borderline role-playing

### Abstract

In the process of defining role-playing, it's critical to also look into the practices on the borderline of definition and analyze activities left outside as well. This paper starts from the three invisible rules of role-playing that can be used to define role-playing, and looks at playing styles that compromise these rules. Three cases are studied; MMORPG role-play that compromises the continuity of game world, freeform role-playing that toys with power hierarchy, and minimalist role-playing that uses roles but dismisses characters.

### Introduction

In the rulebook of almost every commercial role-playing game there is a section describing role-playing. Typically these descriptions discuss the relations of players and game masters, role of rulesystem in creating the adventure and the practices of describing the game world and characters portrayed by players. Often the section discusses character play, maybe even including some rudiments of dramaturgy.

The role of this section is to answer one question: "What is role-playing?" Interestingly, these rulebooks providing hundreds of pages of procedures and con-

cepts never explicate the underlying process of role-playing itself. The reader learns that a sword does d10 points of damage, but the process of play making this information relevant is disclosed only implicitly.

Looking into the rules of the social process of role-playing, I have elsewhere<sup>1</sup> proposed that role-playing is based on three *invisible rules* forming the foundation of role-playing interaction. These three qualitative and usually implicit rules exist on a different level compared to what is generally understood as role-playing rulesets, and apply to tabletop role-playing, larp and to online role-playing equally.

They are the *world rule*, the *power rule* and the *character rule*:

- 1) Role-playing is an interactive process of defining and re-defining the state, properties and contents of an imaginary game world.
- 2) The power to define the game world is allocated to participants of the game. The participants recognize the existence of this power hierarchy.
- 3) Player-participants define the game world through personified character constructs, conforming to the state, properties and contents of the game world.

In essence these rules establish that a role-playing game needs a process of defining an imaginary world. Role-playing needs a power structure with several participants controlling the defining process. And role-playing needs characters, which are imaginary and anthropomorphic representations of players acting within the imaginary world.

I have defined role-playing as gameplay where all the three rules are applied, and thus defined that the fundamental elements of role-playing are the process of re-defining a game world, a power recognized hierarchy to govern the process of re-defining, and personified characters that act as the players' proxies in the game world.

The world rule, power rule and character rule apply to all forms of role-playing, including tabletop role-playing, larping and role-playing conducted in online worlds. This implies that the media used to communicate the imaginary world (such as a virtual space represented on computer screen, physical space serving as a stage for a larp or a world described purely by symbols of speech) are secondary, while the primary processes of role-playing happen on the level of imagination inspired by the communication.

Various forms of role-playing can be differentiated by further, form-specific rules, such as the following two for larping and verbal tabletop role-playing.

- L1) In larp the game is superimposed on physical world, which is used as a foundation in defining the game world.
- T1) In tabletop role-playing the game world is defined predominantly in verbal communication.

In this paper I will discuss several forms of social interaction toying with the rules of role-playing, in order to evaluate the invisible rules of role-playing and to assess their analytic value. All these rules can be bent in many ways, but in this paper I've limited myself to analyzing only some of these ways:

How *World of Warcraft* role-players compromise the continuity of their game world, how freeform role-players toy with power hierarchies and how roles provide interesting content for players without characters in *Epidemic Menace* crossmedia game.

### Compromising Continuity

The first invisible rule of role-playing is, in a sense, a constitution of the role-playing process. The players communicate with each other, constructing imaginary game worlds (diegeses) based on game communication and their own input to the game; the game works as long as the players have a similar enough understanding of the game world to meaningfully interact, and may break with misunderstandings. (Loponen & Montola 2004).

The game world discussed in the world rule is something more complex than a board of *Chess* or the vague symbolic and iconic implications of playing cards. In Juul's (2003) terms the world must be *coherent*. "Some games contain coherent worlds, where nothing prevents us from imagining them in any detail", he writes. In practice, the role-players have to be able to imagine the world and to add details in a creative fashion, which might be highly problematic in the surreal and two-dimensional world of *Super Mario Bros*.

Even though utter rejection of the world rule leads into games hardly having any resemblance to role-playing, many variants of role-playing walk on the border of having a coherent, consistent and chronological game world.

An interesting case of breaking the continuity of game world happens in online role-playing games, where many people attempting to role-play their avatars have to cope with the limitations and problems imposed by the games themselves. I have earlier (2005) discussed the problems of goal structures in online role-playing; the problem of a static, persistent world meeting the needs of an individual player lies in the

conflict of player's extradiegetic motivations and character's diegetic motivations.

Like the most contemporary online worlds, *World of Warcraft*<sup>2</sup> is a static and inflexible role-playing environment: The player has no means to influence the game structure with his choices. For example, a player who wants to play a powerful elven druid has few alternatives to starting his career by killing literally dozens of bears, tigers, boars and other animals, as those animals are pretty much the only opponents a beginning avatar can defeat, and also restrict the player's access to other areas of the game.

Many essential game mechanics can make the game fiction nonsensical; for instance by allowing an infinite amount of resurrections with no diegetic explanation to everyone. The tasks and rewards provided by the game force certain choices: When a nature-loving shaman encounters an undead wizard offering excellent and necessary game rewards for quest entailing spreading of a plague, there is a conflict between role-playing and progress in the game. Sometimes the conflict just makes the game more difficult, but occasionally it also compromises the access to considerable parts of the game content.

The solution adopted by most role-players is "turning off" their character play and diegesis construction for a while. History becomes optional; a group of players may attack an enemy fortress while role-playing constantly, but when the characters die, they typically cease role-playing until the resurrection duties are done, after which the role-play goes on. The nonsensical period is *bracketed* – even though things happened in the virtual world; they are not included in the diegetic history. Sometimes the players pretend that instead of the bracketed events, something else happened – the characters might discuss about tactical retreat after dying and resurrecting in another place.

This optionality of history only occasionally causes conflicts; usually due to misunderstanding on what is

bracketed and what is not: Some role-players bracket all the flavor text in quests (or just leave them unread) while others bracket none and use them as a central part of their role-play. In practice it appears that the most role-players bracket at least 50-90% of their total play time, or at least leave it ambiguous whether they are role-playing or not.

Occasionally the bracketing may lead into conflicts, for example having a druid accuse the shaman for spreading the plague, while the shaman player never included that episode into his character's story of self. These diegesis conflicts can be solved by one player adapting to other, or by finding a consensus in extradiegetic discussion.

### **Toying with Power Hierarchy**

Requiring a role-playing game to feature a power hierarchy is certainly a slippery slope leaving the definition of sufficiently clear hierarchy up to debate. Styles of role-playing are numerous. The strictest rulesets are employed by worldwide campaign organizations (such as Camarilla and RPGA<sup>3</sup>) with dozens of titles, positions, procedures and punishments used to maintain the game. The loosest hierarchies are used in playful improvisation that closely resembles children's play.

Caillois (1958, 13) classifies forms of play on an axis ranging from free play, *paidia*, to formal rules-based play, *ludus*, as follows:

At one extreme an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety is dominant. It manifests a kind of uncontrolled fantasy that can be designated by the term *paidia*. At the opposite extreme, this frolicsome and impulsive exuberance is almost entirely absorbed or disciplined by a complementary, and in some respects inverse, tendency to its anarchic and capricious nature: there is a growing tendency to bind it with arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions, to oppose it still more by ceaselessly practicing the most

embarrassing chicanery upon it, in order to make it more uncertain or attaining its desired effect. This latter principle is completely impractical, even though it requires an ever greater amount of effort, patience, skill, or ingenuity. I call this second component *ludus*.

The element of *ludus* is especially strong in rules-heavy games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, where tedious bookkeeping can be a part of everyday reality. The formal system of a “rule-less” larp is much closer to *paidia*: it’s still formal compared to “uncontrolled fantasy” or “frolicsome and impulsive exuberance”, but the conventions are much more implicit. Even though mathematical or algorithmic game rules are not used, the invisible rules of role-playing are still present.

The continuum from *ludus* to *paidia* is what differentiates – or sometimes does not differentiate – children’s make-believe pretence play from role-playing. If the social rules are fixed and if the power structure is established and recognized, make-believe can change into a form of role-playing. Indeed, drawing an exact line between the two is not necessary. Reflecting the position of role-playing on the Caillois’ broad continuum shows that even though many forms of role-playing are free when compared to *games*, even flexible free-form games reside in the formal part of the big picture of playful activities.

It’s interesting to also notice how certain attempts of abolishing power hierarchy simultaneously create a new hierarchy. One prime example is the collective method of larp authoring which removes one hierarchy, but simultaneously imposes another hierarchical structure with detailed rules and heavy regulation (see Svanevik 2005). Another example is *Polaris*<sup>4</sup>, where the traditional hierarchy of game master and players is removed and replaced with a more intricate process where different positions of participation are circulated around the table.

Freeform role-playing style is a mix and match style of role-playing with considerable input from improvisational theater. The playing style combines the iconic representation of larp, as players act most of the events out, but symbols are used as well. For example, a player might pick up a TV remote and start talking to it pretending that it’s a cellphone, and a couple of minutes later to use it again for changing channels on an imaginary television. The participants improvise new rules on the fly and switch player positions around flexibly.

Without extensive ethnographical data, it’s hard to provide a conclusive view on how power structures and rule systems work in freeform games.<sup>5</sup> In typical setups there is some kind of game master, narrator or at least an originator for the game, who may wield stronger or weaker game master power. Also, often every player is allowed to use game master power momentarily, if that is done with good taste and in accordance to the whole of the play. As the Swedish *Vi åker jeep* collective puts it:<sup>6</sup>

You may add anything to the game world if it improves the story: if you all of a sudden feel that it is important that your character went to Eton, then she did; if you need a bottle of scotch or a plane ready to lift at any time, then you have it, just be sensitive to where the game is heading. If the point of a scene is for the characters to be threatened by a man with a knife, deciding that your character has a gun is probably the wrong choice.  
([www.jeepen.org/dict](http://www.jeepen.org/dict))

Which could be generalized as a form-specific rule for freeform gaming as follows:

F1 In freeform role-playing, any participant can propose any change to the game world or to the rule system. The participant consensus determines whether these are included in the game, usually accepting all or most proposals.

In their work, *Vi åker jeep* has labeled and classified dozens of conventions used in the sphere of Swedish freeform. Their practically oriented work reveals the importance of structures in improvisation, as exploiting established conventions allows other participants to read performative acts correctly. As an example, they codify the method of allegoric play as follows:

Allegoric play is just as the name suggests, expressing parts of the story through allegories, playing a metaphor of something instead of the actual thing. Allegoric play can be used for an entire game, as well as for one track of a story or and individual scene. An illustrating example, that might not be very inspiring, is playing WWII as a tea party (Mrs. America arrived late). More subtle, less tongue-in-cheek uses are of course possible. Unless the underpinnings of the scene are very good, telling your players that they are playing a metaphor for something (and what this something is) is generally a good idea. Interpreting allegoric play is generally harder, but generally, the different interpretations are non-conflicting and compatible. ([www.jeeopen.org/dict](http://www.jeeopen.org/dict))

The skill of reading a freeform game is similar to that of reading any form of expression; it feels natural, intuitive and easy, but the practices are contractual and conventional. For comparison, reading a comic book also feels natural, intuitive and easy, but a reader from a different cultural background would not understand the chronological sequentiality of juxtaposed images (as McCloud 1993 would put it).

In fact it can be theorized that freeform role-play is even *more* complex and structured than regular larp or tabletop role-play, and the freedom comes from the fact that all players can tap into the extensive reserve of conventions used in the game. The lack of regular role-playing rules with tables, dice and mathematics is replaced by the more complex set of social conventions.

### Playing Without Characters

Probably the best current analysis on the essence of character has been created by Hakkarainen and Stenros (2003). According to their view, a role-playing character is a collection of situational roles bound together by a 'fictitious' story of self. In their post-modern sense, character's story of self and player's story of self are equally 'real'. It can be argued that characters' self-narratives are included in that of the player, making the player's identity a meta-narrative, bridging and contextualizing his characters.

The essence of character-based story of self is that it's bracketed from ordinary story of self, and it rises from pretence. According to Lillard (1993) pretence necessitates layers of actual world and fictive world, and the awareness of the layering, fictitious and actual. Thus, in order to role-play a character with a story of self, the player needs to have and bracket his story of self for the duration of play, and craft another story of self – while still being aware of both stories and their layered nature.

Character-rule can now be broken in two ways; either by having appropriate situational roles but lacking the fictitious, bracketable story of self, or by lacking differentiable characters completely (as most people often do in online worlds).

A perfect example of game using situational roles in a very interesting manner while missing a story of self is *Epidemic Menace*<sup>7</sup> (Ohlenburg & al 2006), a prototype game built in order to experiment mixed reality gaming with a wide array of hardware platforms.

Basically *Epidemic Menace* is a campus game lasting a few hours, where players utilize different technological devices (cellphones, PDA:s, AR-glasses, stationary computers) to fight a spreading virus. The various gaming devices have specific roles in the game, and success necessitates collaboration of players using these different interafaces: While augmented reality glasses are an efficient method

for searching viruses, interacting with them requires a player with a mobile phone representing a viral scanner. The players staying in the control room coordinate the action, based on “satellite image” data seen on computer screens. The story of the game is conveyed to the players through video clips. The players portray agents of EEPA, the “European Epidemey Prevention Agency”, but the characters are not defined, in order to reach a more mainstream audience.

Analyzing *Epidemic Menace* in comparison with a typical (Finnish) larp reveals many similarities. It had physical interaction, costumes, props, scenography, backstory and so forth. *Epidemic Menace* lacked characters, but there were *functional roles* emerging from the interaction with various gaming devices. Players were not provided with any character fiction or imaginary names (as is typical to larps), so they didn’t have any starting points to construct a fictional story of self. Even though there were two competing EEPA teams in play, the players were not expected to create game-based social relationships.

Despite the lack of characters, *Epidemic Menace* had game-based roles that were created by different devices and interfaces the players were using. The people using stationary computers in control centre had to assume strategic roles while the field-workers depending on their instructions had to assume away-team roles. This kind of *minimalist role-playing* could be very efficient in creating interesting player interactions in many games while avoiding the aversion and stress of performative gaming often experienced by casual gamers who are forced to role-play. The ludic part of the player’s story of self is separated from the everyday story of self, but the self that plays is seen as a subset of the ordinary self. In full-fledged role-playing games the pretence of character not being the player is central.

In ten years the technologies of speech recognition may offer very interesting opportunities for minima-

list role-playing. Computer observing the discourse on the bridge of Starship Enterprise can efficiently and discreetly enforce a mood-enhancing manners of speech and behavior. While the different consoles used by *Star Trek* officers offer an excellent theatre for functional roles, a computer understanding verbal military commands would create a perfect atmosphere. Forcing players to utter commands such as “*Computer! Power to the shields!*” while having a tactical discussion on the bridge, gives them a legitimate reason to perform casually.<sup>8</sup>

In comparison to *Epidemic Menace*, *World of Warcraft* is an interesting game in the sense that to some extent it features functional roles, as players have dedicated tasks – but these tasks rarely stimulate minimalist role-playing. This is because the tasks are not communication-dependent and because they are executed in a very similar manner – priests and wizards both spend their time blasting spells, one removing health from enemies and other providing it to allies. Succeeding in *World of Warcraft* requires tanks, healers and damage-dealers to succeed in their particular jobs, but the execution of the tasks is not very inter-dependent.

### Conclusion

In this paper and in my earlier work I have stated that the three invisible rules can be used to define role-playing. This paper discusses a few interesting and rewarding activities that lie on the border of those rules in order to demonstrate what is left outside the definition. The borderline practices are useful and interesting to all role-players, as they broaden the perspectives on what is role-playing.

The divides I have presented here are certainly not clear-cut. It’s up to the reader to decide when the element of *paidia* in freeform role-playing is so strong that the power structure loses its significance or when the selective bracketing makes character-play nonsensical. Constructing an exact and accurate category of for role-playing is probably an impossible task.

Role-playing is notoriously hard to commercialize for mainstream audiences, due to the fact that a satisfying game requires some participants to have skills and experience. While many lessons of role-playing have been utilized in e.g. computer gaming (immersive playing, character identification, mood creation), the social interaction component has rarely been exported. Minimalist role-playing might be one recipe for the problem, planning player interaction beginning from functional and situational roles instead of forcing hesitant mainstream players to full-fledged performative pretence play. The military-style chain of command is an obvious starting point that can be rethought for different collaborative and competitive contexts.

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### Notes

- 1 This paper builds on a forthcoming paper, *The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing*, written in 2005. That work has been presented in 2006 in *Playing Roles*-seminar, Finland, and in *Knutpunkt 2006* convention, Sweden. It's available from the author on request.
- 2 *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004) is a fairly typical fantasy-themed online role-playing game, where avatars slay monsters and complete quest in order to obtain gold, equipment and new skills. Observations are based on *Argent Dawn*, *Defias Brotherhood*, *Steamwheelde Cartel* and *The Venture Co.* (EU-region) role-playing servers in 2005-2006.
- 3 Camarilla ([www.camarilla.white-wolf.com](http://www.camarilla.white-wolf.com)) is the player organization of White Wolf running a global World of Darkness larp campaign. RPGA ([www.wizards.com/rpga](http://www.wizards.com/rpga)) is a similar organization of Wizard of the Coast that runs a global game of

- tabletop *Dungeons & Dragons*. (Ref. November 17th 2006.)
- 4 Ben Lehman's *Polaris* (2005) is one of the recent American independent tabletop role-playing games. In the paradigm that has shaped around The Forge internet community, experimentation with power structures is central.
  - 5 As groups around the world do freeform role-play, it's impossible to tap into any collective global freeform culture. All observations in this paper are based on discussions with Swedish and Danish freeformers and experiences from playing their games. Many styles of freeform differ radically from the style discussed here, such as role-playing convention freeform represented by e.g. *Life of the Moonson* (by Nick Brooke, Chris Gidlow, David Hall, Kevin Jacklin, Rick Meintz and Michael O'Brien 1997) that is excellently documented in [www.etyries.com/moonson](http://www.etyries.com/moonson). (Ref. November 17th 2006.)
  - 6 All the freeform quotes are from the website of Swedish *Vi åker jeep* collective (Martin Brodén, Torbiörn Frizon, Olle Jonsson, Tobias Wrigstad & others). (Ref. November 17th 2006.)
  - 7 *Epidemic Menace* (2005) and *Epidemic Menace 2* (2006) were research prototypes created and developed by Fraunhofer FIT and other IPerG partners in Germany.
  - 8 The more performative console games, such as *Dance Dance Revolution* (1998) and *Singstar* (2004) provide the players with similar excuses. *Singstar* allows singing and *DDR* dancing in a context of game, where performance is a byproduct and winning the game is the goal. Minimalist role-playing with speech recognition could do the same with acting and role-playing.

GAME



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# j. tuomas harviainen

## testing larp theories and methods: results for year three

### **Abstract**

This article explores the Process Model of Role-Playing through deconstructing a test larp on the Model, called Tuhkakäärme / A Serpent of Ash. Information gleaned from creating the game, running it as well as a recorded post-game debriefing all provide insight into the workings and potential of the Model.

### **Come with Me, and See**

*“Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you.”*

– Jesus, in John 15:14

Five years ago you were all members of a cult. A small fundamentalist Christian sect, The Liberated, which was lead by an incredibly charming man called Timo. You lived under the same roof, where you abstained from earthly pleasures. And you talked about faith. During the day, you talked with potential converts on the streets. During the evenings, you talked with Timo, who heard the voice of God himself.

When, after two years, Timo suddenly died during a hike, the cult broke up. You realized that you had next to nothing in common with one another. Some

lost faith, others clung to it. All of you were broken, one way or another. Now, as half a decade has passed, one of you has called up as many others as she could. You are here today to talk about what happened. You are here for answers.

Yet what exactly are you looking for? Insight into Timo’s personality? The facts about his death? Restoration of your old faith? Or, just maybe, people to blame for the years you lost?

This is the story of a larp called *A Serpent of Ash*.

### **Project Overview**

Year three of the larp theory analysis project was dedicated to just one research subject: the Process Model of Role-Playing (2005) by Mäkelä, Koistinen, Siukola & Turunen. However, it was not possible to analyze the descriptive aspects of the Model, so emphasis was based on its potential for creating better games.

*“The model can be used for the following:*  
*1. to describe and analyze singular or typical gaming sessions from the viewpoint of an individual or a whole group,*

2. to plan and communicate visions of future sessions and campaigns, and  
3. to describe play preferences of an individual or a whole group.”

(Process Model, chapter 1)

To study even a part of something as complex as the Process Model, extra measures were needed. Understanding its potential for larping required a larp that would both cater to the creative dissonances between players that the Model describes and reveal those dissonances while still remaining intact and – maybe – even enjoyable. This is especially important because the Model is, at the core, aimed mostly towards tabletop play. Thus “A Serpent of Ash” was born.

*“The single most important choice shaping a role-playing session is the Methods used to distribute authority over the Shared Imagined Space. Usually this authority is subdivided into authority over the inner world of player characters and their actions, authority over the actions of other entities of the SIS and finally authority over resolution of events.”*

(Process Model, ch. 2.5.1)

The game participants were given full authority to direct the course of the 90-minute game, to decide the inner worlds of their characters and to influence everyone else. Resolution systems were, for the sake of convenience, defined in advance. It is important to note that the liberties given to the players were much wider than similar ones in “more common” larps.

What was done was a mixture of semi-conflicting character interests and goals. The question of “what happened” was on everyone’s lips, but beyond that, paths diverged.

*“Circumstances are for example the mood of the players, the amount of outside disturbance in the place where the game is played and the social relationships between the players. An important*

*circumstance that exists in almost all games is the gaming history; particularly the facts already established pertaining to the SIS.”*

(Process Model, ch. 2.6)

Circumstances were, in the interests of research, minimized. The game was run for a random audience at Ropecon, the largest Finnish role-playing convention, and anyone could sign up. The playing area was isolated from the outside environment during play. And, most importantly, the larp was designed so that it would differ from most games severely enough, so that standard conventions of play would not influence it.

Naturally, it is impossible to make a larp about religion or social relationships without the players’ own experiences and opinions interfering. Therefore those problems had to be turned into advantages for the game, by showing how being a cult member does have its own appeal. Additionally, the oft-used cult setting creates sufficiently credible reasons for things such as lack of knowledge and radically different views on lived “facts”.

*“EVERYDAY LIFE AMONG THE LIBERATED Street-level missionary work, especially among students who had recently moved to Helsinki. “We have this kind of an informal gathering on Sunday. Come and visit us then.” Discussions on issues of faith every evening – lead by Timo, not reading the Bible. Private pastoral counseling with Timo once a month. Lots of talk with one another about how great Salvation would be. Hugs, praise and encouragement. Silence at 10 P.M., wake-up at 7 A.M.”*

(General player briefing material from A Serpent of Ash)

The game’s intrinsic traits and in-game reality can thus be made to work around conceptual problems, as well as to place emphasis on the elements one wants to examine.

### Coming before Christ and Murdering Love

*“When using the concepts of the Process Model for stating play preferences or describing visions of future sessions or campaigns, one should always start with the Benefits desired. After that, other layers of components can be added on, if desired.”*  
(Process Model, c 3.2)

So, what are Benefits and how did they appear in the game? The Process Model lists them as follows:

“The Benefits recognized in the current version of the model are as follows:

Entertainment - *Enjoyment of fun, being together and passing the time.*

Learning - *Gaining new knowledge or understanding, affirming or questioning old knowledge, spiritual growth and reflection.*

Meaning - *Enjoyment of an emotional experience, resonance with established thought constructs*

Aesthetic Appreciation - *Artistic appreciation, enjoyment of beauty and form.*

Social Benefits - *Positive changes in the social sphere arising from role-playing, for example the strengthening of social bonds, or getting to know the other players better.*

Physical Benefits - *Positive changes in the physical sphere; increased fitness, improved body language, physical pleasure.”*

(Process Model, ch. 4.1)

Of these, A Serpent of Ash catered mostly towards Benefits from the categories of Entertainment, Learning, Meaning and Social. However, the Entertainment aspect, described in the Model as a very light-hearted way of enjoying the game, was quite absent due to the serious nature of the subject matter. According to the Model, the important thing is that the intended Benefits are acknowledged in advance, not that they are all supported in every game.

The Model has faced some criticism on how the line between the Benefits of Learning and the Benefits

of Meaning is blurred (see the FAQ on the process Model site for details). This was very much evident in A Serpent of Ash: During the recorded debriefing, it became obvious that the game participants could not separate these two categories from one another.

*“At all times people were talking about the things I wanted them to talk about. I just could not stand the violent way in which they did it.”* (Niko; player comments taken from the debriefing and referred to by character name.)

*“We find that especially pertaining to Nordic larp culture, Learning seems actually often to be attained through Meaning, or at least the two Results are nigh inseparable. This is not really expressible in the current flow of the model. For analysis purposes however, it usually suffices to note that both are produced.”*

(The Process Model FAQ)

So, in that regard, the division of Benefits is indeed problematic. Something that does not resonate with established thought constructs may provide Benefits that are partially Learning, partially Meaning, while not fitting the descriptions of either phenomenon. Furthermore, the evidence points more towards Meaning being just a facet of Learning, not even a tool. (Do note that this experiment naturally does not prove anything on whether they exist separately in tabletop and/or virtual role-playing.)

The important analytic question is “how does one analyze the significance of Benefits?” Game feedback – public or private – is of course one method, but it is possible to go much further. If a game is, as the Model claims, made out of processes, those processes can be used to measure the direction in which players try to lead the game. If Benefits really do exist as a goal, players will strive towards such goals.

**Light from Many Lamps**

“The major normative Role-Playing Processes discerned [are]:

Competition - *The pursuit of victory*

Tension - *Maintenance and enjoyment of tension*

Challenge - *The besting of challenge and the overcoming of adversity*

Exploration of an Entity of the Shared Imagined Space - *Exploring the many-fold interactions a single entity has with others.*

Exploration of a Concept through the Shared Imagined Space - *Exploring a concept through its expressions in the Shared Imagined Space, and bringing forth such expressions to be explored.*

Immersion - *Equating the self with an entity of the Shared Imagined Space, feeling and acting as that entity”*

(Process Model, ch. 4.2)

In *A Serpent of Ash*, the players had a pre-designed free range and sufficient incentives to potentially explore all of these processes. That was the main point of the test: to determine whether game participants would favor certain processes that they were interested in, or if they would prefer character goals. In other words, are the processes created through diegetic goals, or do they exist as player preferences?

*“While my character would not have admitted it to herself, she was here in order to point her finger at everyone else’s faults.”* (Leena)

The characters were written in manner that would introduce all of these themes into play, so that the participants could then choose which paths to follow. There were religious debate for Competition, social Tension through personality differences and Challenge in the form of Timo’s death possibly having been a murder. The two explorations were represented by the possibility of re-constructing a “truth” about either Timo or the Liberated by sharing memories. And, finally, all of the characters and the

situation itself were crafted so that immersive play was possible for those interested in such an approach.

Example character: *Eetu / Erika* (everyone except Timo was written as unisex)

*You are the only child of a middle-class family from Nurmijärvi. You moved to Helsinki for a new job, but could not concentrate on the work and ended up fired. After that your life consisted of short-term temp jobs, heavy use of alcohol and occasional experiments with drugs. Your parents looked after you, though, so you did not really have to worry about things.*

*A really attractive recruiter (Mirva or Maukka; not present today) lured you into a meeting of the Liberated, and you stayed with the group. Before you knew, it had become your primary work and hobby, then your whole life. You wanted to get married and have children. You asked for more and more money from your parents, and then donated it all to the cult. Eventually your parents could not tolerate it any more, and severed all contact with you.*

*To you Timo was just a leader, not the larger than life icon he was to other members. Nevertheless, his death shook you very much. Over the years you have developed into a truly fanatic believer in Liberated dogma (the details of which you no longer remember that well). “Officially” you feel that they were right. In reality you know that you sacrificed everything for the movement, and if you’d admit that it was a mistake, your mind could not handle it. Thus you cling to that “official truth”.*

*You are currently employed as a shop helper at [a large general store]. You have a relationship, but it is withering because you cannot make any compromises regarding your world-view. You have serious financial problems, and suffer anxiety attacks at nights.*

*You speak constantly, about whatever comes to mind. Mostly you talk about religion and values, but you deal with them too from an emotional, impression-based point of view, not analytically. You are here today mainly because you hope that you'll meet some other former Liberated member who would share your religious conviction. Preferably a single and attractive former member.*

This example character was mainly primed towards Competition and Tension. Yet, at the same time, there are traits that support all of the other themes – either for its player or for the others. Notably, while the character's conviction seemingly prevents Exploration themes, it actually provides material for Meaning and Learning through Exploration by creating conflict between finding out a potential truth and not being able to accept it.

The significant thing is that according to direct feedback, this approach worked extremely well. And while it would be lovely to take all the credit as evidence of my larp design skills, the cold fact is that the game would have been much less a success, had I not followed the Process Model's guidelines. As a checklist of potential goals the players might want (Benefits) and in-game approaches (Processes) they might want to follow, the Model is highly valuable. In that sense it is naturally not unique – many other similar typologies exist. But of the systems I have so far tested, the Process Model's typology matches player diversity best. It is also far more accurate than more popular, more general models, such as Edward's (2004) or Kim (1997), in this regard, due to its potential for hybrid interpretations.

*“Half of why the game was [so] interesting was because of the religious debate (my character had become an atheist), half due to the inner world of my character (I had no friends an even touching other people was difficult).” (Anssi, on Roolipelaaaja Magazine's forum 10 days after the game.)*

*“It was an incredibly strong moment when you started to verbally put me up against a wall, by asking ‘what do you want, then, if not this?’ My character just froze up.” (Leena)*

*“Neither [I or Leena] had anything we could really offer in the place of the faith we'd lost, though.” (Anssi)*

When asked about how they felt about not being able to work towards their characters' goals, some players reported experiencing multiple states at the same time, while others spoke about focusing on character goals alone:

*“I maybe sort of tried to push my agenda, but then I got completely confounded and revealed almost all of my cards. Then people started to change their topics of discussion, but at that point the game ended. And I would probably not have revealed my true goals, regardless of the situation.” (Marianne)*

*“It brought me some frustration, but on the other hand, my character wasn't that interested in revealing his goals.” (Kimmo)*

*“I wasn't really listening to the discussions, as I was just out to offer my help to those who might need it. [...] I had quite a lot of fun, as I'd managed to pick a character who fit well with me.” (Hanna)*

### **Component Interactions**

The Process Model does not, however, stop at descriptive typology. The real meat around those bones comes from analyzing how the aforementioned traits can and do co-exist. Unlike the Model claims (ch.5), with even minimal planning, it is possible to support multiple processes at the same time.

For example,

*“You are solely interested in finding out how many people in addition to Timo participated in fooling*

*you. You are here today to get the facts, and then, possibly, to avenge what was done to you. As you can't strike back at Timo, you'll sure as hell make sure everyone else responsible will end up feeling miserable"* (Character material for Leena)

and: *"From your point of view, Timo died too early. In a couple of years you could have climbed high enough to become his successor. [...] You are here today, in order to re-establish the movement, with you taking Timo's place as its leader."* (Character material for Risto)

together simultaneously create potential for Tension, Explorations and Conflict. Even more significantly, partially conflicting goals such as these create feedback loops: the Processes create new material for other Processes. This is a phenomenon the Model completely misses, a phenomenon that also renders the Process Model's section on component interactions highly inaccurate.

*"My character got an enormous amount of satisfaction from Anssi's questioning of Risto's motives, [...] as Risto was revealed as a hypocrite."* (Leena)

This was especially true for situations where players expanded or strongly extrapolated upon their written character material. Players who had added immersive and/or explorative qualities to their characters provided additional material to other Processes.

*"I myself then expanded the character by deciding that Timo had been so important to him that his death was killing blow to my character's faith in God. [...] My feeling – which was written into my character – was that I might be somewhat bitter to all the creeps who still had faith. [...] I felt that*

*I had to show all of you that you were wrong, but as there was that other fanatic here as well, I did not have to be constantly the one who was lecturing on it."* (Anssi)

It must also be noted that the urge to find out the facts about "what was really going on in the larp" appears to be an interactive process of its own, one that mixes traits from Exploration and Challenge, yet is aimed at gaining completely different Benefits by different players.

### **It Ends with a Beginning**

Finally, it must be noted that all players stated that they had gotten much enjoyment from a game where characters – and thus character goals – were handed out randomly, even when they just then followed the character goals given without varying them. This would strongly suggest that meaningful play-processes are indeed created by the interplay of role-playing processes and other social processes, in the manner described by the Process Model. It also suggests that those processes may be much more situational than common stereotypes about player types lead us to believe.

*"So: how did it feel?" "Horrible." "Really great." "Disturbingly realistic." "Yeah, this could have created real anxiety, had we continued a bit longer." "Has it really already been one and a half hours?" "There's a clock on the wall, look." "Time flies when you're having fun." <laughter>*  
(Start of the debriefing session.)

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# larp as complex networks: measurable quantities of larp and their uses

## **Synopsis**

This article proposes to use known tools from physics and mathematics to measure properties from larps, which can be used to make other types of analyzes than is used normally to evaluate larps. The aim is to explain what a complex network is, what quantities might be extracted and evaluated and why this would be interesting. Thus all aspects of the frameworks used will be explained in layman's terms. The article is written by students of natural sciences, and thus this is the frame from which we attack the problem.

## **Introduction**

Probabilities and statistics are fundamental to both natural sciences and social sciences. In this article, we use theories from natural sciences on larp. Actually, a whole field in physics is dedicated to describing the statistics of a given system, and this field is called statistical mechanics. Usually the framework of statistical mechanics is used to perform calculations

on material systems. Thus in physics, statistics and probability are also a theoretical framework. Examples are diverse: Crystals, galaxies and cell membranes are all described within this context. From the probabilities and statistics we get so called macroscopic quantities like heat, temperature and pressure. These are overall descriptions of a system.

Among other things, we rely on the particles - that is the subjects of the study - being indistinguishable. We say that we cannot tell one atom from another and they all have the same very limited possibilities of interacting. But what happens if we let every particle be unique? This is what the study of complex systems is about.

Complex networks are used to describe e.g. interactions between proteins in the cell, the structure of the Internet and sometimes human interactions. (Rosvall, 2003) Articles using the framework of

complex systems on diverse themes such as sunspots (Sneppen et.al, 2004), traffic networks, (Rosvall et.al, 2005) and epidemic spreading of disease (Boguna & Pastor-Satorras, 2002) have been published and some physicists even proclaim that we are on the verge of discovering a new fundamental law of nature. That is, we may be discovering how things in general self-organize.

Also some sociological models (Zyga, 2006) have seen the day and this is where it becomes interesting as seen from a larping perspective. Here is the idea: The fundamental claim from complex systems used in a sociological context is that in your actions you are restricted by your place in the network you are a part of. To understand this let us have a look at what defines a complex network.

### What is a complex network?

The particles in a complex network are called nodes. In sociological networks nodes are usually individuals or groups of individuals. People interact and these interactions link people to each other. We say that a link or *an edge* can form between two nodes. Thus our network consists of nodes and edges. The number of edges going out from a node is called the nodes connectivity or degree.

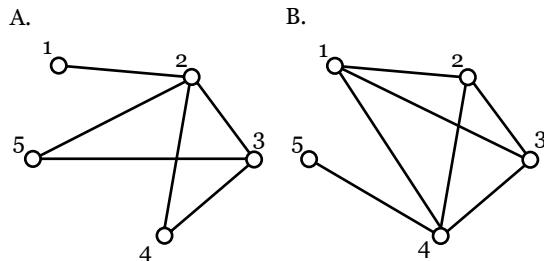


Figure 1. Networks of five friends. An edge is drawn, if two friends have met during the day. The two networks are described in the text.

In figure 1 we have created a tiny network of five friends. In this network every node is a person and we define an edge between two nodes when two friends have had contact within the last day. Maybe 1 went to the movies with 2. Maybe 4 held a party where 2, 3 and 5 showed up. Then we would get a network as shown in figure 1a.

Now let us count how many edges go out from each of the five friends: 1 wasn't at the party, so only one edge goes from him. 2, 3, and 5 went to 4's party and them being friends they probably talked. So from 3, 4, and 5 we have three edges and from 2 we have four edges. In our network we have nodes with 1, 3 and 4 edges, and the majority of the network nodes has three edges. It is possible to define an average number of edges per node and in this case we get fourteen divided by five, which is almost three. This means that if we pick a random node it will probably have three edges.

But maybe 4 didn't throw a party. Maybe he just met with everybody independently during the last day. If 1 then went to the movies with 2 and subsequently met with 3 for coffee (before meeting with 4), then 1 has three edges, 2 has two edges, 3 has two edges, 4 has four edges and 5 has only one edge. See figure 1b. Now, though we *can* define an average it will not give us as much information as before. If we pick a random node we cannot be as sure as before of getting a specific number of edges to/from that node.

In figure 2 we have made graphs illustrating the probability of finding a node with  $n$  edges. In a) we have our two networks from above, in b) we have two larger networks, and in c) we have two networks, which are so large that we can justify using continuous functions. So, if you want to know the probability of finding a node with 4 edges in one of the networks, you go out to 4 on the x-axis and read of the probability on the y-axis. As mentioned before, the number of edges going to/from a node is called the degree of the node. Subsequently, the graphs in figure 2 are called degree distributions.

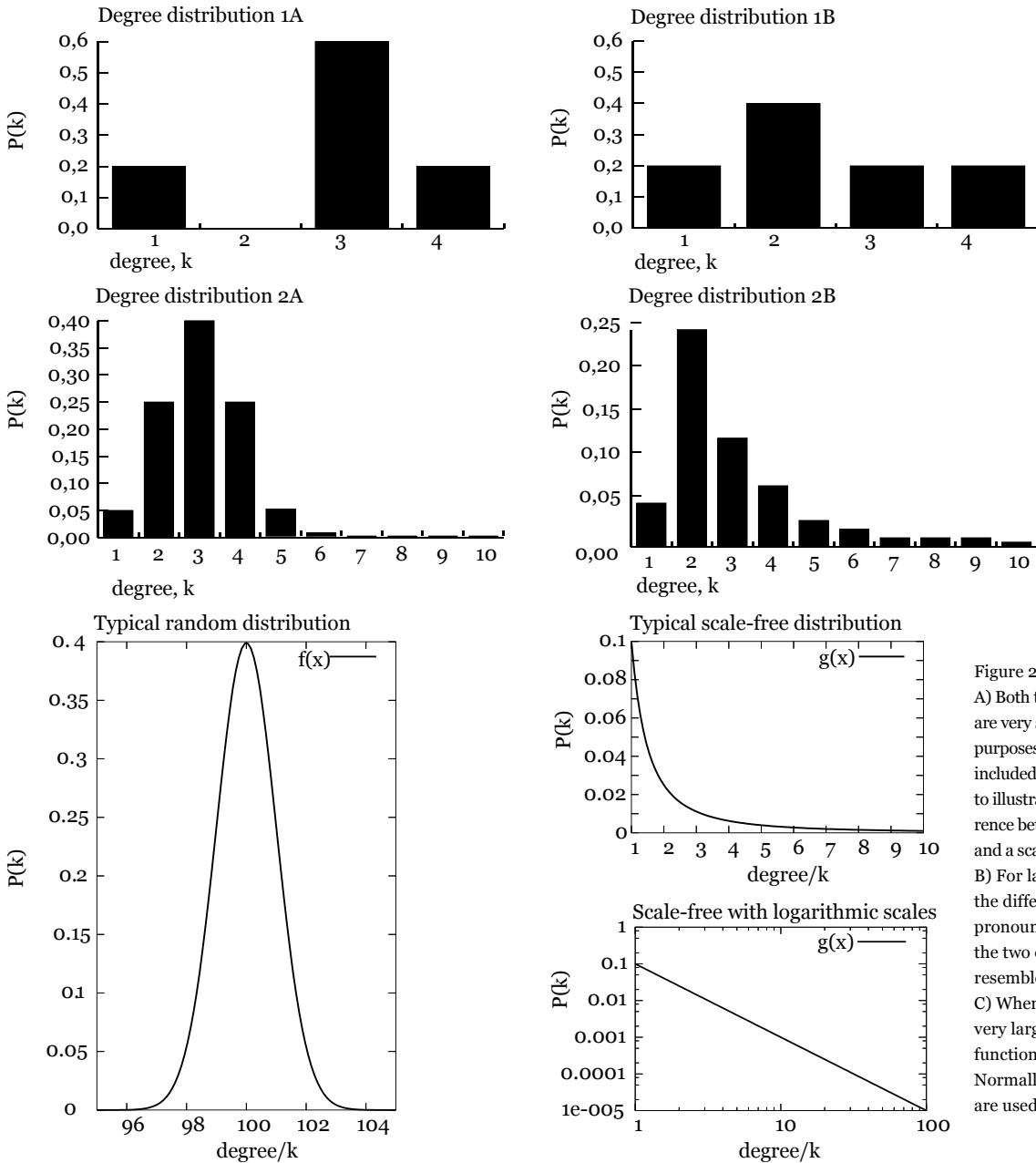


Figure 2.  
 A) Both the networks 1a and 1b are very small. For illustrative purposes we have none the less included the degree distributions, to illustrate the qualitative difference between a random network and a scale free network.  
 B) For larger networks the differences become pronounced. Notice that the two distributions do not resemble each other at all.  
 C) When the networks becomes very large we use continuous functions to describe them. Normally logarithmic scales are used.

*Random versus scale-free networks.* The example above serves to illustrate the fundamental difference between what is called a random network and a scale-free network. The random network is characterized by a bell shaped degree distribution, and it is possible to define an average (or typical) node degree. This means that you will not find nodes in a random network with a degree much astray from the average. The scale-free network does not have this feature. There is a significant possibility of finding nodes with very few edges (low degree), and you can also find a

number of nodes with a very high degree. You can actually see the difference between the two types of networks. See figure 3. The random network looks rather, well, random. The scale-free network on the other hand has structure.

*The small world property.* Almost all networks share a common feature called the small world property that every node is connected to the other nodes via very few edges. You have probably already heard of it in some form: Pick two persons A and B on planet Earth at random. Have A send a word of mouth message to B. How many persons will the message pass through, before it reaches B, assuming we pick the shortest route? The number is surprisingly small, because we live in a small world. And the route exists for almost all people of Earth. Try for yourself. How many people would it take for you to reach the President of the United States?

*Clustering.* Another important feature, present especially in scale-free networks, is clustering. This is the tendency for nodes to organize themselves in clusters where everybody is connected via very few edges. The feature is almost non-existent in random networks, as is also evident from figure 3b. Some nodes serve as hubs - they are connected to almost everybody in the cluster, although not everybody in the cluster are directly linked to each other. Each node has a *clustering coefficient*. The clustering coefficient of the entire network is obtained by averaging over all nodes in the network. To illustrate the procedure of calculating the clustering coefficient of a specific node, we go back to the friends from figure 1b. If we want to calculate the clustering coefficient of node 1 we first see that node 1 has three nearest neighbors (nodes that are directly connected to 1), nodes 2-4. The number of edges between the sub network consisting of nodes 2-4 is two. The number of possible edges is three. The clustering coefficient of node 1 is defined as the number of nodes existing between its nearest neighbours divided by the number of possible edges between them. This means that the

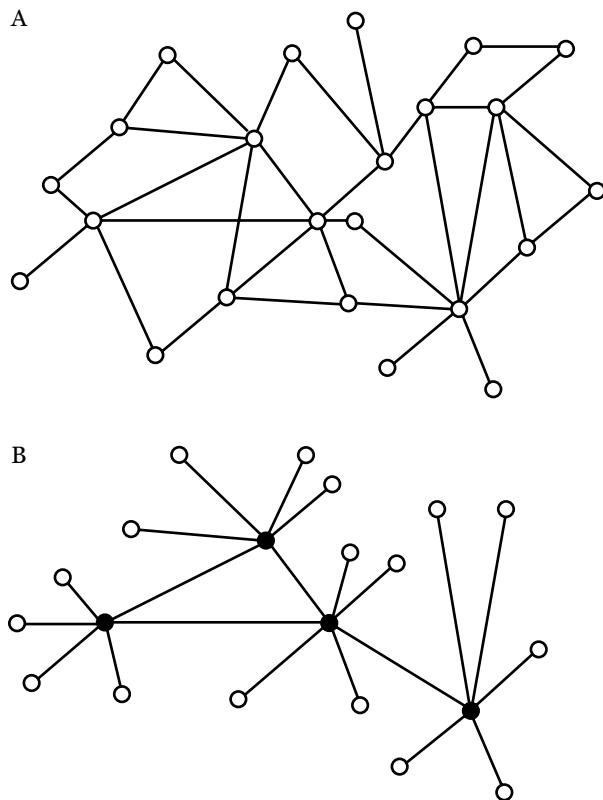


Figure 3. A scale free network (a) and a random network (b). Notice the structure difference.

clustering coefficient for node 1 is  $2/3$ . When a node has a high clustering coefficient it means that there is a tightly knit group of nodes around it - many of 1's friends also know each other.

**Robustness.** What happens if we remove a node from the network? It becomes more difficult to travel the network, because with the node we remove a certain number of edges. If we continue to remove nodes, the connectivity (number of edges) of other nodes will diminish, until at some point we do not have a fully connected network, but rather islands of smaller networks. See figure 4. If we remove nodes at random and one in each time step (eg. one pr. hour) it turns out that scale-free networks remain connected longer than random networks. We say that they are more robust to random removal of nodes. However, we could target the nodes with the highest degree first. Since random networks have nodes with very similar degrees, this is not far from just being a random procedure. It does not affect the network much more than removing a random node. However a scale free network is much more vulnerable to the removal of nodes with high degrees. This makes sense, since the function of high degree nodes is to keep the network connected.

**Information spread. Entropy-like measures.** Suppose you want to get a message through to a friend to meet with you two days from now. However, you will not meet with him and by some peculiar happenstance your only way of communicating with him is through the friends you meet with today. The network is illustrated in figure 5. The easiest way to get your message through to your friend would be through the friend you meet with today, who meets him tomorrow. The *path length*, the number of edges between you and your friend, is two in this case. Another one of your friends will not meet with him in person, but will meet someone, who meets him later on. The length of this path is three. In larger networks others many paths will be possible. *Information* is a measure of the probability to locate the shortest path.

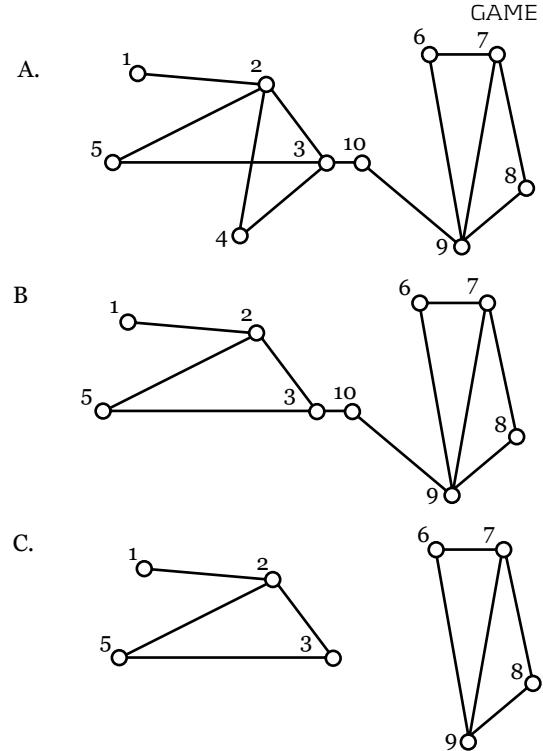


Figure 4. The consecutive removal of nodes reduces the connectivity of the network. At some point islands of networks, which are unconnected, result.

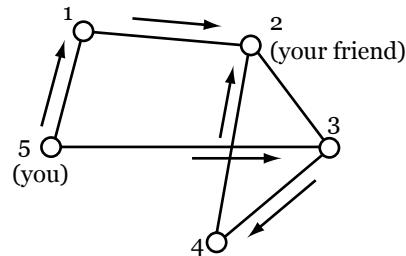


Figure 5. A network of five friends. You are friend 5, and you want to reach friend 2. You know that your other friends will meet as indicated by the lines. A message from 5 to 2 has two possible routes. The shortest having a path length of two.

Sometimes more than one ‘shortest path’ exist and this will make it easier to locate one of them. This in turn will correspond to a lower information cost to locate your friend. The more connected your network, the more shortest paths will exist, and the information needed to send the message to your friend will be smaller. On the other hand, if only one path exists, it will be difficult to locate it, and you will need to know more about the network in this case. It will cost you more information to locate your friend.

Entropy is a measure of how ordered a system is, more entropy means less order. This can be measured in a complex network by asking each node from where the next message will come. Let us use the friends network from above as an example. If you only meet with one person a given day, the question is easy to answer. It will be that person. If you meet with two persons that day, it will be one or the other. The more persons you meet with that day, the harder it will be to predict from which of them the next message will come, assuming you don’t know the order in which you will meet them. A high measure of entropy of a complex network means that it is hard to predict from where the next message will come. So with high entropy we lose predictability, but information will flow rapidly through the systems many edges.

The codeword for this method of analysis is measurements. What we propose here is to analyze role plays as networks by measurements. By numbers. Because this is a basis for comparison. However, the overall quality of a larp for one individual is not measurable. But by analyzing the whole of the larp and comparing different larps, we maybe able to extract some knowledge we cannot get by other means. Let us hurry onwards.

### **What has this got to do with larp?**

Let us try and see a larp scenario as a complex network. The nodes could be for example players, characters or roles if we use the definition of Gade (Gade, 2003). Then the edges would be relations

between players, characters and roles. Who knows who in real life, who is supposed to know who before the game starts, and how does this translate to the whole game? How does the network of the larp evolve during a game? The thing is, although many things can happen in principle, the roles are limited by the network they perceive during the game. So one of the things you may learn more about is the likelihood that the story you want to tell will unfold during the larp. Will the larp work according to your design? This is a big question, and to answer this question it would be nice to know more about the following.

*Robustness of a larp network.* When we remove nodes the overall connectivity falls and the tendency to clustering diminishes. This means that information travels slower. But what does the removal of a node correspond to in a larp? Imagine a game with a city and a king. People in the city are connected in various ways, and probably the king will be a node with a high degree. Many people will interact with him, so many people will be connected through him.

Let us remove the king. This is a targeted removal, and scale-free networks are vulnerable to these. He could be killed or incapacitated in-game. The player could become sick or tired of the game and leave. Maybe the player is not capable of acting on all of his edges. Or maybe not willing to. Maybe the king turns out to be a destructive king, who will not interact with anybody and simply kills people he dislikes. This is actually beyond removal, and if such a behavior spreads, we would have a virus-like situation. Also, in constructing the diegesis some events become more likely to happen than others. Some groups will probably dislike the king and they may try to remove him. If they do not succeed, maybe they will be removed instead. Both possibilities will lead to a quick change in the network, with a changed information flow to follow. It is a choice we can make, if we know enough, how we want to construct the network. Do we want a robust network, where the roles experience a steady information flow, or do we wish

to allow for catastrophes, which will test the roles and the players' abilities to reconnect after a sudden change?

The effects of targeted and random removal of players could be valuable to know, when constructing the relations between characters and roles. It would give producers of larps a design tool not hitherto seen in larp - a means to test how the larp would react when things does not go according to plan: The vulnerability of the larp's social network. For example, it might be of interest to know what happens if ten randomly selected players leave your larp (for whatever reasons). Will the relational network hold? What causes people to leave?

*Information flow in a larp network. Time evolution of relations between roles.* As mentioned above, entropy and information are measures of how efficient a message travels through a network. The term *message* is to be understood in a broad sense. It could be a specific message (meet at sunrise for high mass), or it could be a general rumor (the baron is possessed) or even a feeling (creeping horror). Now, as a message travels the network, it is possible that the network changes. In fact, it is very likely to do so, because people (the nodes) do stuff. The network can change either due to the impact of the message (a rumor that the king is dead could change relations between his former adversaries and friends) and/or due to other factors. These factors include other messages, the fact that unused relations may effectively die out, or maybe that your relation to another player (not his role) changes. All of this unfolds in time, so the network will evolve in time.

The entropy and information measure briefly mentioned above, can perhaps be measured at given times - maybe once every hour in a game. We would then have some statistical characteristics from the game, which may be correlated with general trends of the game. Wouldn't it be nice to know sort of what to expect, given that your larp network looks a certain way from the start?

Allow us to emphasize what may be gained here. We can never predict the actions of a single player/role. But given enough players we may estimate the probability that someone does something. Will there be an uprising against the king in our larp? Well, yes, there will - at least in Denmark. But maybe that has something to do with the way we organize our networks. Maybe it can be read off the network structure. The network structure limits how you see the network. Just like your home country has landscapes, consisting of buildings, hills, lakes, and trees, networks are landscapes, but in an abstract kind of space. You cannot see all of Earth, when standing on Earth, and likewise, you have only limited view of the whole network, when living in it. All you have is a picture of it as seen from your point of view at a certain time. Your picture will not correspond to the actual, precise structure of the network at that time. But you can only act from what you know. So people act from their local picture. But this has effect on the global picture, since everybody will do it. The method described here allows us to analyze this global picture.

The point is again, that we have quantities, which can measure the level of entropy and communicative ability in a network.

*The pre-game setup.* In what situations do we start with a random network and in what situations do we start with scale-free networks? What is realistic? What is best for the game? Well, the first question can be answered by looking at how roles are distributed amongst the players. If every character is written by a playwright and the players are subsequently casted to the characters, then the roles will have a starting network defined by the producers of the game. In the Danish productions *Zombie - Night of Terrors* (Bruun *et. al* 2003) and *U-359* (Pedersen *et. al* 2004) the networks were random. As we mentioned in the introduction random networks are not very realistic when it comes to real life networks. But realistic and what works for a game might not be the same.

Another type of pre-game setups involve registering to a larp as a group. Then you would probably end up with a somewhat modular network - that is very few links connecting the different groups, but with a lot of high degree nodes within the individual groups. In this case, it might be relevant to zoom out, so your smallest unit is not a person but a group. Then to see how your groups are connected. Workshops where different groups meet could make the network less modular, providing relations between individuals in the different groups. But will a workshop do a better job than just writing in a forum on the Internet? To find out, we must measure the differences.

*Edge selection.* How are effective edges selected and what does this mean for the entire network? Imagine yourself in a classroom, it's your first school day and you do not know anybody. Who will be your friends and who will not? Some process of selection will surely go on and a network will result. But as seen from a naive point of view everybody has the same possibilities. In principle everybody could interact with everybody in the class. But they don't. First of all, it is not possible for a single person to have an unlimited number of friends. Second, every person will pursue different individuals to be their friends. Some will seem more fit to be friends than others. Third, after a period of trial friendships we will probably have some further selection, again based on who seems fit to be friends with. Likewise we must assume that at a given larp, some relations between people are more likely than others. But what are the parameters for choosing to play out a relation. And what determines if the relation holds throughout the game? Also of interest, given that we know about these things, what kind of networks do we end up with? And how does the network evolve in time?

### End statements

This article poses a lot of questions. Some of them can be answered, some of them may not be answered at all. And of course, questions exist, which we cannot yet ask. But the exciting thing is, that we do have

mathematical methods, which can be used to describe and analyze larps. But the perspective of just looking at your larp as a complex system of nodes and edges is quite giving, and you can probably use it already now. If you turn on your common sense. Here are some examples:

*The destructive player test.* Some players are not fit to enter your larp, the destructive players. Depending on your method of selecting players you may or may not have the opportunity to cast your players. If it is possible for you to cast your players, you will want to put the destructive players in positions where they will do no harm to the game. One method is to assign them a character with few relations and a poor opportunity to make destructive relations. But then you have to analyze your network to see, where the best 'spot' would be. Also, if you do not have the luxury of casting all players, you can construct the non-castable characters so that the roles they turn into cannot destroy the game very much. The test is simply to analyze your network to see, what can go wrong.

*Graphical picture of your network.* One way to get a feel for your network is to make a drawing or a 3D cloud of it on a computer. For a small Danish role play called *Fra Høje Himmelsale*, this has already been done. (Husted) Using such a model, you can try to determine whether your network is scale-free or random, just by looking at it. Also you can look at individual nodes to see, how well connected they are. Or you could assign weight to edges, so that the thickness of the edge represents how much it is used. In the end the producers of a larp want a specific set-up from the start. They also generally want some things to take place in their larp. These things should preferably be in concordance with their vision. If you want something to happen, you need to find a way to control it. We believe that formulating the ideas, giving word to a vision and then translating these visions into language of networks and using the tools from this scientific field will provide a

powerful tool to control a given larp in many ways. The general opinion seems to be that many larps are uncontrollable, that you cannot predict the outcome. We believe that the outcome of a larp can to some extent be calculated within the framework of probabilities and statistics. We just need to become smarter.

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### Larp Network Group

This is the first article from the Danish Larp Network Group. Our aim is to use the frameworks presented in the paper to describe various larps. One of our short term goals is to collect data from larps and map these data to appropriate networks. Long term goals include computer models of evolving larp networks to increase our understanding of the mechanisms responsible for various outcomes. The group consists of Jesper Bruun, Jesper Heebøll-Christensen, Maria Northved Elf and Martin Bødker Enghoff.



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## five weeks of rebellion: designing momentum

### **Abstract**

In October 2006, thirty dead radicals possessed a group of larpers for a month. Brought back to life by techno-occult devices, they went on with their struggle to create a better world. The mundane reality was used as the stage for the collective story about personal influence, political change and constructed nature of reality. This article shows what happened behind the scenes of *Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum*, looking beyond the surface of various design solutions.

### **Introduction**

Built upon the foundations of larp, MMORPG, cross-media gaming, urban exploration, political protest and alternate reality gaming *Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum* was a pervasive game about conformism and revolution. The aim was to wander the borderlands between ordinary and ludic, exploring the design space where reality and fiction merge into a seamless, immersive and coherent role-playing experience.

The basic idea of *Momentum* was to take our everyday life as it is, and add a little magic to it to create an

enticing story space. In *Momentum* everything was taken as it is; Stockholm represented Stockholm and the old nuclear reactor hall represented an old nuclear reactor hall. Players role-played copies of themselves in the fiction – when a player went to school or work during the game, so did the character. And as the game ran 24 hours a day and seven days a week for 36 days, the players had no choice but to combine their ordinary and secret lives.

All the players, as their character-selves submitted to be possessed by spirits of dead revolutionaries. Most of the time they were students, employees, fathers, girlfriends and such, but in secret they gathered in their base or out on the town, let the rebels loose and plotted strikes against conformism. They studied occultism, debated beliefs, staged rituals, ran demonstrations and planned a revolution, in secret and in public, alone and with others.

Add up 30 players, 30 dead radicals, five game masters, a dozen NPC players, one phased out underground nuclear reactor, one reality and an overwhelming

amount of game material. Mix it up and enjoy the game.

*Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum* was created by Staffan Jonsson (producer), Emil Boss, Martin Ericsson and Daniel Sundström (design), and Henrik Esbjörnsson (locations) with the help of a large team<sup>1</sup>. It was created as an experiment on seamless pervasive role-playing for Integrated Project on Pervasive Gaming IPerG, and built on the experiences from an earlier game, *Prosopopeia Bardo 1: Där vi föll*<sup>2</sup>.

### Lessons of Där vi Föll

*Reality is constructed by social agreements. Everything that changes these agreements can be regarded as magic. "I hereby declare you man and wife" is a spell. "You are under arrest" is another. They both change the world for those participating in the ritual. But everyone can use magic. If you are not satisfied with the rituals of society, go make up your own.*

Many of the ideas of *Momentum* were originally tested in *Prosopopeia Bardo 1: Där vi föll*, including indexical propping, possession model, runtime game mastering, seamless merger of life and game et cetera. *Där vi föll* was played by 12 players in Stockholm for 52 hours in 2005.

*Momentum* was an ambitious attempt of scaling the game up in terms of duration and number of players, having 30 players play for 36 days continuously. This required especially addressing the issues of pacing and viability. In *Där vi föll* the players played rather continuously for the whole 52 hours. In *Momentum* that was not possible as the players had to be able to go about their ordinary lives as well.

Constructing a game where participants could drop in and out at any time and still experience a coherent whole was demanding. The game masters who had stayed awake for most of *Där vi föll* couldn't do the same in *Momentum*. It was important to create orche-

stration tools to facilitate the communication of the large game master group, in order to maintain the illusion of continuity among the players.

The *Momentum* possession model was changed from the one used in *Där vi föll* a bit in order to make it easier for players and more sustainable over very long durations. In *Där vi föll*, the players themselves were possessed by spirits. Many players found this gigantic leap of faith difficult to play out. In *Momentum* the two-tier model of "host" and "spirit" was expanded to a three-tier model. In the revised model, the player can alternate between host and spirit, but he can also go completely outside the game and be just himself by using the safe word "prosopopeia".

Thus the participants of *Momentum* role-played themselves in a slightly more magical version of the ordinary world. During the game they got possessed by the dead revolutionaries, all real life persons that the players had to do research on. The role-taking model was based on the ritualistic traditions regarding possession as a form of self-hypnosis eventually leading to contact with invisible entities. The possession in *Momentum* was like immersion is in role-playing: The players shared minds and bodies with their spirits.

In *Där vi föll* the border between game and ordinary had been hidden by giving the players as little off-game information as possible and in every way denying that the game was a game. This proved to be at best confusing to the players and removed the common ground and common agreement that has showed to be so important for improvisation in the Swedish larp scene. The problem was that there was no *agreement* on how to play and what to play.

*Momentum* was clearly marked it as game with a regular information site, a participation contract and a player seminar *before the game*. But when the game started the players where supposed to go into seamless mode where they played a carbon copy of them-

selves in a magical world. During the game the ludic nature was denied and the game was treated as reality.

At the start of the seamless period the players were called to a meeting where the game-masters explained that everything is real and that *Momentum* wasn't a game but a real phenomena masked as a game to hide it from the rest of the world. This technique, earlier seen in many pervasive games including *Där vi föll*, was used in order to create a seamless transition from the preparation period to the game itself.

Reasons for seamlessness are political, practical and diegetic. If you have seamless integration of ordinary reality and game reality, you don't *have* to treat the game as a game. By not talking about the game as a game and dropping the meta-game, you can take it much more seriously. This solution also allows puzzle-solving game challenges, as the players are able to use their full range of skills while still maintaining the stance of role-playing.

### **Advanced Runtime Game Mastering**

*Momentum was a game about playing with social agreements, looking for new perspectives to our lives, and letting the lives of others inspire us to new behaviour and ideas. The design mixed hard facts about the dead radicals with the players' subjective imagines of them. The dead came alive as the magic of immersion turned stories into action.*

Runtime game mastering is the process of influencing the flow of a game in real time. In *Där vi föll*, runtime game mastering depended on direct game master observations, NPC reports and technical surveillance. The methods of *Där vi föll* needed to be improved in *Momentum* in order to make long-term game mastering efficient and less taxing for the people running the game.

*Momentum* complemented the methods of *Där vi föll* most importantly with the use of *controllers*, four players who served as game master informants,

sometimes also secretly guiding the players. The primary use of a controller was to act as the eyes and ears of game masters: It's very difficult to understand a given role-playing situation through sensory equipment, but an on-site person can analyze it much better. The controllers were also a feedback system telling how players liked different game elements during the game that could be used in further runtime game mastering. They also refereed the player ritual performances from their own aesthetic perspective, deciding if rituals succeeded or failed.

In *Momentum* the controllers were also used as the backup solution in case of technology failures: The designers started with three plans using different amounts of technology. Planning for failures saved the game – some central pieces of equipment were critically delayed and never made it to the game. As a solution, the role of the controllers was increased, and the game content was changed from gamist exploration of magical landscape more towards personal drama.

Other methods that enabled scaling up, pacing and viability were the intricate mythos and proper orchestration tools. The world of *Prosopopeia* has a very complicated and intricate mythos of what was happening on the other side. It was rooted in real world history, focusing on threads such as electric voice phenomenon, Enochian magic and revolutionaries, but expanded on that. The idea was to make it self-sustaining, something that the players could research independently from thousand and one subtle clues in the game. This created a lot of content for the game, but it also enabled the game masters to make snap decisions when the players surprised them with the direction they were taking the game. Having a solid, mythic foundations enabled the game masters to improvise better on the spot.

The game masters used a web-based orchestration tool, where they gathered information about players

and characters, kept notes on the individual plots, stored sound files that the players had sent and received and where the diegetic reports from the spirits were kept. This tool made it possible for one game master to initiate a plot on his shift and another to pick it up later.

### Design Principles

*The struggle for a better world continued beyond death. There was no heaven or hell, only another journey through a world calling out for renewed responsibility and action. In life after death, activists, hackers, environmentalists, anarchists and terrorists fought on against representations of the same oppression they experienced in life. The post mortem revolution was threatened not only by hostile powers but also by schism and strife among the revolutionaries. In order to save the revolution, thirty spirits were sent back to life, to wage war from the lands of the living.*

The first design principle was to create a game as close to the border of reality as possible, integrated in and interacting with the players' everyday lives. Montola (2005) writes about three ways in which pervasive games break the boundaries of traditional games. *Spatial expansion* means that the games are played everywhere and in everyday environment – streets, cafés, workplaces and back yards. *Temporal expansion* means that the games are interlaced with everyday life, the games can call you in the middle of the night or all of the player's life might be part of the game. *Social expansion* means that non-players are pulled into the game as spectators and participants. *Momentum* employed all three expansions to create a game where reality and fiction were seamlessly mixed, where players could not tell where the game ended and the ordinary world began.

The emphasis was on the social expansion. Blurring the line between participant and non-participant meant that the game would bleed into the ordinary world. The provocative idea was that *real people* are

the most interesting possible feedback system for the game. The game could have an effect on the world of ordinary life and *change* it for real. Influencing the game world also lead to influencing the real world.

The second design principle was to *create a dynamic story*. When playing in reality the variables are so many that a certain outcome can't be predicted. Technologically mediated game mastering was used to face this challenge.

The design reflected lessons learned from *Där vi föll*, which had been very gamemaster controlled and directed. In order to have both a satisfying story and enough freedom, *Momentum* was designed to have a number of different endings and alternate story threads depending on the choices of the players.

The third design principle was to *use reality as the source book*. Any piece of information needed in the game was sought from the real world and real history, until something was found that fulfilled the need of the game. The fiction of the game was woven from these threads of reality.

### Art and Politics

*The afterlife of Momentum is an allegory for the future. The spirits of dead radicals are stuck in the old ways, and try to use their old methods when facing contemporary problems. When they are forced to go beyond their prejudices, and learn new perspectives can they find working methods for change. Action instead of reaction, responsibility instead of resigning.* The characters of *Momentum* were dead radicals from recent history, people that have given their life to a cause and that not even death could stop. Strong characters were used to give the players courage and incentive for taking their play out in the streets and also underline the seriousness of the thematic and story. By taking a role of someone who had made a great change, the hope was to help the players to understand that they have the power to change the world as well.

The story was about change, articulating how something is not right on both our world and on the other side. The old metaphysical idea, “As above, so below”, was used as the guiding principle in negotiating the relationship between this world and the next. The problems of the world of the dead are reflected on our plane and vice versa. “The Gray”, agents of conformism, were the main opponent in the story.

The game was designed to intertwine with the ordinary life of the players. Yet it was implemented in such a fashion that players were able to control how much to play over extended time. The idea was to create internal dilemmas: “Should I go to the movies or let Ken Saro-Wiwa out?”

The historical characters were chosen with several criteria. They were relatively recent in order to understand world of today with things such as internet and electricity, as that is not very interesting to play and would have diverted attention from the central theme. The chosen rebels were people who were fighting for one single thing, people like Chico Mendez, who was shot by the logging companies for speaking up against the exploitation of Brazilian forests. This was used to underline an anti-conformist attitude and prompt questions. “You are able to change your own world and your own life. What is really important? What do I really want to accomplish?”

To create collaboration, context and to illustrate the different approaches and methods of change the characters were divided into four groups represented by the four elements, which also provided a supportive context where experienced and active players could support less active and experienced players. When the players chose a character they also unknowingly chose a side in the revolutionary struggle.

Water represented revolution by individual enlightenment; dreamers, poets and hippies fighting for a world with brighter colours – a world more open to indivi-

dual interpretation. A typical character here would be Ron Thelin, one of the founders of the hippie movement. Air wanted a revolution of the mind, liberating information, encouraging research and distributing insights and ideas to everyone. A typical air character would be Tron, a member of the Chaos Computer Club and creator of the cryptophone.

The rebels of fire wanted a revolution through direct confrontation, to respond to injustice and oppression with force. George Jackson, a member of the Black Panthers, who died in prison stood proud in their ranks. The earth faction was grounded in the concrete; they knew that whatever humanity is going to do it has to be sustainable and well thought through in the long run as well. Judi Bari was an environmentalist who fought for the redwood forests, knowing that without earth we are nothing.

The elemental groups provided social and ideological context for characters and social frameworks for the players. All the groups had basically the same goal but very different methods of getting there. Also, after the success or failure of the revolution the strife between different factions was the source of drama.

### **Long-Duration Larping**

*Rebel headquarters were prepared in the first Swedish nuclear reactor that was shut down in sixties. R1 was the base of operations in Stockholm, the secret hideout you could visit at any time. It consists of 43 rooms far below the ground, hosting a command centre, a war room, a gym, a green house, a library, and the reactor pit. Here the spirits communicated with their comrades on the other side using computers, sliders, radio transmitters, synthesizers and crystals – all based on historical theories on talking with the dead.*

In most larps a player is supposed to play all the time the larp is running. In order to allow long duration *Momentum* was different: the game *was* on all the time, and the players were supposed to live their lives

in it. The possession model was used as the solution: The players were an army of sleeper bodies, enacting their possessors when visiting R1 or when meeting each other.

As the game was on all the time, anything in the surroundings could be a part of the game. This makes the players see and interpret things they have not noticed before in their everyday environment. Exploring these clues allows new sub-stories emerge in surprising patterns. Changing the players changes the way they perceive the world.

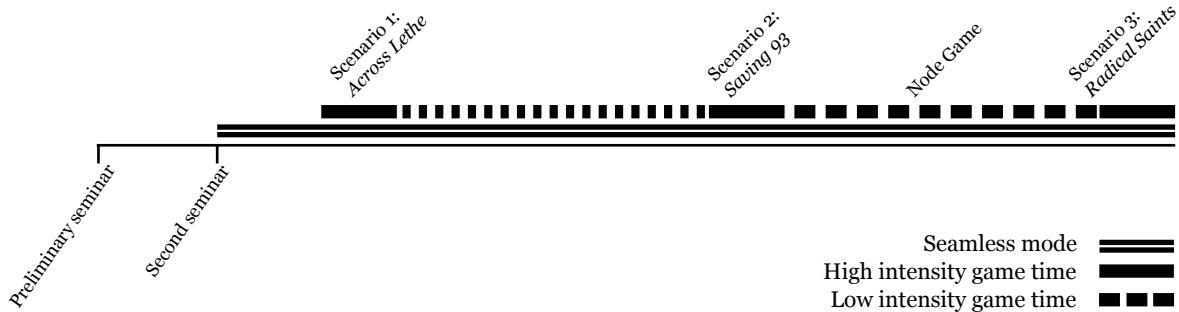
In order to create a collective experience for all 30 players and to make sure that they felt that the game was a coherent whole, the game was structured in high and low intensity periods, and the players were given an advance warning on when the game would go to high intensity. These periods were three weekends during the game, and at these times the players were supplied with lots of prepared game content.

If one person played only the recommended weekends and another played all the time, they could still play the same game – the different levels of activity and information adds an interesting dynamic to the play. The players kept in touch during the game through meetings and a web community that they created for themselves.

The game structure was influenced by two things: first of all, the structure reflected that of a revolution, and secondly it was paced so that even player with no background in role-playing could participate. Playing a seamless game is difficult, and thus a learning curve and a supporting context needed to be provided. In the beginning the game was strongly guided, but as the players learned to fly, it opened up into a more challenging, performative, player-controlled and eventually public experience.

The central theme of the scenario was revolution, and thus the classical structure of revolution shaped the game. In the beginning of a revolution the radicals have a common enemy as the central unifying force, but after the success or failure the rebels lose their unity. In the case of success a new society has to be built and new order needs to be established, and in the case of failure the rebels need to struggle for survival in an even more oppressive environment. This was reflected in the scenario structure, which started with collaboration culminating in the decision between victory and loss in the middle of the game, and left two last weeks for infighting over the future of rebellion.

The game was preceded by a seminar where the players were given instruction on how to play a seamless game and for example the safe word was



introduced. As the game started, the first week and the first high intensity weekend was focused on introducing the world of *Prosopopeia* and mindset of the game rather than creating player-driven drama or facing challenges. The purpose of the tutorial week was to set up the scene for things to come. The first high intensity weekend, *Across Lethe*, represented the oppression of the time before a revolution. It set the stage and showed how the player headquarters was supposed to be used.

The second high intensity weekend, *Saving 93*, was played two weeks later. It opened up the drama; *Saving 93* was about how the revolution was resolved, and decided whether the rest of the game was a success story about the victory or a tragedy about bitter survival. In this phase the players had to think, plan, coordinate and execute activities. Collaboration as a key ingredient in creating a revolution was emphasised, and thus the factions were working together and competing simultaneously.

During the last high intensity weekend, *Radical Saints*, the players had to be competent, confident and organized enough to go public with the characters. It involved a lot of non-players in the interaction and allowed the players to do whatever they wanted with the fact that they were playing a game in secret. In the culmination of the game there were two major public events on the last Saturday of gaming. First one of them was a public demonstration parading through downtown to honour the dead, and the second was a homecoming party where the vessels bid the spirits goodbye and celebrated their victory, before going home.

The intent in these last events was to make the players feel that *they* had planned and executed the party and the demonstration by themselves, instead of having the game masters organize everything. The game masters had acquired a demonstration permit and informed the police in advance about the route it would take and organized the party venue, but the

actual content was left for the players to produce in both cases.

### Conclusion

*I am not my name*  
*I am not my body*  
*I am not my mind*  
*I am not my thoughts*  
*I am not my breath*  
*I am not what I create*  
*I am not my memories*  
*I am not what I forget*

*Then what am I but motion and flicker in the mind of another.*

-Anna-Ki Henriksson

The *Prosopopeia* series experiments with highly pervasive ways of role-playing. The intent is to create game experiences where game content and ordinary reality are impossible to differentiate. Successful execution of this kind of game both brings the excitement of the game to the players' ordinary life, and the thrill of non-safe reality to the game experience.

*Momentum* was an attempt to take the framework of role-playing and use it to bring together the post-modern politics of identity, the aesthetics of urban exploration and the tactics of activism, and take the action to the streets. The game was constructed to show that if we want to we can enchant our lives by making them a game and make that game matter. Seamlessness was a requirement as in order to make a game about social construction of reality, the game had to be framed as reality. By showing the players that they can confront the consensus reality, conformity and boredom with magic in a game-that-is-real, they would see that the same methods would work in ordinary life.

*Momentum* was also a game about change; by doing symbolic resistance it allowed you to step outside the

boundaries of the usual 'real'. Role-players have been sitting on elven pillows long enough – *Momentum* wanted action, relevance, and responsibility.

### Acknowledgements

This paper would not have been written without the dozens of people who made *Momentum* happen or the thirty players who devoted considerable effort to play it. This paper was written as a part of the EU-funded Integrated Project on Pervasive Gaming.

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### Notes

- 1 Karl Bergström, Torbiörn Fritzon, Niclas Lundborg, Pernilla Rosenberg, Sofi a Stenler and Tobias Wrigstad (scenario design), Anders Muammar (props), Karim Muammar (rules), Linus Gabrielsson, Henrik Summanen and Jonas Söderberg (sounds), Anders Daven (graphis), and Moa Hartman (costumes). The game technology team also included Karl-Petter Åkesson, Henrik Bäärnheim, Sofi a Cirverius, Anders Ernevi, Pär Hansson, Niclas Henriksson, Tony Nordström, Erik Ronström, Olof Ståhl, Anders Wallberg, Peter Wilhelmsson and Maria Åresund.
- 2 *Prosopopeia Bardo 1: Där vi föll* was created by Martin Ericsson, Staffan Jonsson, Adriana Skarped and others (June 2005, Stockholm) has been discussed in detail before (see Montola & Jonsson 2006 and Jonsson & al. 2006).

GAME



j. stenros, m. montola & a. waern

# post mortem interaction: social play modes in momentum

## Abstract

*Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum* was a five-week larp featuring double-layered character model. Every player was expected to larp a diegetic copy of himself, and the spirit of a deceased revolutionary possessing the diegetic larper. The combination of these twin roles, long game duration and a design where players had to interact with non-players lead into interesting types of social interaction in the game. In this paper we describe how the players experienced some of the various play modes provided, and introduce a model for interaction modes in pervasive larps.

## Introduction

*Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum* was a pervasive larp organized as part of an EU-funded research project into pervasive gaming (IPerG) that lasted for five weeks in Stockholm in October and November of 2006<sup>1</sup>. Much of the game was played on the streets of the city, and thus the participants interacted with a lot of bystanders. This paper concentrates on the different modes of play that players participated in with each other and with non-players.

Creating player/non-player interaction had been one of the design goals of *Momentum*. The goal

had been to break the magic circle of gameplay<sup>2</sup>, drawing outsiders into the game. In comparison to regular games that are played by certain people at a certain time in a certain location (think *Monopoly*), pervasive games can expand in spatial, temporal and social manner (Montola 2005). The aim on *Momentum* was to employ all three dimensions of expansion. In this article we will concentrate on the social aspect. In a nutshell, the game sought to blur the distinction between players and non-players.

*Momentum* also employed a number of methods developed in the field of Alternate Reality Gaming (ARG) (see e.g. Szulborski 2005).<sup>3</sup> Namely, the game was framed as reality. After the first workshop, where game mechanics and the theme were explained for the participants, the *seamless* phase of the game started, where the seam between game and ordinary life was obfuscated: the game was officially cancelled and the players were told that everything would be real instead of being a part of a game. As one player reported<sup>4</sup>:

The game started for me on Sunday the 30<sup>th</sup> October when the boys from SICS told us that they had been forced to leave their premises in Kista and that the funding of the project was in great jeo-

pardy. That was when I first took the leap of faith that has been discussed. I chose to accept that the events they were referring to actually had happened. (player post-game interview, email)

The seamlessness was achieved through a number of methods (such as indexical propping, see Montola & Jonsson 2006), but from the point of view of the players the most important aspect was the *Prosopopeia protocol*.

Explicitly the Prosopopeia protocol means that the participants are supposed to “play the game as if it was real”. Implicitly it also meant that content that could be generally interpreted as ludic should be interpreted as real. Whenever players encountered something that *could* be interpreted as supernatural, magical or occult in nature, then that *would* be the correct (“real”) interpretation.

Another feature of *Momentum* was the *possession model* of role taking. As the seamlessness of the game lasted for five weeks and the participants were supposed to be able to also work, study and carry on with their everyday life during the game, it was important to use an immersion model that supported this. Basically it means that the participants role-play two parts, themselves and the character. The player was then able to choose which one to play at a given moment. This meant that the character could be pushed to the back of the head when working at the office. The possession model was first introduced in *Prosopopeia Bardo 1: Där vi föll*<sup>5</sup> (see Montola & Jonsson 2006), and revised for *Momentum*.

Together the seamlessness, the possession model, the extremely long duration and the Prosopopeia protocol created a basis for a number of interesting modes of interaction. In this paper we divide the interaction modes into four groups and look at how they work. The findings presented in this paper are based on ethnography (participant observation the players were not aware of) as well as numerous email

and face-to-face interviews conducted during and after the game.

### Playing with Other Players

The most common way of interacting in a larp is with other players. This character-to-character interaction within the diegetic<sup>6</sup> game world is the core of a role-playing game. In *Momentum* the game world was the everyday world with the addition of certain magical and occult ingredients, but basically the game world was built on real world history.

The character-to-character interaction was complicated by the fact that all players played two characters, a carbon copy of themselves in a magical world (the host) and the dead revolutionary possessing them (the spirit). In the beginning the host was almost identical to the everyday self of the participant (the player). The only real difference was that the player was playing a game and that the host believed in, or at least was receptive to the existence of, supernatural phenomena. Yet, as the game progressed and the hosts had strong supernatural experiences the difference between the host and the player grew.

Thus the character-to-character interactions could be further divided to host-to-host, host-to-spirit, spirit-to-host and spirit-to-spirit interactions. All of these are characters, of course, but they felt different. Especially those players who had a background in larp sometimes felt that playing the host was almost like stepping out of the game, off-gaming, and thus interpreted the spirit-to-host interaction as non-diegetic.<sup>7</sup> This was mostly due to the lack of clear instructions on how the possessing spirit was supposed to be played. In *Momentum* the game organizers had left that up to the participants and some of them aimed at playing the spirit as much as they could, some played the two characters equally and some constructed an amalgam of the two characters.

As the Momentum guidelines suggested: Always assume that people are possessed, so this I do, or

at least I assume they are playing their vessels [aka hosts]. So I approach players with the name of the guest [...] and with their own name, if I know that they are their vessels right now. If I need to talk to their guest [aka spirit] I just ask if they can try to call for their guest, and it has worked out just fine. I speak some English and try to change my body language and behaviour when being [possessed], to make it easier for others players to see whom they are talking to. (player post-game interview, email)

Most players followed the Prosopopeia protocol completely and did not talk about the game as a game. Some used the opportunity offered by the possession model to talk about the events of the game as the hosts, thus discussing the game on a meta-level even if they never explicitly articulated the ludic nature of the game.

The word “prosopopeia” did not exist in the game-world. Instead it was the safe word that could be used to step out of the-reality-that-is-the game into the everyday world. The word was used a few times during the game, mostly to check that the players who were playing very intensively were not hurt when their characters were, and to convey meta-information. These occurrences were very rare and many players played the whole five weeks without ever hearing the safe word.

Some players talked about the game as a game with other participants, but only with people they knew in advance, people they knew wouldn't mind the off-game discussion and people that they trusted. Also, some people talked with the controllers and game masters.

Yes, I broke the proposal *two times during the five weeks*, once to check if [another player] really was okay and wasn't being mind-raped by [her spirit] and once to have an open conversation with my girlfriend. (player post-game interview, email)

I was called once by [a game master] and I called

[him] once to discuss [game events]. It was OK, but I felt uneasy. It really broke the illusion and *it took a day or two to get it back*. (player post-game interview, email)

The players had a special kind on relationship to one NPC that was played by one of the game masters. This NPC showed up during the first week to instruct the players. He was basically there to disseminate information. Many players saw this character for what he really was, a game mechanic. Some even compared him to the mentors encountered in digital games. This was a strategy consciously chosen by the game masters (jokingly called the *tutorial mode*). Most players regarded this NPC as a guide who could and indeed should be milked for information. Very seldom was any of the information given by him questioned, mostly because he was played by a game master and because he filled the stereotypical mentor role.

Adam talked a lot, and we asked a lot, and I don't believe we understood half of what he said, and I don't think we remembered more than 25 % of what he said, but still, it was okay. He talked a lot, yes. He could've been more efficient at this, but still, it's not as (-) a seminar, there's no need to be efficient. If Adam is a character that is inefficient, he's inefficient, it's not a problem. Okay, you can get irritated at him, so what, it's in-game. (player post-game interview)

### Playing Alone

One of the most interesting elements of game play in *Momentum* was the emergent *selfplay*. Many participants reported that they had gone through a number of meaningful “interactions” with themselves. As the host and the spirit occupied the same physical body for a long while, after the game had been running for some time the differences between these two personas started to demand addressing. This inner conflict led to a number of cases where the host and the spirit carried a conversation or even fought outright.

One player reported that the spirit carried out a ritual to rob the host of all willpower. Another told that the two personas were only able to communicate through writing and thus she wrote long discussions were the handwriting would change as a different persona took over. A third player engaged in a shouting match with himself alone in his apartment after the vegetarian spirit protested the use of eggs in pancakes and so forth.

And one of the funniest things I think during this whole thing was, because I was vegetarian for one month, and one evening I came home very late, and wanted to do some pancakes, and I used some eggs, and my [spirit] didn't like that, so I was actually screaming at myself in my apartment. I knew that nobody would have really seen it or listened, but I was screaming at myself and arguing with myself and even throwing the egg shells on the floor and stuff like that, and it was. Of course it was part of the game, and afterwards I know that it didn't much [matter] for anybody else, but for myself to keep the feeling that I really was two persons, and it helped me. (player post-game interview)

Again, the possession model that could be interpreted in a number of ways, created the stage for these "interactions". Basically this meant, that suddenly it only "took one to tango", showing that some forms of role-playing alone are possible and make sense to the players.

Role-playing alone has been a widely debated question on the email lists and conventions of Nordic role-players for years. *Helsinki FTZ* (by Panu Alku), an early street larp played in Finland in 1997, created debate about the possibility of playing alone while out on the town. *Helsinki FTZ* was a spatially (and thus socially) expanded larp before the term was invented, and in this context playing alone meant playing with non-players. If a character goes shopping for clothes for two hours, is he playing or not? Is the player role-playing alone when interacting with the clerk? Now, ten years later, interaction with non-players is not seen as playing alone.

In the discussion that followed the publication of *The Manifesto of the Turku School* (Pohjola 2000) the proponents of immersionist play declared that it was possible to role-play alone in a closet even if there was no interaction with the rest of the game world. Many recent definitions and descriptions of role-playing are based on a process involving at least two participants (Fatland and Wingård 2003, Mackay 2003, Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003, Montola 2007 in this book), and thus playing alone (without even a potential co-player or a gamemaster) has been branded as not being role-playing.

The problem has been how to distinguish between daydreaming and role-playing.

I spent the first night, around 10 hours, meditating together with my spirit to get to know her, and for her to get to know me. I knew quite well how she would like me to act and she knew my preferences. We weren't always acting accordingly. (player post-game interview, email)

It is impossible to draw that line based on *Momentum*, but it is evident that selfplay is something that does happen, something that the participants interpret as part of the game and something that can be supported with the right game design decisions. However, in order for the selfplay to be "meaningful", the context that the game provides is needed. That is, self-play is daydreaming that becomes meaningful in, and because of, and adds to the meaning of, the game context of which it is part. The game is what enables the interpretation and assigning of meaning in selfplay. Even though the players were alone at the time, the collectively constructed game world was present for them. Also, the players knew that they would later interact with other players and the events that took place during selfplay could be relevant.

### Playing with Friends and Relatives

The third mode of interactions happened when participants interacted with people who were not part of

the game but who already had a personal relationship with the participant. Roughly this meant playing with friends, relatives and workmates.

The most common way of interacting with friends was to use the Prosopopeia proposal and talk about the game as if it was real. What separates the friends of the participants from strangers is that most of these people knew that the players were going to participate in a game as it had been discussed in advance. Thus they could have a winking relationship to the game, pretending along with the players that the game was real. They pretended to take it seriously while the game was running as they knew it would end at some point. However, some people really disliked the way the game affected the players. For example a girlfriend of a player threatened to end the relationship if the player continued to refuse to acknowledge her.

Avoidance of the people not related with the game or avoidance of the subject of the game was another strategy that was often adopted. Some players effectively cut down their interaction with friends and relatives during the game. They said that they are involved in a project that they couldn't really talk about and that they were willing to talk about it afterwards. Others simply refused to discuss the subject of the game. They said that did not feel comfortable talking about it "in these terms" (as a game) yet and that after the game they would talk about it. Some also referred to the game as a game as that was an excuse that the players were instructed to use when talking with outsiders. The game was real to the players but they could pretend that it was a game.

I tried to keep my family and friends out of the game. But this proved difficult, since they started to worry, and ask questions about what I was doing, and why I never was at home. After a while I came up with the perfect lie: Its all just a game. Although my game-self didn't believe it, it was a very good, and seamless, way to relieve others. (player post-game interview, email)

A few players also decided to break the Prosopopeia protocol with certain people. Mothers, best friends and people distant enough from Stockholm larping scene were mentioned as example of people that players talked with outside the game context. Some felt that they wanted to get away from the game and do so with people they cared about, others said that they felt that it would be dishonest and disrespectful toward people they cared about to pretend that the game was real. In all cases the players insist that the people they decided to break the Prosopopeia proposal with were carefully selected.

I only broke [the proposal] while discussing with people that either were part of the game master team or with non-participating friends wanting to discuss the game as a game. (player post-game interview, email)

I felt a need to talk about it and my feelings and such involving the game. So I talked to my boyfriend. And felt that it was necessary to do that. Otherwise I wouldn't have been able to play normally for such a long time. (player post-game interview, email)

### **Playing with Strangers**

As the larp was played in Stockholm, the players would frequently encounter people who did not belong to either the player group or the game masters. On some occasions, the game masters had staged such meetings; for example, one of the player groups was instructed to meet up with a nurse at a hospital. On this occasion, the woman they met was a specially instructed player who did not actually work as a nurse in the hospital. On another occasion, the players met up with a gallery owner, who was supposed to hand out a painting to them. By contrast, this gallery owner was authentic and, although given a specific task, had no information about the ongoing game. Finally, the players would frequently need to interact with complete outsiders, e.g. to buy food, ask for directions, etc.

The reason why the game design included all these modes of interaction was to implement a tight integration between the real world and the game world. The Prosopopeia proposal provides an adequate framework to interact with all outsiders in a consistent manner. Rather than deciding if an outsider is part of the game or not, a player decides how much of the ‘truth’ that an outsider needs to know and he can be told. However, in practice many players tried to second-guess the status of the people encountered during the game. Were they complete outsiders, or specially instructed by the game masters? Many players showed a willingness to act out much more with the people that they assumed to be plants deployed by game masters. They would also be quite quick in assuming that the plants already knew much of the story context and uncritically relate it to them. The most critical side-effect was that the players treated assumed plants with different morals compared to outsiders – as an example, a character might be willing to steal from a plant (as a part of the game), but not from an outsider.

This is perhaps the most obvious way in which seamlessness failed to manifest in the game, and against what the game masters had intended. It is important to note that the players did not always guess right; they probably were able to spot almost all fully informed plants, but sometimes bystanders were thought to be NPC:s.

From the outsider point of view, there are three rough levels of game engagement. In the unaware state the game around the outsider goes unnoticed or is interpreted as ordinary everyday events. In the ambiguous state the outsider suspects that something is going on, but what is happening is uncertain. Finally the outsiders can enter the conscious state, where the game context is entirely accessible. (See Montola & Waern 2006.)

*Momentum* was a game that invited the outsiders to participate in unconscious and ambiguous fashions.

Unconscious interaction happens for example when players go shopping during the game – the clerk hardly realises that someone is shopping as a part of the game; the player appears as just another customer, even if for the player the interaction might be very meaningful.

I was dressed as [my spirit, who is] a transvestite – maked up and wearing a wig. The time was after 01.00 Friday night and I was looking for a cab. When I jumped in the driver gave me the girl-rate (it is a lower rate for girls during night time). It took maybe 5 minutes before he recognized that I was a transvestite. It was difficult for him to handle in the very first – but in the end he opened his heart and started telling me some personal problems. A reality moment. (player post-game interview, email)

Creating ambiguous interactions was one of the aims of *Momentum*, and that happened a lot during the game. At numerous times the players did things in the public sphere that was difficult to understand in the context of everyday life. It is difficult to evaluate how these events influenced or were interpreted by the bystanders, because most of the time they cannot be tracked down after the scene has ended.

At one point the game took the players to an art gallery. The game masters had planted a painting in the exhibition without telling that the proprietors that the picture would be a prop in a role-playing game. The gallery had only been instructed to “give out the painting to someone who really wanted it”. The next day a number of players showed up to look at and ask about the painting. When introducing themselves they gave the names of their characters. After awhile the people at the gallery started suspecting that something odd was happening and they started not only writing down the names of the people interested in the painting, but to also googling them – effectively starting to play a game of their own.

I tried to look up Ingela [the person credited for creating the painting], and I couldn't find anything except she was mentioned in like a blog. They were [also] talking about a journalist that was killed, [...] they mentioned her name there. And it seemed to be like about all these conspiracy theories and all of these UFO's and all that, so I was like, it was intriguing that these were the people that they were doing. [...] It was definitely something to do that day, yeah. (gallery worker in a pair interview)

When they were interviewed a few days later and the ludic nature of the events was disclosed, they reported that the ambiguity of not knowing what was happening had been fun and that the experience had been a positive one. When asked if they would like to continue to participating in the game after they had been informed that it was a game, they declined:

I don't know if that would work, because it's funnier when you don't know. Cos if you know, then... That wouldn't be fun. (gallery worker in a pair interview)

This was exactly the kind of social expansion the game masters had wished to create. Yet it is probable that the fact that the people had background in arts made them more receptive to weird artistic events. Still, the occurrence shows that the kind of positive social expansion often sought after in pervasive games is possible to achieve.

- 1: Yeah, it wasn't upsetting enough to feel like an invasion. Looking back, it doesn't, it didn't matter at all really. If they had played a different prank with someone more, something more serious, but maybe that would've been. But now, I still don't think that was [an invasion].
- 2: They could've taken it even farther I think, like it ended kind alike oop, okay, I guess it's just over now. Like they're not gonna come back, like no-one's come in angry like where is the thing!
- 1: Yeah, once we started to feel it was a game, we

kinda, we were waiting for like..

2: We were ready.

1: Maybe like a big polar bear walking in! You know, like something. [laughs] (gallery workers in a pair interview)

Whether *Momentum* invited any outsiders to participate on the conscious level, interacting with the game as if it was a game, remains up to debate. No outsider was really provided the entire ludic context (except some friends and relatives), but many players lied (inside Prosopopeia protocol) to outsiders that their actions were parts of some game. The point of this lying (which was a lie in the game, but truth in the ordinary world) was more to get rid of the outsiders rather than to invite them further into the game: Telling that something was just a part of a game erased the curiosity-inspiring ambiguity drawing some outsiders towards the game.

In *Momentum* the ambiguity of division between game and ordinary life was a major source of enjoyment. This seems to be a major source of enjoyment in many other pervasive games as well (see for example McGonigal 2003, Szulborski 2005 and Pettersson 2006), and bears repeating as one of the central attractive properties of the form.

### Playing in Public

Even though playing in public is technically playing with strangers, it's differentiated here because it's a very specific way of playing with others. With public play we mean the scenes of *Momentum* where players entered the public space and their performative gaming attracted audiences. The rituals staged by players were a central form of performative gaming, but during the game the players were also expected to stage a demonstration through downtown to honour the dead, and to run a party where they could invite their friends. (See for example Benford et al. 2006).

The game served as an empowering mechanism for redefining the rules for the environment; the players

could use the game as an excuse to act against social expectations and conventions. One player reported the following.

When acting among bystanders I realized how assimilated I had become to the alternate reality of Momentum. When I performed the ritual at Olof Palmes gata, I just thought that the bystanders were weird, because they didn't understand the importance of my work. It didn't really occur to me that I was the strange one. (player post-game interview, email)

In some ways the climax of the game was the demonstration for the dead, staged by the players on the last Saturday. The game masters only provided the players with the information that police had been notified of the demo, but the details were left for the players to sort out. In the end they paraded through the downtown with torches, escorted by the police.

Observed from a distance, the parade and the subsequent player ceremony displayed the typical signs of slightly embarrassing outdoors performance; as an observer commented, "you could almost see the magic circle" due to players being in a round, introvert formation facing in the middle. This reinforced the observation from the first *Prosopopeia* game where the players tended to move in groups, in order to establish a zone for role-playing in order to both reinforce the illusion of role-playing and to cope with the social pressure of engaging in performative play in public.

The demonstration was escorted by several police vehicles. On the one hand this helped to integrate the game into everyday life. On the other hand it strengthened the magic circle by creating a boundary for the ritualistic space where (carnivalistic) demonstrations are held. Still, the players did actively interact with the passers-by, at least when they wandered within the zone of play, clearly approaching the demonstration or the ceremonial circle.

Pohjola (2004) applies Hakim Bey's concept of *temporary autonomous zone* to larp, claiming that the fictitious realities created in role-playing serve as a structure that has the potential to empower and enable the players to "comment on real-life societies and even change them".

At other times bypassers were stopped by player activities and were wondering them aloud. Some rituals were conducted in central places during party nights. People who were going home from a bar stopped to look at and something talk with the players who were "cleansing the place of mammon" or "commemorating the triumph of green activists".

Occasionally the actions of the players were also interpreted as dangerous. One of the ritual demonstrations staged by the players took place in the front of the US embassy. The techno-magical equipment used by the players caught the attention of the police, who showed up with a riot vehicle.<sup>8</sup> The players explained that they were performing a perfectly legal ritual of symbolic resistance as part of a game, and the police could do nothing about it.

[The police] came with, you know, a whole strike force, you know, these buses, it was a full bus, but only the two people in the front came out, because the other, they were suddenly in there prepared with submachine guns and everything, in the car. [...] And, and they came out with you know their hands on the guns and walked up to us [...] [T]hey were really jumpy, and they started to explain that this is a game, and of course that was the easiest explanation. It, we didn't break the *Prosopopeia* proposal, but we explained it to the cops that this is a game, because it's an easy thing to say. (player post-game interview)

This incident serves as an interesting example on how ambiguous playing is culture-dependent: Mc-Gonigal (2006) reports an incident from Ravenna, Ohio, where *Super Mario* –style yellow blocks were

distributed in urban areas as a part of an art project in spring 2006. According to McGonigal the 17 yellow Mario-themed box installations lead into bomb squads being called and subsequently into criminal investigation. “Five teenage girls from Portage County face potential criminal charges after attempting to play a real-life version of *Super Mario Brothers*”, McGonigal quotes the local news. Obviously, what is doable and acceptable in Stockholm and Ravenna is very different. The police in Stockholm was also aware of this:

So I started to explain [to the police] our equipment [which had piqued the guards’ interest]. And they were like, you can be shot for having one of these things. *In Israel you would’ve been dead by now*. Yeah, sure, I think you have watched too many movies, that was the thought in my head at least. (player post-game interview)

### **The Prosopopeia Proposal and Seamlessness**

As discussed above, the players were not primarily guided by the Prosopopeia proposal, “play the game as if it was real”, in their interaction with outsiders. Similar behaviour occurred with their play in the environment.

There are a couple of reasons why this happened. One reason was that there were some very obvious plants in the game that were exposed very early. A couple of players ‘died’ during the first weekend, and one traitor was discovered within the player group. One group of plants, the ‘Kerberos guards’ followed the players throughout the game, imposing a threat to capture them and dispel their spirits. Thus, the players were well aware of the existence of plants.

The interaction with the real world was influenced by similar design choices. Not only were the headquarters of the game a pure game arena, complete with extensive propping, but several of the tasks set out in the real world required the players to interact with specially propped diegetic artefacts. On one

occasion, the players had to seek out and destroy a set of magical antennas. To avoid the risk of players destroying real antennas, the objects to destroy were clearly marked as ‘game props’. On one occasion, the players entered a church to retrieve water from the baptismal font. Again, the fact that the church was open and that there was small glass bottle made them conclude that the scene had been prepared for them (in collaboration with the local staff).

One player reported on a specific interaction with the game master, which made him select a ‘reality as a backdrop’ approach to the whole game. During the first weekend, his subgroup formed a plan to enter a subway train and rob it of all advertisement. Since one of the game masters were participating during this weekend, he informed the game master about the plans and got feedback that made him interpret this as unsuitable within the game.

[W]hen [a game master played NPC] came in and said we shall not use reality in this game, we shall have reality in the background, playing as [backdrop], scenery. And that was.. I, I’m not disappointed, but I’m sad that happened, because I think I would’ve had a better experience had I not ceased my ambitions to make direct actions and to really try to get political. (player post-game interview)

These examples illustrate well a central problem for games that blur the borderline between the game and reality: games become games precisely because they offer the opportunity to go outside of what is acceptable in the ordinary world. Prior to the game, several players also stated this as their main expectation of the game:

I expect to be forced by something that isn’t me to do subversive things, and by that force non-players to question their reality. (player pre-game interview, written on paper)

How far will people push their boundaries for a game, however merged and pervasive? (player pre-game interview, written on paper)

The game feels really exciting, and I hope that it will drive me towards exciting happenings that I would not normally do. (player pre-game interview, written on paper)

These expectations cannot be met unless the game offers activity that is not commonly accepted (or even legal) in real life. Unless these activities are identifiable for the players, they might not dare to engage in them. In *Där vi föll*, players were more dependent on game master interventions to progress in the game. Although this behaviour had several contributing reasons, we believe that one of them was an uncertainty of what they were intended to consider being part of the game. If the borderline is too fuzzy in this respect, the play may become conservative no matter how engaging the setting is.

A problem that adds to this is that the game organizers have responsibility towards players, authorities, financiers and outsiders to ensure the safety and legality of the game. As an attempt to solve the issues of responsibility, the *Momentum* player agreement stated that the players were responsible for all of their activities just as they would be in normal life. Thus, when a game master was asked about the appropriateness of a particular activity (the aforementioned subway action), he was forced to discourage it: by asking the players transferred responsibility for the action from themselves to the game master.

To sum up, the Prosopopeia proposal did not provide a sufficient context to create real-world gameplay, and *Momentum* used a lot of cues that separated gameplay from reality. The effect of this was that for some players the ordinary world became a backdrop rather than a seamless game board.

Yet even with that in mind, many game masters and players longed for a real possibility to step outside of the game. In *Momentum* the only way to fully exit the game mode was to invoke the safe word, but few people were willing to do that. The de facto lack of an off-game mode in a game this long made game mastering very challenging as all information and instructions had to be communicated in a diegetic fashion. Some players also wished for a way to reflect on the game with other players while it was running. This kind of non-diegetic interaction should not be forced on the players, but a possibility for that should be provided in future games.

[I don't like] that you can't discuss the game with any one who's in the game. An off game area where you can have reality checks would be great. (controller-player post-game interview, email)

Thus it seems that in some ways *Momentum* was not seamless enough, and in other ways it was too seamless. The magic circle was visible between the game world and the ordinary world as some of the game mechanics were visible. At the same time the players were hesitant to step outside of the game and break the seamlessness. In practise this meant that the players could encounter the seams of the game and even be confused by them (or their implications), but they had no way of addressing or discussing these on a meta-level.

### **Interaction Model for Pervasive Larp**

Above we have divided the modes of interactions into four rough groups based on situation and level of involvement. This can be used to construct an interaction model on how players interacted with each other and to fine-tune the interaction modes. In Table 1 it is possible to see the different modes that a person could choose between based on what state they were in and the state they presume the person they are interacting with is in. It is important to note, that the decision on what mode to use was very often based on a hunch as participation in the

game, or choice between spirit and host was not visibly communicated.

Eirik Fatland (2006) discusses this challenge in the context of live-action role-playing by introducing the concepts of interaction codes and improvisational patterns:

Whenever two players facing a similar situation in a similar context will tend to make similar decisions, we can talk of an improvisation pattern. “Context”, here, will need to be understood broadly and flexibly: the character portrayed, the larp it is portrayed at, which other characters are present, the social situation, etc. In some cases, a “similar context” will mean the same character at different runs of the same larp. In others, it is enough

that the characters belong to roughly equivalent cultures at larps in somewhat related genres.

We can take for granted that such patterns exist—if not, then we should see peasants using pacifist tactics against invading orcs as often as they brandish swords and pitchforks, or often experience role-played businessmen converting to Zen Buddhism in the middle of a management meeting. (Fatland 2006)

These improvisational patterns can be expanded to apply to pervasive larps as participants and non-participants struggle to find a meaningful context. *Momentum* did not offer a ready-made package of interaction codes, so the interaction model presented

	<i>Spirit</i>	<i>Host</i>	<i>Player</i>	<i>Aware</i>	<i>Ambiguous</i>	<i>Unaware</i>
<i>Spirit</i>	Diegetic	Diegetic	Ambiguous/ conflicting	Diegetic	Diegetic	Diegetic
<i>Host</i>	Diegetic	Diegetic	Ambiguous/ conflicting	Diegetic	Diegetic	Diegetic
<i>Player</i>	Ambiguous/ conflicting	Ambiguous/ conflicting	Non-diegetic	Non-diegetic	Non-diegetic	Non-diegetic
<i>Aware</i>	Diegetic/ ambiguous/ conflicting	Diegetic/ ambiguous/ conflicting	Ordinary life/ ambiguous/ conflicting	Ordinary life/ ambiguous/ conflicting	Ordinary life/ ambiguous/ conflicting	Ordinary life/ ambiguous/ conflicting
<i>Ambiguous</i>	Ambiguous	Ambiguous/ ordinary life	Ambiguous/ ordinary life	Ambiguous/ ordinary life	Ambiguous/ ordinary life	Ambiguous/ ordinary life
<i>Unaware</i>	Ordinary life	Ordinary life	Ordinary life	Ordinary life	Ordinary life	Ordinary life

Table #1:

Interaction model for *Momentum* (On the vertical axis we have player A whose perspective is used and on horizontal axis is player B).

here is a coping strategy where the participants look for correct state for themselves and the correct interaction mode.

The interaction modes for the spirit and the host are the same. In *Momentum* all the interaction that they participated in was diegetic, as long as they were not addressing a player outside the game. Officially the only way to do this was by invoking the safe word, but at times there were situations where it was uncertain if the person a spirit or a host is addressing is actually the player. This led to ambiguity that had to be negotiated. If it turned out that a host or a spirit was addressing a player, then a conflict emerged, which had to be resolved.

Some participants also reported that at times it felt that players who were playing their hosts were “off-gaming”. Though these interactions were diegetic, the players did not experience them as such. These are examples of situations where the participant misread the state of person they were interacting with and saw a conflict. It is noteworthy again, that the other person

in the interaction may not have noticed this conflict if his interpretation of his own state was different.

According to the rules the player-level interactions were only allowed in a case of emergency. Still, many players reported that they did discuss the game with outsiders as a game. Depending on the case, that might be diegetic (diegetic lying about the diegetic reality) or non-diegetic interaction. In most games the division of non-diegetic interaction to game related and non-game related would not be relevant. In *Momentum* almost any comment could be interpreted as diegetic and thus there is no real distinction between non-diegetic, non-game related interaction and diegetic interaction.

The non-players who were aware of the ludic nature of the event had the widest selection of modes available. They could basically decide if they played along with the diegetic world or if they just pretended to be oblivious to it. Still, whatever choice they made was conscious. In many ways they were able to either act as players or as (unpossessed) hosts.

	<i>Player/ aware playing</i>	<i>Player/ aware not playing</i>	<i>Ambiguous</i>	<i>Unaware</i>
<i>Player/ aware playing</i>	Diegetic	Ambiguous/ conflicting	Diegetic	Diegetic
<i>Player/ aware not playing</i>	Ambiguous/ conflicting	Non-diegetic	Non-diegetic	Non-diegetic
<i>Ambiguous</i>	Ambiguous	Ambiguous/ ordinary life	Ambiguous/ ordinary life	Ambiguous/ ordinary life
<i>Unaware</i>	Ordinary life	Ordinary life	Ordinary life	Ordinary life

Table #2: General interaction model for socially expanded pervasive larp

Only conscious role-players participating in the game construct imaginary worlds. Thus diegetic interaction was not possible for non-participants in an unaware and ambiguous state form their point of view, as they are not aware of the existence of a game. Unaware participants spent the entirety of their game-influenced life in the “ordinary” world, outside magic circle of gameplay. Still, ambiguous participants could start to construct some kind of “proto-diegesis”.

There were two types of ambiguous interaction in *Momentum*. For an aware non-participant and player participants the ambiguousness emerged when they did not know who they were interacting with. For the unaware non-participants the ambiguousness came from encountering the game and starting to suspect that something out of the ordinary was taking place. The clearest example of this was the art gallery example, where the people working at the gallery started playing a game of their own (even if it wasn't a role-playing game). They did not engage in diegetic interaction, but were questioning the applicability of everyday life rules to the interaction with the players.

For the non-participants, who came in touch with the game and did not suspect that something ludic was taking place, the interactions carried no meaning beyond that of everyday life. Thus applying the concept of diegetic or non-diegetic has no relevance to those interactions. Still, from a third party point of view these interactions could still be interpreted as diegetic, if the observer was in a host or spirit state.

Based on *Momentum*, it is possible to categorize the interaction modes of pervasive larp in general. In Table 2 the number of states is reduced from six to four. As an aware non-player can actually act in a similar manner to a player, these two categories are combined. Also, host and spirit are combined as a more general character state, which is here called the playing state. For non-pervasive larps, only the upper left corner is relevant. The way the size of the table swells when non-participants and multiple levels of

character immersion are added illustrates how pervasive expansions complicate things that are quite simple in non-pervasive larps.

*Momentum* is a great example how complicated the interactions can become when a live-action role-playing game is expanded socially. The two levels of character immersion also contribute to making the situation a bit hazy. Thus, as the seamlessness was not complete and players played differently with participants and non-participants, there was a lot of the guessing going on regarding the state of the person they were interacting with. In games as complex as *Momentum*, in the future it would make sense to develop ready-made interaction codes for the players.

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### Notes

- 1 For a full description of the game, see the Jonsson et al (2007) article in this book.
- 2 The *magic circle* used by Salen & Zimmerman (2003), as inspired by Huizinga (1938), “is where the game takes place. To play a game means entering into a magic circle, or perhaps creating one as a game begins.” It separates game from *ordinary life*.
- 3 Alternate Reality Games are games that pretend to be real. Typically they are internet-based, but playing may involve using telephones, fax machines, meeting people et cetera. Even though ARGs pretend to be real, they are typically designed to fail in that, disclosing their gameness but allowing the player to pretend the game is not a game.
- 4 The citations are from the player interviews that were carried out before, during and after the game – or from interviews with other people who were involved with the game. They have been edited for clarity, and the emphases are ours. Names of players and characters have been changed or omitted.
- 5 *Prosopopeia Bardo 1: Där vi föll* was the first game in the *Prosopopeia*-series. It was played in June 2005 in Stockholm and organised within IPerG by Martin Ericsson, Staffan Jonsson, Adriana Skarped and others.
- 6 *Diegesis* is the constructed, fictitious reality of the game. Everything existing within diegesis is *diegetic*. We use the word in the fashion it has been applied to role-playing earlier.
- 7 Multi-level character immersion models have been tried out before *Prosopopeia* series at least in two Finnish games. *Pitkä Perjantai* (eng. *The Long Good Friday*, 1997, by Arkham Paradox) used the method to create a horror game and *Wunderbar 2: Kuumempaa kuin helvetissä* (eng. *Wunderbar 2: Hotter than Hell*, 1996, by Panu Alku and Tuomas Lähdeoja) played it for laughs. In both games players portrayed larpers who were larping.
- 8 This is an example of the problem with professional involvement: the guards at the embassy must be wary on anything strange going on outside it. So even if they suspected a game or a prank, they can't turn away from it but must call the police. And the policemen are still annoyed because they have been called out unnecessarily. For professionals, an 'invitation to refuse' participation is not available. We have earlier discussed ethics of pervasive gaming in Montola & al (2006).



# juhana petterson

## castle caldwell - redux

Jean-Pierre Melville adapted Jean Cocteau's classic novel *Les enfants terribles* into a film. Jerome Robbins based his Broadway musical *West Side Story* on the William Shakespeare play *Romeo and Juliet*. We remade Harry Nuckol's *Dungeons & Dragons* adventure *Castle Caldwell and Beyond*, and discovered that reinterpreting something which has very little substance of its own presents a new set of challenges.

*Castle Caldwell* is one of the first *D&D* adventures to be translated into Finnish. It was the very first roleplaying game I ever played. Careening on similar feelings of nostalgia, Mike Pohjola, Markus Montola, Ville Takanen, Mika Lopenen and I decided to create a series of five reinterpretations of the old classic. Each of us would design his own version and run it for the others. The central challenge was always to create content where there is none.

I started playing roleplaying games when I was in the fourth grade. My first character was called Spoon. He was a magic-user. The rest of the team consisted of Fork and Plate. I think I can safely speak for all five of us when I say we've come a long way. Still, those early games did work in some fundamental way, since we're still playing games after all these years. The things I do in roleplaying games nowadays has very little to do with the stuff I started with. The princi-

pal aim of recreating *Castle Caldwell* is to create a connection between what we do now with the combat-oriented tabletop fantasy roleplaying game heritage we share.

### **The Legend of Castle Caldwell**

*Castle Caldwell and Beyond* is a *Dungeons & Dragons* adventure module published in 1985. It features a cover painting by the legendary fantasy artist Clyde Caldwell. The cover shows a brawny lizard man holding an unconscious, buxom woman dressed in a tattered gown. The module is an anthology of five entry-level adventures. The first two, *The Clearing of Castle Caldwell* and *Dungeons of Terror*, form a continuous whole, while the others are unrelated. The cover painting draws its inspiration from the third adventure, *The Abduction of Princess Sylvia*. We decided to focus on reinterpreting the title adventure. The use of material from the other four was not prohibited, and many of us chose to do so.

*Castle Caldwell* is a very simple dungeon crawl in which the adventurers are hired by a man called Clifton Caldwell to kill the monsters inhabiting his castle. The action starts in a tavern. The castle itself has a simple layout and the NPCs and monsters do nothing except wait for the characters to show up and kill them. The single mobile element provided in the adventure is a gang of goblins who show up at random.

Montola coined the term “Christmas calendar adventure” to describe the way the characters would open the doors one at a time and then deal with whatever there was inside. The greatest issues with the adventure from a modern viewpoint are its complete lack of dramatic structure and the tediousness of just opening the doors in a random order.

The average room is described like this: “The east wall of this room has a ledge about seven feet from the floor, with two small windows above the ledge. The room appears to be empty except for a statue of a shepherd in the northeast corner.”<sup>1</sup> The statue is a magical construct that answers three questions the characters may ask.

In other parts of the castle, the characters will come across a group of traders camping here on their way to somewhere else. One room holds three stirges, giant mosquitoes that attempt to suck the blood out of anyone who opens the door. Other monsters include a couple of wolves, a supremely lethal giant shrew, some fire beetles and a crab spider. The selection is rounded out by a band of bandits and a chaotic, female cleric. Not all of the encounters are hostile; the cleric is “anxious to avoid fighting with a large party.”

### **Juhana Pettersson: Old School Grinder**

The original *Castle Caldwell* adventure consists of four pages of text, one illustration and a map. There’s not a lot to work with. The map provides the inherent, dys-functional dramatic structure of the adventure. The text contains a selection of elements that can be used in the game. My version was extremely faithful to the original work: I wanted to work within the basic framework of the adventure without changing one detail. Instead, my design would venture into the kind of content not featured in the original, such as character motivations and roleplaying, and generate meaning through a strict but critical use of the mechanics provided with the *Dungeons & Dragons* game. In practice, this meant asking questions like: “Who are the four goblins who’re waiting for the

adventurers in room 2?” and following through on the logical implications of the mechanics. For example, I created the player characters based on the randomly generated results of the attribute die rolls. Because of the way the die roll probabilities go, everyone ends up being rather inept. Here’s a character I wrote based on the die rolls:

Your wife died five years ago, leaving you with five children, two sons and three daughters. The boys are two young to work, the girls too young to marry. You work in the fields all day, every day, but most of your harvest goes to the Manor and your children stay hungry. The youngest one is sick and you can’t afford a priest.  
Your father was a soldier. (...) You’re tired of poverty, useless toil, and the way everyone else seems to have it better. (...) In some other world, you would have been a communist.

The numbers say that this character, *Fleetwood*, was stupid and uncharismatic, but also wise and agile. In the interests of recycling as much source material as I was able, I used the example character names and the pictures from the rulebook.

Character goals and motivations were provided by the central motif of inadequacy suggested by the statistics. I attempted to fix the dramatic problems of the map of the castle by tying the histories of the characters into some of the encounters inside the castle. Thus, a dwarf has lost his magic axe to a group of thieves, who now reside in the castle.

Unfortunately, my rigorous principles of game design and low-key approach to game content were no match for the surprising lethality of the dungeon. On the discussion forum of the roleplaying magazine *Roolipelaaja*, where we debriefed after each game, Montola said that “The *Dungeons & Dragons* combat rules created a situation where there wasn’t a lot of fighting, but really a lot of horror. A spider falls on your head, you get three points of damage, you die.

Immediate death lurks behind every corner.”<sup>2</sup>

As far as I remember, we had played it by the book when we were kids. I remember it being easy. This time around three of the four characters died in the second encounter, killed by goblins. I can only conclude that when we were kids we kept our characters alive by cheating like crazy.

This unforeseen meat grinder destroyed most of the players’ chances of character immersion, all of my pre-designed character moments, and the mood of the game. What emerged was a bloody burlesque of random death and dismemberment. Pohjola spent most of the game writing new characters on the fly so that when someone died, he could have a new one immediately. In total, Pohjola wrote over fifteen replacement characters, four used by Lopenen alone. Pohjola’s improvised characters started out by extending the ideas I had set forth in my character descriptions (Fleetwood’s daughter entered the game at some point), and became increasingly strange as the bodies continued to pile up. One of these later characters reads as follows:

A melancholy and androgynous elf that’s looking for her place in the world. Your father was an elf prince, your mother an elf adventurer, but you are left between two worlds!!! Who are you? Elf? Or adventurer? Maybe today all will become clear... You like to talk about your problems with everyone.

Montola says: “We were only able to finish the adventure through a common conspiracy between the players and the GM. Any sane adventurer would have fled the dungeon, no matter how poor he was. Instead, Takanen made his new character a fanatical adventurer wannabe, Pohjola decided that his character couldn’t leave without his daughter, and I did something similar as well. Lopenen specialized in dying really a lot. The lesson of the game was that it’s better to eat watery porridge than to be killed by giant mosquitoes.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Markus Montola: Comedy of Manners**

Montola set his *Castle Caldwell* in a fantasy version of 19<sup>th</sup> century England, in the style of the computer game *Arcanum: of Steamworks and Magick Obscura*. His subject was the adventures in real estate of a few members of the idle class. The question was, how did Clifton Caldwell end up with the castle. Instead of using the material provided in Nuckols’s text and map, Montola based the castle in his game on an adventure he had designed himself when he was ten years old.

Running of the game, Montola used strategies developed in his own *Manhattan* roleplaying campaign. We played different characters, moved from scene to scene through GM fiat and improvised large amounts of material.<sup>4</sup>

Montola’s two sources of content, the Victorian comedy of manners and the curiosities of his childhood adventure design both avoided the main source of trouble with the original *Castle Caldwell*: the map. He extended the game outside the castle, so that the dramatic arc of the game was not dependent on the map. There were several introductory scenes where Clifton Caldwell, a player character, asks a friend to go along with his auctioneer and a couple of hirelings (also all player characters) to assess the castle. After they escape and give the property glowing reviews, there’s an epilogue where a frazzled and angry Caldwell hires a group of Gypsy thugs to drive the squatters in his castle away.

Inside the castle, the way our characters were designed discouraged systematic and professional dungeon exploration, leading us away from the Christmas calendar syndrome. One fine application of the idea that all characters should be played by the players was the scene where we meet the orcs. One of us got to play the entire cowardly and dumb tribe, while the rest go forth fearlessly, using tactics learned from young boys’ adventure books. Pohjola says that: “The best thing about the game was the collision of

the arrogant reserve of the Victorian upper class and the directness of the *D&D*-style dungeon crawl.”<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps embarrassingly, the map Markus designed for his own castle at ten provided much better dramatic shape than the one provided with Castle Caldwell. Montola explains that: “I prepared by digging up the map, but to keep things fresh I didn’t read any of my old childhood room descriptions in advance. I was quite surprised when, during the game, the characters go into a tower, and I read aloud to the players there’s a weird smell in the room. There’s no furniture and a lot of dust, and an even layer of dead bodies covers the floor. Thankfully, the auctioneers weren’t in the least bit interested where the bodies came from, because I certainly have no idea what I was thinking when I put them there, years ago. I had further described that all the towers were identical, so that I suddenly discover the place is overflowing with corpses.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Mika Lopenen: Metagame Elegance**

Montola and I approached the *Dungeons & Dragons* games of our youth with the critical, deconstructionist attitudes. Lopenen was the first to tackle the mystery of those childhood games head-on.

In her blog, my former flatmate describes her first encounter with Thomas Hardy’s novel *Tess of the D’Uber-villes* when she was thirteen years old like this: “The first reading of *Tess* was done like a spelunker treading blindly in an unknown cave complex. Not everything was visible, not everything was comprehensible, but that was what kept me moving forward.”<sup>7</sup>

The quote seems strangely appropriate to describe the early experiences I had when I first started to play roleplaying games. I looked at the cover art, I read the game books, and it all seemed mysterious, enticing and full of hidden meaning. When I read those game books today, the dark corners are gone. I know the cave complex like the back of my hand, and although there’s always a temptation to go back to those old *D&D* games in the spirit of nostalgia, the one thing that seems impossible to capture is that original

sense of mystery. Lopenen managed it with powerful dark fantasy archetypes and strong metagame rules governing the way we access the game.

Lopenen sidestepped the structural issues of the original *Caldwell* map with two alternating timelines where the structure was created through the way things in one timeline affected the other. The first characters went into the castle to bring back Caldwell’s family treasure, and accidentally freed an ancient evil. The second party goes into the castle to rescue the first and to destroy the evil. In the end, the timelines merged and players had two characters each.

Exposition and player briefing was done with impressive economy. In the beginning of the game, we knew the genre, but not much more. We didn’t even know who our characters were. Pohjola describes the beginning of the game:

The first few minutes of the game were highly atmospheric even though we didn’t have characters yet.

“Your melancholy party is walking down the road. It’s dusk and the air is thick with smoke.” The only thing we knew in addition to this description was the genre, epic and dark fantasy. Trying desperately to immerse in almost nothing at all created a very strong atmosphere.

“A tear falls on my stubble-covered cheek, but I barely manage to refrain from crying.”

“That’s very understandable, given that the ruins of your home village are blazing behind you.”

To contain problems arising from this method of exposition and the two timelines, Lopenen used the *normality rule*. It states that all retroactive changes to the characters must be accepted without undue fuss, as if things had always been this way. The rule was in use quite a lot, because Lopenen used it to his advantage to make sweeping changes to the game world on the fly. My personal favorite was the moment around the middle of the game when he mentions in passing that the crop yields have

decreased for the last six years, ever since the sun was extinguished. Suddenly the entire game was recontextualized in a startling and powerful fashion. These statements also generated drama into the game, since even though my character knows all this, I as the player don't.

For the heaviest dark fantasy elements to work, it was necessary to accept everything at face value. To accomplish this, Loponen made a *moratorium on sarcasm*. It forbade metagame cynicism, parody, splatter comedy, sarcasm and deconstructionist attitudes to the game. In practice, it worked really well. It was surprisingly effortless to just jump into the game, critical faculties be damned.

Many of the characters and the resulting interaction were recycled from my version of the game. We had Felonius the magic-user, Fleetwood the fighter, and other familiar faces, making it easier to get into the characters on the fly. The character themes had been tweaked to a more epic direction, giving them the kind of gravitas my version completely lacked. The idea of using reinterpretations of old characters was explored more fully in Takanen's version, next in line.

### **Ville Takanen: Heavy Metal Hyperbole**

Takanen's Caldwell brought the REDUX idea to its logical conclusion by recycling the original adventure, the dual timelines from Loponen's version, characters from my version, scenery from Montola's version, and the world from a fantasy campaign he himself used to run, in addition to using some of the archetypal fantasy stuff none of us had employed so far, such as a Tarot deck for the game mechanics and *Heavy Metal* magazine style softcore atmosphere for the visuals.

According to Takanen himself, the goal of the manic recycling was to conjure archetypes typical of Commedia dell'arte or Shakespeare from the previously used *Castle Caldwell* material. The roles themselves would be interchangeable, the characters so caricatured that anybody could play anybody.

Clifton Caldwell is the only recurring character gleaned from the original adventure present in any of our versions. I invented a wife for him, a conscienceless young gold digger. Fleetwood is an old soldier who has quit adventuring and become a farmer. Felana is a young rebel who constantly fights with his father Felonius, and may be working at Fleetwood's farm as a maid. Felonius is an aging magic-user, who doesn't want his daughter to become an adventurer, but still feels compelled to protect her on the road she's chosen. Felonius and Fleetwood are brothers. Other recurring characters are Touchberry the rapist halfling and the elf Belariana.

In practice, playing the recycled characters didn't feel like playing an archetypal character, but instead it felt like developing a strain of thought. The best example is the character of Caldwell himself, who appeared as a money grubbing capitalist, an idle fop, a techno-noble and an adventurer, to say nothing of the Caldwell in Pohjola's version. Instead of reinterpreting an archetype, we were reinterpreting a loose set of almost random characteristics that gave us quite a lot of leeway.

The inherent strangeness of this kind of reinterpretation and repetition was further emphasized by the stylized take Takanen had on the fantasy genre. The epic fantasy used by Loponen gets a further shot in the arm here, becoming almost insanely overblown. The game began with our loser characters in a tavern and ended with, in Loponen's words, "Exploding castles, demon princes arriving with their armies for the end of the world, and player characters resurrecting dead gods and becoming witch kings or collapsing as dead bodies by the side of the road."

### **Mike Pohjola: Clyde Caldwell, Secret Agent**

The last and most surreal of the Caldwells was provided by Pohjola. Set in the present day, it featured a wonderfully evocative dungeon workshop and characters plainly recognizable as ourselves. In the dungeon workshop, Pohjola assigned each of us traditional adventuring party functions: leader, map-

maker, the bearer of the zippo and the key master. We descended to Pohjola's basement, a vast sprawl of narrow, low corridors lined with overflowing storage spaces filled with junk. We had a map pointing us to the right direction.

The first thing we discover is that it's really, really dark. The zippo, our only source of light, heats up very fast, and we can't keep it on for any length of time. Without it, we see nothing. The ceiling is so low, we have to crouch, the floor has junk and our chances of finding what we're looking for in the dark are zero. We spend the first fifteen minutes moving a distance of maybe ten meters.

Things get easier after we discover a stash of candles. We can see the pipes running along the ceiling so we won't hit our heads and we can read the scraps of paper and the little clues we discover along the way.

At the end of our adventure in Pohjola's basement, we discover our prize: the characters we're going to play in today's game! Surprisingly, each character was a depressing caricature of its player, typically with a twist enabling the character to disregard supernatural events. Here's the character I got:

Peter Johansson

- Doesn't care about theory without immediate practical applications.
- An artist and a journalist, single, has studied abroad.
- Hates authority and rules.
- From an old Finnish-Swedish culture family.
- Does psychoactive substances, is used to seeing things that deviate from commonly accepted reality. Classifies them as hallucinations.
- Is always telling absurd but true stories about his experiences and desires related to sex, demonstrations, drugs, magic, fights, politics and work.

The characters we played were also engaged in a series of *Castle Caldwell* re-interpretations, and the game was set in the very same day we were at in real

life. Only this time, each of us gets a call from Supo, the Finnish secret police. "We need your help in a matter of national security."

It turns out that *Castle Caldwell* is based on a real dungeon deep within the fortress island Sveaborg, off the coast of Helsinki. Harry Nuckols, the module's author, has kidnapped **Silvia**, the Queen of Sweden, and is hiding deep in the dungeons of the old fortress. Only we have the necessary expertise to rescue her! Our ally in this quest is the U.S. fantasy artist Clyde Caldwell, a Vietnam veteran and all around badass.

The game wobbled a bit in the beginning because we were confused about what kind of style we were supposed to go after. The characters suggested a kind of caricatured realism, while the setting was highly fanciful. We were instructed that this is a game about loss, melancholic nostalgia for things which we can never have again. Obviously meant to mirror the larger *Castle Caldwell* project, this metagame instruction failed to translate into the game because the game didn't support it in any way. Playing ourselves in an action-oriented dungeon scenario didn't lend itself to the kind of character interaction necessary for themes of this kind to come into play.

Another way in which Pohjola's game served to sum up the experiment so far was the in-game use of all of our previous *Caldwell* material. Since the characters we played were essentially ourselves, and they had also ran a series of games reimagining *Castle Caldwell*, all of our *Caldwell* stuff was usable game material. Pohjola promoted this idea, reminiscent of pervasive gaming, by printing all the forum discussions we'd had, copying the original adventure module, and otherwise making sure we had the physical *Caldwell* papers in our hands when we played.

The strange thing about Pohjola's version was that along with Montola's game, it featured the largest amount of original content, but at the same time stayed surprisingly true to the original adventure.

This proved to be a mixed blessing, because although it served as a fitting end to the series, it also carried along the structural deficiencies of the original module.

### **Total Caldwell Experience**

My high school creative writing teacher used to tell us that limitations free us to be creative. I don't know if that happened here, but at least the extremely limited subject matter forced us into all kinds of contortions to make it work. The original *Castle Caldwell* adventure consists of the bare minimum required to conduct a dungeon crawl. Reinterpreting it meant that at least some amount of original work was necessary; there's not enough to work with in the original.

Montola provided the only light-hearted Caldwell. Mine was at best blessed with graveyard humor, Loponen's and Takanen's versions were very grim and Pohjola's version was too confused in terms of style to be comedy.

Loponen did the best job among all of us when it came to bringing the sense of mystery and discovery which characterized our childhood roleplaying games back into play. He managed to create artificially the feelings that originally arose from tantalizing lack of understanding and the fascination of the newness of it all. Paradoxically, to achieve this he relied heavily on our familiarity with the genre conventions and elements of fantasy.

Looking at the five games we made, it's obvious that the *Castle Caldwell* content we were reinterpreting was in large part created by ourselves. The differences in depth between the games and the spartan text of the original are startling. Content was carried more from game to game than from the original to the game.

We have more versions of *Castle Caldwell* in the works. It seems that the seductive pull of the four goblins, the giant shrew and the killer snake trap is too powerful to ignore.

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### **Notes**

- 1 Nuckols, 1985
- 2 Montola, 2006
- 3 Montola, 2006
- 4 Markus's *Manhattan* campaign runs on a system where the GM is constantly giving each player more characters to play, so that after a while a single player may control over thirty characters.
- 5 Pohjola, 2006
- 6 Montola, 2006
- 7 Rajasingham, 2006



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# nathan hook

## the bristol manifesto

It was the fashion a few years ago to write manifestos about a particular style of larp; the most famous and infamous of these being the Turku manifesto that supported immersionism and simulationism over gamism and narrativism. In this tradition I present a manifesto outlining my preferred style and reasons for it. I do not claim this is the only 'good' style, although it is the one that I currently enjoy the most.

The four-way model (gamist, narrativist, simulationist, immersionist) has been around for a while: In the 2003 forward to the Turku Manifesto, Mike Pohjola writes 'they're all transcending into something much bigger.' I like to think that this is what this manifesto does.

### **The Manifesto in bullet points**

1. The role of a player (see footnote 1) is to immerse in their role and to act, think and feel accordingly. As much as possible, this should not be influenced by external concerns such as the need to win or produce a good story. An important part of this is to bear in mind the social conditioning of the cultural background of the character.
2. In order to strengthen the immersion of the players, they should as much as possible not have access to knowledge their characters do not have. Furthermore, they should not have control over aspects of the setting beyond that which their characters have control over.
3. The role of an organiser is to run the simulated setting as accurately as possible, without bias for external reasons, such as the need to arrange a preset result or produce a 'good' story. This may involve the use of modelling to help administer the wider world, particularly if there is a downtime for the organiser to administer as well.
4. The role of the writer (see note 2) is to create the setting, including the characters. This should be done such that an interesting story will emerge. Events should not be pre-planned or pre-determined; what happens during the event should emerge naturally and organically.
5. Character creation including assigning the players to characters is ultimately down to the writer. The players may have some input, even as much as writing whole characters and submitting them for approval, but the writer should as a minimum have a veto on what characters are played – and be prepared to use it.
6. The physics and metaphysics of the world should be properly defined by the writer, and adhered to by the organiser. This maintains internal con-

sistency, which in turn strengthens the immersion for the players. This includes defining mechanics about how the setting works that the players will never actually read or know for certain.

7. WYSIWYG – What You See Is What You Get. As much as possible, everything should be as real as possible. This includes designing the setting to not include things that cannot be adequately represented.

### **The manifesto**

Larp is a medium, just as theatre and computer games are media. Some larp can be considered art, but not all. What makes larp different to previous media is that it is interactive. There is no focus on entertaining a passive audience, and no determined outcomes. The fortunes of our characters lie not in the stars or the writers, but in us. This does not mean it is competitive for the players, even if certain situations are competitive for the characters being portrayed. It means there is no fate or fate-play save that which we make for ourselves. This is one of the defining criteria that mark it as different from books, films and theatre plays. The crude branching used in most computer games is no representation of true character freedom.

This does not mean that players are free to have their characters act as they wish. It means they are free to act in accordance with and remaining true to their role. Regardless of who wrote that role, the event writer should have approved its existence in the setting and assigned it to them. The occultist Alistair Crowley famously wrote 'do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law.' This has often been misunderstood; true will in Crowley's usage means 'your highest purpose.' I apply the same statement here - The players are free to act fully within their role and so fulfill their highest purpose within the larp.

That is not to say that actions are greater importance than other elements. The deepest act of role-play is

to become the character portrayed, not merely to mimic their actions and talk the talk, but to adopt their thoughts, feelings and internal subjective worldview.

In order to support this freedom for players to fulfill their will it is necessary to model a wider space to allow it to be influenced. The surroundings should be as real as possible, and react in a real and consistent fashion. The social world and setting within which the characters exist should be fully developed and defined.

Sometimes the world beyond the borders of the physical site needs also to be accounted for. This is particularly true for an on-going larp broken up by periods of downtime. Rather than the results of such downtime being decided by a person's whims or the 'needs of the story' such events should be modeled and simulated to produce a rational outcome. Players should not have more control over such events than their characters have, since their sense of control or lack of control is part of that immersion.

Therefore, we support the immersion of the player in their role, and the simulation of the setting for that role to exist within. This is the middle way that transcends immersion and simulation.

We reject utterly the classic Narrativist / storyteller approach. This is baggage from older media (media of the passive audience) that does not apply to this new one. The storyteller approach is merely an organizer imposing their will over the players to create their own story. What is a 'good' and 'bad' story is too subjective to be used as a basis of determining what happens.

However, at the same time we embrace a new evolved idea of storytelling. We hold that a 'story' is an emergent property than can be admired after the fact, not something that should be deliberately guided at the time. Appropriate seeds should be carefully planted in the setting before the event starts with as much skill as possible, that the flowers of a powerful story can organically emerge. This might involve carefully crafting the characters and their briefings, defining

the metaphysics to produce interesting situations, and so forth.

In theory a larp could use any setting. In reality most possible settings are not interesting enough to justify playing – a larp about playing inanimate objects would be of little interest to most people. The setting should be designed in its creation to produce ‘interesting’ results, which includes elements which will likely lead to a good story through their interactions.

However, there is still the problem what is a ‘good’ story as opposed to a ‘bad’ one. We support the use of the principles of Jungian archetypes, Campbellian mythic structure and other notions from story theory to create powerful stories, with the provision that such principles are used to create the setting, and not guide it once in motion.

This then concludes the middle way that unites and combines immersion, simulation and narrativism together into a balanced trinity where each has its own role to play. Blessed by the light of this combined trinity we stand against the Great Adversary that is Gamism.

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(Credits to and apologies for the following section are due to my co-author: ‘John, King of England, Lord of Ireland, Duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, and Count of Anjou’ from whose Magna Carta of 1215 this is adapted; see footnote 3)

No free player can have their immersion in their character stripped due to story logic, nor will we proceed with force against him, except by the judgement of the simulation. To no one will we sell, deny or delay right to events being allowed to take their natural course. We will appoint as justices, constables, sheriffs, or other officials, only men that know the laws of the simulated realm and are minded to keep it well. All evil customs related to storytelling and lack of immersion are at once to be investigated in every county and the evil

customs are to be abolished completely and irrevocably. As soon as immersion is restored, we will remove from the Kingdom all the foreign concepts of narrativist requirements, and their gamist attendants, that have come to it, to its harm, with horses and arms. All these customs and liberties that we have granted shall be observed in our Kingdom in so far as concerns our own relations with our subjects. Let all men of our kingdom, whether organizer or player, observe them similarly in their relations with their own men. Since we have granted all these things for God, for the better ordering of larp, and to allay the discord that has arisen between the four ways, and since we desire that they shall be enjoyed in their entirety, with lasting strength, for ever, we give and grant to the players the following security: The immersion of the players is paramount, and all shall cause this to be observed with all their might, the peace and liberties granted and confirmed to them by this charter.

### Notes

1. Astute readers will note I use the term ‘player’, where as some on the larp scene prefer the term ‘participant.’ I use ‘player’ not in the same of someone who plays a game, but in the sense of someone who acts a part in a play – that is, plays a role.
2. Notice I make a clear distinction between an organiser and writer. A writer writes the larp in advance. The organiser runs it while it is in progress. These roles may sometimes be done by the same person (and/or by multiple people), but they should not be being done at the same time, since any change or addition to the setting once in progress violates the principle of simulation.
3. The Turku manifesto included a section adapted from the Communist Manifesto. In that tradition I include this section adapted from the Magna Carta issued by King John of England. The ‘Great Charter’ placed limits the powers of the monarch and empowered the twenty five barons, and is today held by some to be an important step towards the development of democracy.



# ulrik lehrskov

## my name is jimbo the orc

Kicking back some beers at the beach one late summer evening a few years back one of my friends wanted to introduce me to a suave looking fellow that had just joined our small camp-fire, complete with cooled drinks and Dylan guitar playing. I wasn't really in my chatty corner, just trying to squeeze the last drops of leisure out of my vacation, but my friend insisted. 'He is really a nice guy' he said. 'And a role-player, too'. That settled it. I had to go talk to the guy. It is an almost sacred rule amongst role-players that we have to maintain some sort of secret connection or common identity by always gathering in small crowds, no matter the situation. I went over to him and introduced myself. I'd been told he'd just returned from a big German larp that I'd wanted to go to myself, so I could at least ask him what I'd missed out on. Besides, he looked like a nice fellow. Blond hair and a smile. Clean, nice shirt. One of those blokes that can walk into a bar anywhere in the world and get that crucial first-glance acceptance by the regulars.

'Hi' I said, adding my name and referring to our mutual friend.

'Hi' he returned, so far still in the green-zone of my social barometer 'My name is Jimbo the orc'. 'What the fuck!', I thought, restraining all my face muscles to keep it secret from him that he'd just redefined my concept of 'bad first impressions'. But I was stuck

there. Moving away from someone at a camp-fire cannot go unnoticed. Everyone will know that you got bored out or disliked whoever sat next to you and that is, per strange definition, a rude manoeuvre – no matter the behaviour of your company. So once you slap down you have to wait until you have to either piss, get a new drink or – if you are lucky – the smoke from the fire is trying to kill you. And that was at least 5 more minutes, so I decided to politely ignore his first remark and ask him about the German larp that I knew he'd been to. Bad move altogether.

He started jabbering about how he'd played this orc-character named Jimbo who had this really cool special cleave-move that the gamemasters had bestowed specifically on him because his latex-axe was the coolest one they'd ever seen and how he'd been all tangled up in these family intrigues in his orc group and how they'd totally wrecked the entire scenario by suicide charging the kings convoy on Saturday, because they were bored and hung over from drinking ouzo in their camp the night before with some really cute Goth-chick dark elves. Now I've been a role-player for almost twenty years, so I have highly acute survival tactics for these geek-sieges, but this guy was totally over the edge. And he even had on such a nice shirt. I tried vainly to ask him what the whole scenario had been about. How they

had conducted the gameflow. How the characters had been written. How the city had been built. How the story had unfolded. What the mechanisms of the society was like. How the scenario had worked for the players. But all I ever got out of Jimbo was how his experience as the orc with great cleave had been. How his game had flowed. Why he had gone there. How his interaction was with his co-orcs. How his character was written and so on and so on. It still puzzles me how 4 pages of character can amount to nothing more but ‘Wow, what a cool axe. We are giving you GREAT CLEAVE, which is a +5 dam modifier’ which apparently was what Jimbo had picked up. Oh, and that he was an orc.

No matter what and how I tried, all Jimbo could talk about was his own, subjective angle to the larp. How it had been for *him*. Hard pressed he told me that it had taken place in Germany near Hamburg, been for around 500 people and that the setting had cost around 200.000 euro to build. This still left me with a feeling that I’d never really heard anything about the scenario in and of itself. I had no feel of it. Nothing to discuss with him about it. He had talked, and talked, and talked and not once had he said anything that allowed me to respond in any meaningful manner – apart from asking more “How was that, then”-questions.

Saved by a full bladder I excused myself and got up, carefully not settling down next to Jimbo as I returned relieved from the dark. But the problem still kept puzzling me. When had I in fact, ever, heard a decent description of any larp, by any person, that allowed me to get a solid grasp on what had gone down, what the larp had been about and if I regretted not going there myself? Had I ever gotten such a description? It seemed to me not. Now some of my friends are professional writers, communicators and storytellers but even they have always digressed into the same dichotomy as Jimbo: either tell about hard, overarching facts about the scenario or dig deep into your own experience of play.

There have been plenty of attempts to define and describe role-playing on numerous theoretical levels. The activity of acting under the common assumption that you are someone else and interact with others that do the same is well described. This goes for several levels of play, ranging from what it means in a semiotic or dramaturgical sense to ‘play a role’ and what is happening on a social level when groups of role-players interact in larger plays. But all these theories aim at a description of role-playing as a type of action, and never the single larp as an actual event. Saying about the aforementioned German larp that it was ‘a large group of people acting under a mutual, wordless assumption that they were all someone else, interacting in a large, constructed, social meta-structure, following a pre-generated narration in accordance with their pretended selves’ gives me (nearly) absolutely no information about that specific larp. It gives me a lot of information about the type or nature of the activity that was going on, but – knowing that already – I’m left with no clue as to the actual feel, structure and story of the larp. How well it was played out. If there was an idea or a story, how it came across on a general, non-personal level.

We can easily make all such claims and analyses when we watch plays, go to the movies or read a book. We can criticize plot and structure, execution, language, length, story, narrational economy etc. But why can’t we do this when it comes to larps? Why can’t we, condensed in a single concept, make a literary analysis of a larp?

Well, the answer lies head on: because the larp is seen as a largely non-intentional happening. There are characters, background information, NPC contributors and all that, but at the end of the day anyone agrees that the main contribution to any particular larp comes from the players themselves. No matter how rail-roaded or tightly knit a plot is, the main content itself – the actual role-playing – is something that is brought to the larp by the players in their role of individual subjects. It is always *me* that is playing a

specific role, and whatever is happening, I will always see *my* role-playing as largely attributable to myself. It is a personal experience that I create myself, strengthened and supported by my surroundings, who are in turn also creating an experience for themselves.

How could we talk about *the* Plot or *the* Structure of an actual larp, when we all know that these concepts only exist, in their capital sense, as something actualized by the subjective actions of several players on some open plot and structure laid out by the producers? How can we talk about Execution of the idea or story of a larp, when we all know that these things are not meant to happen in a strictly specific way, like in a book or a movie, actualized by the players as they see fit. Indeed, how can we even talk about Story with a capital 'S' in a larp, without using it as either a mere synonym for 'plot-outline' or as a term that bundles up the individual stories of the players, generated in interaction with the plot-outline.

And this is why Jimbo keeps jabbering on about his experience at the German larp. Because the main content of the experience – the story – was something that he brought with him himself in his interaction with the setting provided by the producers of the larp. Hardly pressed, he tells me his impression of this production as well, but it doesn't lie at the heart of his experience.

So what are we left with here? Does larp evade any literary analysis that tries to look at large perspectives, but not focus on the pre-made material, the actual, physical circumstances or the plot-outline? Can we not talk about *the* Story of a larp? Because if we can't talk about the story we have no hope of invoking any kind of literary analysis, complete with talks about structure, execution and economy.

It seems that the very heart of the matter, the individual story, prohibits any such literary or general

analysis. But why is that really an obstacle? Just because we immediately recognize the personal experience of story as that intrinsic to role-playing in general, we are not as a result prohibited from drawing out a story-whole for us to talk about. We can't, however, hope to find this 'story-whole' by simply adding up all the smaller personal stories. We have to change perspective altogether and look beyond the subjective approach that is so inherent in role-playing, but so alien to literary analysis.

To find the larger story in a larp, we have to look at it and pretend that everything that happens is in some way intentionally composed and made by the producer(s). When Jimbo and his band of orcs attacks the king's convoy, we have to see it as *not* a group of individual players acting out their roles as they see fit, but as a narrative manoeuvre, well planned, orchestrated and set in motion by the author. They were *meant* to attack the convoy. And the kings' knights were *meant* to loose the battle in the way they did. Everything that happens in a scenario should be seen as coming from a united source of intentionality. Then, and only then, do we have access to a story that contains the whole larp, and not just a single character.

But isn't this cheating? Isn't this taking the role-playing out of the analysis of the larp? The very personal experience that constitutes it as what it is? Sure it is. Or rather, it is a way for us to ask questions of the larp that we otherwise could not. We forcedly see the larp as a single 'story-whole' and as a consequence can treat it momentarily as such while we try to interpret and explain what was happening.

On another level, this isn't cheating at all. In a way it is, in fact, a method of loyalty towards the main aspect of role-playing, namely story. If we do not perceive the larp as a 'story-whole' we are forced to talk about it in meta terms, explaining how the producers made characters, plot-outlines, setting etc., and how the players interacted into this pre-made

frame. This is telling the story of the larp as a ‘the-making-of-story, not as the story in the larp itself.

To do that we need to invoke this story by allowing ourselves to see story features in the happenings that took place. Story features simply means that we allow ourselves to interpret and explain A in terms of B (i.e. the band of orcs attacked the king so that he couldn’t return to find his queen in bed with her lover). Something happened because this allowed for something else to happen (or not happen), not because Jimbo thought it would be cool to do it so that he could get killed and go to the off-game zone and smoke cigarettes and eat junk-food.

Let us call this method the method of story attribution, since it attributes a single story to a large amount of events.

If we use this tool of story attribution we can start analyzing larps in a new way. We can talk about how well we thought the individual groups and people fitted together. How the events played out to form an interesting, overarching whole. How much time and activity that went into doing things that maybe didn’t improve so much on the larp as a whole.

Of course the method of story attribution is not any sort of an exact science. It is devoid of any kind of truth. It is simply a tool which we can use to compare and order different events and types of events in a larp. Also it can be quite fun.

Taking the German larp as an example it is possible to interpret it as a mainly Marxist story, where the rise of the orcs are perceived as a symbolical commentary to the rise of the working class against a ruling aristocracy (i.e. they attacked the kings convoy). They seize the means of production (looted the corpses) and society as we knew it broke down. A criticism to this analysis could be to point out that no Marxist society was established in the course of this ‘revolution’,

which must mean that the story is in reality a criticism of revolutionary tendencies, showing that they lead only to instability and anarchy.

Another interpretation of the German larp could be to see it as a clear tribute to the legacy of classical writers such as Lucan (or Aesop or Homer). The very setup made a confrontation inevitable and tragedy ensued, showing how the brutish nature of Man (the orcs) will always seek to destroy the nobility of our spirits (the king), resulting in chaos and instability and internal conflict (the ensuing civil war is seen as a symbol of inner, human conflict), that can only, possibly, be salvaged by true love (when the widowed queen marries her lover at the final day of the larp).

Another interpretation could be to see the scenario as a mainly absurd genre critique. The setting and props themselves seemed on a superficial level to invite us to believe that we were dealing with some sort of medieval scene with a few fantastic elements, but everywhere you saw the ‘actors’ and the material components trying to disrupt and break down this illusion. The ‘actors’ sometimes referred to current events like 9/11 and even spoke of themselves as actors (and some of them wore wristwatches) – and we haven’t even begun to speak about the clear Von Trier/Dogville tribute in the use of common rope to symbolise walls! This is clearly a commentary to the multiple layers of fiction that we, as human beings, involve ourselves in at an everyday basis, living our lives as they weren’t absurd! Wonderfully sharp observation!

It is hopefully clear from the above examples how story attribution can both be fun and challenging and how it can provide us with a way to compare and order different events in a larp into coherent, meaningful stories. Below you will find a suggestion as to how you in praxis can use this method to evaluate a larp.

**SYMPOSIUM****– A GAME OF STORY ATTRIBUTION**

The game consists of 3 simple rules and 7 easy steps.

**3 Simple Rules**

- 1 The larp is always referred to as ‘The Piece’ or some similar wording that in and of itself stresses that we are now seeing the larp as a single story-whole where everything is planned and intended. Accordingly the producers of the larp are referred to as ‘The Author’, ‘The Larpwright’ or ‘The Director’.
- 2 As a speaker of the table you must under no circumstances refer to your own experience as a player in the larp. You must act as if you were present as audience only, not as a participant. If you want to refer to something that your role did, simply say something like “I think everybody is missing the shift that happened in the scene where Jimbo goads his fellow orcs into attacking the convoy”. Remember, however, always to have the focus of creating a story-whole.
- 3 It is encouraged for the speakers of the table to take on different roles or styles of story attribution. In this way the game becomes a mini-larp in itself. You can be the socialist critic, the hip fashion-magazine reporter, the art nouveau literate, the layman, etc. Act and attribute accordingly.

**7 Simple Steps**

- 1 Place yourselves around a table or in a similar comfortable situation. It is recommended to be no more than 8 people and no less than 4, at least if this is your first game.
- 2 Appoint a host of the symposium. The host stewards who gets to talk when and how much and makes sure that nobody gets lost in their interpretation.
- 3 The host gives a presentation of all the speakers present. He tells from where in The Piece they were situated as audience and, if you invoked rule #3 above, what critical inclination the speaker has.

- 4 The host now gives a swift presentation of the brute facts of The Piece. What happened when, how much and for how long. Be as specific and to the point as you can be, so you don’t accidentally push the interpretations in a certain direction. Think of yourself as a serious news speaker or as a stiff, British clerk giving a debriefing.
- 5 On request from the host, the first speaker presents his interpretation of the meaning and story of The Piece. The host asks the table to comment on the interpretation, ask questions and discuss it. He makes sure that not too much times goes with this discussion by inviting the next speaker (the hardest critic of the current speaker for example) to give his interpretation.
- 6 When all speakers have presented their interpretation of The Piece the discussion is open for general criticism and evaluation such as The Authors ability to get his points across, the narrational economy, the quality of the set, the actors, the morale of The Piece etc.
- 7 Let all hell loose, get drinks and talk about the scenario in any way you like: personal anecdotes, kudos to brilliant or funny performances or situations, slap backs and enjoy yourselves like you use to.

Have fun.<sup>1</sup>

**Notes**

- 1 The idea of story attribution in terms of regarding a larp as an intentional whole was conceived in a discussion with Malik Hyltoft, the co-headmaster of the RPG-inspired Østerskov Efterskole, during a lecture he gave on the possibility of creating a typology for describing larps in the fall of 2006. Without him, as with so many other things in Danish role-playing, this couldn’t have been.



# troels barkholt & jonas trier

## what was the story about: poetics for larp in practice

We have all been there; on that grass covered field among pitched tents, camp-fires and people in various costumes. But at times you start thinking about the whole situation. We know that a group of very determined people have worked hard, so that we can be here. We know that they have put a year or mores worth of effort and work into it. We know that at this very moment they are all running around to retain, what has been their darling child of mind for months. Their highest concern the past couple of weeks. The larp we are participating in.

But then, why isn't anything happening? Why is it that the majority of all large scale larps, insist on not having anything to do with what is actually going on? Why is it that a challenge of us – as players – on the matter of background and character personality always fails to appear? Why is the player's impression of the larp always left in the hands of coincidence or sheer luck, under the pretence of individual freedom of acts?

Publications of the latter years have shown quite a bit of theoretical conquest in the field of *what* role-playing is. However, in accordance with the particular guidelines of this publication, we will strive to comment on the practical sphere, though without

renouncing the possibility of saying something of general concern. Therefore we will not waste much time on differentiating between one term and another. We have chosen the term *story* for what, in Denmark at least, usually is known as plot (the diegetic events, the organizers have planned out), even though *narrative* probably would have been more accurate. We do so, because we believe that the notion of one singular story is exactly what we want of organizers.

We wish to establish a normative theory and take some of the fundamental presumptions and prejudice about role-playing up for revision. This is an attempt to establish guidelines for what one *should* do when organizing a larp.

Larp organizers cannot with certainty be said to be artists. That is a discussion we do not want to embark onto. It takes focus away from that which is our main concern: Organizers are storytellers. E.g. in many flyers and pamphlets and on numerous websites on role-playing it says that "*Insert random name here*", is a story about a king who is trying to maintain control of his country. But is that really it? The experience of the story derived from this is not at all an experience of having a story conveyed. Of having been told a

story. More over it feels rather like being placed in a *playpen* where, should we be so lucky, we get to witness a mere shred of the story.

To further examine this discussion we must first look a bit closer at that which defines a story.

### **The story**

In our definition, a random set of events have three unquestionable demands they must meet in order to be characterized as a story. First and foremost someone or something must act (in the sense of an action). No action, no story. Subsequently something must come of this act. Thus a story has a sequential or temporal dimension. And as the third and deciding criteria, something must be told (narrated). A sort of narrator has to be present.

And this is exactly where many larps fail. Being a narrator requires an overview of that which happened, that which is happening and that which is going to happen. Within a larp only the organizer is in a position where such a massive overview is attainable. In this context the organizer is understood as a single position, where as, in real life, the organizer position is often made up by several individuals. Throughout the article we will view the organizer position as a single entity.

Please note that the term *story*, in this context, is not to be understood under the strict rules of literary and dramaturgic theory. Hence it is not our task to create an analogy between the theatre director and the larp organizer, because the creator of a larp will always work from the basic assumption that players can and will react to elements in the story in whatever way pleases them. This article's main focus is on the organizer's intention of motivating and leading his or her players in a predestined direction.

On one hand an organizer is just that (someone who organizes), but on the other hand an organizer is also a conveyor of a story - a storyteller. In our view a larp

is constituted of every element a participant/player experiences from beginning to end. Therefore both off-game experiences such as tidying up the location as well as off-game thoughts, such as the double level of consciousness are included.

We believe that it is imperative that organizers also accept their role as storytellers or narrators of the larp. But a natural responsibility also comes with that accept. When an organizer accepts that it is his or her story to tell, a responsibility of carrying out the story successfully also arises. No storyteller – no story.

### **Playpens and frameworks**

We wish to come to terms with a tendency among Scandinavian larps. The particular notion that the organizer's field of operations is situated outside of the story. In other words, larps, where the organizer's only influence on the concrete unravelling of the event, is to create a frame. Somewhat provocatively we have chosen to call these specific events, *playpen-larps*, as the experience has often been compatible with that of being stuck in a *playpen* throughout the larp. Why is it that we see such a blatant lack of intervention and will, to adjust a story that these people have spent months preparing? Because it is not a story as such, a fact that brings us back to the core of our argument.

To meet the requirements we have stated, it is necessary that our whole perspective, of how to set up a larp, is changed. As organizers we must not settle for simply establishing the frame of the larp. We must actively partake in the management of the story and create – what we choose to call – the *framework*. *A basic structure where everything - all the elements of the story – are connected, so that the player participating in the larp may leave it with a sense of story-wise coherence.*

Naturally this raises the question of how a project of such profound impact is achieved. How can an entire larp be turned into a framework without falling back onto the theatrical aspect? To us the only apparent

solution is to make sure that all the elements of the framework (i.e. roles/characters, props etc.) are firmly based on a common denominator. The story must have a theme which is reflected in everything and to which everything refers.

Let us, for instance, look at a hypothetical case - a larp where the story is based on the theme of unrequited love. Now, should half of the parts written for this particular larp be centred on a notion of how the system of state is structured, they would largely avoid the actual theme at hand. The factor which is meant to be a guideline throughout the larp, our hypothetical unrequited love theme, would now disappear or even worse, become a sort of strange obstacle for the remaining unfolding of the larp. It would be a clash on the thematic level which, at best, is irrelevant. On the other hand, had the organizer of our hypothetical larp made sure that every role-player knew about the thematic guideline, the obstacle could have been circumvented. If the players were aware of what aspects of their roles they should emphasize according to the guideline, the organizer would have been able to create the thematic congruity which is the sole reason for there being a story in the first place.

To briefly sum up our point, we see a profound tendency towards creating larps from the *playpen* model. The organizer point out the frame (scene, setting and the particular 'world' etc.) and then leave the rest of the work, carrying out the story in a responsible way, to the players. In order to create a story the organizer must first accept his responsibility and then set up the *framework*. Thus creating larps, where all elements (*both* roles and settings) are rooted in a shared theme. Not to say that this, in any way is a new thought. It is one of the most profound notions of the more dominant storytelling genres, such as literature, theatre and film etc.

Why do we, as role-players, feel a need to opposition ourselves to the more established genres? Why can't

we be inspired, learn and perhaps even borrow from them instead?

To briefly return to the necessity of the theme, we do not only want the organizer to see the diegetic events as being an integral part of his field. We also want to challenge the ruling notion that a larp is to be viewed as a bi-polarized event. A story separated from its background – the outside aspects.

The most pressing example (at least in Denmark) is a large scaled larp centred on a city where the ruling power, for instance a king, does something. The story, from the organizer's point of view, is this *something* which takes place around the court. It is not a conversation between two peasants thirteen miles from the main castle. Instead the thematic guideline of the larp should be so profound that, regardless of whether or not the peasants are aware of what has happened, their actions are never the less determined by it. To speak in terms of our previous example, maybe the peasants have experienced the same type of unrequited love that the court and king have. A well thought out and well implemented theme can provide the guidelines for a larp, in spite of the complexity that arises when hundreds of players act simultaneously. This is the very fabric of the story.

From a narratologic point of view the *playpen*-larp strives to create an epic display. It tries to implement a superior, distanced perspective where the roles have different value in the story. Some roles (e.g. the king) have a superior view of the story and participate in it. The peasants, on the other hand, are thrown back and forth as mere pawns in a game of chess without ever having the possibility to see the whole perspective. They are mere background – upholders of a scene on which the actual *players* act out their larp.

That which we are trying to endorse is a scenic display where the internal conflicts and social relations of every role determine their path of action. We wish to establish an intimate, understanding and scenic

perspective. To remain within the boundaries of this metaphor: We would much rather play checkers.

The theme is made obvious to all players by being the firmament upon which all the elements are based. Also, it provides all players with a tool to navigate within the actions possible in the larp.

In our hypothetical example, the theme is unrequited love. If all players are aware that this is fundamental for their actions, they will know that they should rather fall in love with a married woman than with a willing virgin.

The theme can thus be viewed as a possibility – a tool - for the individual larp and its players to establish a principle upon which the framework is constructed and constituted. In many ways it is similar to the rules of a genre. If you're playing the private eye in a noir-story you will know that the dame in the red dress most likely is a *femme fatale*.

In the same way the organizer has a strict guideline and structure for the story, which should give him the possibility to judge, at every turn in the process of organizing the larp, if a given element is constructive or destructive to the game and its focus. In our personal experience of organizing a larp, a principle of keeping it simple, has proved valuable and effective. The story's theme should rather be simple and clear than complex and blurred.

### **Being or representing**

The quest for the authentic set design has been an almost canonized notion in recent years (at least within the Danish larp-community). The main logic behind this is an idea about keeping the level of abstraction and forced imagining at a low. In short, the less abstraction within the larp, the better the actual play will be. We feel that this is a faulty assumption. The notion of "*what you see is what you get*" is fundamentally wrong. We might as well make this point sooner or later: The perfect illusion is unattainable.

Often this is due to practical concerns. Swords are simulated with latex-weapons, in order to prevent deaths during battles, and building full-scale houses would be too much of a financial and time consuming activity – thus plywood is used. From time to time it is desirable to have a larp contain certain elements that, due to various reasons, are not something that should be imposed on the role-player as an experience with the larp as a concrete event. These are elements like drugs, sex and violence, and in order to incorporate these elements into the story, rules are, of course, a necessity. Finally - and perhaps most importantly - it is imperative to differentiate between *player* and *role*. The player is *not* the role. The player will most likely never become a knight. He or she is genetically ill disposed to be so and the often supernatural abilities cannot be accounted for either. Far more important though, is the fact that a player, regardless of role, does not create a new personality for him- or herself. The player experiences the larp and the event as a whole. In our definition the player represents that structural element of the story which is his or her role. In other words, the player is the flash of lightning which sparks Frankenstein's monster – in our case the story – to life.

The player is someone who pays to take part in the larp. In the dullest of senses, he or she is a customer, who, in exchange for money, expects admittance to the event. The player is the only real audience the story has. The role on the other hand, is part of the diegesis – one of many structural elements in the framework created by the organizer. From our point of view the role does not separate itself from any of the other elements that constitute the framework. Thus the role is not par excellence any more important than the set design. Should a story – God forbid – be centred on the quest for a magical sword, we should be able to agree upon the relationship of equal importance between the actual sword and the peasant boy who learns about its existence.

The idea here is that we have to be able to fully differentiate between player and role – both in theory as well as practice. The player is of most importance, seeing as it is his or her experience with the entire event that really matters. The role is just a place in the diegesis where the experience is conceived.

What we, in reality, are trying to question is a very common prejudice that focuses on the experience of the role as the most important aspect of larping. As it was in the case of “*what you see is what you get*”, so is it here - a faulty assumption. The most important aspect of larping is, in fact, the player’s experience of the larp. Thus the simulation of living in e.g. the Middle Ages or in a distant future is not of importance. The overall experience, however, is. It is what shapes the story. The conversation between a village merchant and a black-cloaked stranger is in reality quite dull. But because the player representing the merchant-character is aware on his double level of consciousness that the stranger is in fact a rogue assassin, the seemingly innocent contents of the conversation are suddenly filled with new meaning. The player, being conscious of his role’s separate and limited supply of information, experiences a tragic story where a merchant stands on the brink of death facing an unstable killer, whereas the character, on his level of consciousness only experiences another day in the line of being a merchant.

In much the same manner the set design also represents structural elements of the story – e.g. locations and objects of physical character. From our point of view it does not matter whether you - as in the Danish film *Dogville* - draw chalk lines on the floor to represent buildings, or build them in plywood and stone. They represent the same thing in the diegesis. But why settle with doing so? Why is the set-design only considered a background for the story? Why can’t we let the set design help shape the story? After all it is one of the largest resources in shaping a setting the organizer has available to him or her.

Elements of meaning in the outskirts of the diegesis  
The blacksmith’s son is teary eyed. From his hideout at the brink of the woods he can see clear through the windows of the forest magistrate’s house, and observe the love of his life – the forest magistrate’s daughter – embarking on her wedding night. They both know that their love will never be, and it is only a question of time before her newly wed husband discovers that she, in fact, is not a virgin. The blacksmith’s son is doomed. On the windowsill a bouquet of dried roses sway gently in the evening breeze. The blacksmith’s son is filled with grief and sorrow. Meanwhile, the player acting out the role of the blacksmith’s son is filled with thoughts of death, decay and lost innocence.

The above mentioned example is banal. But if we follow through on our quest to rid the world of larp from the “*what you see is what you get*”-mentality, we will find a changed perspective on the meaningful elements in the larp. We will find a passage for the integration of symbolism. Of course several larp events has tried to incorporate this aspect into their campaigns, but on a larger scale it is a narratologic and aesthetic tool that has not reached its full potential.

Symbolism is easily confused with the practice of allegories. The allegory is the classical image where something portrayed means something else. Thus the lion is Christ, and the sun is life etc. The symbol however, is characterized by the transaction that occurs between image and interpreter. It is a process in which the two elements that constitute the meaning – what is shown and what is meant – constantly exchange positions. To put it plainly, the interpreter reflects on the image and the image reflects on the interpreter<sup>1</sup>.

In practical usage the allegory is suited to draw conclusions in the larp, whereas the symbol is better suited to create atmosphere. The symbol is constantly saying *something* of what is about to happen and is thus in a constant connection with the larp’s theme.

Within the world of larp, the allegory is what the symbol used to be.

From a structural point of view the symbol is placed somewhere in the outskirts between the inter- and the extra-diegetic. It does not belong here or there but is rather a forger of the two main elements of the event – the story and the larp. It is an element in the framework not concerned with meaning anything to either the player or the role, but rather to reach into both worlds.

As previously stated the ‘dried rose’-example is banal, because the player’s ability of adapting to the world isn’t challenged properly, as the roses would tend to drift away as a mere prop. But to the keen eye it still has potential of greater meaning.

In the other end of the symbol-spectrum we find elements that are quite capable of parting ways entirely with the homogenous set design. But still they serve the purpose of commenting on theme, story and framework. Imagine for instance a medieval larp. Now, on your way to church in our hypothetical world you encounter a great, big neon sign that reads “*Have Faith!*” in purple letters. Obviously the reaction we are hoping for here isn’t a large group of peasants talking about ‘*A big shiny sign*’. It is an element of set design which is supposed to create atmosphere and state a point.

The use of symbols can make even the most hardened organizer tremble with fear of having his precious larp ruined by players. Players, who have not been informed that all visible elements are visible in the diegesis.

A way to get around this problem is often a question of supplying a sufficient amount of information about the larp to the players. Things like pamphlets and oral instructions that point to the fact that “*what you see isn’t what you get*”. Another alternative would be to supply all the interdiegetic elements with a special icon (perhaps the particular logo etc.<sup>2</sup>).

Another possibility is to avoid the use of symbols within the story all together. Props can be used effectively, even though they are not considered symbols anymore. A good example for such a procedure would be to, for instance, play the theme-melody from a Tim Burton film in the bus en route to the location of a surreal horror larp. From our viewpoint it is a good idea to constantly, yet discretely, use elements that subtly point towards the theme of the larp. This however, must be done without ever turning into explicit attempts. It is our hope that the schism between event and story can be laid to rest, so a more direct influence on the experience of the player is made possible. All this is to prevent that all the information about the story has to go through the role, because roles often have a tendency to filter out much of the original information, and thereby the possibility of incorporating symbols.

### **The Final Question/The Big Fat Kill**

All of the above mentioned leads us towards establishing definitions of how to regard larping, and in turn how this affects the combination of both event and story. We do not necessarily mean that our focus on the narrative element is the only correct way to regard larping. It is our hope though that this focus can help resolve issues on how to grasp and understand the medium, and maybe become an important factor or catalyst in the future shaping of larp events.

To briefly sum up our point, we feel that it is important to differentiate between the actual event and the story within it. Both are elements in, what up until recently has been called the larp scenario. The event is in the field of the participants. This is where the plywood houses, the rubber-swords and festival-styled toilets are located. The story, on the other hand, is where we find all the structural elements such as roles, the town or spaceship in which the story takes place. These are the inward looking faces of the elements in the diegesis.

A second important point is the fact that all things are equally important structural elements within the story. Hence all elements must be granted an equal amount of time and effort from the organizer or the storyteller. No one role is but background and no plywood house can be placed arbitrarily. Everything – all the elements – is a part of the story. The theme-based plot does not focus its energy any more on the prince than on the peasant. They are equally relevant and defining for all roles. On the other hand we welcome differentiation between information passed on to the player and information passed on to the role. The player is a participant, where as the role is the position from which the player supplies Frankenstein's monster – the story – with a vital flash of lightning.

We recognize the fact that some might find our argumentation unfavourable to the player's own initiative. This however, is not what is it implied. The entire article is conceived from an organizer's point of view, so naturally we have disregarded the players' input to the story. This input is not something one can account for or even take into consideration when planning out the story. Therefore one must totally disregard this aspect, because players will always have a will and mind of their own.

Furthermore we do not deny that *playpen*-larps with all their player-autonomy and improvised intrigue, can be great fun. However they rarely challenge the players' views and opinions, they are questionable as mediums and perhaps most importantly – they are not stories.

All that is left to do is to appeal to you, the organizer, and have faith that in the future you will devise your larp's based on one single question: *"When my players leave my larp after having participated in something they've spent months preparing for, will they then be able to answer this very simple question: What was the story about?"*.

### Notes

- 1 The difference between symbol and allegory is still an issue of much debate within art and literary studies. The definition that we lean against is the one made popular by J.W. Goethe which to our perspective is the most suitable.
- 2 This method of approach was among other places used in the Danish, political larp *System Danmarc* (Opus, September 2005), where janitors responsible for technical equipment, electricity etc. took care of their tasks both in-game and off-game, wearing a specially designed logo.



scene



# johanna koljonen

## eye-witness to the illusion: an essay on the impossibility of 360° role-playing

Since the mid-nineties, a new larp aesthetic has developed in the Nordic countries, especially Sweden and Norway. I call it the 360° illusion, and attempt in the following a description of its special circumstances. Its most obvious characteristic is the ambition to place the players in a physically total, real and present environment, while refusing to limit itself to realism in genre or subject matter.

Its most surprising effect is its incompatibility with roleplaying as it has previously been understood within this gaming culture. The 360° illusion at best can create intense experiences, but it does so through replacing *internal visualisation of the room and psychological immersion into character*<sup>1</sup> with *physical presence in the room and visualisations, both internal and external, of character psychology*.

Readers who dislike theoretical terminology will benefit from skipping the middle section: some practical discussion of actual games is included toward the end.

Speaking of the experience of larping inevitably puts one in an anecdotal and subjective position, which is why I have chosen the essay form. A full disclosure of my position relative to the larps and larpmakers mentioned would run as long as the text itself. In short, I have played all the games used as examples unless otherwise indicated. Inevitably, most of these larpmakers are acquaintances or friends. Out of the games mentioned, I was a character coach for *Euro-pa* and peripherally involved in character writing for *Hamlet* and *OB7*.

### **The full 360°**

At Knutpunkt in Stockholm in 1998, Samir Belarbi gave a presentation of *Föreningen Visionära Vetenskapsmäns Årliga Kongress* (“The Annual Congress of the Society of Visionary Scientists”, FVV), a larp he had staged on the Stockholm-Turku ferry<sup>2</sup>. Whether by coincidence or through prescience, FVV exemplified everything that a then emerging Swedish gaming style would strive for: a complete universe available to interact with, a situational, emotional and physical realism in character immersion, and

a what-you-see-is-what-you-get attitude to the physical environment of the game. I call this style the 360° illusion, in reference to the totality of both the physical game environment and the space for immersion it strives to create.

An onboard conference centre was rented for the titular meeting. The players stayed in character for the exact duration of the cruise, bringing only character belongings with them (although, presumably, off-game IDs). The setting automatically solved some of the central challenges later identified with the style and especially with larping in “the real world”: providing borders to the game that are solid but feel permeable, managing character movement and communication, and dealing with non-player interaction.

In contrast to a situation in which a person larps in public in his home town, here the player’s private life could intrude on the character’s experience only in the unlikely event that another passenger happened to be an off-game acquaintance. And as for interaction with non-players, the choice of location made sure that they would in some sense be “in character” as well.

To Finns and Swedes alike, these cruise ships function as transitional or indeed ritual spaces. It is an unvoiced cultural given that what happens on a cruise does not “count” as part of every-day life. Nearly all groups of passengers define for themselves a new set of behavioural rules for the duration of the cruise, whether the trip to them is labelled “family vacation”, “romantic getaway”, or “graduation blow-out” – or larp. Thus the FVV players could assume with some safety that non-intrusive weirdness would be dismissed by the other passengers as some variant of cruise behaviour, rather than mental illness or offensive provocations.

FVV became significant both because of its artistic merits and the way it was discussed on the local and Scandinavian level<sup>3</sup>. The players’ appreciation of

the every-day tragedy of their superficially comical characters opened new avenues of subject matter and tone. The game fed a debate on the ethics of real-world larping that continues to this day. And at an especially fruitful moment it helped raise the bar on illusions of reality. Belarbi was at the end of an influential larp career and never made another game. But in the year he gave his presentation, preparations for Daniel Krauklis’s hugely influential *Knappnålshuvudet* were already under way<sup>4</sup>.

Apart from Swedish influences, it seems almost certain that Krauklis’s team was influenced by the experiences of Eirik Fatland, who had previously organised the similarly pioneering *Kybergenesis* in Norway. Some of Fatland’s methodology was adopted for *Knappnålshuvudet*, which also had a Norwegian player presence.

Tracing influences is very hard, but regardless of causality I would argue that *Knappnålshuvudet* and its direct Swedish descendants, like *Carolus Rex*, *Hamlet* and *Ringblomman* (all with participating players from at least one other Nordic country), share their aesthetic with contemporary Norwegian games like *1942*, *Europa* and apparently *Panopticon*<sup>5</sup>.

All these larps received thorough post-game analyses at Knudepunkt conventions, feeding experiences and ideals of game aesthetics back into the scene, and less directly spawning projects with similar ambitions. These include otherwise fruitful games, like *Moirra* and *Dragonbane*, that aimed for but did not successfully achieve the 360° illusion, and several games like *OB7* and *Prosopopeia Bardo*, in which I did not participate and therefore cannot adequately judge.

In the following I will focus on differences in the Swedish and Finnish traditions, as these are the gaming cultures with which I am most familiar.

### Great Pretenders

In tabletop and freeform role-playing games, it is possible for players to explore dreams, memories and the borders of the map, to acquire and use items that are not represented by props or by stats, or to call a character's previously unknown aunt on a moment's notice. While none of these things are impossible to do in larps, making the option available is usually too impractical to bother, curtailing both the plot content of Scandinavian larps and the in-game actions of players in them<sup>6</sup>.

In many other countries, the entire toolkit of tabletop is available to larpers too, making any action possible as long as one has access to a game master and a willingness to abstractly simulate physical action. Scandinavian larpers generally have neither. They would rather drive game events in a less plausible direction than play changes that require off-game logistics, like a note on a building informing players it is in fact now representing a smouldering ruin.

Yet most Scandinavian larp traditions have in fact made do with more than one kind of representation<sup>7</sup>. A sheet for a cape, a boffer for a sword, cardboard for a gun, a hand-written note for a lock on a door, a classroom for royal chambers, a game of chance for physical conflict. We imagine our co-players as taller, as not having a ponytail hidden in their collar, as elves, as charismatic beauties. The imagination is a strong muscle, and as long as that muscle is willing to work, a total and present 360° environment is not strictly necessary.

Transforming input into powerful images, holding them in one's mind and manipulating them is the most basic role-playing tool. We employ it to place ourselves within a narrative, but across society it is used for many other purposes. Athletes and dieters call it "visualisation", others prefer "meditation" or "hypnosis" – pagans, doing it in a group not entirely unlike tabletop roleplayers, refer to it as "magic". In tabletop, the information is mostly aural and

gradually added, which initially requires a high level of concentration, but allows for a strong, real-feeling image and consequently a strong gaming experience. Contrary to the common-sense assumption, the game environment is easiest to believe in when it is entirely restricted to the imagination.

In Swedish freeform (close to some American variants of larp), the imaginary world is partially mapped out on the physical room. And in Scandinavian style larp, time and space are generally represented on a scale of 1:1, even when items, costume and the physical environment are not indexical.

The way we use our mind-muscle while larping is by accepting input for the visualisation from our whole perception – by systematically manipulating and filtering our reading of the surrounding reality. As a process this is much more complex than collective visualisation in a mood-lit room, especially since one needs to be very attentive to the ways a greater number of co-players have interpreted the available information.

On the other hand, the sheer concentration can actually be helpful in suspending disbelief. In my experience, the process gets less demanding over time, which could help explain the special intensity of first larp experiences – the initially required discipline keeps the mind from bothering us with off-game thoughts and non-game associations.

Larping in representational games is a process of continuous translation. Back in the days when players commonly wore nametags, we made them invisible by convincing our brains that the tags were an externalised image of our character's memory processes. We turned whole characters invisible by systematically ignoring anyone with a fist above their head until our brains, too, pretended that they were not there. Our brains retroactively corrected ugly sets and bad props to fill our in-game memories with beautiful rooms and period clothes.

### Settling the art debate

Metaphorically speaking, this kind of larping is almost like coping with autism. In our daily lives, we can assume that reality is what it is: a chair will carry our weight, a cloak will warm us, food is edible, and alcohol is intoxicating. But to function in a representational larp, we must constantly question even perceptions that in our daily lives are completely automatic.

From the player's vantage point, natural laws and causality are out of sync, memories are unreliable, making assumptions about the world is a struggle, and even human contact can be incomprehensible. Is the opposing character lying – or is the co-player just really, really unconvincing? Editing this barrage of information into a coherent whole is challenging and exhausting. But when it works, it is exhilarating, because the whole we construct is not “reality”, it is “art” – and let us just sidestep the elitist baggage of that word for now by defining it in a formalist way.

If “reality” is the amalgam of our understanding and experience of nature, society and culture, then “art” constructs subsets of reality that are independent from some of its rules. All of art is based on treating information differently than we normally would – this, briefly, is the meaning of “estrangement”<sup>8</sup>, which is the Russian formalist name for what art does. A traffic light turning red does not stop us walking if it is in a gallery, and we do not run screaming out of the movie theatre when King Kong attacks (although we do jump in our seats if he does it suddenly, since many of our responses are faster than our powers of contextualising analysis).

Estrangement from ordinary codes of communication through flexing our powers of perception is the source of the pleasure of art. And according to thinkers ranging from Victor Schklovsky to Jean Baudrillard, the purpose of fiction and artifice is in fact to invigorate our relationship to the reality around it<sup>9</sup>.

In a 360° game, when what you see is what you get, the role-player's whole struggle of continuous visualisation goes out the window. If the game-makers succeed in presenting the player with a reality they can find plausible, then the world is the world is the world, enabling an experience that does not perceptually come across as fictional. There the estrangement arises not from the language of the situation, but from the role we present in it and the difference to our everyday lives.

Depending on the setting, content and success of the game, this sense of estrangement can become very strong, but not necessarily very different to any situation in our private lives that we would describe as feeling “unreal”.

To a player from a strongly representational game culture, the 360° environment can be startlingly disappointing. If no effort of self-estrangement goes into putting you in that fictional space, then it is indeed often *you*, not the carefully constructed character with its carefully filtered thoughts, that stands awed in the medieval village.

As long as immersion into the game world requires continuously transforming your understanding of reality into the significantly different perception of your character, even brooding in relative isolation (“Turku style”) is an interaction with the game itself. If, on the other hand, the environment requires no transforming visualisation, the experience of being in character must be supported by something else entirely. But before I get into what that can be, we must make a small digression to consider what believing in a character entails.

### Portraying “self”

Aesthetically speaking, realism is only an –ism among others<sup>10</sup>. It is prevalent enough in Western culture to sometimes get confused with reality itself: many of the symbols and agreements of its constructed representations are common enough not

to create an obvious sense of estrangement in the audience any more.

But we certainly have the choice of telling stories about reality differently. When I speak of the 360° illusion, it is not because “360° realism” sounded less cool: it is because this aesthetic – not unexpectedly in a cultural form sprung from the fantastic – does not seem to accept the adequacy of the realist narrative as a description of reality. Nor does the ambition to create a tangible world limit the larp-makers to realism in genre or subject matter.

Represented “reality” must always be pruned for length, plausibility, dramatic purposes and on ideological grounds. This is demonstrated by the vast chasm between fictional representations of identity (causal, coherent, with specific properties) and our first-hand experiences of being “ourselves” (random, biological, in a variety of social roles). We turn ourselves into fictions too. We say: “I am like this” to explain our actions coherently, even though we know that is not what we are like at every moment of every day.

It is not impossible for art to convey subjective identity. Modernist novelists like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf had some considerable success at this. Unfortunately, the better the artist mimics stream of consciousness, the less we understand of, or care about, the plot. Even Woolf’s accessible *Mrs Dalloway*, while leaving us with a detailed snapshot of its main character, suffers from this problem: it is difficult to remember what actually happens in it.

Being fiction and belonging to our culture, it makes practical sense for larps to operate with characters that are realistic – in accordance with our cultural traditions if not our personal experience. But since in larps we observe the fictional character from inside an actual head, this is the one art form where this tension between realism and reality is difficult to ignore.

In a representational game, with all the translation going on, “being in character” is like reading a novel – or rather improvising one in one’s head. Reading icons like “room” and “gun” creates one’s own character too, because text always implies an author, and interpretation always implies an interpreter. The process of visualisation is perhaps not unlike the language we interpret to harvest the experiences and emotions of *Mrs Dalloway* – except that in this case, we also participate in writing the book.

In an indexical environment, on the other hand, since everything around us is “real”, the estranging fiction emerges from the characters we play. In comparison with what it feels like to be me in a room, being my character in that same room does not feel real at all.

Even if we manage not to think of our off-game lives – which is not all that difficult, once the mid-term memory gets filled with game events – we are left with immense mental resources used, typically, to think as little as possible. In the vast expanse of identity, the character information we had going in (name, number of siblings, location of secret map) only amounts to some insignificant rubbish in the corner of a vast, echoing emptiness. In reality, our thoughts and memories are manifold. In the game, our characters become single-minded in the extreme.

You could argue that this creates estrangement. At its best it can certainly convey the experience of leading a passionate, unmediated, non-reflexive life. At its worst, it makes belief in the character impossible. Perhaps this is why Swedish fantasy larpers in the mid-nineties said that they sometimes did not even feel in character until the third day of the game.

### **In medieval underwear**

One reason for the 360° illusion to emerge so strongly in Sweden in the late 90s was that the fantasy genre already had a head start<sup>11</sup>. For years, Swedish fantasy gaming had increasingly focused on period outfits and gear. Many Swedish larpers

very seriously believe that even period underwear is necessary as not to disturb oneself or the co-players with reminders of the outside world. (Requiring a substantial investment of time and/or money has the additional affect of guaranteeing that the players show up on the day).

This sense of responsibility for the closest co-players is fuelled by the tradition of plotting the games on the level of (sometimes quite large) character groups. As for individual character personalities, in this type of game the players or player groups pretty much developed those themselves.

The appeal of this style of gaming – of being in, experiencing and sharing a fantasy world together – is obvious. Yet at its most extreme, this tradition is said to have resulted in larps focused entirely on hanging out: off-game buddy groups on feel-good fantasy tourist trips to campfire country. There may have been some truth in this, but on the other hand the same games also catered for player groups interested in interaction, especially political or armed conflict (“adventure”, broadly speaking).

Still, if one considers larp an opportunity for in-character socialising in a visually realistic fairytale environment (last-day orc attack optional), there is really no need and scant opportunity for character immersion in the sense of translation and visualisation.

On the other hand, since the activities one’s character engages in – walking on uneven paths, cooking on open fires, digging, drawing carts, swinging swords, crapping in a hole and generally roughing it – are mostly outside the scope of one’s private life, they are enough to conjure up a sense of estrangement akin to that of an exotic vacation.

This method of physical immersion has the added benefits of continuously reminding the player of the tangible reality of the game world, of encouraging

the players to action, and of bringing a vivid sense of immediacy to the proceedings. The head may be resting, so the speak, but the body is alive.

I do want to emphasise the continuing validity of this aesthetic even as I presume to call it anti-intellectual. If one’s goal is to give the players new ideas and insights, achieving it through a larp of this kind would be quite challenging (although historically not impossible). Similarly, achieving sense of wonder will get progressively more difficult as players get used to the environment.

By the late nineties, many larpmakers were looking for new options. Some took the complete environment to other worlds and genres (the Star Wars-game *Röd Måne* set on a forest planet especially springs to mind), others went looking for ways to insert ideas and advanced storytelling in it, and out of these quests the 360° illusion emerged.

When the 360° illusionists looked for ways to fill the mental space left by receding imagination, they turned to two important facets of the tradition of Swedish indexical fantasy. The emphasis on physical immersion – later leading to an almost comical proliferation of pre-game physical improv sessions – was carried over as an ideal of good gaming. And so was the inherent assumption that larping is a group activity. This has resulted in the ensemble playing method.

The ensemble player employs aspects of his role to support the initiatives of his co-players with the express purpose of creating satisfyingly dramatic situations for the group to experience. The ensemble is collectively responsible for the dramatic arc in the whole game as well as each scene, and may choose to do something implausible or illogical to achieve the most moving narrative. An influence from the Swedish free-form scene, which has viewed playing in a similar way since the early 90s, is not unlikely.

### Personality Striptease

In Finnish larps, by contrast, the characters have usually been written by the game-master, who communicates the plot to each player in the shape of a more or less detailed description of the character's situation and psychology.<sup>12</sup> Since reacting to new in-game information in plausible accordance with this description is ideally necessary for further information to be revealed and the plot to unfold<sup>13</sup>, Finnish larp culture places great weight on psychological immersion into the role.

The task of the player could be summarised as mastering his character before the game, and explore the truth of this character through action and interaction during it. Performing this task correctly or even enjoying it does not in itself require immersion on the level of actually feeling the character's emotions – they only have to be taken into account. I suspect psychological immersion became the Finnish ideal because the fog of emotions helps to obscure the (sometimes clunky and obvious) mechanism of the gradual reveal of the story arc.

From deep inside the fiction, the fiction is always logical, and for a character, the unfolding action is always new, whether or not the player has seen stories take similar turns before. Thus immersion strengthens the player's experience of the narrative. The downside is that a highly immersive player playing a passive, grieving or shocked character will sometimes block the action unnecessarily. Very roughly put, the Swedish tradition tends to lean on action, sometimes created through emotion, and the Finnish on emotion, sometimes expressed through action.

At *Knappnålshuvudet*, the characters were treated as storytelling functions in the Finnish manner. But in harmony with Swedish larp culture, Krauklis and his team placed equal emphasis on physical improvisation as on the written materials. Just as the psychological institute in the game was indexical and present, just as the whole world was available

to the players on a 1:1 scale, so the entire body was co-opted for a playing field. That the characters were all in therapy, much of it tactile and bodily, was in retrospect even more important than the pre-game improv in keeping the body involved. The player-characters were encouraged to experience grief, anger, frustration, and joy all through: involving lungs, muscles, tear ducts, and brain chemistry.

### A hen on the open sea

Only a decade ago, the idea of going to a larp to suffer was considered new and fairly foolish. To some, *Knappnålshuvudet* may still sound like a pretty terrifying experience. As for suffering, that really does not need to deter from art – if people avoid reading *Crime and Punishment*, it is not on account of the titular criminal getting such a bum deal. It is because involvement with any story of that ambition and magnitude seems like a commitment. Ah, you say, but then the pain stays in the novel? The reason *Knappnålshuvudet* was not terrifying is the same: its borders were clearly defined.

Borders that limit the game are useful for the dual purposes of framing the fiction and for creating an atmosphere of safety and trust. Knowing that something has a beginning and an end not only makes turning it into a narrative possible – it also makes almost anything tolerable in the middle. Marking this beginning and this end with a ritual action, however minor, is especially helpful if the intervening period is to be spent away from one's everyday self.

Let us imagine for a moment that I am getting married, and my friends, in a profoundly disappointing misjudgement of my taste, organise my hen party on the Stockholm-Turku ferry. They bring me to the harbour blindfolded, revealing where we are only as we show our passports to the customs official.

The boat is reached through a series of gates, one of them the entirely fictional gate with the ship's name painted on it, by which the ship photographer takes

a humiliating group picture. This is the first activity of the party and the cruise: I do not usually allow strange men to take my picture, but I am already bound by the implicit rules of the party. I do not usually drink alcohol on a Tuesday afternoon or a Wednesday morning, dance sexily in a Spider-Man costume while singing karaoke, or travel without a cell phone and computer, but on this cruise, I probably would. In real terms, these things should be as embarrassing to me on the sea as they are on land. Yet I am prepared to accept them in this context.

If you argue that these are all minor things that I would be shallow to care about anyway, consider for a moment that a significant number of polled Finns were of the opinion that casual sex while intoxicated on a cruise does not count as infidelity. Would I crown my hen party by sleeping with the cruise host? No, as “I am not like that.” But neither am I the person who appears in public in a Spider-Man costume and a beer-stained tutu. The Meilahti model postulates that the fictionality of our larp roles in comparison with our other social roles is irrelevant, since the experiences are real (Hakkarainen and Stenros, 2003).

That does not render the limits between these roles irrelevant, on the contrary we rely on borders in real life as well to enable a hierarchy between our experiences, allowing some of them to “count” more than others towards the construction we consider our “identity”. A series of gates helps me encircle my cruise experiences with a border marked “exceptional, true”, just as standing in a circle in a darkened room listening to a certain song can help me mark an overdose at a larp as “exceptional, fiction”.

Highly representational larps automatically include all kinds of borders and differences in comparison with real life. Restriction to a specific area, violence without physical consequences, the memory of “my husband” devoid of corresponding emotions, and of course the limited range of thoughts and actions that were available to the role in the fictional situation

– all of these are estranging, which helps us organise the information as “art” rather than “life”. (A ritual ending – an applause, a debrief, a silence, a gate – is often helpfully tacked on anyway).

In a 360° illusion, where many borders are obscured on purpose, others may need to be erected. *Knapp-nålshuvudet* had an agreed-upon time frame, but no physical borders. However, the unravelling of the plot was directed in some detail through the use of fates (*skjebne*)<sup>14</sup>, constructed to ensure an intense catharsis experience for each player. Limited to one a day, the skjebnes were only minimally intrusive to player freedom, but they served as a reminder that the action was not arbitrary, giving the players a tool to bounce improvisations off – or to support themselves on if they felt like the story was pulling them under.

A similar marker of the fiction’s borders is the safety word, borrowed into intensive larping from S/M world and used to perforate the surface of the story when its reality becomes too uncomfortable.

*Moirá*, which required the players to perform in (iconic) heavy make-up in the otherwise purportedly indexical environment, successfully mapped out the borders of its fiction on the building in which it was played. The top floor was the in-character game area, on the middle floor a player would still be in character but perform actions not normally expected of fairies, such as brushing teeth, and the lowest floor was entirely off-game and used as a dressing room for touch-ups. Converted into a physical act, passing in and out of character became as simple as the verbal markers used to do the same in a tabletop game.

### **Reliable but permeable borders**

Time, space and story borders are helpful, but also a nuisance. They impose on all larpers a filter of self-censorship, which in all too many games is in conflict with both the ambition to create cool situations and the ambition always to act in accordance with charac-

ter logic. The player is forced to censor all off-game thoughts, which is inevitable to some degree, and all character impulses that are impractical to realise in a game situation, which can actually be avoided.

Creating a real 360° illusion requires solving this problem, which FVV can elegantly illustrate. Since the game was set in our reality, it automatically provided a complete world of experiences to reference during the game – removing the problem of players having to edit their associative processes or to make up fictional but “commonly known” cultural phenomena. The practical constraints of being at sea solved the problem of unrestricted physical movement diluting the interaction.

The common problem of characters needing to contact other fictional characters, forcing the players to make up plausible reasons not to, was automatically solved by real-world technical limitations: at the time, the ferries were equipped with impractical and unreliable satellite phones, and had no cell coverage for most of the cruise.

The space ship of *Carolus Rex*, the asylum centre at *Europa*, and the bomb shelter at *Hamlet* all functioned similarly – adding one crucial aspect, the permeability of the border. Even when a physical border is logical to the game world – a border the characters *do not want to* cross – the players veer toward treating it as an absolute that their characters would not conceive of violating – a border the characters *cannot* cross.

To liberate players from this self-censorship, the totality of the surrounding world needs to be demonstrated. *Hamlet* had three phone lines out of the bunker that the players could use to call anyone they pleased in all of fictional Denmark – and reach them or not, depending on the roster of experienced table top game masters at the other end managing the simulation of the surrounding world.

A few hours into *Carolus Rex*, a retro-futuristic pulp adventure set during a war between the space empires of Sweden and Denmark, the ship made contact with an escape pod from another ship. The players struggled for some time to find a way around this dilemma – they could not explore it, since they “knew” that their space ship was really a museum submarine, and that only the game masters and the off-game world remained on deck.

As the ship’s AI, played by a GM on the outside, steadfastly refused to accept any of their many excuses, the docking was finally performed. Down the opened hatch came a large group of uniformed enemy combatants, portrayed by Danish larpers secretly smuggled to the game area and kept hidden until the Swedish players were all in the game.

A plausible universe can deliver surprises. To make the player accept the border of the game as something else than the border of the fiction, it is the duty of the truly illusionist game master to demonstrate that characters, plots and information could, and sometimes will, cross them.

### 360° Surreality

In games concerned with people not in continuous action – prisoners, asylum seekers, philosophers, the grieving, the waiting – physical immersion is a less helpful practice. To simulate a freewheeling, unpredictable inner universe other methods have proved necessary. This was the break-through innovation of *Knappnålshuvudet*: the emphasis on creating character memories not only before the game (through agreement, improv, literature and private preparation) but during it.

Into the otherwise indexic milieu, three symbolic elements were introduced to reflect and affect the inner landscape of the characters: sound, emotions externalised as invisible non-player characters or “angels”, and an abstract room in which dreams, memories or emotions could be acted out with the aid of these angels.

Before *Knappnålshuvudet* sound design, efficient because sound so easily slips past our analytical faculties, had long been neglected in the larp world. At the larp, meta-diegetic music played at low volumes within the building created moods or associations for the players to engage with. In the abstract game space or “womb” (see below), a soundscape composed for the purpose represented the voice of God (the same composer, Henrik Summanen, would go on to create the 72-hour meta-diegetic soundtrack for *Mellan Himmel och Hav*).

Meta-diegetic sound was apparently also employed at *Europa* to simulate post-traumatic stress in the asylum seekers – although curiously, my brain has filtered out this information from the in-game memories themselves<sup>15</sup>. Both *Hamlet* and *Carolus Rex* used diegetic sound (bombing, crowds, engine sounds, torpedoes sent and received) to create a three-dimensional world around the game area.

In *Knappnålshuvudet*, dumbfounded players were awoken in the middle of the night and led to the womb to “dream” – to act out primal memories or work through the events of the day. In *Europa*, some of the refugees were granted a meta-diegetic meeting with “the bureaucrats”. Although played during the game in a building in the asylum centre complex, these scenes were not to be considered literally true. The players were free to use them as fodder for memories or treat them as daydreams, nightmares or potential futures.

In *Hamlet*, the game action was intermittently suspended for all the characters to gather and hear a performed soliloquy from Shakespeare’s play. The players were instructed to treat the soliloquy as an external manifestation of the psychological struggles of their own character.

In parallel with the 360° illusion – or perhaps as a subcategory of it, if abstraction can be said to indexically represent abstraction – another experi-

mental aesthetic has developed in the Scandinavian countries. These game-spaces are difficult to rate on the symbolic-iconic-indexical scale. What does a symbol represent if it can represent everything? What do your dreams “really” look like from within? Was the trash heap setting of *Amerika* literal? Were the white canvas labyrinths in which *inside:outside*, *Hamlet inifrån* and *Mellan himmel och hav* took place symbolic or iconic?

In *Luminescence*, possibly the most symbolic larp of all time, the terminal patients were placed in an abstractly lit room on a tonne of white flour – and the players instructed to treat this fact as both literal and entirely expected. The way this distances the player from the fiction is positively Brechtian: I suspect the result of this kind of estrangement is the opposite of psychological immersion, but then again, there is something both powerful and appealing about using fiction as a petri dish for ideological reflection. I guess we could call it intellectual immersion.

### **Not walk alone**

The angels of *Knappnålshuvudet* remain the most beautiful illustration of the way the 360° illusion can express inner reality through external action. Each tiny player group was written to the theme of an emotion, given physical form by their guardian angel. The angels were clad and painted all in grey for easy identification, and when there were two or more of them in the room, they moved softly and in seemingly telepathic synchronisation.

The angels were diegetically present, and although the characters could not understand seeing them nor interact with them directly, the players were intended to do both. The angels were even scented to make it possible to sense their presence before they stepped into view.

The angel players (practically bordering on game masters) could punctuate character actions through

physical movement, make suggestions through nudging them in the correct direction, enact inner conflict through whispering in their ears, comfort them through touch or protect them by blocking their way. Since the angels had studied both the character descriptions and the skjebnes, they came across as all-knowing.

If interpretation implies an interpreter, so does interaction, and ultimately this is the form of being and doing that saves the 360° illusion from its own efficiency. A grief-stricken character in a representational game can be immersed in by a player through continuous visualisation even though he is sitting alone in the bathroom. In a 360° illusion, especially in the early parts of the game, balancing the fictional inner life with the actual surroundings is harder. It helps to cry quite loudly, to know that someone might hear – this turns the solitude into interaction, but it is perhaps not what the character would really do with his secret sorrow. At *Knappnålshuvudet*, the character crying silently was at this moment of the story represented by two players: himself grieving, and his angel, that other part of himself, either comforting, or weeping with him, or egging him on.

### **A feature, not a bug**

Even in the best of 360° illusions, some elements that disturb the fiction will remain. If nothing else, having previously seen the players as them selves can provide a blip in the fiction's internal logic – a potentially significant blip, since representational elements in indexical surroundings easily sabotage the whole venture. Given that the illusion is unstable even over the course of the same game, I have seen more failed illusions than I have seen successes. The experiences have been rewarding all the same. The ambition at totality is enticing in itself, and besides, the players can often turn a collapsed illusion into a good (albeit often unnecessarily expensive) representational larp.

Perhaps role-playing games should be divided into three categories: those that are created all through visualisation (tabletop), those that require continuous translation (free-form and larp) and those in which the environment can be accepted at face value (larping in the 360° environment). In the last category, the process of role-playing is the least cerebral. It becomes immediate, physical, and social. It may not even be role-playing in the sense of constructing a shared fiction. As a mental process, it lies closer to the sense in which we role-play in our everyday lives – except that in this role, we actively censor recollections of our other roles and environments.

This necessary refusal of complete personality within the complete environment can make the most perfect 360° illusion feel pointless and hollow. With the aid of physical immersion, immediate action and social interaction, and occasional bursts of stubborn self-suggestion, this emptiness can be kept at bay and the off-game blips to a minimum.

That said, the next logical step for the 360° illusionists is to start treating this weakness not as a problem but as an integral part of the aesthetic. At the *Prosopopeia Bardo* games *Där vi föll* and *Momentum* the players were apparently instructed to fill the emptiness with their own lives, memories and experiences. I guess this works, but it does limit the range of possible characters more than a little.

Most larpmakers must find another way to balance the internal illusion with the external, to make the limited personality of the characters generate wondrous estrangement rather than startling disappointment. Only then can the 360° illusion be lived like a life, experienced and remembered with an extra-ordinary vividness, and allowed to affect us profoundly.

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## Notes

- 1 English lacks an exact match for inlevelse/eläytyminen. “Immersing” is actually closer to fördjupelse/syventyminen, but in this text the word, especially in conjunction with “psychological”, is intended to retain the nuance of “placing oneself in the position of another through empathy” that “inlevelse” carries with it.

- 2 The description is based on Belarbi's presentation and participant recollections.
- 3 A similar perfect storm of coincidental brilliance provided Finland with its ground-breaking 360° larp, Mike Pohjola's school room dystopia *.laitos* (1997).
- 4 Another strong influence on the naturalism of that game, which I unfortunately know very little about it, was a series of occult larps set in the 1920s, informally known as the Gyllenstierna campaign, that started in the early nineties and reached its finale with *Sista Kapitlet* in 1998.
- 5 For a description of the Norwegian "Hardcore-laiv" aesthetic, see Fatland (2001).
- 6 Scandinavian Style larping is a collective term for the kinds of larps that are indigenous to Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland. Players generally stay in character for all of the game and are attired in appropriate costumes from head to toe. During the game, playing is usually not suspended for sleeping, to simulate fights, or for any other purpose except for safety reasons or to indicate the passing of time within the narrative. Within each of the Nordic countries, however, many different gaming cultures have developed, some of them from international, commercial rules systems, all of them with differing assumptions and ideals.
- 7 I use the word "representation" or "representational" in reference to things that represent things that they are not. This includes both *symbolic* representation, which is dissimilar (like a word for an action or a piece of paper for an object), and *iconic* representation, which is similar (like a gesture for an action or a boffer sword for a real sword). This distinction is mostly overlooked in the article since I suspect that the effort of imagination involved in reading symbolic and iconic input is broadly the same, while reading *indexical* input (regardless of degree – a house representing either that same house or an identical house) requires almost no effort at all. On representation, see Lopenen and Montola 2004, and on indexical propping, see Montola and Jonsson 2006.
- 8 Also translated as being defamiliarized – either way it refers to making things feel unfamiliar.
- 9 In "Art as Technique" and "Simulacra and Simulations", respectively. Baudrillard, with his postmodern doubts about reality, naturally paints this process in a quite more sinister light.
- 10 More properly, a number of related –isms in the arts. Realism was a reaction to romanticism and is the opposite of idealism. Realists attempt to describe things accurately and objectively, aesthetically seeming to reject symbolism and politically often rejecting idealized and beautiful subject matters. The logical problem of realism is, that even naturalistic representation involves interpretation, what is shown is inevitably symbolic of something the artist wishes to convey.
- 11 Other reasons probably include the high level of organisation and positive media image, which enabled financial grants for these often quite costly productions, and participant overlap with the Society of Creative Anachronism.
- 12 Players can express preferences as to character type, but are centrally cast and not expected to prefer playing with their friends.
- 13 While in practice many characters were filler, there was broad agreement within the gaming culture that a good larp made every character feel like the main character – i.e. provided each with ample, personally relevant "plot".
- 14 A storytelling device. A non-diegetic instruction ensuring that the player has his character perform a certain often seemingly unimportant action, or appear in a certain place, at an agreed upon time.
- 15 As in film theory, diegetic sound is audible to the characters, meta-diegetic sound is representative of or directly affecting (the inner worlds of) the characters, and non-diegetic sound is a communication between the author and the audience. An example of non-diegetic larp music is the melody played at the beginning and end of each act of *Hamlet* while the players were going into and out of character.



# claus raasted

## the "bigger! better! more!" problem - and thoughts on how to solve it

Look around you. Look at the larps that are played, and the larps that are talked about. We're getting better and better at what we do. Projects are becoming wilder, more impressive and more expensive. "Mellan Himmel och Hav" (the gender-bender larp from 2003, not the John Wayne movie from 1954) was held at the Swedish National Theatre and had a budget of over 1/2 million Swedish Crowns (approx. 60,000 euro). 2005 saw the political Danish larp "System Danmarc" played in a container city in Central Copenhagen. Budget? Even bigger than "Mellan Himmel och Hav". And in the summer of 2006, the probably most bombastic larp project of all time, "Dragonbane", tried to redefine fantasy in the forests of Sweden. On a budget rumored to be around ten times that of System Danmarc!

A common denominator for these and similar projects is the fact that they were made by volunteers. And of course they were. For we make larp con amore – for

love of the art. Or for those of us who make boffer games for kids, for love of beating up pre-teens with latex swords. And that's how it should be, isn't it? It's always been like that and why should it change?

Maybe it shouldn't. But I'm afraid it has to. One way or another. Because we're losing people. We're losing the old guard, and nowhere is this as apparent as in Denmark. Why? Simple. Because there aren't enough games that they find interesting. And the reason for that is even more simple. Because there's nobody to make them!

A huge and overwhelming percentage (my guess is 95, yours might be different) of Danish larps are battle-based fantasy affairs for kids and teenagers. Apart from that there are the big summer larps held by the big organisations which involve hundreds of people, wooden houses, weeks of building and burn out organisers at a frightening rate.

Sure, some of the old guard go to these events, but one of the things I've begun to crave after becoming a bit older (and I'm only a measly 27) is variation. And it just isn't there.

For this I see several main reasons. First of all, we make larps to get laid. Some of you may be thinking "What a load of rubbish", but that's your *prerogative*. And by "laid" I don't *necessarily* mean in a sexual sense, but simply that we make larps for glory. Not purely, but it goes a long way for most organisers that somebody pats them on the back and says "It was awesome". *Recognition* and appreciation by our fellow Women and Men is something we all strive for. Some of us do it in the larp community and one of the ways for doing it is making larps.

And that's one of the reasons that the Danish scene is almost exclusively children's boffer-fantasy. Because they LOVE it. After all, who'd want to spend a year working your doing ass off doing some weird Shakespeare larp and having the old guard laugh at you because "...it sucked, and those Swedish guys did it years ago"? Not me. And especially not when there's a huge untapped resource of love and appreciation just waiting to be tapped in the kids. So point one. Larps are made for kids because it's easy and they love it. And adoration is a powerful motivator.

*Secondly*, and perhaps even more relevant. In 1999 some of us did a Danish fantasy larp mini-series called "Legendernes Tid". It was wild. It was awesome. It brought people together and redefined standards, and spawned a ton of creativity and growth in larp circles in Denmark. Looking back, I remember proudly telling people "We have white *pavilion* tents made out of plastic! Aren't we cool?" and "It's a larp based not so much on combat but on intrigue. And no dwarfs! Awesome, huh?" The point I'm trying to make is of course simple (I'm a simple sort of guy). What was cool and visionary seven years ago just doesn't really cut it anymore.

The contemporary Danish fantasy summer larps have wooden houses, impressive costume standards and well-written material, and if somebody did "Legendernes Tid I" all over again, players would laugh their asses off.

And besides making you aware of the fact that I actually once organised something that people thought was cool, where am I going with this? It's all about what we demand of our larps nowadays. They have to look good. They have to be interesting. They have to be mind-boggling, because we've tried it all before. Luckily for us, we have people who are up to the task. But they're a dying breed. And why? Because they have lives to live too. And while I once organised a 75-person larp on two weeks notice, those days are gone. Dragonbane took 3 years of planning. Working on a larp for a year isn't seen as anything special. Of course not! When you look at the amount of work that goes into the *creme de la creme* projects, it's amazing that people can squeeze that many hours out of a single year.

And I know that evolution has been different in other countries, but from what I know most larp communities face the same problem. We expect more and more, and more takes both time and resources. System Danmarc is a great example of this. Out of a budget of 70,000 euros, player fees were less than 20%. The result? That a great game with an awesome setting could be played by anyone willing to pay 40 euros for a weekend! 40 euros!!!!????

For a mind-blowing experience that will forever change the way you look at some things? You've gotta be fucking kidding me!

And the best part is yet to come. Because when one asks the main organisers of System Danmarc whether they'll do a sequel (or something on the same scale) they all smile and say "NEVER!" Because doing the impressive larps is costly. Costly in terms of time, of

favors, friendships and relationships. You give it all you have and hope your significant other doesn't walk out on you after the sixth night in a row you've bailed because of the project. You wheedle money and work out of people you know and you do all-nighters hoping fervently that everything will be worth it. And sometimes it is. Standing there afterwards hearing the masses applaud you IS gratifying.

But it's *not* enough. If it was, there'd be more of the old guard still around. But they've been swallowed up by careers, marriages and children. They've found hobbies that don't make as large demands on their time, and when they go to the big fantasy larps (which happens very seldom) they pay their way out of things they'd do themselves back in the days. They buy their costumes from seamstresses, they'd rather pay an extra 100 euros than have to build wooden houses for 4 days and they sleep on folding beds rather than sleeping mats.

And when you ask them whether they'll ever organise a larp of their own again they talk of vague plans and innovative ideas, but never progress any further than discussing them in trendy cafés and shaking their heads disbelievingly at those still burning with the fire to go on. Because the truth is becoming more and more apparent. Firebrands burn out when there's no more fuel. And our larps are swallowing more and more of our fuel, and it's seen as perfectly natural that people burn out forever after being at the top for a number of years. "Oh, she grew up and doesn't have time for larps anymore..." is a phrase I hear too often. And no matter how you slice the lemon, it tastes sour. And I hate lemons. One thing is people losing interest. Another is them admitting to themselves that it's just too costly in terms of time and energy. The first happens to everybody. The second we can fight. And we should.

But how? I see two ways, and maybe you see more. The *first* is both the simplest and the hardest. By lowering expectations. By giving organisers room to

breathe and by being content with projects that are great instead of mind-blowing. Because the problem isn't that larps demand time and energy – it's that they demand too much of it. And I want to have organisers who after a game start planning the next one instead of saying "Now I need a half year break before I even THINK of organising a larp again". And one way of getting them to do it is by demanding less of them. So instead of holding "Mellan Himmel och Hav II" in the National Theatre, it'll be held in an empty warehouse. "Dragonbane II" won't have a mechanical dragon that walks and breathes fire. It'll have ten guys in a dragon suit with a flamethrower. And "System Danmarc II" won't have a container city in the middle of Copenhagen but a tent city on a field outside the city. The number of man-hours required to do a "Big Project" will be halved and then halved again. Nothing will be as good. But it'll be there.

Of course I'd rather play in the originals than the sequels. Of course I'd rather have somebody working for a year on the larp I'm going to than somebody working on it *for* two months. But I'd rather avoid burn-outs even if it means sacrificing quality. I grew up with fantasy city larps in schools. In schools!?! But if there was nothing better, I'd go back. But of course I'd rather not have to.

Because I want the real submarines, the well-written characters and the fire-breathing dragons as much as everybody else. But the solution I see is maybe a bit controversial. It's money.

Because one thing most of us used to have was time. We were youngsters, students and struggling artists living on shoestring budgets. At least, many were. This is changing, however. And in a world where time equals money, why should it be any different for larpers? Sure, I'm as much a revolutionary as the next man, and I actually believe in changing the world, but that's neither here nor there. What is real is the fact that we have a growing number of adult

larpers who've got the cash and the hunger for good larps, but don't have the time to do them "the old fashioned way".

This is not said in any way to disrespect those who do volunteer larps on a grand scale. I love you guys! You make it possible for me to get *my* mind blown away for 40 euros. But I don't believe in it for the long term. I believe in money and freeing up people's *resources*.

Just think about it. Who among us wouldn't swap their day job for the chance of organising larps full time at a reasonable pay? Who among the old guard wouldn't pay the cost of going to these larps? I know I would and I'm not alone. Not by a long shot. Because more and more of us are making real money and working full-time. And paying 500 euros for a weekend larp suddenly isn't out of the question anymore. Look at what people pay to go *skiing*! Personally, I love skiing, but skiing isn't my passion. Larp is. And if I could go to a week-long larp for the same price that I pay to go skiing, I'd jump at the chance if it was good enough.

It's a debate that's raging in Denmark at the moment, where more and more larp organisers are making money on doing larps for kids, and more and more are willing to pay for service. Even Dragonbane had a little of it. *There*, you could get in for free on one condition – if you helped build the village for a month. A MONTH!!!! Instead of paying 145 euros! A month. I kid you not. I love the people who did it for doing it, and hope they had a great time. But unless you love building stuff, it's a bit more attractive just to pay your way out of it. And I hate building stuff.

So where am I going with all this?

I'm pointing out that there's a developing market for larps which actually cost money. And if some of that money goes to paying organisers so they can work

on the larp instead of working in their normal jobs, isn't that just a good thing? We tried it back in 1999, where two people were paid for working full-time for three months on the first Legendernes Tid game. People spent endless hours complaining about it. We were capitalists. We were evil incarnate. We did it for the money. And how much did we pay them? Did we pay them extravagant amounts of money?

We paid them 5,000 Danish Crowns (approx. 700 euros) a month. And if we pretend they only worked full-time (which is of course, a bit of an understatement) that means an hourly wage of just around 4 euros/hour. Sure, I could see how it was evil and doing it for the money. Because I worked full time on that project too and for nothing. Luckily, the university paid me money for doing nothing too, so I got food on the table anyhow. But enough reminiscing.

The larp community wasn't ready for it in 1999. But many things have changed since. And while my price in 1999 for working full-time probably was even lower than 700 euros/month, it's risen a bit since. I still do volunteer projects, but I only have the time to do so because I've managed to secure a job which pays nicely compared to the time spent doing it. Because I've gotten part of the way. I actually make my living by organising larps for kids and by teaching larping. But that doesn't change the fact that I'd jump at the chance to do larping full-time for adult larpers instead. If I can get my bills paid while doing what I love, how could I say no?

Would you?

SCENE

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# gordon olmstead-dean

## impact of relationships on games

It is a given that when we produce Live Action Roleplaying events, we try to do everything possible to make sure the game goes well, and take control of every detail. But in the midst of most games sits a proverbial 1600-pound gorilla, a force more powerful than almost anything else in our game. And for the most part we shrug and ignore it. We seldom talk about it except in passing, and we tend to pooh-pooh it as a major factor in our productions. In truth it controls the participation of many of our players, and even the way in which our plots will run.

I'm talking about personal relationships in-game, specifically those that have a romantic or sexual element to them. These relationships, both in and out of game, are the one element that writers and producers often have little real control over that affects the game profoundly.

Relationship problems have caused games to fail, destroyed GM groups and frequently caused players to drop games. While it's unusual for us to know a player who got so upset over special effects, or even food service or the game site, that they quit without warning and without giving the game a second chance, most of us know someone who has left a

specific game – or even left larp overall – because of a relationship.

In looking at how relationships affect larp. First we'll look at why relationships (meaning in this sense romantic or quasi sexual relationships) are a unique feature of larp not shared by most other hobbies or arts. We'll also look at the various types of relationships that exist in larp – those that are engineered and those that arise spontaneously, and the different consequences in different lengths of larp. Finally we'll look at what authors and producers can do to help control the impact of relationships and harness them as a positive force in their games.

Throughout, we'll be sharing quotes from a November 2006 survey of 54 larpers, publicized to support the composition of this article. The survey was publicized through lists for four diverse campaigns, and through the general announcement forum for LARPA, the *Live Action Roleplayers Association*. Because the survey was not random – those who answered it are probably those most interested in relationships in larp, it is not statistically valid as a measure of frequency, but it is a fair tool for giving a rough idea of how relatively common certain situations are to

those who tend to become involved in relationships through larp. The majority of respondents can be presumed to be from the Eastern United States, however some were from Europe or the U. S. West. Italicized quoted material, is from this survey unless otherwise indicated. Where respondents are not identified they chose to remain anonymous and are quoted by permission.

### THE UNIQUE NATURE OF LARP

Every human group has its romances. Even the office may have water cooler seductions. We are used to dismissing romance as incidental to our arts and hobbies. But in larp relationships are integral. We build drama on human intimacy and interaction.

The principal antecedent of larp is certainly drama, and drama shares some of the characteristics of larp. Since the days of Restoration Drama, when females first strode the boards as professionals, actors and actresses have had a reputation for flamboyant sex lives. *I believe that it is difficult to separate in-game relationships from real relationships even though we know better. I believe this is why Hollywood actors and actresses have intense relationships with people they have played romance with in film and theatre.*

It has been posited that larp is essentially interactive theatre – a form of drama where there is no distinction between presenter and audience. This may be the case. However, it means that the passions which are reserved for screen stars in film involve every participant. As audience in theatre or cinema we are in no position to become involved with the leading lady. But in larp we may become her male lead, or foil. We do not just watch, we are drawn into the drama in a very literal sense. So while relationships are incidental to the local sports league, they are *integral* to larp.

Let's think about this seriously. We take a group of people who in most cases have no formal training as actors, and have no special social training, and

we throw them into situations where they play at being emotionally involved with each other, and act out dramatic interpersonal situations. It would be surprising if they did *not* form intimate relationships. The problem is that in many cases they are unprepared for this, seem caught by surprise when it happens, and have little idea what to do about it. Often they walk away scared or muddled, and are lost to the community, sometimes blaming larp for ruining a relationship that existed outside the game. *There are a lot of people who think that they are mature enough to deal with this type of situation, but just like someone who thinks it's ok to "swing" before they've ever experienced it before, they sometimes find out that it's too intense of a situation for their long term relationship to handle or survive.*

Long time larpers do not seem so easily burned by these things. This is probably because they have "gotten the hang" of interpersonal interactions within the community. The problem is that this is a difficult level to achieve. In the early days of larp most producers believed in the "school of hard knocks." Players learned the hard way how to handle larping, or dropped out when little help was given. But a more modern approach suggests that we can predispose players to success by providing them with guidance and information. The problem is that this is explosively difficult with relationships. Yet relationships are one of the most common factors that may cause a player to leave our game.

It is difficult to be straightforward about advertising the reality of relationships in larp. How does one say "welcome: you are joining a community unlike most others, where relationships are driven not by casually getting to know your fellows, but by heavy emotional involvement mandated by the event, making your life as volatile as that of any Hollywood actor or actress."

The difficulty is that many people do not overtly come to larp for emotional or relationship involvement. Most people do not think of larp as a singles bar, and

if they are interested in “meeting people” many think of it in a very passive way as if they were becoming involved in any other low key activity. If anyone pointed out the really heavy emotional investiture involved in larp they would probably see it as “too much drama” and look elsewhere, even if actual participation showed that it was not a major problem for them. As we’ll see later, of the many who are drawn to larp for these reasons, fewer still can easily admit it.

Relationships in larp should not be seen as “a problem” anymore than any other emotional or adrenal experience is “a problem.” In fact, it has become my belief that a desire for intimate relationships on many levels is the primary driving force behind most players participation in larp – secondary only to adrenal reactions in Live Combat games.

My thesis is that larp essentially rides on the back of a need for human contact and intimacy. All of the elements that can be found in larp which go outside of that – except for adrenaline in Live Combat – can be found better and more completely in other types of gaming. There are better puzzles to be solved online, better mysteries to be read.

The traditional model for larp suggests that it flourishes through the desire we have for fantasy and to experience being someone else – that it is essentially escapist. After twenty years involved in larp I feel that this is not the case, or is at best putting the cart before the horse. While I certainly acknowledge that escapism is an element of larp, I feel that the principal underlying element is social – we play to come into contact with other human beings. larp circumvents many of the artificial rules of society on how we can interact intimately with others. While that represents a sort of escape, the primary instinct is social not escapist. As Dr. Keith Harris said, “Humans are social creatures through and through. As undergraduate psychology majors universally learn, at its core, all psychology is social

psychology” (Harris, 2003). larp meets our social needs.

### **Self Deception and Honesty**

Unfortunately human beings are not inherently socially honest creatures. Dr. Eric Berne, in developing his influential social theory of transactional analysis classified most of our social interactions into a set of gamelike patterns (Berne, 1964). These games are inherently somewhat dishonest. Whether or not one accepts Berne’s theories, almost all psychology suggests that people are seldom entirely candid or frank about their motives and goals in social interactions. Since the turn of the century we have understood that individuals may often not understand their own psychological motives and goals. Most forms of analysis from Freud to the present day suggest that some effort is required to get humans to recognize their own subconscious motivations. We know that this becomes more true in cases that involve relationships that fall into the sphere of sexual contact; human courtship and mating behavior. In practice we can be quite deceptive about these matters, to ourselves and others.

Most people are raised in a society that teaches certain “goods,” and “norms.” In the most traditional of societies this may include marriage, eternal fidelity to one partner, and so forth. larpers, at least in North America and Europe, are drawn primarily from the educated middle and upper-middle classes, especially those with a college education, since at least in the U.S. that is often where players first become involved in larp. Predictably this means that larp has a higher proportion of individuals who already are disposed towards a more liberal outlook on social interactions, including a higher acceptance of alternative sexuality and alternative relationship styles than most other communities. However even participants who are not strictly monogamous – whether they actively consider themselves polyamorous or simply are “single and dating” – often have cultural expectations of fidelity and devotion.

The problem is that many of our core instincts work against the “rules” of whatever society we are involved in. Research in the early nineties even indicated that biology can have great impact on human sexual conduct and behavior in real social settings (Barker, Bellis, 1993). On an admittedly more day to day level, social norms typically tell us to be loyal to our current partner, but biology and psychology may be driving us to seek a better partner, even if we do not realize it. Conversely a person who professes to be accepting of their partner having other relationships may claim that such behavior is acceptable, while giving strong social signals that it is not.

### The Threat

In previous centuries society often condemned “dance” as an evil. As late as the 1950s, some conservatives railed against the “wild music” of sock-hops at the high school gymnasium. These moderators of society were not mindless – they knew what they were about and they had a good point. Dance creates a social environment in which there is implicit permission to touch, and be intimate with, others who are not our chosen partners. In a small society, beset with challenges, chaos seemed to invite death and irregularity in the social order was seen as a grave threat to survival. A sword at the throat. To indulge a custom which might tend to destabilize the social structure by promoting the formation of what 18th century French writer Choderlos de Laclos termed “dangerous liaisons” seemed threatening indeed.

Realistically if dance is a sword at the throat, then larp is an atom bomb. Dance allows for a few whispered words, a passionate glance, a touch.

*They [relationships] are, like any other aspect of larp, perfectly safe and healthy as long as clarity is maintained... It's much harder with emotionally-loaded material like this, [Live Roleplay] of course.*

Let's consider for a moment. In most social situations how would we react to someone proposing “how

about for the next four hours your boyfriend will pretend to be my boyfriend. We won't be very physical, but we will have deep and intimate personal conversations, which you of course will be excluded from, and your boyfriend will behave as if he belongs to me.”

Larp as a social threat is very real. In many ways it is playing with fire.

*While not all the questions presented here have occurred directly to me, I have observed the full breadth and depth of them in action - real-world marriages ended because players were swept away by their in-game romance, real-world S/Os [Significant Others] demanding “in character” relationships end because they are severely uncomfortable with the amount of real-world time the “in character” love-interest is demanding, “in character” relationships where the participants said they would never fall for the player in the real world ending up dating them for years.*

### The Promise

Now that we've looked at why larp may seem socially threatening, it's time to look at the very positive things it can accomplish.

Larp is a fictional landscape in which we can “practice” actions and emotions that have much more serious consequences in the real-world. There are many things to experience – moral dilemmas, suspense, frustration, and how we respond to them tells us something about our own personality but interpersonal relationships are certainly the core of larp. larp is inherently social – it isn't primarily about solving puzzles. Occasionally we'll see a player who steadfastly refuses to acknowledge any segment of the game that does not involve mechanics or puzzles. Often this is a player with problems making social contact trying to reach out, and over time they come “out of their shell.” However the player who consistently refuses all but the most superficial social

interaction may do poorly in a larp where there is much depth of play, branded a “geek” even in a world where “geek culture” is common and accepted.

Most players come to have some level of real emotional exchange with other players and in many cases that deepens into relationships. In some cases they learn differently: *It turned out that we were [attracted] but we had no plans to do anything about it since, at that later time, we were each looking for different kinds of people for serious play and/or partnering. (In fact, larping with zir convinced me that we would probably not be compatible in the short or long run.)*

But the keyword is “experimentation.” Our example above would be difficult in real life. However there is no singles scene where you would find someone make a suggestion along such lines. “Let’s be in a very passionate committed relationship. But just for the next four hours. Then we’ll pretend it didn’t mean anything and didn’t happen, and feel no major social awkwardness about that, because it will be perfectly normal.”

Larp allows us to experiment with feelings: *I think that in-game relationships can be a good way to explore your feelings for another person if an out-of-character relationship is not possible for whatever reason... just as it is possible to experiment with different sexual modes in a “safe” way – akin to performing “thought experiments” about subjects, or fantasizing without actually performing the acts in question.*

### **DIFFERENT TYPES OF GAMES**

Different larps have different characteristics in regards to relationships. Most players who are involved in larp play games which are episodic, often called “campaigns” after terminology borrowed from wargaming through tabletop RPG. Most Live-Combat games are “campaign” format, as are most games based in the various Vampire milieux. While the

practice is not invariable these games tend to call on players to develop much or all of their own character concepts.

For obvious reasons, campaign-length larp is where we see relationships have the most impact. First, there is more time for the arc of a relationship to appear, rise, and potentially cause trouble. Additionally players are often encouraged to build their own characters, leaving them free of GM-created encumbrances. In some cases groups of players may come in with pre-existing relationships already defined, which can cause its share of issues.

### **Live Combat – the Adrenaline Factor**

Live combat carries its own odd distinction. While relationship interest may be a “stealth” interest in all other larp, we can clearly see that interpersonal interaction of some type dominates play. But Live Combat has another big lure. Adrenaline. So it is perfectly normal to find players, both men and women, who are lured by the fighting element, and are getting the same athletic charge out of larp that they would out of paintball or soccer.

In twenty years of larp I have often seen accusations go back and forth about roleplaying at combat games being superficial. I think in many cases the relationship gorilla is the determining factor. In some groups where larp is more like a sport, the same rules prevail that would prevail in most other social settings. “Don’t get too close to my boyfriend... don’t act too flirtatious.” When players break those rules in the name of roleplaying they might be successful, drawing the group more into the realm of roleplaying. But if a group’s first few relationships are negative – spurring messy breakups or resentments – a chilling factor can prevail, where the group paradigm suggests that “we are not about that.” In other larp groups this might lead to the collapse of the group, but in combat larps there is another very primary and emotional element bonding players to the game – the combat element itself.

Obviously many combat groups fluctuate on what behavior is tolerated, and some have even broken into sub-groups where some factions or cliques are emotionally interactive and relationship elements are strong, and others are much more distant and focused on the athletic and adrenal element of the game.

The argument about roleplaying in combat-oriented larp is often a cover for a core debate about the nature of the game. If it is essentially a sport – in which case relationships should be curtailed and behavior subordinated to the athletic and team ethic. If it is primarily a roleplay event, then the full gamut of relationships should be allowed and encouraged – even if that means making some members who are intolerant of risk or acting out along those lines withdraw from the activity. Unfortunately the debate is seldom framed so clearly, and often progresses by action and crisis as relationship activity is put forward or slapped down. Often it progresses by luck. A successful in-game romance can make emotional roleplay “more acceptable,” while an infidelity or ugly scene can promote a “crack down” in which the group’s social leaders evince intolerance for emotional roleplay.

One model I have strongly observed in more conservative communities is a larger larp where relational and emotional elements are kept at arms length with a core of “good roleplayers” who are strongly emotive. When one comes into close proximity with them, one finds that they tend to have a more colorful and flamboyant set of interpersonal relationships – the sort that one would tend to associate with “actors and actresses,” often including polyamory, triads, sexual experimentation with kink, or outright affairs. However they may also be secretive, and a “code of silence” may prevail leading to the appearance of a double standard, or severe misunderstandings about the nature of relationships within the group or the larp overall. This situation may be adaptive, but it is far from ideal.

## HOW SHOULD IT BE?

### – IS INVOLVEMENT RIGHT OR NOT

In those games where it is taken for granted that in character relationships will exist and will be explored in some depth, there are several schools of thought regarding to what extent such relationships should go and how they should be allowed to proceed.

For many players, especially those identifying as being in long term relationships, expressing a separation of in-game and out-of-game is important.

*Different people have different levels of “inner separation”. I consider mine fairly high, in that in-game is strictly in-game, and that’s that. I admit I really do have to at least be on friendly terms and feel comfortable with a person though in order to have a fun in-game relationship/romance.*

Some make a conscious decision to control their emotional investiture: *I tend to have emotional relationships that don’t include close physical contact. It keeps the emotions at arm’s length, too, but the drama of too much emotional involvement is just not worth it to me.*

However most acknowledge the reality of relationships overlapping into real life.

*I think in-game relationships are VERY tricky to keep in-game and I think it takes more than a fair bit of maturity to keep them in-game, especially if you’re in a committed relationship with someone else.*

Many see the progress as healthy, and see little reason to disguise the fact. A male respondent said: *I’d be lying if I didn’t say that hooking up at a larp event isn’t at least 50% - 75% of my reason for being there. You’re playing a role, you meet members of the opposite sex, and you get to be somebody else for a few hours. Of course you’d think about throwing a little romantic action into your gaming.*

Women could be equally forthcoming: *On several occasions, I've been more apt to attend a game because a good-looking, interesting-seeming guy whom I've just met has either encouraged me to play or flirted with me in past game sessions.*

Another respondent put it simply: *Everyone I've had a relationship with, I've met in a game.*

Some players acknowledge the move toward real relationships as normal, and positive. *And it's HARD for regular human beings to turn that off at "Game Over", shake hands, and go their separate ways for 6-8 weeks. Borders on dysfunctional, in my opinion. So, I think that in-game relationships that are healthy, would (barring other OOG [Out of Game – ed] relationships) naturally progress to OOG and either succeed or fail. As to the effect that might have on the in-game relationship ... I think that would depend upon the parties maturity and professionalism.*

Another said: *One of those in-game relationships continued for many years, and very slowly and naturally developed into a friendship and then relationship with the other player. I will note that this other player and myself didn't begin dating until after that in-game relationship ended and I started playing a new character.*

The situation is muddied by subversion and mixed-signals. Many of those who are seeking relationships and intimacy say they are not. In some cases, they may be subversively seeking intimacy that does not exist in their out-of-game relationship, but may become frightened when it happens, causing them to suddenly move away from the relationship.

*Sally was an attractive girl in her second year of college. At an event outside her normal circle of acquaintances she met several male larpers, was flirtatious with them and even engaged in off-camera sexual relations with one of the players*

*which she wrote about to that player and a GM. Before the next game, she broke off contact, citing some of the content of the game unrelated to her relationships as making her "uncomfortable" and refused to return.*

Sometimes we don't know the basis for a breakup, but it is not uncommon to see a situation where a player makes a false move and the other moves away.

*My last in-game relationship ended when the other player took inappropriate action toward me during a scene, and I asked the player to leave me alone in-game and out-of-game because of this.*

## ENGINEERING RELATIONSHIPS

So far, we've dealt primarily with those relationships players choose for themselves spontaneously during runtime. There are two other areas to look at – relationships that are pre-planned by players and those which are infused into the game by the writers.

### Planned Relationships

In some cases players plan in advance to have their characters in a relationship. This can be very simple, or quite elaborate.

*In a campaign I once played the abused daughter of another [male] player - with an incestual element. The details of the relationship weren't known to the other players at first - it was something we wanted to become more apparent as time went on.*

*I've had relationships with female friends in larp's, that we set up ahead of time with lots of road blocks, even though neither of us are bisexual out of character. Generally, when we do that, we decide we were a couple in back story and could be again.*

*As a GM in a game with a lot of in-game relationships, I found that when the players negotiated the in-game structure in a time and space outside of game, and far out of character, they tended to get*

*along better, both in-game and out. It reinforced the fictional aspect of the relationship - it's a story we're telling together, rather than a relationship we're muddling through.*

*My favorite experience playing in a relationship was being part of an in-game triad in... a Vampire MET game. The triad was comprised of my boy-friend and our best [male] friend. It gave us an immediate "group" to play in-game full of strangers, and allowed us to create three symbiotic characters. We negotiated the character generation process but let the rest of it develop on the game floor. We had a great time confusing people, while still being a politically strong unit and a force to be reckoned with. We never really had any OOG issues about our relationships in-game, but that's because we were very close friends and had known each other for years beforehand.*

Most players agree that planned relationships go smoother. But that is often because they are more conservative to begin with, more "acting" and less romantic interest, as well as potentially more openness about expectations. To many players, particularly those with long term relationships outside the game they feel "safer." At the very least they represent pursuit and experimentation with someone who already has a certain level of interest and trust.

*Stereotypically, women more than men seem to do more organizing of the pre-planned relationships, manage the holding of the gate keys of what is and isn't permitted, and are more likely to give "I was just swept away and couldn't help myself" as justification.*

To players seeking new in-game relationships and attending at least somewhat based on that, existing pre-planned relationships may seem pernicious, creating an artificial barrier. And they can go awry if players don't maintain them, or find another interest.

*Doug, Katie, and Walt were friends who entered the game planning to play together as a team. Walt was playing Katie's current romantic interest, a fiance, and they talked loosely of marrying in-game. Doug was an old flame. Katie was dating someone who did not play but broke up with them shortly after game start. Within a few of the game's monthly sessions, she'd started dating another player. Doug and Walt were both shy and had counted on Katie for a great deal of their character's social context. They found themselves floundering as she "ignored them" in favor of her new found interest.*

### **Writer Infused Relationships**

How much say writers have in setting up character backstory varies from game to game. In some games, particularly short games, writers provide "character sheets" detailing the character's entire life. In others the game producers are merely referees and have no control over the players past or present. Many games fall somewhere between these extremes.

The principal danger in writer-created relationships is of them being ignored, or the player being unhappy about them.

*In a game nearly fifteen years ago, I was cast in a romance plot opposite someone unsuitable. I did not particularly like the person, found them unattractive and unpleasant, and was on very bad terms with their S/O. I did have some respect for them as a roleplayer, and I think we were both painfully conscious of carrying the burden of not screwing over each other's game or the plot by failing to play, in the coldest most formal possible manner, our "romance." It wasn't fun.*

At the time, the tradition was to write sheets well ahead of time, and it was considered almost an evil to take personal chemistry into account when casting. Obviously there is some benefit to this. Some people might never be cast in romantic roles if it were left to the prejudices of a GM. On the other hand, a lack of

chemistry may doom a romance plot, and if any other plot point hinges on it, that may fall to the wayside.

Some GMs like to play matchmaker. One female GM was insistent on her ability to play “Yenta” to her players, even though her matches were often visibly painful. A GM who invests too much time in “setting up” romantic relationships may be acting out their own power fantasy, controlling others by arranging their sexual relations.

One suggestion is to set up brief pre-game scenes in order to investigate chemistry and allow some selection by players. In any case, it is impossible to know how well a relationship will work until the players interact, and failures are probably as likely as the occasional stunning success.

### THE COMPLEXITIES AND MOTIVATIONS

It’s wrong to call all complications from relationships “problems” because that suggests that, among other things, the larp is more important than the interpersonal happiness of the people involved in it. And one person’s “problem” is another person’s “love story.”

### Fantasy

One element that justifies the view of “larp as escape” is the frequent use of in-game relationships as an “escape mechanism” from an unhappy out of game relationship.

*I was in a very long relationship that was not in a good place when I was in an in-game relationship with someone else. I found that I had more fun with the in-game relationship, and almost used as an escape from the rocky relationship I was in. The in-game relationship never turned serious out of game.*

Fantasy matters to the game producer because it is important to understand that an interpersonal fantasy of this sort may be more powerful to the player than some other character element, and they

may respond badly to the perception of the game producer “interfering” in it. The player may respond with something very like the immortal words of Mick Jagger “Hey you, get off of my cloud.”

*It can be fun, and intense, to have an in-game relationship; after all, it’s like acting out a fantasy in many ways. The problems arise when the fantasy doesn’t meet the players’ visions... and of course, each player has his or her own vision of that fantasy*

### Breakups

Of the two biggest negatives to in-game relationships, it almost goes without saying that breakups are the first. There are two basic patterns of breakup. In the first, the in-game relationship goes sour. In the second it is going too well, and an out-of-game long term partner exerts pressure to end it.

One respondent said: *One example, the woman got kind of “freaked out” by the in-game relationship and broke it off as it was just too freaky for her.*

Another said: *I’ve seen my share of OOG break ups cause folks to not return to games. While sad, I think that is a fact of larping, especially when one of the partners was lead to the larp thru that previous SO.*

Often it is a long term partner who becomes jealous. One respondent said: *My only problem with the area has been the occasional jealousy on the part of an out-of-character partner of my in-game partner- in at least one case, this has caused the in-game relationship to break up, even though in that case there was nothing save friendship between me and my in-game partner out-of-character.*

A respondent felt that: *To be fair, some men also get swept up in the in-character relationships and end OOG relationships as a consequence.*

Even the choice to play separately may unduly affect a player:

*My girlfriend always wanted our characters to be partnered. Not only did this mean that I couldn't flirt with anyone else, but it meant that I couldn't follow serious plots, go off and fight, or be involved in diplomacy because I had to be having romance with her. When I was cast in a game as a leader who was an older man with no romance in his plotline at all, she made a really unlikely pass at me, playing a character I wouldn't even know or have anything in common with, and was offended when I tried to brush her off. I don't know how much of this was really wanting romance, and how much was wanting to keep other girls away from me.*

Breakups become big problems for game planners when they happen just before game, or derail a long term plot. In one game, planners set up two players in a known relationship to play long lost partners – only to have them break up a short time before the game.

Producers and writers must keep a weather eye on relationships in their game. It is fine to hang a plot on two characters love affair, but if they are known to be mercurial and prone to sudden reversals or breakups, care must be taken to ensure that the fun of others is not derailed. Sometimes players may be good sports and continue to play at least a semblance of the plot if it affects others, but it is not uncommon for one or both to leave the game entirely, resulting in a rapid and painful end for any plot based on their relationship.

Worse the breakup of two characters who served as the core of a “group” can split the group dynamic. Breakups among polyamorous partners may tend to be slightly less violent, however this is not always the case and in some cases a “domino effect” may take several players out of the game, or split multiple game segments or groups.

Players in-games are no more averse to making others “choose sides” in breakups than they are in real life, and close friends may feel they have little

choice, withdrawing from contact, and breaking game alliances on which plots depend.

### “Bleed through”

In addition to the potential for an OOG partner to force an in-game breakup, there is the potential for OOG relationships to affect play in other ways. This goes back to the initial element we mentioned in the introduction, the proverbial invisible gorilla. Currents outside the game may profoundly affect how players behave towards each other.

*From what I've seen, OOG relationships are more likely to affect a larp than in-game relationships are to bleed into outside life (though I do know of one situation where an in-game relationship did lead to some nasty OOG complications). I go to larps to have fun, and knowing that I'll be around someone I'm currently having difficulties with certainly doesn't up my incentive to go. On the other hand, I haven't avoided games or events because an ex was there. Maybe it's because I tend to end things on good terms with my exes, or perhaps it's just because I'm in so many relatively small communities that trying to avoid exes is simply pointless.*

Some players make an effort to compartmentalize the effects of “bleed through” by choosing roles in which their real life relationships won't unduly color in-character behavior.

*Generally, my SO and I don't play as a couple in larps. We ally our characters in ways where we would never betray each other, playing siblings, allies, pack mates, best-friends.*

### Rivalry

Rivalry is another bugbear of in-game relationships, and it can take many forms. Often the most traditional is the least damaging.

*There are two larps that I really enjoyed, but was forced to drop solely for romantic/personal*

issues. *The first was a vampire larp that I invited a girlfriend to attend... . Sadly, we broke up very shortly afterward for reasons completely unrelated to the larp. I decided to keep attending the larp, and made a promise to myself to treat her character as civilly as if nothing had happened between us. But she seemed like she used that opportunity specifically to torment any character that I played. After a few games, I realized that any new character I created would have to plan advance contingencies for: “What to do when my ex-girlfriend tries to ruin the game for me”, so I stopped coming to games.*

A noted facet of in-game relationships is a tendency toward heterosexual players, particularly females, anecdotally and in survey expressing enjoyment of situations in which they were part of a triad, and the other two members were of the opposite sex. Socially most people like the idea of having many partners and of being the center of attention, so it should not surprise us that individuals who have been in a situation where they had the attention of two admirers enjoyed the situation. The tendency of members of either gender to want to attract a “harem” may lead to conflict:

*Robert was a career man....had never ventured into interpersonal relationships in larp, but now he became involved in a “triangle” with a female player about his age who was coming out of a divorce. Robert was not free to carry the relationship into “out of character” interaction, and his rival, a single programmer and longtime fixture in the local game, was....when the object of his affections chose his rival, very obviously because they had begun dating outside the game, Robert felt bitter, and within a few months left the game.*

Sometimes the rival is a former partner:

*I...was forced to drop solely for romantic/personal issues....Sadly, we broke up very shortly afterward for reasons completely unrelated to the larp. I*

*decided to keep attending the larp, and made a promise to myself to treat her character as civilly as if nothing had happened between us. But she seemed like she used that opportunity specifically to torment any character that I played. After a few games, I realized that any new character I created would have to plan advance contingencies for: “What to do when my ex-girlfriend tries to ruin the game for me”, so I stopped coming to games.*

### **Stalkers**

The word “Stalker” gets thrown around with alarming frequency in our society. Anyone who reads Victorian literature would quickly conclude that the sort of pursuit that was considered normal, or even idealized in a previous era might be categorized as “stalker-like” now. To make matters worse, the sort of impassioned desire for intimacy and intrusion into personal life that characterize stalking may be welcome from a partner that is desirable and only become “stalker-like” when they are carried out by one who is undesirable or inconvenient.

Typically women are more likely to complain about stalking behavior than men, but members of both genders talk about being “stalked” at least in the social sense.

*I was involved in an in-game relationship with a girl at a game I was driving to attend in another state. We flirted online but always in character, and our relationship got very complicated. It was never physical, we never even kissed. But she began to get very obsessive about it in chat rooms between games. I eventually broke it off and stop going to the game, but she wouldn’t stop contacting me or bothering my friends....I wasn’t sure she really understood the difference between the real world and the game.*

*I have found that some larpers (Theatre Style) don’t know how to handle an in-character relationship. Some can’t deal because they are emotionally*

*immature. Others refuse to separate reality from larp. Whatever the case may be, some become stalkers and others become sexually 'free'.*

Some players in long term relationships preferred to form in-character relationships only with others in similar relationships: *Committed friends know the difference between in-game and out of game, whereas single male friends invest in the ic relationship and often step over the line, thinking we're such a match that they start pursuing my out of character, which is uncomfortable.*

### **GENDER DIFFERENCES**

It is difficult to make many meaningful extrapolations about gender differences in larp, though there are a few exceptions.

First, it is clear that women are presented with the opportunity for relationships more than men, though it is unclear whether because in general men tend to play the role of pursuer or because women are more scarce in larp.

*I get "asked out" rather frequently, mostly because I think that serious female gamers who have a clear understanding of the rules are rare creatures.*

Resultantly concerns about relationships being taken seriously out-of-character when they were not intended that way is a high concern for female larpers.

One woman commented: *before the next game session, a mutual friend told me that he was extremely interested in me out-of-game, so I decided that the out-of-game attraction would make an in-game relationship a poor idea.*

Another said: *a person may pursue you for an in-character relationship that you don't necessarily want and end up hurting them both in-character and out-of-character, or perhaps they're completely*

*relentless, or sometimes the other person wants to turn it into an out-of-character relationship etc.*

Another respondent sheds some further light on this.

*The second game involved a girl who was one of those "just a friend" people that I was none the less very attracted to. There was a lot of chemistry between us, but I was engaged, and she claimed to be not attracted to me. I invited her to a outdoor boffer larp. When we got to the game, she clung to my side most of the time, and didn't really let me interact with the other players....Out of game, she remained very clingy and passive-aggressive, almost as if she thought of me as a kind of surrogate boyfriend. I later found out that she left my wedding reception in tears. After that, I felt very uncomfortable going back out to the game with her.*

The suggestion may be that women are as likely to be attracted to men as vice-versa, but may be less likely to act out, potentially because of pre-existing societal conventions.

One other notable gender difference is "playing house." Young girls have a strong preference for playing house (Cramer, P., & Hogan, K. A., 1975: 145-154). Sociological theory suggests women carry this preference into later life "Women enjoy talking about buying homes" (Relationships/How Women Select Men, 2006).

In-game women may move rapidly to press for an in-game wedding. *You have barely gotten to the point of kissing and women want you to get married in-game. That's the first thing that they want to do. And you can just see the guy wilting.*

Typically we see women as the ones who, at the early stage of the relationship, are likely to cut it short, head it off, or curtail it for fear of getting "too serious." But once committed we see men as the ones more likely to shy away from "commitment" at a later

stage and move on. Said one respondent: *Some men have proven more inclined to enjoy the benefits of blurring the lines between in-character and out-of-character relationships (making out, sexual benefits) and then re-establishing those boundaries when they decide they are ready to move on to someone else.*

In-game weddings can themselves be a mixed bag. Like real weddings, if properly run and well directed they can be a benefit to the game environment. But also like real weddings, they are for the audience not for the bride and groom who could elope if they wanted an intimate personal encounter. If the players understand that, and can be ecumenical in planning, handing out roles, an in-game wedding can be a successful event.

In real life, weddings tend to trump all other social events. Even those who are constant complainers or detractors feel some obligation to behave with dignity at a wedding. This balances to some extent a tendency of brides or grooms to behave badly or selfishly. They may get talked about but not disrupted. In-games, while a wedding carries more *gravitas* than most game events, the immunity of real life weddings does not exist. Players who are jealous of either member of the couple – or who are just jealous that someone else is having an in-game romance while they are not, may feel much more free to vent their emotions on the event.

Organizers also run the risk of seeming to play favorites. If one high profile couple that is relatively well liked marries in-game with time and or resources set aside for the service, other players may want “equal time” even if they are not as popular. Such demands can be very taxing on producer time and resources.

### **POLYAMORY AND ALTERNATIVE LIFESTYLES**

A final element to consider is the complexity brought by non-traditional relationships. Above we briefly discussed polyamory, and the fact that such relation-

ships may make for a “domino effect” taking down several plots or game elements if they collapse.

Polyamorous relationships seem to be statistically less likely to disintegrate spectacularly. The degree to which the relationship is “open” may be seen as a predictor of this. A polyfidelitous triad (a group in which all of the members are faithful to each other) may explode as painfully as a fifteen year marriage, but three individuals all of whom are dating other partners are less likely to come to a truly explosive end.

There is actually a real dynamic here. Proportionately they have less invested in the relationship and because of other interlinked relationships may have much more to lose socially by “turning it ugly.” There is no rule, but a predisposition. Breakups in dating couples tend to have less long term impact than divorces among married couples and the same is true of those who have multiple partners. The availability of other options tends to soften the blow and to some extent the perception of “need” to fight over the relationship that is failing. The more loose the bonding, the less explosive its disintegration.

Alternative sexuality and lifestyles don’t seem to have a profound impact on larp, however there can be issues. In the demographic among which larp is popular, homosexuality is effectively accepted and normal, at least in the Eastern United States. Individuals may have issues, however as a group, larpers are unlikely to feel negatively about gay players.

There are subsidiary issues however. Some players who identify as gay may be perfectly happy to play a heterosexual relationship in-game. Others may be actively offended, or made uncomfortable by the idea. The issue can become more unclear if a player “comes out” during the course of a campaign, something not at all uncommon in campaigns with a college demographic, where individuals may be confronting their sexuality for the first time.

One woman said: *I've also been in a relationship with a PC who was straight, even though the player was 100% gay and in a committed relationship.*

Transgender players can create additional complexities. An attractive outgoing transgender player might be a tremendous asset to organizers, being willing to play both male and female roles and having a winning personality that tends to put both genders at ease. On the other hand a transgender player who is sensitive about a complex gender identification can constitute a substantial challenge.

Again this can be complicated among younger players when an individual is first “coming out” with a new gender identity. Confusion, especially if it results in a set of changes that involve “acting out” can make other players uncomfortable, and if it involves taking offense at perceived slights can arouse resentment and hostility.

*We had a problem player in our game who said sie was agender, or had no gender. Sie seemed obsessed with things that pertained to gender, with what people called hir, and we got tired of it. Sie never seemed happy and everything having to do with gender was a big issue. Most of us felt like sie was using the game as a therapy group.*

Transgender sexual identities are not necessarily as widely accepted as Gay and Lesbian identities, possibly because they are more ambiguous and perceived as more of a threat by those who are not comfortable with alternative sexuality to begin with. One player confided that they “could not deal” with a Transgender player and stated: *I try to ignore that they exist.*

Despite a few negatives however, most players seem very accepting of difference, likely because larpers tend to be educated, and educated people tend to be more tolerant. The fantasy world of the game helps render sexual distinctions less significant, and soften

the impact of differences, just as the filter of “the game” softens “in-game” relationships to muted mirrors of those that dominate life “out-of-game.”

## CONCLUSIONS

Relationships in-games are very much the same thing for producers of larp as weather in an outdoor game. We can do very little to head it off. But we can predict it and see it coming, and take appropriate action to lessen the damage, or take advantage of good weather.

Relationships are clearly a driving force behind participation in larp overall, and underscore the larp as primarily a vehicle for social interaction. To ignore them as a driving force of our games would be as unrealistic – and self defeating – as boffer organizers failing to plan for excitement and competitive spirit.

larp producers tend to be heavy on control and sometimes weak on reaction. Relationships are a matter for reaction – we can seldom control them, but we can do things to make sure they don't damage the game for others, and to take advantage of the energy they create to drive our game along.

Some respondents suggest going further however. *I think as a storyteller that the best way to hook players in-game is to offer a relationship to them with an NPC, or to encourage ic relationships and then but tension on them - one is kidnapped, etc. People really respond to relationships and it seems to be the easiest way to add tension to the game without providing live or die situations, which have to be spaced out to keep up tension.*

By understanding and studying the relationship gorilla, we can at least keep it from doing as much damage, and at best learn to harness its power for good.

Often it is relationship energy that is driving large segments of our game. At least one respondent out

and out admitted that it was more than half the reason they attended at all, and others hint that it is not an insignificant factor. That much energy is a tremendous portion of our player interest.

First we need to look at the Gorilla. Then we need to understand it, and not just by taking what players say at face value, but by looking at the hidden social exchanges in every human interaction, from Berne's games to the deceptions inherent in our biology. Then we need to look at how it positively influences our games, and how we can draw more energy from it, without placing too much reliance on a thing which is still... at heart... a very wild beast.

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# ragnhild hutchison

## the norwegian larp archive

### **Abstract**

The Larp archive (Laivarkivet) is a national collection of material from the Norwegian larp community up to December 1st, 2005. The archive consists of material made for Norwegian larps, i.e. character descriptions, background material for the settings, summary of plots and administrative material such as participants' lists and accounts. Lists of participants have been edited according to the Norwegian Law of Privacy. Pictures, audio material and film are also included in the collection. Approximately 2/3 of the material is electronic.

### **Introduction**

The Larp archive documents youth and youth-activities in Norway at the turn of the century. Youth and youth activities are generally underrepresented in archives, both with regards to the percentage of society which young people constitute, but also when considering the importance adolescence is given in today's society. The Larp archive helps document an activity and a culture created and controlled by young people. Since larp is considered by some, both institutions and individuals, as amateur theatre, the Larp archive also documents a part of Norwegian amateur theatre tradition.

The Larp archive was handed over to Trine Næss, head of the Theatre collection at the Norwegian National Library the 15th of December 2005. The people engaged in the project have been: Ragnhild Hutchison (project coordinator and head collector), Sunniva Saksvik (collector in Trondheim), Jorg E. Rødsjø (technical support and web page). Ravn contributed with practical assistance, the National Library and The State Archival Service have provided guidance to the collection of data and the Larp archive rented facilities at Norwegian Institute of Local History. The collection of data has been possible through economic support from The Arts Council Norway.

This report is made up of two parts. The first deals with what larp is and how it has developed in Norway. The information in this part is from Ragnhild Hutchisons article "Larp organising and gender" in "Dissecting Larp" (Knutepunkt 2005). The second part deals with the experience made during the collection of data. The report was handed over to The Arts Council Norway and The National Library of Norway. The present publication of the report has been updated to include recent developments.

## **PART 1** **Norwegian larp**

Larp is a young medium, dominated by young voices. In the Nordic countries larp dates back to 1989. Most of those participating in larps (Larpers) are in the age range 16-32, with a majority in their early twenties. In the last approximately five years larp can be described as becoming a more mature art form, expressed through increased emphasis on larp theory and interaction with more established art forms through participation in exhibitions and other venues. Larp is in continual evolution, seeking to find its own aspects and forms, and therefore a medium which dares experiment.

Larp is an interactive medium where in the organizer has created a fictive setting and background in which the participants play out their roles. The organizer has created these roles in the setting and background, given them goals and a description of their character, not unlike character descriptions in prose. Together the participants create a community and a story within the boundaries of the setting. The story is improvised and it is up to the participants how the story evolves. The variation of settings is large; stretching from the darkest tragedies to comedies. Larp draws mainly on elements from theatre and tabletop role-playing games (i.e. Dungeons & Dragons, Fabula or Draug), but also has clear connections to art forms like storytelling, film and theatre sport. Larp is an art experience where all the senses are used, something that creates real emotional responses in a controlled environment.

### *How larp has developed in Norway?*

“The larp community” is used to describe larp communities at a local level (i.e. the larp community in Vikersund), as well as all who, nationwide, participate in larps (e.g. the Norwegian larp community). On the local level larpers are knit together in communities consisting of organizers and participants (often overlapping) of whom it may be said that they share some common ideas about larp, i.e. the demands for cos-

tumes, age limits for participation, views on alcohol and the length of events.<sup>1</sup> The number of local larp communities varies over time, but the oldest and most stable are located in Oslo, Trondheim and Bergen. Larpers often clearly express ties and a feeling of belonging to their local larp communities. At the national level the Norwegian larp community is made up of local communities, however there is no formal organized group. Instead, the web portal Laiv.org has since 1999 functioned as a central meeting place for local larp communities.

How large is the Norwegian larp community? The general consensus in the community itself assumes between 3000 – 5000 persons. This estimate is however, riddled with uncertainties. First of all, these numbers have been circulating for at least 10 years, a period in which we shall see later, changes has occurred which may have influenced the size of the community. Secondly, it is difficult to define when a person should be considered to be a larper or not. Some would say that as long as you have participated at one, perhaps two larps, you should be counted, irrespective of how long ago it was. Others set a time limit, but how long should the time limit be? And others again feel it should be up to the individual to define oneself as a larper or not. Further complicating the estimate we find that there are people, both at national and local levels, that has not participated in an actual larp in perhaps 5 to 7 years, yet still are active in the larp community through e.g. discussions or at social occasions.

One way of finding an estimate could be to look at the number of registered members at Laiv.org. Laiv.org has existed since 1999 and information exists making it possible to reconstruct the growth of members. Presently Laiv.org has approximately 2250 registered members. However, these cannot be considered synonymous to the number of Norwegian larpers. Firstly, many larpers have not registered, and secondly the number includes people who may not be considered larpers<sup>2</sup>. Thus, no decisive conclusion can be given

concerning the size of the Norwegian larp community. In order to arrive at a more accurate estimate it would be necessary to develop a method and analysis which is outside the scope of this report.

The first larps in Norway were held in 1989, one in Oslo and one in Trondheim. The larps originated in two local communities which had little knowledge of each other. What they had in common was that the organizers were mainly groups of boys with a background in tabletop role-playing games, as well as the scouting movement. The participants at the larps were friends and acquaintances, often from school. Both communities were in the beginning dominated by boys, and the settings were mainly “fantasy”. In Oslo it was the group Ravn, and in Trondheim it was the group Soria Moria which came to dominate. From the early to mid nineties more larp communities appeared, both in the larger cities, such as Kråke in Oslo, but also less urban areas, such as Grenland, Elverum, Kristiansand, Vikersund and Kongsberg.

Since the first larps in 1989 there has been steady growth in the number of events. This has coincided with an increase in the number of participants and in groups organizing larps. From two events in 1989, the number increased to 22 events in 1994. According to Laiv.org’s calendar 35 events were organized in 1999, and in 2005 71 events were registered. The number of events in 2005 has not been confirmed since the number of cancelled events is not certain. The registered number of larps up until 1999 can be considered to be correct since the national community at that time still was small enough to make it possible for people to be informed of all the larps held in a given year. Today the community has become so big that keeping the calendar updated has proven difficult.

Over time the size of the events has changed. Until the end of the nineties the events were often relatively large, i.e. with between 100 and 200 participants<sup>3</sup>.

In the 2000s fewer larps of this size have been held. One likely explanation is the increase of the number of groups organizing events. This has led to a harder competition for participants, which may have led organizers to make larps for fewer participants. Another explanation may be that larp communities recruit less new participants. This does not mean that recruitment has stopped, but rather that many of those who were active during the nineties have reduced the time they spend larping, or stopped because of competing demands from work and family.

In the early nineties the majority of larpers were between the ages of 16 and 23, but with the years the age spread has become larger. Today the spread spans from the ages 16 to 40, with the majority in the early twenties. The change can be explained both by recruitment of older people, mainly parents of larpers, but also because the larpers themselves have grown older. The gender composition of the larp community has also changed over time. In the early nineties larp was male dominated, both among participants and organizers. At this time approximately 1/3 of participants were female, and maximum two of the organizers were women. In the middle of the nineties a change occurred. Today girls make up about 40% of the larp participants, and among the organizers the share of girls has in some communities at times exceeded 50%.

It has not been possible to confirm, however there might be a correlation between the increase in female participants and the changes in the settings used from the middle of the nineties. In the early nineties most events were set in a fantasy setting. Often the setting was inspired by literature like J.R.R. Tolkien’s “Lord of the rings”, C.S. Lewis’ “Narnia” series or other similar literature. Common ingredients were fighting monsters, magic and supernatural elements (organised with different rule systems, a legacy from the tabletop role-playing games). In the early 90’s it became a tradition that Ravn (in Oslo) organized two events each year; a summer event with a fantasy setting and

a winter event with a historical setting. However, even though the winter events were supposed to be historic they often included supernatural elements to spice up the setting. From the middle of the nineties the settings variety has increased, e.g.: American High School in the 1950-ies (Sunrise High) and a matriarchal Bronze Age society (Ravn's winter event in 1996). Historical authenticity became more important and several contemporary larps were held. At the same time there was an increased focus on the ingame relations between the roles.

An organizing group normally consists of between three and ten people who create the setting, roles and plot. The organizers themselves take the initiative to organize the event and often work on it a year before it is actually held. The organizing groups are often ad-hoc project groups who meet to organize a specific event, or a series of events. Some larp organizations not necessarily organize larps, but instead support the larp organizers in their work. The financing of the larp has predominantly been done at self-cost; the participation fee has gone to cover the expenses. Even so, many larp organizers have used considerable amounts of their own money to arrange events. Since the year 2000 progressively more larp organizers have applied for financial support from various cultural institutions. "Frifond Teater" is one such institution, and also receives the majority of financial applications from larp organizers.

There are several reasons for the increase in applications for monetary support. One is that the organizers have become aware of the possibility, something they may not have been previously. Secondly, several of the events held in recent years have put more emphasis on scenography, and therefore have had a greater need for money than earlier events. It could also be that the possibility of getting financial support has increased the level of ambitions for scenography. Thirdly, the state funds available for culture have changed in recent years, shifting the focus away from large youth organisations and over to smaller, more

ad-hoc projects. This benefits larp since most of the activity is project based.

An important characteristic of in the Norwegian larp community is its' loose organization. There have been three attempts to organize the community in some sort of umbrella organization, but none have succeeded. Instead, local communities has kept in touch outside larp through Laiv.org and by meeting at larp events such as parties and seminars. Through the yearly gathering Knutepunkt (a Nordic larp conference organized yearly in turn by the Nordic countries since 1997) the Norwegian larp community has established better contact with the larp communities in other Nordic and European countries. The community early adopted modern technology such as e-mail, web pages and Internet. Discussion forums soon became an integral part of the information exchange. There has been no need for a united representation of the larp community towards the public. In the few circumstances where a more formal comment has been called for, this has often been done by more experienced larpers.

Schooling and exchange of experience has been important to ensure and improve the quality of larps, recruitment of new organizers and strengthening the community in general. Several seminars have been held for those who are interested in organising larp e.g. Ravens "IL-workshop" in 1994 and 1995, and the "Laiv-mekke gatherings" in 2001, 2002 and 2003. The quality of the events, logistics and production of larp material (everything from databases to armour) have consciously been endeavoured to be improved through the transfer of experiences and knowledge through the existing informal networks. Furthermore, a tradition for yearly gender gatherings, separating the boys and the girls for part of the evening in order to discuss various topics, often connected to the gender.

Larp has also become a part of several educational institutions' offers. In recent years a number of larps

have been organized at Folkehøgskoler, larp has been used at NTNU in Drama and Theatre studies, and several museums, among them Norsk Folkemuseum uses larp as a means to convey history. It should also be mentioned that Frifond Teater each year receives several applications from school classes which are planning to organize larp.

## **PART 2**

### **Collection of data for the Larp archive**

The Larp archive consists of the following:

- > 92 larps sorted chronologically
- > 21 folders containing material to settings or serie-larps
- > 9 folders with clausal larps
- > Miscellaneous material that is not directly related to a specific larp event or organizing group, flyers and secondary sources about larp

The Larp archive is national and has collected material from as many larp communities as possible. The collection of data has primarily focused on collecting background material created for larps. By background material is meant; the character descriptions which the participants receive, background information given to players (called compendiums) and the organizers summaries of the plots. Administrative material such as lists of participants and tallies, has also been collected. The lists of participation have been edited in accordance with the Norwegian Privacy Law in such a way that only name and year of birth is available. Photographs and films have also been collected. As much of the material as possible has been digitalised, with exception of the edited participant lists which are on paper (in accordance with the Norwegian Privacy Law).

Approximately two thirds of the material in the Larp archive is electronic. For practical reasons it is therefore divided into two parts; one physical and one electronic part. The physical part was handed over in archive boxes and binders. It consists of all the paper material, as well as a copy of the electronic material

relevant for each larp. In this part of the archive every larp has been put in separate folders or binders. The electronic material for each larp has been stored on CDs, and put in the respective folders. The second part of the archive, consisting of all the electronic material handed over on two DVDs.

### **The data collection**

The 6th October 2005 the Larp archive was announced on the Norwegian larp community's discussion *forum laiv.org*. The Larp archive got its own discussion thread where people could ask questions, and which the Larp archive could use to inform. A web page for the Larp archive was also created at [www.neoplex.org/laivarkivet/](http://www.neoplex.org/laivarkivet/). It contained information about the project and an archive key by which the material being submitted was to be sorted according to.

The Larp archive specifically addressed larp organizers as they were considered the most likely to have the most complete data collections from larp events. Some organizers had complete copies of all the material made for the larps they had organised, whilst others only had what they had written themselves. Few had lost or discarded any of the material.

Information about the Larp archive and the opportunity for organizers to contribute with their material was spread through relevant channels like [laiv.org](http://laiv.org), e-mail lists and gatherings in the larp community. In a few cases the Larp archive contacted organizers directly. These were organizers which had over the years made numerous larps, and the Larp archive wanted to make sure that these were informed of the project. The decision to contribute material to the Larp archive has been left to the individual larp organizers and organizations.

It has not been possible to achieve a complete archive of all Norwegian larps. The method used for gathering the materials was the information channels used primarily by larp organizers active at the time of the

collection, the result has been that the Larp archive is slightly lopsided, containing more material from recent years. The Larp archive has tried to correct this by actively seeking material from older larps. Many of the organizers active in 2005 have organized larps earlier, and they have contributed their earlier material. Furthermore, many of the organizers from the nineties still follow the community, even though they are no longer active themselves. Many of these former organizers have contributed material. Several larp organisations have had their own archives, and the Larp archive has received copies of these. This includes among others Ravn, Nosferatu, Soria Moria and Arcadia. Even so, larps made by organizers of few larps, as well as larps in the smaller larp communities are less well represented. To strengthen the representation of the Larp archive, we have also accepted some contributions from players, but only if the material has been from larps not already in the archive. The material from players is far from as complete as material from organizers, but at least it provides some information, and is therefore better than nothing.

Nine of the folders in the archive are clausal. This has been necessary because they contain information about plot and settings for larps still to come or for larp series that have yet to be concluded. To let this information be publicly accessible would reveal secrets which are of importance for mysteries of future larps. The clausal period is set to 10 years because the electronic material is stored on CDs and DVDs, a storage medium with limited lifespan.

### **Challenges during the collection of data**

The Larp archive is the first collection with so much electronic material handed over to the National Library. This made the work both challenging and exciting. One of the main challenges with the collection work was to clarify in what electronic format the material should be in. This was important because we wanted the archive to have an electronic format that could be accessed not only in the present, but

also in the future. The National Library gave few guidelines about the electronic formats, and in the end we contacted senior counsellor Trond Sirevåg at the National Archive Services of Norway for advice. Royal Norwegian Archives has since the late nineties received electronic archives, and they accept material in Word format, text format and PDF, text and PDF being the preferred formats. Pictures are to be handed over as .JPG or .GIF, and sound in .MP3 format. The LARP-archive chose to use these same guidelines.

The combination of paper and electronic material has presented challenges in the organization of the material. The Larp archive has chosen a two-part solution, one physical that contains all the paper and all the electronic material sorted according to each larp, and one part that just contains the electronic material. The electronic data in the physical part of the archive has been stored on CDs and stored in folders together with the paper material. This makes the physical part of the archive complete, but only for the next 5-10 years. The CDs will then degrade, and the information stored on them lost.

To ensure a slightly longer lifespan for the electronic data, the Larp archive has also collected this part of the archive on two DVDs. However, it is still not enough to ensure the information stored on them survive very into the future. The electronic material in the Larp archive must therefore, within maximum 10 years be transferred to a storage medium with a longer lifespan than both CDs and DVDs.

A third problem has been the downloading of web pages. Since 2000 the overall majority of Norwegian larps have had web pages. These have increasingly become the most important information channel for the organizers and participants. It was necessary to find a way to store these web pages, which did not rely on the reader being connected to the Internet and that the pages were still hosted. The solution decided upon has been to store them as PDFs. Another challenge has been to copy the larp community's

most important contact forum, [www.laiv.org](http://www.laiv.org), and a picture gallery on the Internet, [www.youhei.net](http://www.youhei.net) with pictures documenting larps. These websites were too big for the Larp archive to download. It was agreed that the National Library should download them (harvest them). The Larp archive also consists of a considerable amount of film material. Much of it is old, and therefore only available in old formats. The National Library will convert this material to the format they consider best suited. At the moment of writing, neither the web pages have been downloaded, nor the films converted.

### **Further work**

There was a small handover in January 2006 to include material from larpers that has been abroad (due to work, studies and so on), and that therefore was not possible to hand over this autumn.

The Larp archives web pages will during the winter of 2006 be remade into a portal and be incorporated in the National Library's web pages. The portal will include more information about larp, and samples from the archive. The National Library will in the future take over the pages. For now the pages are located at [www.neoplex.org/laivarkivet/](http://www.neoplex.org/laivarkivet/) This has not yet been done since we await instructions from the National library regarding how the pages should be organized technically.

According to plan there will also be an exhibition at the National Library based on the Larp archive. This will not be before 2007 (due to the Ibsen year in 2006). The work with the exhibition was to be clarified in the winter of 2006, however, there is still (October 2006) much uncertainty as to whether the exhibition will be realized.

*This report was written and completed by Ragnhild Hutchison the 9th of January 2006 for the The Arts Council Norway and updated for Knudebogen 07 in October 2006.*

### **Notes**

- 1 This is of course a generalisation. The local communities consists of individuals who often not are organized in specific groups, and thus the opinions and perceptions vary with the individuals.
- 2 In order to post a text on [laiv.org](http://laiv.org), it is necessary to register. Thus people who do not want to post, only read, do not need to register. People outside the larp community have also registered in order to post texts with the aim of get in contact with the community.
- 3 Relative from a Norwegian point of view. Sweden, Denmark and Finland have other traditions for what should be considered a "large" larp.



society



# klaus thestrup

## warhammer freestyle: larp in pedagogical work

Buffer swords, orcs and 'fantasy' are hitting the after school clubs at a high pace. The pedagogues and the kids are bending over glass fibre pipes, pads and gaffa tape to make buffer weapons for the playground. As drama teacher and as lecturer at Jydsk Pædagog-Seminarium Randers, Denmark it is of my interest what implications larp might have for pedagogical work. This article is based on different encounters with children over the sharp edge of a buffer sword.

Larp in a pedagogical context is first and foremost about more than making good buffer weapons: Teachers and children alike need to establish a game with firm rules on e.g. when you die, and how you may re-enter the game. Everyone must be able to participate in a kind of improvised theatre play where they all construct a story by participating and altering it. Child-care workers also meet children who find themselves in the middle of a media society and with the buffer swords uses figures and scenes as a resource in their own media based games..

### **Children in the media web**

The larping children I have met at large, structured events, randomly between town houses or at times where I have initiated sword games seem to use larp

in another way than the young experienced larpers who organize large and successful larps in the woods with hundreds of participants. These larpers often have a history in a very consuming, time demanding subculture, while the children seem to use larp as one of more opportunities.

The buffer swords are part of an immense web of media and stories. The children play computer games, read comics and novels, play miniature war games, play collectible card games and watch *Lord of the Rings* on DVD. They go to stores selling miniatures and swords, walk around and discuss the different miniatures. They dig down into catalogues and rule books that they can barely read as they are in English. They take the buffer swords and run out into the backyard, or between the blocks and make rules and teams without being monitored by anyone but themselves. With irregular time spans they participate in larger larps by a society or a group of adults.

The discussions and stories fly between them, while they play, bicycle to school, or paint miniatures and ruins for the next battle on the dining table. They meet the stories of Tolkien by constructing them from games, movies and miniatures. They use bits and

pieces from these stories together with stories of *Star Wars*-movies, the on-line role-playing game *World of Warcraft* and the Manga-cartoon *Dragon Ball* or other things that occupies them at the moment. These bits and pieces become resources of new stories told through rules and figures in their own larp or through stories, they tell one another. One moment they cooperate intensely in front of the screen to kill the next enemies, the next they run out to circle around one another and construct stories about the next enemies. A bit later they are back in the room.

Very few of these children will presumably be game masters but they are storytellers and consumers. If you as a parent, child care worker, teacher, larper or scientist is interested in larp as a phenomenon in children's lives in the media society, children's participation in larp organized by youngsters or adults is not enough. The decisive point is the childrens use of different types of media in a web of technology and stories.

### **Cultural creators in local connection**

In the type of larps I have participated in and worked with personally until now, the sword has been the decisive turning point. The basis for the larp is a combat game with rules for using the sword. These rules originate both from the many handbooks on the subject, from the large larp events and from the children themselves. Here are some rules I often use together with children:

You can be hit three times without anything happening, you are invulnerable. Forth time you die no matter where you are hit. If you hit an opponent in the head it is a suicide and you die yourself. When you are dead you go to the *churchyard*, a place on the battlefield, where you count to twenty-five. Afterwards you can enter the battle again and fight on with new hit points.

Often I use the game 'Piercing Sword' to practice the basic rules. This game is like dodge ball but with

swords instead of a ball. Everyone fight one another, if the person A is killed by B, A does not enter the game before B is killed by another. It is hard to end this game with one winner, because it goes so fast with being killed and re-entering the game that the game often has to be stopped so everyone can catch their breath and maybe get something to drink.

The above rules and games are off course not the only right ones, but they work. Other groups of children and adults have in other connections made many more and more complicated rules and games. The point is that it is a group of participants outside the big larps who have tried, changed and altered rules themselves; ending with something which makes sense in the community they are part of. The rule of suicide is not one I met at a big larp the first time, but among a small group of boys playing behind the houses, in which they lived. The game 'Dodge Swords' I have made myself with a group of children in the backyard; far away from institutions and experienced larpers. The rules of the big established larps is a source of inspiration, however not definite and to be regulated by the participants themselves.

In the handbooks on larp written by larpers many examples on games and rules which can initiate a larp are found. These rules seem to originate from the authors' own testing of rules, from the time they were fighting with buffer swords in the woods themselves. The children of today seem to have the same starting point as younger larpers back then. They develop their own rules and a local culture based on playing with fiction; however it is a culture where larp is one of many opportunities and not the only and all time consuming daily activity.

### **The game with fiction**

The game 'Dodge Swords' can be developed into the bigger game 'The three bases'; these become the basis of a regular larp. The participants can be distributed into three groups with one base each, with some distance in between. The walls of the Base can be

marked by some bushes or by rope. On each base you find a 'Sacred Artefact'. This artefact can be a flag or something else. It only has to be small enough to carry. The game is now about conquering all three artefacts. The group to first have all three artefacts on their base has won.

In this game a non-linear drama is included. It is not given beforehand who wins the three artefacts. Neither is it given who is going to make the most spectacular attempts to win the artefacts, and which group will be the one to almost win. The game can be further developed with introducing prisoners, negotiation and release. One person in the group can be the *Captain* with an extra hit point, while another is the *Magician* who can 'freeze' any opponent with a lethal touch of his hand. You can make flags, names, costumes, props and stories for the groups the participants belong to.

Another game is the 'Sword and tell' it has been picked up from two boys who played it the following way: A is guarding a gate, while B approaches it. B will not immediately tell who he is and attempts to enter. As A is the guard he cannot allow this without further explanation. After some chit-chat and negotiations the game explodes into sword fighting. Thereafter the game starts over. This game can also be played with more guards and approaches. Here you can then introduce the rules of death and the churchyard.

Both the described games are rule-based games and games using theatricals. The participants both need to know the rules of combat and improvise, say manuscript lines and imitate an character. The space, time, characters and story of the fiction are present in the game and can be negotiated and changed by the game participants. It is possible to stop and exit fiction and role, to alter the frames of the game at all times. To children staying in the fiction all the time is not the goal. Children exit and enter the fiction untroubled to make the game succeed.

Another basic element in the play culture is the ability to improvise over a formula. Children appear to receive impressions and structures from their environment very quickly and transform it to a game. The 'Sword and Tell' game uses the meaning, drama and figures of larp as inspiring formulas that are repeated and improvised on over and over again. Larp arranged by experienced Larpers becomes a resource of play in line with computer games, movies and merchandise. The 'Sword and Tell' game and the rule game 'Dodge Sword' become cultural expressions of children's extensive play with the different media available in their lives.

### **Freestyle as interpreting tool**

Together with a group of children I have played a number of miniature war games with plastic figures of the Warhammer universe. We assembled and painted the figures, built landscapes with forests, houses and hills, and fought battles of epic dimensions on a dining table. We spent a long time on testing and constructing rules of the game

In the middle of all these discussions and amazing battles it suddenly appeared to us that we actually did not play after the very extensive rules, that the company *Games Workshop* supply in their rule books. We did indeed refer to the figures of the Warhammer universe, but we e.g. approached every figure as an independent warrior that the player could move and let fight on its own, while you with the established rules move large groups and approach the figures as regiments.

The decisive is not what is best, but that we understood what we did ourselves as vital! It made sense and had to be that way until we made something else up. We did not think of what others did as better, or something we ought to live up to, but as a deeply fascinating source of inspiration. I suggested at one time that we named it *Warhammer Freestyle* to underline a difference and independence without losing the connection to the inspiration or the teachers who could enrich our game at the table.

Today I can see that we were a cultural union of interpretation were the labelling not only covered the way to play with the miniatures, but also the way we were together. From the outside people may recognize a group of children and adults gathered around a story in the way that maybe was different than others, but not of lesser worth.

### **When the culture is masculine**

It is a mistake to believe that girls cannot participate in developing a culture around larp. Certainly the vast majority of participants are boys in the large larps, but it is not a problem to create connections, where girls are equally welcome. When we started playing with miniatures it showed that it took as long to paint a figure or build a good ruin as to play a battle. The two were equally needed and respected activities in our time together and this made way for everyone, despite gender and age, to eventually find something to do that made sense and provided recognition. A well painted miniature was as important as a rule to play it with.

It is also my experience that the girls are as crazy with combat as the boys. Girls, too, like to test their energy with roughness and like as much to be physically present in the game as the boys. Initially some girls may require some special space when fighting. You can give them the best weapons, shields, more life or help them to fight together, so they can manage even the most savage boys. In this way they stand more equal when the combat begins, but after a while it is no longer necessary to provide the girls special terms. Girls can easily be warriors.

Larp, by the way, includes many other facets that both genders can play with. It is necessary to sneak, run, negotiate, play roles, improvise, innovate and be attentive. You need to practice immersion, participate in a story on play a game with rules.

There's sufficient space for girls and boys together to find a culture were gender is not viewed as a constraint.

I will, however, point to the fact that boys also need the opportunity to organize or participate in larp where there are no girls. Boys tumble with a masculine force, that neither society nor child care workers apparently need. They seem miss a connection, where they can explore the biological and cultural sex they have available. Larp is maybe the last playground of the boy culture, and one of the opportunities boys have left to become competent citizens. But whether larp is escapism or a way to handle the future is hard to say, it may be both.

### **The associated rooms**

In sword combat it is possible for the child at a symbolic but specific level to challenge the authority of the child care worker. In the after school club or the group of children in the kindergarten, the child can win over the adult. Children often know a lot more about the popular culture that the child care worker is coming across maybe for the first time. And when the meeting point of children and adults is play, the childcare worker meets the children at a point where they have experience, while the childcare worker learn things to participate. The childcare worker is no longer the know-it-all but has to very personally present as person with both strengths and weaknesses.

With a sword in the hand the childcare worker suddenly participates where children navigate: In the web of media and stories. The weapon that the childcare worker makes together with the child might be used the next day where the child lives. The childcare worker can suddenly happen to hear more about the last movie the child has seen, or the computer game that the child is playing at the moment. When the rules are determined at the playground children usually tell of rules from big larps or rules they have made themselves. The stories that turn up at the playground together with the childcare worker can become part of the stories that are told in other places. The childcare worker is no longer the expert building on knowledge

constructed over many years by other childcare workers or lecturers, but is participant in a common development of cultural expressions existing in constant exchange with the surrounding world.

The childcare worker also participates in a survey of the meaning of the figures, stories and rules. The Warhammer-universe can e.g. be interpreted as being about the battle against the absolute chaos of the world, where there no longer is any cohesive force. Fantasy can be understood as the long lasting battle between good and evil. In Tolkien's work it is even a random event that lets the force of good wins. It is universes where magic and religion apparently are better answers than social realism and rational thought. It is universes where the human and fellowship arise under persistent resistance. But it is also universes of a thrilling joy of inventing and telling stories with dramatics and rules. Everything can happen in worlds parallel to the modern every day life and they are a way of mirroring this life.

If the childcare worker only sees larp as a means to e.g. strengthen social competencies, he or she have not seen the focuses, occupying the children and the opportunities lying in the stories of popular culture. Larp is an aesthetic and cultural way to ask some essential questions and here lies a large potential for pedagogical work. The realisation of this potential, however depends on the pedagogical approach, the child care worker bases the work on.

I will suggest a cultural pedagogical position, based on the idea of *the connected rooms*. In this pedagogical work in a day care institution there has to be space for the children to play on their own and develop their culture of play. There also has to be space for the childcare workers to show the children something, the childcare workers really are able to or are interested in. Finally there needs to be room for childcare workers and children in a cultural fellowship explores the thematic focus and forms of expression. The point is that these pedagogical

rooms are connected: Buffer swords, materials, ideas for games, rules for combat and genuine anchorage areas can flow between the three pedagogical rooms in the day-care institution itself. The childcare workers can also, as an intended strategy, connect the pedagogical practice with the other arenas the children are in daily. With this position the child care worker is not primarily a role model for already established morale values, but the manager of investigating processes, where everyone can participate and matter to the answers that may arise. Children can together with adults become very active participants in the construction of larp and eventually their own lives.

Larp no longer belongs only to the organisers of the large larps. Children are already much occupied with finding their own use of stories, characters and rules. The childcare worker is also entering as one of the actors who can shape the area together with the children. Till now it primarily seems to be about making swords and bring them to the playground, but that is also a good starting point.

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sanne harder

# confessions of a schoolteacher: experiences with roleplaying in education

The premise on which this article rests is that you are able to accept that role-playing is not only theoretically an excellent method for organising education, it is also by now a widely used practice. There are those who are still discussing whether or not role-playing has a place in education. However, by now many others than myself have amply discussed the question of legitimacy<sup>1</sup>, and it is hardly a topic that breaks any new ground.

This article is about my personal experience with role-playing as an educational tool. Over the last 10 years, I have worked with role-playing inside and outside the Danish municipal school system (Folkeskolen).

The role-playing that I use for teaching often has very little to do with the hobby as we commonly think of it – the usual genres and forms are only rarely compatible with the overall learning goals.

When I choose to use role-play as a means of teaching it is because it is an excellent way of organising teaching, not because the hobby appeals to its fans. In the 21st century, being a teacher is not about teaching pupils facts, it is about helping them internalise knowledge, skills and competencies. (A definition of key competencies that “*help individuals and whole societies to meet their goals*” in a modern world has been published by DeSeCo, a work group put together by the OECD. The definition gives a general overview of what education should be comprised of. See my bibliography for further reference). This is an immensely complicated task, which depends on the pupils’ active cooperation. I discovered, like many others have<sup>2</sup>, that role-playing is a possible way of meeting some of these challenges. But using role-playing as a tool does not automatically ensure that all of your teaching goals are reached. It is important to make a qualified, conscious effort, as the following examples illustrate.

**IT'S ALL GREEK TO ME**

My first attempt with role-playing in education was during my teaching practice with a class of third graders. Children who attend third grade in Denmark are between 8 and 9. With the regular teachers of the class, I prepared a course that integrated the curriculum as a whole. The overall theme was 'Ancient Greece'. Thus, the math teacher would be working with basic mathematics and geometry as in the days of Pythagoras, the Danish teacher would be working with stories from Greek mythology, the art teacher helped create a setting and costumes, and finally the history teacher would help the children do research on architecture, clothes, daily life, et cetera. All of these activities were organised so that they functioned as research towards creating characters, who the pupils were going to role-play for three hours in a scenario which concluded the course.

Even though none of the pupils had role-played before, they were thoroughly excited and enjoyed creating their characters. They made drawings of the characters, and the girls especially enjoyed writing little stories about their characters' lives.

**'We didn't learn anything, but it was fun'**

The role-playing itself was very interesting, if not altogether a success. Some children, who were usually in the top of their class, never grasped the idea of improvisation, but kept asking the teachers for 'the right thing to say'. But others, for instance a little girl who was not otherwise known for her intellectual prowess, did really well.

It was quite clear that the competencies that were put to the test in role-playing were different from the skills that the children usually perceived to belong in a school context<sup>3</sup>. Sitting still, repeating exercises, concentrating and being self-disciplined were all of a sudden not as important as being able to initiate discussions, putting yourself in the lime light, and being able to argue your point convincingly.

These new competencies and skills are just as much a part of a modern curriculum as the more traditional,

but somewhat passive educational content<sup>4</sup>. However, not knowing exactly what to expect ourselves, we as teachers had not prepared the pupils for this new situation, and thus many, especially the usual top-achievers mentioned earlier, became frustrated and discouraged.

Another major mistake we made was placing the role-playing at the end of the course. We did a very superficial evaluation with the pupils afterwards. When asked the question: 'did you learn anything from this course?', the pupils would answer: 'No, but it was fun'. They had no notion of what they had learned or why. Also, they only saw the research they had done as relevant for writing their characters, not as knowledge of a more general nature, which could be relevant in other situations.

**Pythagoras is still alive**

We had failed in telling the pupils what it was that we expected them to learn. They did not know or understand the learning goals, and therefore had no chance of assessing whether they had reached them. If I had the chance to revise this course, I would be sure to maintain a constant dialogue with the pupils about what they were learning and why. In my opinion, it is particularly important to show relevant connections with the pupils' own experiences and every-day life. Why is Pythagoras still relevant? How do you apply his laws to every-day problems? What influence has Greek mythology had on e.g. modern-day storytelling? Thus the course would become more relevant to the pupils, and they would be able to apply their knowledge more generally. Furthermore, I now recognise the necessity of easing pupils into role-playing situations with simple exercises, which prepare them for the experience. It is not so much a question of training role-playing techniques, as it is a question of making pupils understand what is expected from them.

**ROLE-PLAYING AS EMPATHY TRAINING**

One of my most successful role-playing experiences

as a teacher was not a role-playing scenario as such. Officially it was a drama course, but I secretly considered it role-playing, as it emphasised process over end result, and it had a progressing plot. I had a group of twelve 6th-graders between the age of 11 and 12. All of them were girls, and all of them wanted to act. Two were the most popular girls in their year group, one was the most unpopular (with the physical disadvantage of a clubfoot, no fashion sense, and poorly developed social skills), three were vying for the attention of the popular girls, and the remaining girls were attempting to keep out of the power struggle.

After having broken the ice with a day of physical exercises, I introduced my concept to the pupils. We were going to improvise a small scenario, which would be performed at the end of the course. We started out by brainstorming the theme, and the girls came up with something that was very much on everyone's mind: bullying. We then brainstormed several scenes (as the points connecting them were not important) which the pupils felt were related to the theme.

At this point, I asked the pupils to "fill in the dialogue" by role-playing the scenes. Only a few of the pupils were playing at a time, and the rest were watching. This turned out to be an extremely potent learning situation. In one scene, a girl wearing a headscarf was rounded up in the schoolyard by another girl, who wanted to bully her. The girl with the scarf was played by one of the popular girls, whereas the bully was played by one of the girls who were vying for her attention. She was always exceptionally nasty to the girl with the clubfoot. However, having to bully the popular girl was a completely different situation, which proved a challenge for her, even though the popular girl kept asking her to be more aggressive. Meanwhile, the reaction of the girl with the clubfoot was also interesting. Seeing the popular girl in a situation where the roles were reversed, she did not feel

sympathy for her – instead she cheered and made suggestions to the bully. Instead of feeling empathy, she felt vindictive. When the girls were done playing the scene, I placed the two actresses on chairs, and asked them to describe what they thought their characters had been feeling during the confrontation. I also asked the rest of the girls, who had been their audience, to contribute. Together they described the humiliation, loneliness and sadness of the girl who had been bullied. They also described the bully's feeling of power. Interestingly, neither the girl with the clubfoot nor the girl who had acted the bully were able to contribute very much.

At the end of the session, it was clear that the sympathy lay with the girl who had been victimised. I asked 'the bully' how she felt about her character, and she answered that she felt such resentment towards her that she could barely express it, and used such adjectives about the character as 'cold' and 'unfeeling'.

### **Aesthetic doubling**

The exercise proved to be a lesson in empathy training. As should be clear from my example, role-playing is a particularly powerful tool for this. Aesthetic doubling (see e.g. Østern & Heikkinen, 2001<sup>5</sup>) is one of the many expressions, which describe a specific characteristic of the process of playing a character. First and foremost, you are yourself. But you are also the character, and you have to understand the character's point of view in order to play convincingly. The character is at once alien and part of the player herself, and in defining the boundaries between player and character the player is forced into a meta-cognitive process.

Putting empathy training on the curriculum might seem strange to some. But empathy training in schools is nothing new – it is, in fact, increasingly something that teachers have to deal with. Psychologist Rudolph Schaeffer has studied children's social development, and claims that society is becoming more individualistic and families are

becoming smaller. Research shows that children who have to deal with many siblings or large peer groups from an early age become more emphatic (Schaeffer, 1999). Since many families have only one or two children, the children do not necessarily have the basic emphatic competencies that they need to function well within a large group of peers when they reach school age.

The ability to relate well to others, and to function socially within groups, is a vital competence,<sup>6</sup> therefore it must have a place on the curriculum. Since this is not a competence that is tied to a specific subject, the obvious choice is to integrate it in cross-curricular activities.

### **TEACHING OUTSIDE SCHOOL IS MORE EFFICIENT**

One of the hardest challenges teachers have to overcome is motivating pupils. Attending school is compulsory, and therefore many pupils experience that they are being forced into learning. I find this very evident in the fact that my most successful experience with role-playing as education was *outside* of the school.

While I was finishing my bachelor in teaching, I supplemented my income by teaching role-playing to teenagers in an evening school. The physical frames were appalling (we had one very small class room in a run-down inner city school), however, I have never taught pupils as well motivated and enthusiastic as these. While some of the motivation undoubtedly stemmed from the fact that the pupils were there voluntarily, it is my belief that role-playing itself also had a part to play – because of the simple fact that role-playing is, fundamentally, *fun*.

The specific course that I would like to describe was a scenario called Fra Høje Himmelsale (which roughly translates to From Heaven on High). I had given my pupils the task of putting together a live role-playing scenario. We had a mutual brainstorm for ideas on the blackboard, and afterwards the pupils divided into groups. One group of three came up with the

highly original idea of making a theological role-play, where the characters were angels. The plot was about some disgruntled young angels, who had invited their colleagues to a debate about their relationship to each other and (perhaps mainly) to God. However, as always there was a snake in Paradise, as Lucifer himself appeared at the meeting in disguise. His intentions were to infiltrate the angels and have them doubt the existence of God.

### **Different perspectives on belief**

What was ingenious about the scenario was not so much the intrigue with the devil in disguise, as the fact that every angel had a unique perspective on theology. Some were stern believers, some were not, most were somewhere in between.

The scenario was held in a church in Copenhagen, and was much appreciated by the players (who were at first pupils from other role-playing classes, and later on, as the scenario was played again and again, adult role-players). However, I believe that my three prodigious pupils who had written the scenario (and myself!) were the ones to gain the most. In writing the scenario, the pupils had to do research into the mythology of angels. They interviewed several people on their beliefs (or lack thereof), and they had lengthy theological discussions, which went far beyond what one could expect of their level of education. They worked together on writing the characters, giving and receiving feedback and correcting each other's material. They dealt with deadlines, press-material and having to promote their product. Some of them did things that they would never have believed they could do, had the scenario been produced within a school context.

### **Commitment and action-taking**

Not only did the pupils gain theological knowledge – there were several by-products from organising a work-process this way. Apart from employing several skills that are related to the writing process (brainstorming, writing, feedback, etc.), the pupils had to develop competencies that relate to

working in a group, develop action competence (see Schnack, 1994) and the ability to actually implement something that had begun as an intangible idea. These are competencies which relate to doing well in the world.

It might seem incredible that I was able to make my students do very hard work – without the reward of making good grades. The reason it was possible is, quite simply, that the pupils wanted to do it. Essentially, this has to do with how we construct knowledge. Associate Professor Søren Kruse from the Danish University of Education has described constructivistic theory as an approach to learning where you perceive knowledge as something that only the pupil himself can actively construct (Kruse, 2004). This implies that only someone who *is willing* to be taught *can* be taught. Furthermore, the more interest the pupil shows, the more he will gain. Role-playing in school can probably never reach the same potential, as things you are forced into are never as appealing as things that you choose freely. There is no reason to expect that just by using role-playing as a method of teaching, pupils will automatically become motivated. Within a school context it is perhaps safer to think of role-playing as a means of organising teaching, rather than a way of making your lessons more entertaining – or one might end up thoroughly disappointed<sup>7</sup>. Even so, the fact that role-playing is so much more involving than traditional teaching methods, often makes it more appealing to the pupils.

#### **WHAT TYPES OF TEACHING IS ROLE-PLAYING IDEAL FOR?**

The examples above illustrate that role-playing can be used as a tool for diverse forms of content; it is certainly not limited to any subject in particular. However, it seems to me that it particularly excels in areas that cover some of the more elusive elements of curriculum, such as developing competencies that relate to what kind of person or citizen you choose to be<sup>8</sup>. This is important because teachers need new

tools to cover a particular part of curriculum - it is in fact an area that many find more challenging than teaching skills and knowledge, which have traditionally been parts of the school's responsibility.

#### **Going beyond a school context**

A school that only teaches pupils how to function in a school context does not fulfil its own main purpose, which is to prepare pupils for life and the world *after* finishing education. Therefore – paradoxically, it might seem – in order to succeed, the school must go beyond its own context. What role-playing offers is a means of providing alternate contexts in which the pupils can simulate situations from outside the classroom.

Role-playing is ideal for teaching competencies that are related to taking action, speaking your mind, and asserting your rights because it provides a context in which it is possible to practise. Even as flawed as it was, my example with the cross-curricular Greek course in third grade shows that there is a need for such education. As young as they were, the pupils had already been socialised into perceiving the school as a specific context, had adapted to it, and found it hard to go beyond that context.

#### **Making the theoretical tangible**

Internalising experienced knowledge (that is, knowledge which you have practical or first-hand experience with) is easier than internalising theoretical knowledge – what one might also refer to as “book knowledge” (Dewey, 1996, 2004). For instance, several professions, such as teaching, feature a so-called “pre-service experience” as part of the educational programme. First-hand experiences seem to count more weightily, no matter if you are a school pupil or a scientist. However, first-hand experiences have the drawback of being highly subjective, and they are therefore not as generally applicable as book knowledge. Book knowledge, on the other hand, is based on empirical facts, and (generally) strives to be objective. By using role-playing, you can make a context in

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which academic, fact-based knowledge becomes an experience. This is precisely what we attempted to do with the Greek course, and perhaps a goal that was actually reached, as the pupils *did* experience the content of the course as relevant (if tied to that specific situation).

Role-playing can bridge practical knowledge with theoretical knowledge. You can concretise a theoretical situation by making it into a practical one, and let the pupils experience it through the role. The “empathy training course” was another example of using role-play to make the theoretical tangible. The girls had had theoretical education that had taught them that “it is wrong to bully other people”. However, as such situations were embodied, the experience gave them a much deeper understanding.

### Seeing the world through someone else’s eyes

Seeing the world through a character’s eyes has advantages. One such is quite simply practising the rhetorical ability to make an argument. In the scenario From Heaven on High, the pupils had to represent the character’s opinions – no matter if these were consistent with their own. Understanding other people’s point of view is a very important skill when participating in a debate, but not only this; you might discover the holes in your own arguments by seeing things from different perspectives. Role-playing can provide a context for presenting different perspectives on a matter and letting pupils represent differences of opinion.

### Imagining scenarios

A role-playing sequence is often referred to as a scenario. Scenarios are interactive stories that can follow many paths of narration, which are created by the player. The degree of player influence can vary, but the player’s choices are always part of the unfolding action. This implies that role-playing is a context within which pupils can hone their ability to make competent choices. Part of being good at making choices is imagining the consequences before they happen – in other words, to picture a scenario.

### TEACHING WITH ROLE-PLAY

There is already a strong tradition for theme-based teaching. Role-playing is just another form of theme-based teaching; only it enables you to focus and train skills and competencies that are difficult to teach by organising your teaching traditionally. I have tried to shed light on which competencies and skills role-playing is particularly suited for.

At present, numerous teachers use role-playing in education. It is especially common in language teaching. However, few probably use it to the extent that I have described in my three examples. I happen to have an advantage that most teachers do not: I am both a teacher and a role-player. When talking to colleagues about using role-playing, I often find that several points intimidate them. First: Role-playing seems chaotic, as improvisation is always an important factor. With a role-play, it is often difficult to anticipate which way the plot will twist. Themes that are on the pupils’ minds, but which were not part of the teacher’s carefully planned curriculum, might surface. This can be good, but situations might also arise when the content of the lesson becomes irrelevant, and you have to take charge and get the pupils back on track – something which demands constant reflection from the teacher. Secondly, since the lines between the subjects become blurred in cross-curricular courses, some teachers are afraid of not being able to ensure the “proper amount” of curricular content. For every subject, there are certain parts of curriculum that would fit more smoothly into a role-playing course than others. For some of these parts this might be a valid fear. For instance, I imagine that teaching English grammar by role-playing must be quite a challenge. However, I do not like to dictate what can and what cannot be done. Another challenge that I have not addressed is the teacher’s competence as a drama teacher and as a narrator/director. Role-playing *does* require a minimum of acting skill, and in order to get the benefits of re-contextualisation, it is necessary to create a situation or story within which the role-play can take place.

### Curriculum or form first?

The three courses I have described in this article are all examples of possible ways in which one can use role-playing in teaching. With two of the courses, I found myself in a privileged situation that enabled me to let the pupils decide the content – all I had to do was provide the form, and play the part of supervisor. But most of the time, when planning a role-playing scenario for a class, teachers will probably be thinking of the curricular content that has to be covered, and prepare a course that incorporates that specific content.

I think both approaches have their own merits and problems. Letting the pupils “steer” means navigating through chaos at times. On the other hand, the reward for making the pupils claim ownership of what is taking place is that they become more committed.

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### Notes

- 1 See e.g. Malik Hyltoft or Thomas Duus Henriksen on this topic.
- 2 In Denmark e.g. the Danish Research Centre on Education and Advanced Media Materials, [www.dream.dk](http://www.dream.dk), has several ongoing projects that pertain to role-playing as an educational tool.
- 3 See e.g. sociologist Basil Bernstein for studies on the importance of the school as a context.
- 4 E.g. Per Schultz Jørgensen elaborates on why exactly competencies such as these need to be a part of modern curriculum in ”Hvad er kompetence? – Og hvorfor er det nødvendigt med et nyt begreb?” (*What is competence? – And why is a new term necessary?*).
- 5 Østern and Heikkinen’s article is part of the anthology “Nordic Voices”, which sprang from a Scandinavian symposium on drama and theatre in education.
- 6 It is featured on DeSeCo’s list of key competencies, and is also stated in the Consolidation Act of the Danish Folkeskole.
- 7 See Thomas Duus Henriksen’s article on this subject, “Educational Role-Play - Moving beyond entertainment”.
- 8 In fact, this is also expressed in the Consolidation Act of the Danish Folkeskole.



anne marit waade  
& kjetil sandvik

# 'i play roles, therefore i am': placing larp in a broader cultural perspective

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women, merely Players;  
They have their exits, and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,

William Shakespeare: *As You Like it*

The attention paid to live-action role-playing and other forms of leisure role-playing has exploded over the past few years, both due to the fact that the role-playing community continues to attract a lot of new members, the fact that role-playing as a creative, self-organizing and self-reflecting activity is getting an increasingly growing attention from the media, and the fact that educators, teachers, and development consultants have discovered the potential inherent in role-playing, both as an idea and a strategy. In this essay, we place leisure role-playing in a broader

Our lives are role-play.  
We have to master different scripts  
and act on several stages.  
Thus the actor may serve as  
a suitable metaphor for modern man.

Finn Skårderud: *Uro – en rejse i det moderne selv*

perspective, not only in relation to actual phenomena in mediatized popular culture (such as computer games) or to *storytelling* in organizations, but also in relation to role-playing as a tradition and theoretical consideration within education, theatre, and the social sciences. The points and discussions are based on our book *Rollespil – i æstetisk, pædagogisk og kulturel sammenhæng* (2006), which is the first Danish academic anthology on role-playing as an aesthetic, educational, and cultural phenomenon.

### The world's a stage

There is a connection between how role-playing is being used as a metaphor, e.g., within philosophy, sociology, and psychology and the way of thinking which is the basis for different forms of role-playing. We know a lot of examples in our cultural history of using role-playing and other concepts, which have their cultural origin in the theatre.

The conception of the world as a stage and human life being as transient as a play can be found not only in the writings of Shakespeare, but is also summed up in the concept *Theatrum Mundi* ('theatre of the world'), which is found as an idea as far back as ancient Greece in the thinking of, e.g., Plato and Seneca. This notion appears again in mystery plays of the Middle Ages as well as in Baroque and Renaissance theatre, and in the beginning of the 1800s *Theatrum Mundi* was the name for a very popular kind of puppet theatre that represented actual events such as great battle scenes. In our time, the concept has been used by theatre anthropologists such as Richard Schechner (1985) and Eugenio Barba (1995). What is common in all these cases is that theatre is being used as model or metaphor for the world.

In recent years, sociology and psychology, especially, have made use of theatre metaphors in order to describe the way in which humans function as individuals and in relations to others. Sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) puts forward a dramaturgically founded sociology in which he describes how we orchestrate our selves and play different roles in different contexts in order to put on a specific performance and create a specific image of our selves. Psychiatrist Richard Sterba (see Bentley 1964, p.145) also connects life and theatre by describing how our desire to be a spectator in the theatre has narcissistic elements that may be traced back to early childhood and our ability in childhood to create imaginative worlds to play roles in. And psychologist J.L. Moreno (see Bentley 1964, p.165) regards life as a complete theatrical play in which living is being directly involved in the

dramatic actions and events, and he uses this to formulate a specific psycho-dramatic method, which is concerned with getting patients directly involved in whatever drama they want to experience, and where therapists—according to the theatrical principle of using fictional characters as substitutes—are playing different roles in a variety of confrontational scenes which are not just reconstructions (as in other psychotherapeutic methods), but also consist of new and spontaneous situations. This last example demonstrates how theatre metaphors constitute a starting point for role-playing used as a concrete – here therapeutic – narrative form.

The question is then: does the use of theatre metaphors today have the same meaning as it did at the time of Shakespeare, for example? When both William Shakespeare, in *As You Like It*, and Norwegian psychiatrist Finn Skårderud, in his books on modern identity: *Uro* [Restlessness] (1999) as cited above, are using theatre metaphors such as stage, actor, and role, are they then talking about the same issue? Well, yes and no. Both are describing the world and human conditions, but neither the world nor the human conditions are the same today as they were when Shakespeare lived. When Shakespeare makes the character Jacques say that, 'one man in his time plays many parts,' this may be regarded as the same as Skårderud's statement, pointing out that 'we must master different scripts and act on several stages'. But Jacques is talking about the different roles which the phases of life (childhood, youth, adulthood, old age) and society's institutions (occupation, marriage, social class) deal us, whereas Skårderud's metaphors describe the conditions of modern man in today's hyper-complex society where roles are not necessarily something we are dealt, but rather something we create ourselves.

Even though we still have to submit to biology and in the end meet the second childhood 'sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans anything' (as Shakespeare puts it), the hyper-complexity means that the individual

to an increasing extent is set free from those social institutions that earlier defined its role. To use one of the worn-out phrases of postmodernity, there are no longer any great stories that define the scope of actions for the individual. Instead, the individual creates her/his own roles and stories. We create ourselves as roles, as stories, so to speak. And in this process we use—as in theatre—different props and costumes: media technology (e.g. cell phones), styles of clothing, body decorations, music, etc. as narrative means included in our self-presentation. Role-playing thus becomes a narrative vehicle for creating our own stories and testing different identities.

### **Role-playing in a cultural context**

Role-playing in all its many facets is a complex activity that at the same time is theatre, storytelling, self-presentation, children's play, education, self-mobilized leisure culture, popular culture, and commercial culture. Role-playing is embedded in a larger cultural context in which there are connections between role-playing as narrative format and related educational, psychological, artistic, religious, and everyday-cultural phenomena. As such, role-playing appears both as a specific cultural phenomenon with its own forms, logic, and history, and as a phenomenon that ties in to a variety of other cultural phenomena, both present and historical.

Role-playing-like activities have existed at different times throughout European cultural history. As its predecessors, we may mention the Cult of Dionysus in ancient Greece, the Medieval Passion play, masques, and carnivals. In an educational context, the ancient schools of rhetoric, the educational practice of universities in the Middle Ages, as well as some forms of military training represent typical examples of activities which may be understood within the framework of role-playing. The purpose of different forms of role-playing has typically been educational, therapeutic, or artistic. Today, role-playing has to a larger degree also become an activity for leisure

entertainment as well as an activity that plays an important role in modern man's self-narration and identity-formation. We can find resemblances to role-playing in religious, ritual practices—both today and historically. Role-playing as a therapeutic or rhetoric method and practice can be found in different areas such as psychology, sociology, marketing, and human resource management.

*Live* role-playing (larp), in which the roles and the game takes place within a framework that is both physical and fictional, may be used artistically in various theatre forms where spectators are invited to partake in the performance. Live role-playing may also be used in educational contexts such as conflict-play in regard to, e.g., teambuilding, human resource management, or psychotherapy or it may be used as entertainment in live-action role-playing. Role-playing, as entertainment, includes tabletop-games, computer games, collective storytelling processes around a table or on the Internet (MUDs), as well as larp. There is a certain interest within the role-playing community in making historical role-playing, - so-called *reenactments*, where historical authenticity in costumes, weaponry, and role-characterization play an important role, and where role-players are part of so-called living museums (e.g. Viking markets) and stage historical events.

As an overall leisure activity, role-playing has evolved from being a 'nerd-activity' to becoming one of the most common activities among children and youth: in 2004 24% of all children and youth in Denmark were playing some kind of role-playing (Bille et.al. 2005). This implies that the status as a sub-culture—or counter-culture—that has been an important part of the role-playing community identity is dissolving or losing its validity. It can reasonably be argued that larp has now grown up, and this means that there is no longer a major need for defining larp solely as something absolutely unique and different from other cultural phenomena. Instead it is possible (and also enlightening, inspiring, and useful)—also within the

role-playing community—to look at how larp relates, e.g., to theatre, to educational role-playing formats, to role-playing, as a metaphor as well as tool, within the fields of sociology, psychology, and psychiatry. Of course, there is still a need for defining how larp differs from other types of role-playing and theatrical activity, but as larp matures it becomes possible to regard it as a part of a larger circle of mediatized popular culture and to look at the similarities and benefit, e.g., from the knowledge and craftsmanship residing within theatre as an art form, as well as from the ways in which role-playing is used as metaphor and model for social interplay (see Kjølner 2006).

### **Narrative formats and genres**

As an actual narrative format, role-playing differs from other narrative forms. Here, the status of the narrative is changed from something static that is *narrated* to us, and in which the world and we in it are being *told*, to a form of narrative process into which we place ourselves as important agents. The narrative is something we create ourselves, and in which we play the roles ourselves. A major shift in how we perceive the world occurs when we no longer regard it as a series of events which are either quite random or determined by destiny, but rather regard it as different narratives which are man-made and not explained by, e.g., metaphysics or science, that is to say, factors above or outside ourselves. The hyper-complexity characterizing today's society, occurring on all levels, challenge traditional narrative forms and initiate narratives which are more complex, more open, and even interactive.

There are many ways to define role-playing, and there are several types of role-playing that produce different types of player-experiences. It is obviously not the same experience, socially, educationally, or aesthetically, if the role-playing's frame is a meadow or a wood, a classroom or a drama studio, or created by a computer. It is not the same experience to play together with others in a physical space or to play against others on-line or alone against the computer.

If we look at how role-playing functions as a narrative, it is possible to disregard these differences and define role-playing as a designed fictional world, in other words a dramatic-narrative framework, which enables the player to take on fictional characters (roles) inside this frame. These roles or fictional characters may be pre-defined by the game-deviser (game master, game designer, teacher), or they may be developed by the players themselves (or they may be situated somewhere between these two positions), and using these fictional characters, the players create actions and dramatic narratives within the pre-designed frames. The extent, to which the roles and narrative frame are pre-designed, varies according to how much the designers want to control the players and the narrative. In some types of role-playing, the frames are quite open, and the player has quite a great extent of influence on the role and the play; while in other types of role-playing, the frames are narrower. Even in live action role-playing and 'teacher-in-role' formats of educational drama, which we tend to regard as more open than, e.g., computer games, we find that the roles and the fiction frame may be very closely defined. Common for all types of role-playing is that both roles and dramatic-narrative frame must be open enough for the players to reside within them and to develop them. Even a closely defined game character (avatar) as Lara Croft, of the computer game series *Tomb Raider*, present itself as only partly shaped, quite cartoonish, as a loosely sketched character which is handed over to player and into which the player project herself and through and by which she carries out different game actions. Good game design may be compared to a good conversation: a dialogue where you not only speak, but also listen and thus insert holes in the speech flow for the others to fill out, which is exactly the same kind of openness needed in the game character and the dramatic-narrative framework in any kind of role-playing. Without this dynamic, it is not possible for the player to act out a role in the role-playing narrative. The point is not to read for the plot, but *to play the plot*.

This interactive and play-centric mode of reception is what differentiates role-playing from all other forms of narratives and is the main reason for its popularity and its potential usefulness in a variety of areas (see Sandvik 2006a, 2006b).

On the way to connecting larp to a larger mediated popular cultural circle, you must look at how larp relates to this complexity and the postmodern use of role-playing as means of self-presentation and creation of identity, for instance, when it comes to making use of and recycling different popular cultural matrixes. Uses of popular cultural matrixes can be found in the way fiction genres like fantasy and horror create different thematic platforms for role-playing, but it can also be found on a formal level in how role-playing relates to different media formats. The relationship between *campaigns* and *one-shots* may be regarded as the relationship between tv-series (campaigns are larp events which are repeated in an episodic structure) and the movie (a larp event which is enacted only once) (see Waade, 2006).

We find resemblances between *soap* as a media format and Vampire Live with its focus on infinite intrigues and inner conflicts where relations and dialogues dominate the play. An important part of being in the game is keeping tracks on how characters relate to each other through bloodlines or friendships and being able to create trust and discover betrayal. Vampire role-playing appeals to female players who—more than male players—know the *soap* as a media format and narrative genre. In *soaps*, dialogues, intrigues, and relationships are much more important than plot, action, and drama. The subtle glances, wiggling of a shoulder, and the great amount of words and exchange of lines are what create suspense in the game. The vampire-campaign functions as an endless vampire killer-series as *Buffy—The Vampire Slayer*. The campaign initiates a type of play and players that differ from combat-scenarios with their emphasis on physical fights, e.g., *action-fantasy*-campaigns like *Sunday 1st* in Århus, Denmark. In action-genres, the

external conflicts and violent actions set the agenda. Here bodies, fighting, physical action, and dramatic peaks are important.

The endless serial-format and the repetitions of the campaigns give larp a ritualistic touch. The actual chain of events and the overall plot is not that important compared to repeating the play together with friends, in the same setting, within the same dramaturgic and temporal framework. Even if we see this activity as theatre, the campaigns appear more like a leisure cultural cyclic ritual than a theatre performance. The live-campaign *Sunday 1st* even carries the name of the time for the ritual: every first Sunday of the month. Actions, roles, and plot are subordinated the event of meeting at the same time at the same place.

### Exit

Live-action role-playing (as well as other role-playing formats) represents a type of narrative that is dynamic and open to influence from its recipients: the players. This does not imply that the creation of fiction is handed over to the players altogether. There is still a need for an effective framework as well as efficient rules to guide the player's interaction with and within the interactive and play-centric fiction and secure some kind of progression. Interactivity is not interesting in itself but must be embedded in a game design, which makes it appealing for the player to interact; some kind of progression must be present to create dramatic suspense and development, which encourages the players to partake in the story-creating process. Developing the life of the player-character, gaining experience and skills, developing relations to other characters as well as to their players, are all part of this necessary progression as well as the players' possibility to embark on exciting and dangerous missions.

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# brian morton

## larps and their cousins through the ages

Taking larp seriously requires that we think seriously about larp's relation to the rest of our culture. How does larp relate to other areas of business, art and recreation? What are larp's nearest cousins and neighbors? Likewise, if we wish to push larp to its limits or develop innovations of form, genre, or style, we must understand what its limits and neighbors are. The history of larp and its nearby cousins and neighbors is a rich field of ideas and object lessons. It is sometimes thought that the story of role-playing games begins with Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, who created the first modern tabletop role-playing game, *Dungeons and Dragons*, in the early 1970s. Indeed, that's basically what I thought too, a few months ago. I am no longer convinced that this is true, even for tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs). But the story of live-action role-playing games (larps) and their close cousins is far older and richer. It involves Caesars and kings, Shakespeare and Goethe, Samuel Jackson and John Belushi. Many cultural forms, that we do not usually think of as larps, are either larps or very close. In this paper, my goal is to sketch the stories of a dozen or so styles of larp, or perhaps close relatives of larp, through the ages, with an eye to what issues the history of larp raises for larpers in the RPG tradition today.

### **What is a larp?**

Defining live-action role-playing is not easy, and any definition is in danger of favoring some forms and styles of larp over others. Larps vary on exactly how "live" the "action" is: a genuine sword-fight is more "live" than a scripted one, which is still more "live" than a game of rock-paper-scissors or a roll of the dice. Larps vary on exactly how "roles" are "played." A water rescue training larp may involve players taking the roles of lifeguard and victim, without any real characterization, whereas a vampire larp may involve players immersing themselves into detailed characters, with little emphasis on the characters' roles in the game. By 1951, social psychologists were already distinguishing role-taking, taking-the-role-of-the-other, and role-playing, and distinguishing four levels of participation in role-playing exercises (Coutu, 1951: pp.180-187; Haas, 1949: p. 418). Indeed, a movie actor, a confidence trickster, a shaman playing the role of a spirit in a religious ritual, and even a person pretending to be unconscious in a CPR training exercise are all engaging in live-action role-playing, even though they are not playing a game. Nonetheless, the custom is to restrict the term "larp" to live-action role-playing activities that are either games or very game-like. It

is fair to wonder which of the styles, we are about to examine, genuinely count as larps and which are merely relatives of larps. This is a discussion we will mostly avoid, but I think the issues will not turn on the details of how we define “live-action,” or how we define “role-playing,” (see Mäkelä, Koistinen, Siukola & Turunen, 2005; Pohjola, 2003; Hakkarainen and Stenros, 2002; and Edwards, 2004 who defines “roles” but not “role-playing”), but on the details of how game-like larps are required to be, and exactly how we define a “game.” What is and is not a “game” is a thorny philosophical problem (Wittgenstein, 1953; Crawford, 2003), but games usually involve goals, rules, improvisation and play. Games often have other goals or functions besides just recreation: many games help develop practical skills or perform an educational or psychological role, for instance. But if an activity looks too unstructured, or too much like work, or like theatre, it might cease to be considered a game (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003; Crawford, 2003; Costikyan, 1994).

### **The earliest larps**

The basic childhood game of “Let’s Pretend” is probably the oldest of all larps and was probably played in some form by pre-historic humans, or even pre-humans. There is still some controversy, but many experts believe that a wide variety of mammals engage in complex play behaviors, some of which have rigorous enough rules to constitute games (Mitchell, 1990, Rosenberg 1990, Allen & Bekoff, 1996). Play-hunting, play-fighting, and play-mating behaviors are all present and distinct for canines, as are other simple games or proto-games, like fetch, tug-of-war, and tag (“Play,” 2002). It would be surprising if juvenile early hominids did not engage in similar live-action roles of play-hunting, play-fighting, and play-mating. However, there is no evidence of this in the pre-historic world, and the earliest recorded histories do not focus much on the play behaviors of children.

### **Spectacle larps from ancient Rome to now**

The first larps, we have records of, are the spectacle

larps of the Roman world where theatre was considered a form of game (*ludi*), and gladiatorial and naval combat involved various levels of role-playing. Role-playing was present to a small extent, even in normal gladiatorial matches. Gladiators were expected to feign killing fury and bravery, even if they did not feel it (Cicero, 45BCE, 4:48). Training and maintaining gladiators became expensive enough that killing became more rare, and dummy weapons were occasionally used to make the action seem more deadly than it was (Plass, 1995: p. 32). The costumes of many categories of gladiator were intended to represent the ethnic dress of various enemies of Rome. Gladiators were thought of as playing a role in the ritual re-enactment of the triumph of Rome over its enemies and (when animals were fought) over nature itself, and even re-enacting historical battles for spectacular entertainment was popular.

It is a hard line to walk to make a spectacle a larp, rather than mere theatre or mere sport. If the competition is too serious, then the incentive to play the role disappears, and the gladiator fights for his life, rather than pretending to be a Thracian soldier fighting for his life. Sumo wrestling, for example, is a sport spectacle that once focused on role-playing, but no longer does. Contrariwise, if the outcome is too scripted, the gladiator becomes an actor playing a role, but no longer a game player. Modern professional wrestling is (usually) a theatre spectacle, but not a larp. But balance these two, provide safety and incentive to play a role, and yet enough freedom to encourage improvisation, and you have the makings of a larp. There was a variety of sham-fight conducted by two teams of boys in ancient Rome called the “Troy Game” which may have been such a larp. Another ancient spectacle genre that is a good candidate for counting as a larp was the *naumachiae* or mock naval battle. Romans liked to give *naumachiae* a historical re-enactment theme and often fought many ships and thousands of men at once. Importantly, the outcome was intentionally left open, to heighten the excitement for the spectators.

When Emperor Titus staged “The Battle of Syracuse,” the Athenian side won, even though they had lost the original battle (Kohne & Ewigleben, 2000, p. 74). It is hard to imagine that the participants (thousands of condemned criminals) were not role-playing being sailors, or that it was not truly a game. The fantasy genre was also popular in the Colliseum: mythological spectacles or “fatal charades” complete with sets, props, monsters, gods, heroines to be rescued, etc. were performed (Ow, 1994).

Spectacle larps did not end with ancient Rome. Some modern recreations of medieval jousting in US “Renaissance Fairs” have the same basic structure: a competition put on for display before spectators in which the participants are playing a role, but also given just enough freedom from pre-scripting to be a genuine game. Another, far more popular modern example, is the Mexican wrestling style of “Lucha Libre” masked wrestling, which dates to 1930s Mexico. Here, as in Rome, masked combatants enter the ring to perform a partially staged combat (in wrestling slang a “worked” match), in which some degree of improvisation is allowed, and occasionally the outcome is not pre-determined (called “shoot” matches) (Levi, 1999). In Lucha Libre wrestling, the contestants wear masks and consciously adopt a character whom they are portraying. It is important to the style not to “break kayfabe,” that is, letting out the secrets of the show, such as by breaking the diegetic frame by letting on to the audience just how much of the action is pre-scripted or by confusing the stage-identities with the off-stage identities.

Spectacle larps suggest an opportunity for larp and give us a cautionary tale. Larps put on for non-participating audiences can work and even be popular while still being meaningful for the participants. The danger here is that the larp can turn slowly into a form or pure theatre, as American professional wrestling has, or into a sport in which role-playing becomes less and less emphasized, as in Sumo. Another trick worth noticing from spectacle style

larps is the Renaissance Faire style of having people at various level of the audience-participant spectrum. Some guests are pure audience, some play a little by dressing up or affecting an accent, some play more fully with full costume, persona, and kayfabe info, and some people are full participants. In professional wrestling there is a spectrum from pure audience “marks,” to “smarks” with some insider kayfabe information, to pure participant “workers.” Audience and participant need not be an on-off switch, but can come in a spectrum.

### **Theme party larps:**

#### **Caesars, kings, detectives, and knights**

A second form of larp that goes back at least to Roman times is the theme party. While young, Octavian (who later became Caesar Augustus) hosted a “banquet of the 12 gods,” in which the diners dressed as and pretended to be the 12 Olympian gods, and where they even had a larpwright (called a “*choragus*”) helping to direct them in playing their roles (D’Arms, 1999). Themed banquets became popular among the upper class later in Roman history, with themes such as recreating historical or mythological events, and even parties where the guests take the role of departed shades. The medieval and early modern Europeans enjoyed theme parties as well. For example, King Charles VI of France was injured in 1393 when he was playing the role of a “woodwose” (a sort of French Sasquatch) for a “costume ball” (*morisco*), and his costume accidentally caught fire (Tuchman, 1978).

In modern times, theme party style larps have continued to be popular. The Society for Creative Anachronism, which was a huge influence on the growth of early combat-oriented larps in the US, was created in 1966 and began as a medieval theme party larp. A genre of larp called “Interactive Murder Mysteries” has grown up in the past few decades, apparently outside of the influence of RPGs, out of mystery fan conventions. In this genre, one participant in the party is a murderer or thief, and the other participants are playing out various other

roles typical of a mystery novel and attempting to determine “whodunit.” In some forms, there is even a mix of professional actor “ringers” salted in with the game players (Kim 1995).

Theme parties are certainly not all larps, even today. Often they lack the goal-directedness that games require on most definitions. But it is fairly easy to turn a theme party into a larp by adding some game elements, and this style has a lot of lessons to offer. Most importantly, theme party larps are very easy, which is probably why they have been perennially popular for millennia. They take little training in game mechanics, and it is not difficult for the audience to learn to appreciate what is going on. They are often quite approachable, even for people who have never larped before. The diegetic frame is everything that happens “in story” or “in the world” of the fictional action, and theme party larps tolerate breaking diegetic frames quite well. If some participants are talking about events in the real world or doing a poor job of staying in character, it need not be particularly distracting for the other participants. If a theme party is used as a frame for a larp, then you can make food, dancing, and perhaps some other light entertainments available along with some kind of game or plot. Those who find they enjoy the role-playing and plot or game elements can focus on those while others can focus on other aspects of the party. Because these events work well for a large spectrum of people, in the US they are sometimes used for family reunions or corporate events, situations where most kinds of larp would seem quite inappropriate. Interactive Murder Mysteries also provide a good illustration of how the notions of kayfabe and diegetic frame are distinct. Imagine that “Miss Delacroix” is an insider salted into a murder mystery, but that she accidentally betrays insider knowledge too early in the evening. It might well be that in the diegetic frame she has a good reason to know the information, which will eventually be revealed. If so, her slip is not breaking the continuity of the fictional setting, but it is still breaking the kayfabe frame, by tipping off that

she is a ringer, and partially spoiling the order and pacing of the revealing of information.

### **Festival larps: Saturnalia, Mardi Gras, and the Booger Dance**

A third style of larp with ancient Roman credentials is the ritual larp. Religious rituals in many religions include elements of role-play: the Egyptian priest adopts the role of Anubis during the funeral ceremony, the shaman adopts the role of a storytelling spirit to retell the stories of the mythic days of old to the tribe, etc. But religious rituals often are too solemn to be playful enough to seem like games. On the other hand, festive rituals, on the boundaries between religion and party, are common in many cultures and are prime locations for religious role-playing to become game-like. In Europe, many of the traditions surrounding Christmas and Carnival go back in some form to Roman celebrations of Saturnalia. For example, in medieval Britain a celebrant was chosen by lot to be the “Lord of Misrule” and preside over the “Feast of Fools,” in which social roles are intentionally inverted in all sorts of amusing ways. Servants played the roles of masters and masters of servants. People cross-dressed. The Lord of the Misrule had the power to decree games and their rules and might appoint people to a variety of other mock offices. Role-playing is central to the fun, and the atmosphere is one of play. Further, because the Lord of Misrule has the power to set rules, goals, and even contests, the festivities include games on most definitions. In a sense, the “Feast of Fools” is a lower class medieval analog of the high-class theme parties, but with religious overtones.

Nor is European culture alone in having ritual celebrations which spill over into playful role-playing that are either larps or very close. In the Cherokee tradition, there was a dancing event called the “Booger” Dance, in which masked men (and occasionally women) take the roles of extremely crude, sexual beings called “boogers,” each of which has an obscene

personal name (Rothenberg, 1969). There is dancing, but it is interspersed with improvisational bits where the boogers attempt to shock, enrage, and entertain the audience, while drawing them into the diegetic frame. The spirit is playful, and there are rules. The booger must dance a solo in the most awkward and grotesque steps he/she can manage when someone sings a song starting with his/her booger-name. All participants must clap whenever a booger's booger-name is spoken aloud. Everyone must smoke between the 3rd and 4th act, etc.

Modern festivities like Halloween and Mardi Gras are likewise right on the edge of being larps. There is clearly a strong role-playing element (again note the repeated importance of masks), as well as playfulness; the issue is to what extent these are games rather than some other kind of play. So, what ideas can these cases give RPG-style larps? I have yet to see a RPG-style larp whose emotional tone was "festive" or one focused on intentionally crude sexual humor, a genre which has been explored by tabletop RPGs. Likewise, can larps be integrated further into other kinds of traditional festivities? Christmas larps and larps focused on local history have begun in Scandinavia, but I have not seen either in the US yet. Clark and Glazer (2004) argue that some larp forms are ideal for strengthening community bonds. Could we create parade larps? Larps as part of a wedding reception or bridal shower? Mardi Gras or Carnival larps? County fair larps? Can we integrate larp into existing social structures of festivity?

### **Training and educational larps: from war games to the classroom**

A fourth style of larp already present in the ancient world is the training larp. Consider for a moment combat sparring: two warriors face off in a ring under the watch of a trainer, with fake weapons, and pretend to be enemies fighting each other. We have a clear game with rules, players, a game-master, and goals. Further, we have the rudiments of role-playing: the combatants are pretending to be enemies whether

they are or not, and the diegetic frame is enforced. Yet, role-playing and the diegetic frame, while present, are just not the focus or point of a sparring match. It is in fact a larp, but no one thinks of it as a larp because the role-playing is so secondary to the point and the experience.

But by the 18th and 19th centuries, the ideologies about how training exercises are supposed to work were changing. In military training, the Prussians were developing *kriegspiel* or war games. Some were sandbox exercises with models, which were forerunners of the TRPGs, and some were pure drill exercises, but some were field exercises emphasizing the diegetic frame of the fictitious war as much as possible in an attempt to make the exercise as much like real warfare possible. It is hard not to view this last kind of field exercise as a larp aimed at training military personnel.

Nor is military training alone in using larps. Doctors engage in mock diagnosis role-playing exercises, and legal training often involves mock trials (called moot courts in British dialects). By the 1940s, under the influence of thinkers like Dewey and Moreno, "reality-practice sessions" involving "role-playing" were being used to train everyone from elementary school kids to grad students in the US (Hendry, Lippitt, & Zander 1947; Haas 1949). By the 1960s, "Role playing cases," "models," "simulations," and "simulation games" were all related but distinct genres of education technique, used in many contexts and widely studied (Balinsky & Despenzieri, 1961 pp. 583-585; Kibbee, Craft & Nanus 1961; Chesler & Fox, 1966; Pancrazio & Cody, 1967 pp. 60-65; Shaftel & Shaftel, 1967; Boocock & Schild, 1968) and 70s (Bollens & Marshall, 1973; Nielsen, 1977). They were especially popular in social studies and business fields. We would have no trouble recognizing "role playing cases" as short larps designed for a classroom use, and we even have transcripts for some of them (Haas, 1949; Shaftel & Shaftel, 1967).

Many of the lessons of the training larp tradition are lessons that RPG-style larp has already learned. Yes, larps can be used to good effect for educational goals. If the rules are too complicated, it is often better to implement them in computer game format than in larp format (business games even went through a live-action plus programmable calculator phase in the late seventies). If the larp is very simple, it can help teach concepts one at a time, but if it is complex, the students will not be able to say exactly what they have learned, even if they have learned. Larps can be enjoyable, even when very short and using almost no props or setting elements, if you can create a situation with incentives both for conflict and cooperation. However, some of the techniques emphasized by educational larps are not now in common use. Several books emphasize replaying a basic scenario several times through in one setting, so that all can see the consequences of various choices. Likewise, a warm-up before the larp and a discussion of the results of the role-playing afterwards were thought to be key elements. Shaftel & Shaftel agree with Hendry et. al., 1947: that there are 9 “essential steps” to role-playing in an educational setting “1) ‘warming up’ the group (problem confrontation) 2) selecting the participants (role players) 3) preparing the audience to participate as observers 4) Setting the stage 5) role-playing (enactment) 6) discussing and evaluating 7) further enactments (replaying revised roles, playing suggested next steps, or exploring alternative possibilities) 8) further discussion 9) Sharing experiences and generalizing.” (p. 65-6)

### **Commedia dell’arte and Goethe’s friendly game**

The renaissance also saw the development of a tradition called Commedia dell’arte, which flourished in 16th- 18th century Europe. Commedia dell’arte involved a troupe of actors engaging in improvised theatre for comic effect (Henke, 2002). They were not games at the time: they were professional comedy for the livelihood of the troupe. However, in the late 18th century, Goethe portrays a group of friends doing

Commedia dell’arte style improvisational comedy as a game for themselves (and one heavy on flirting) (Goethe, 1795 book 2, chapter 9). When a stranger encounters the group, he doesn’t find the activity odd and joins in, so using Commedia style as a live-action role-playing game must not have been too odd during the late 18th century. Indeed, the characters have a discussion on the role of improvisation in the arts, which is the earliest example of larp theory I have yet found. Commedia dell’arte has also been used as a larp in the 20th century and is an influence on improvisation in general. The heart of the style is to use stereotypical stock characters, stereotypical stock situations, and improvised dialogue salted with stock lines and jokes (*lazzi*). Commedia dell’arte was an important influence on writers like Shakespeare or Molière. One of the things that the Commedia tradition teaches us is that exploring minor variations on extremely stereotyped characters and situations can be enjoyable. Indeed, the stereotypicality of the characters and situations make portraying them easier, and makes it easier for the audience to understand what is going on. The Commedia tradition is also a great source to mine for characters and situations in modern larps.

### **Jacob Moreno: the first larp theorist?**

By the early 20th century, artists around the world were beginning to passionately embrace the possibilities offered by improvisation. In music, improvisational elements in Jazz were coming to the fore; in dance Free Dance was gaining ground. Improvisational theatre seems to have arisen independently in several places at once. In Russia, it was pioneered by Stanislavsky and Meyerhold and eventually morphed into what we now call “method” acting and the New York style of improvisation. While this style allowed some improvisation of lines, this was strictly for the sake of interpreting the existing script, and was not at all game-like (Frost & Yarrow, 1989 pp. 15-20, pp. 40-54). In France, Jacques Copeau is imagining improvisation largely along the lines of a modern revival of Commedia dell’arte. By

1916, he argued that “games” of improvised acting needed to be part of curriculum of the theatre school he opened in 1921, writing, “Somewhere along the lines of improvised play, playful improvisation, improvised drama, real drama, new and fresh will appear before us (Frost & Yarrow, 1989, p. 24).” Improvised drama was also being performed in the gardens of Vienna by 1911, calling itself “art of the moment.” It was a spontaneity theater aimed at children (fairy tales were a major theme) and also had a child of 10 or 11, Elizabeth Bergner, as one of its stars. From 1922-25, it was recast as “*stegreiftheatre*”—theatre of spontaneity—and aimed at adults, largely by Jacob Moreno, although Peter Lorre was in the troupe too (Blatner, 2000 p. 17). In 1923, Moreno wrote the seminal *Theatre of Spontaneity* about this style, which is probably the first book of larp theory and is challenging, but still insightful today. But he is far more famous for developing the style in surprising directions away from pure art. He imagined impromptu theatre as a tool that could be useful in education of children and in psychotherapeutic treatment, as well as an amusing entertainment for audiences. A student of Karl Jung, he moved to the US in 1925 and worked on sociometry, psychodrama, and group therapy. He coined the term “group psychotherapy” in 1932 and “role playing” in 1934 (Biddle, 1979) and is now generally recognized as the father of psychodrama (Blatner, 2000, chap 2). For Moreno, psychodrama is one possible elaboration of a more primordial technique of spontaneous live-action play, exploring society and self (Moreno, 1947: p.31-36).

In psychodrama, participants act out their emotions and interpersonal interactions on stage. The primary goal is psychotherapeutic, and acting becomes a replacement for the psychiatrist’s couch. A given psychodrama session (typically 90 minutes to 2 hours) focuses principally on a single participant, known as the protagonist. Protagonists examine their relationships by interacting with the other actors and the leader, known as the director. This is done using

a number of specific techniques, including doubling, role reversals, mirrors, soliloquy, and sociometry. There are over 10,000 practitioners internationally, and it is a popular technique for group therapy. Psychodrama is not typically a game (although games might be used in related psychotherapeutic techniques like “play therapy” and play is an increasingly important part of psychodrama theory (Blatner, 2000, Chap 9)), but its resemblance to larp is striking, and it is an important origin of much of the 20th century’s interest in role-playing.

The psychodrama tradition excels at drawing out the intricacies of tangled characters (which is, of course, central to its psychotherapeutic goal). It does so by focusing on one character at a time and constructing other characters largely as foils of various kinds for the protagonist. It has well worked out doctrines on a variety of theory issues of interest to larpers: for example, psychodrama holds that there are four distinguishable levels of catharsis: abreactive, integrative, inclusive, and spiritual connectedness (Blatner, 2000, chap 11). The psychodrama tradition has long been interested in various ways of diagramming social relations and roles and uses techniques like sociometry, social network diagramming, action diagramming, and role diagramming; these are well-explored analogs of RPG techniques like relationship-mapping (Henry, 2003; Edwards, 2004).

### **Theatre Games and Improv**

After WWII, a fourth major school of improvisational theatre began emerging: the Chicago style of “Theatre Games” created by Viola Spolin. Spolin had been taught by Neva Boyd, a sociologist, who emphasized “the use of games, storytelling, folk dance, and dramatics as tools for stimulating creative expression in both children and adults, through self-discovery and personal experiencing”(Spolin, 1963 p. xi; Frost & Yarrow, 1989; p. 49), working at Northwestern University during the 20s and 30s. Spolin developed a series of “theatre games”: short live-acting exercises

intended as games, most of which involved role-playing. By 1955, her son Paul Sills, became one of the founders of the “Second City” comedy troupe in Chicago, which became a launching pad for Saturday Night Live comedians, such as John Belushi, and the Chicago improvisation style. Chicago style “improv” is a whole complex ideology (Seham, 2001; Spolin, 1963: p. 3-50; Libera, 2004). For decades, it was aimed at training actors and creating enjoyable experiences for mildly participating audiences, not at being fun in its own right. But, by the early 80s Chicago style “improv” was being repackaged as a game or sport, by companies such as ImprovOlympics and ComedySportz, as was a close relative, TheatreSports, created by Keith Johnstone in 1979. These forms are team games focusing on live-action role-playing for comedic effect. With the success of “Whose Line Is It Anyway?” a comedy show squarely in this tradition, in the late 90s and early 21st century, improv is continuing to gain ground. Improv is divided into “short-form”: in which a game may last only few minutes or less, and a string of many games will be played at one sitting, and “long-form” (often called “Harold”): in which a situation might be extended to roughly the length of a sit-com. Although Chicago-style improv involved “games” early on, it has drifted towards sports metaphors during its struggle to be taken “seriously” as a comedy art form distinct from stand-up. An important style element in most forms is to take suggestions from the audience or even use audience members in various ways, trying to break down actor/audience distinctions. In a sense, RPG-style larp and improv are two examples of a broader trend towards interactive theatre (Izzo, 1997). Part of the value of the improv tradition for larpers is as a source of situations and training exercises (Bernardi, 1992; Spolin, 1963, and 2001; Atkins, 1994), but it also provides models for much shorter larps than are typically played in RPG styles.

### **Games and Experimental Art**

The experimental theatre of Moreno emphasized spontaneity and play, but not games as such. The

improvisation of Spolin or Copeau used games as a training technique or a way of generating material, but did not think of the games as art. Duchamp was fascinated by the project of combining games and art (Thomas, 1988) and did so in many ways, but neither he nor any other Dada artist seem to have tried anything quite like larp. By the 1960s, experimental art was exploring a variety of intermedia art forms, including happenings, events, Fluxus, and conceptual art. There are many lessons to be mined from this tradition, much theorizing, (Jenkins, 1993; Higgins, 1997; Friedman 1998) and many indirect influences on larps. The idea that an abstract metaphysical system, even a rules system, could itself be a work of art, probably could not have occurred to game designers without the influence of conceptual art in the 60s. The breaking down of the walls between audience and performer was flirted with by Moreno, but was pursued more vigorously by the 60s experimenters, such as Allen Kaprow (Goldberg, 1997: p. 83). The notion that art can be appropriate even when it is a form of goofing off is a fairly recent one that owes much to the aesthetics of jazz and of Fluxus-aestheticians such as Filliou or Flynt (Jenkins, 1993: p. 72).

I have not been able to find any piece from this extensive tradition that looks much like a larp. Often there are playful elements; often the artist collaborates with the audience to create the artwork. In Yoko Ono’s 1964 “Cut Piece,” for example, she sits motionless on stage wrapped in bandage-like clothes and invites the audience to come up on stage and cut away her clothing with a pair of scissors (Jenkins, 1993: p. 81). Most are shy and awkward, cutting a little. The responsibilities of choice, the air of sex and violence, and the passiveness of the victim are each present to all. Yoko and her audience are playing roles, complicit victim and hesitant voyeur, the action is live, and yet it is not at all a game. The actions and point of the art are tightly controlled by the author, who shares a little of the power as part of the point, but the action is not spontaneous. It

is important to the style of this tradition to work to efface the boundaries between life and art and to pack as much meaning into as tight a package as possible. But these very features efface the game vs. life distinction critical to the diegetic frame of most larps. Traditional performance art and its relatives are probably not larps, but they are just on the other side of larps. They are what happen when compact artistic meaningfulness overcomes the playful and game elements of a larp, just as sport is what happens when the competitive elements overcome the role-playing.

### **Larps and youth politics**

Another larp tradition, which dates back to the early 20th century, is the political larp, such as Model United Nations and mock legislatures. In 1916, Taylor Statten, a Canadian “boy’s work” promoter with the YMCA, envisioned a national boys’ conference, modeled on various regional conferences promoting boys’ work. The idea began with the boys meeting to regulate their own organization, but soon developed into the concept of a boys’ parliament, where boys pretended to debate laws in the manner of a real parliament. He may well have been influenced by the “mock parliament” organized by Nellie McClung in 1914 to parody the refusal of the government of Manitoba to grant women the right to vote. By 1917, he had organized the first “Ontario TUXIS and Older Boy’s Parliament” (Edwards, 1960) (TUXIS was a Canadian youth organization like the Boy Scouts, except that it was explicitly Protestant in goals). Youth parliaments spread around Canada in the 1920s. Both New York City and Harvard appear to have begun “Model League of Nations” groups in the 1920s. Other early mock legislatures include the “Junior States of America” (founded by E. A. Rogers in 1934) and the YMCA “Youth in Government” (YIG) program in the US (founded by Clement Duran in 1936). Each of these aimed at simulating the activities of governments via role-playing. None of these American models acknowledge a debt to Statten, but it is hard to imagine that they are not imitating his work in Canada. By the 1960s, model

legislature has reached Australia, and the UN itself was promoting model UNs (UN & UNESCO, 1961). There are now about 400 Model UN Conferences in 35 countries with between 30 and 2000 participants per conference for about 200,000 participants a year (UN, 2006). US Supreme Court Justice Breyer, Samuel Jackson, and Chelsea Clinton are among the former larpers from this tradition (UN, 2006). Model governments usually have goals including education and real-world political goals, as well as entertainment goals. Some, like the Model UN’s, explicitly describe their activities as “role-playing,” (United Nations Association in Canada, 2004 p. 5) while others, such as the European Youth Parliament, aim at political expression “without reverting to role play” (“What is EYP”, 2006). Model governments have several noticeable style differences from other kinds of larp. First, they often get very impressive venues. Youth in Government often uses the real capitol building of a state while the politicians are on spring break, and I can attest that the authentic setting adds immensely to the quality of the larp. Second, model legislature larps often involve intense preparation on the part of the participants (Hazleton & Mahurin, 1986). Third, they often involve very large groups of people: 2000 participants is a big larp by any standard. In YIG, this is accomplished by having several largely distinct but partially overlapping larps take place together. The legislative branch does a mock legislature; the judicial branch runs mock trials nearby; the media creates mock newspapers; radio, and TV programs reporting on both; the lobbyists attempt to influence each of the processes; etc. But these, mostly distinct, games overlap in various ways modeling the actual process. Fourth, model governments by their very nature work hard to move their conflict resolution into the diegetic frame. If there is a rule dispute, it is taken to the parliamentarian, or even the Supreme Court, and dealt with in-frame, rather than being given to a referee, if at all possible.

### **Parlour games**

The parlour game tradition goes back well into

Victorian times. It emphasized quick, easy games that could be played in a parlour with few props other than what would be readily at hand. Parlour games sometimes involved role-playing, (“Household Amusements,” c. 1880), but this was rarely much of an emphasis. By the late 1920s, the game of “Murder” was being played, a variation on the classic parlor game “wink murder,” with far more emphasis on live action role-playing, incorporating elements of the assassin game and of interactive murder mystery. We know the game was a favorite of the “Algonquin round table” of New York intellectuals, including critic Alexander Woolcott, writer Alice Duer Miller, and comedian Harpo Marx (Marx, 1961: p. 218-220). In 1935, the game *Jury Box*, by Ray Post, was published in the US, extending something like the parlour game tradition into the realm of a role-playing game. In *Jury Box*, the players take the role of jurors at a trial and try to piece together the evidence presented to render a judgment. The emphasis is still on puzzle solving rather than role-play, but the emphasis is now on the diegetic frame. Also, this is the first example I’ve been able to find of published props and structure for a larp. Another trope in the parlor game tradition that might be interesting for larps is a game where the rules are not known by the players, and much of the fun is trying to learn the rules by experimenting to see which things are allowed and disallowed, such as in the game “Elephant’s foot umbrella stand.” The far more recent parlour game known as Mafia, Werewolf or Village, invented by Dimma Davidoff in 1986, has a lot of potential as a larp frame too (the Graduate Mafia Brotherhood of Princeton University website lists over 80 variations).

### **Diplomacy and Slobbovia**

The game Diplomacy was created in 1954 and released by 1959. Although it featured a board and pieces and stood clearly in the war game tradition, most of the action of Diplomacy takes place in the acted out negotiations of the players playing the roles of early 20th century diplomats. Diplomacy

is an important forerunner of tabletop role-playing games and was an innovator in Play-By-Mail gaming. It also features in the “Slobbovia” larp of Manitoba, which began in 1969. Slobbovia began as a live-action game with few rules, played by adolescent boys in the woods pretending to be high lords of Slobbovia, a fictional setting from Al Capp’s Li’l Abner comic strip. Upon learning Diplomacy, they created an alternate diplomacy board and switched their pretend wars to that venue. Eventually a regular journal of Slobbovia, the “slobinpolit zhurnal,” was created. A typical issue had 75 or 100 pages of “strakh,” stories written by the players about their characters, and 6 or so pages of “strumph,” actual moves in the diplomacy game. Players often borrowed each other’s characters but usually tried to coordinate stories when they did, so that characters didn’t end up in different places at the same time. It was an unwritten rule that no player could kill another’s character without his consent. Slobbovia came to resemble nothing so much as an ongoing cooperative novel (Costikyan, 1984). While it began as a live-action game, it morphed into a purely written format and eventually disbanded.

### **Assassination larps and Quest Games**

In 1965, inspired by Robert Sheckley’s science fiction story “The Seventh Victim” and a 1965 film adaptation “Tenth Victim” by Carlo Ponti, college students began to play games of assassination (Johnson, 1980). The idea is that players are assigned some other player to attempt to assassinate while trying to prevent being assassinated themselves. The assassination game has a lot of names and variations, Paranoia, Killer, TAG, Killing As Organized Sport (KOAS), Circle of Death, etc. It spiked in popularity in 1980, Steve Jackson Games published a book on it in 1981, and several movies followed (Jackson, 1981, Tan, 2003 p. 25). In assassin games, one could be attacked suddenly at any time, perhaps with nerf weapons or ping-pong balls, one’s food could be “poisoned” with food coloring, one’s car “bombed” with an alarm clock, etc. The key element of this style is to allow play in a wide enough variety of contexts

that the player's normal lifestyle becomes invaded by the game. There may well be "safe zones" or some clear kind of way to step out of the game, but big chunks of one's normal life takes place within the game. Salen & Zimmerman have dubbed this a "lifestyle invasive" game.

Another game genre worth looking at is the quest game. Typically a team is given a clue which if deciphered leads to a destination where there is another clue and so on until the finale. The 1980 film "Midnight Madness" is a great modern example. This genre has roots in several earlier traditions including the Polish game of *podchody* and the Victorian tradition of "Letterboxing" (Clark & Glazer, 2004). Quest games often are not larps, but the structure adapts to larps well enough that they are now a standard technique of larp at MIT (Tan, 2003: p. 41). Both of these styles raise issues about how space is used. Larps are often very restricted in space or take place almost entirely within spaces that are deemed safe by the organizers. This can be a strength, but it can also be a limitation. The lifestyle invasive game makes us think about our use of space and time in daily lives. The quest game, in addition to being a great (and classic) frame for a larp, is a genre with great potential for exploring place and community. In a sense, a quest frame allows a larp to be "community invasive" rather than confined to a small area or to put the same point another way offers an excuse for building ties to the broader community.

### **Tabletop RPG influenced larps**

By the 1970s, tabletop role-playing games had found their way into the science fiction convention culture and the gaming conventions, which already had well-developed costume ball traditions. Furthermore, role-playing was now clearly something that could be done as a game rather than as education or therapy. The SCA's combat and character systems, the rules systems and gaming emphasis of tabletop RPGs, and the convention traditions were all merging to create the American larp styles.

Much could be said about the development of different styles within the RPG traditions and the influence of other elements during this time, but it would take a whole separate paper to do it any justice. Niven and Barnes' novel *Dream Park* is an important influence, as is the questing game tradition, especially in Colorado where the use of real locations and heavy interaction with non-players was normal. On the other hand, at MIT players often holler out "NP halt" and play halts when a non-player happens onto a larping scene (Tan, 2004, p. 69). Some larps emphasized live-action combat, often from the SCA or assassin traditions. Others emphasized symbolic combat, using rock, paper, scissors, or card decks. Some larps were designed to last a few hours at a convention and some to last days at a college campus. Some involved organizer created characters, plots, and even goals; others allowed more player control over the nature of their character. Some used published game material; some were custom designed.

### **Altered Reality Games and Reality TV games**

One new game style that has arisen since RPG larps is the Altered Reality Game (ARG). Altered Reality Games (ARGs) are a genre of cross media games that deliberately blurs the line between the real world and the in-game experience (McGonigal, 2003). A classic example is "the Beast," a game created to help promote the 2001 Steven Spielberg film A.I. Film trailers and posters included a credit for Jeanine Salla as a "Sentient Machine Therapist." Attempting to research Jeanine Salla on the web would lead to a host of interlocking web-pages allowing the player to attempt to decipher the riddle of the murder of Evan Chan. ARGs typically pretend not to be a game. They often involve heavy use of the Internet and electronic media and are often sponsored by corporations or are parts of "viral marketing" schemes. In a sense, they are live action, in that the players must engage in real world activities like calling phone numbers or using search engines to solve the clues. Some, like the "StreetWars" ("Streetwars Killer," 2006), even mix ARG-style clues with classic water-gun style assassin

larping. Because so many real life interactions now occur on-line and surrounded in the technological culture, ARGs become a kind of long-distance larp where the cooperating players are not playing “characters,” but are often acting “roles” via email, phone, and fax. ARGs have their roots in TRPGs, and Wizards of the Coast’s 1996 “Webrunner: The Hidden Agenda” may well be the first real ARG.

Another recent development in larps is the reality TV game show. Reality TV has been popular off and on since the Candid Camera shows of the 1940s, but none display role-playing and game playing until the 1997 Swedish show “Expedition Robinson,” which produced spin-offs called “Survivor” in several other countries including the US and has spawned a host of imitators. These shows combine the lifestyle-invasive TV genre forged by MTV’s “The Real World” with strategic game play similar to the Mafia parlor game. Like spectacle larps in general, these games have to walk a tightrope to remain larps. Too much scripting and they cease to be games, becoming pure theatre; not enough incentive to role-play, and they become pure sport. But somewhere in the middle, perhaps some of these shows should be considered larps. If so, they are among the most popular larps of modern times. Both ARGs and reality game shows are attempts to mix larp with electronic formats, and both are searches for alternative business models for larp funding. As larp continues to grow up, funding and electronic media will surely continue to be issues larp will have to engage with one way or another.

### Conclusions

What topics does this history suggest that we think about more? We should think about masks, which have been perennially popular and unlike costumes can cut the player off from their normal identity as well as enhance the alternate identity. We should think about spectators and how to create a variety of levels of interaction between purely inactive spectators and purely participating actors. We should think about information flow: kayfabe

secrets, ringers, plants, codes, and a variety of techniques can affect the process of revealing information about the fictional situation. We should think about how to make larps easy and approachable for non-larpers. We should think about emotional tone and how to achieve emotional tones in larps that have not been explored much recently. We should think about how to integrate larps into existing structures of art and festivity. We should think about varying the length of larps: past styles have tried larps from a few minutes, to an hour, to an evening, to days, and even weeks. We should think about how larps use space: confined larps can tightly control their space, but expansive larps can adapt to existing places. We should think about politics. Larps can intentionally reinforce existing power structures, Imperial or democratic. They can covertly reinforce power through display of wealth or hierarchies of control over the game. They can critique society didactically or with satire, or undermine social pretensions subtly with comedy. We should think about money: larps are expensive in time and materials, but lots of strategies for supporting them have been tried. We should think about other media: writing, song, dance, TV, and computer media have all been integrated with larp at various times. In 1984, sociologist Gary Fine argued that role-playing games are tiny “idiocultures” where small groups of people create their own private culture and “use culture to imbue the events in their world with meaning and to create newly meaningful events” (Fine, 1984: p. 238). Role-playing games have built a meaningful and powerful culture, but it has remained largely isolated to our own little “idiocultures.” Our next task is to build bridges between our RPG cultures and the broader cultures we live in. Thinking about how RPG style larps relate to forms of live action role-playing outside of the RPG tradition and to culture as a whole is one instance of this broader project.

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openings

# frank aarebråt

60 years old, Professor at the Department of Comparative Politics, University of Bergen.

Educated at University of Bergen and Yale University, USA. He is professor at the University of Örebro, Sweden, and also lectures at Institut des Sciences Politiques, France, and the Humbolt University, Germany. His main focus area is democracy building.

## **What is your impression of the role-playing medium? What experiences have you yourself had with this medium?**

I first met role playing as I was teaching at the University of Michigan in 1973. This was the year when the first home computers were sold in America. At the time, the University of Michigan was the centre for the Midwestern War Gaming Association. They played war games with miniature soldiers. Also; the first edition of Dungeons & Dragons was published. D&D developed from a computer game called Dungeons and was played on teletype machines on the old mainframe computers at universities. These three things converged in Michigan in 1973. They were brought together by students and staff who were creating their own sets of rules based partly on D&D and partly on the set of war gaming rules made by the British Association for war gamers called “the ancient rules”. I should also mention that many communities organized what they called Medieval Fairs, or Renaissance Fairs, during the summers. At these, ordinary American families dressed up in costumes and pretended they were at a medieval fair. At the same time high school students discovered Tolkien, a book that previously primarily had been read by PhD students. Personally, I read Tolkien as a PhD student at Yale in 1969. It was in this atmosphere, that the idea of live role-playing was conceived. People dressed up in old

costumes, but instead of going to a fair, they went to a forest and began playing fantasy games using the existing rulebooks. Not long after, Sci-Fi games inspired by Star Trek popped up as well.

In the years I have followed the scene, it has remained a hobby mainly for students and young academics. However, today we are at the brink of a new development making role-playing commercially interesting as a tool for teaching. The concept has been around for years, notably used for teaching challenged children and adults, as well as people with dyslexia. Nevertheless, imposing rules on drama teaching and role plays provide new dimensions and open possibilities for using it in advanced courses for “the man in the street” .

## **What strengths and weaknesses do you think that role-playing has as a medium?**

The great advantage with role playing games is that it is *not* a one-way communication. In modern business and public administration, workers are regularly sent on seminars dealing with e.g. ethics, technologies and new challenges. The typical seminar consists of a lecturing teacher using a Powerpoint-presentation. Good teachers hope the participants are active, and encourage questions. Those that ask often get more out of the seminar than those who stay quiet.

”Today we are at the brink of a new  
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commercially interesting as a tool for teaching.”

Role plays, on the other hand, ensures that all the participants take part. They force the participants to be active. And, to be quite honest, it is a lot more exiting than the traditional lecture and power point.

However, a danger with role plays is that the organizer may focus too much on form, not content. This may easily result in a too complicated game, while forgetting the aim of the seminar. As long as role play is a hobby, form is of course important. However, when it is used as a tool; content is of the essence.

**Which direction would you like the role-playing medium to move in?**

Those developing role playing games into a professional tool should consider making international ethical standards, and perhaps establish an accreditation organization which can ensure the quality of the products offered. By this I mean an organization to which discontent customers can complain, and which role playing groups can be members of and thus use to advertise the quality of their products. You find such organizations within media and press, as well as in older professions such as laws and medical doctors. If you deal with the public, you should also ensure the quality of the product you offer.

**Can you use role-playing in your field? How?**

I have not used role playing games much in my teaching at Department of Comparative Politics, but I have used it quite often when teaching international politics to officers embarking on UN missions at the Norwegian Naval Academy. It has been easily accepted by the cadets. As one said: “a normal military exercise is really just a big larp”.

However, role plays are cheaper and can be made in a smaller scale. Furthermore, in cooperation with Raftohuset (a human rights organization) my son Erik has drawn me in to help develop a role play aiming to give high school students a 4-5 hour experience of being in a prison camp (modelled after the Nazi transit camps).

# sigrid alvestad

57 years old, Senior Master, Bjørgvin videregående skole, Bergen, Norge

Master degree in History and Law. Teacher in upper secondary school for the last 18 years. Have also been working with Human Rights and Election Observation for UNHCR and OSCE.

## **What is your impression of the role-playing medium?**

My impression is that role-playing normally involves people between 18 and 40 years old. It is furthermore an activity that seems to take up quite a lot of space in those people's lives, while its almost unknown to everyone else.

## **What experiences have you yourself had with this medium?**

My only first hand experience with larp has been a World War II larp placed outside Bergen, called "1942". However, my main contact to the scene has been through my son and his friends, who have been dedicated larpers for many years now. Furthermore, I have used larp as an educational tool in my history and social studies teaching (upper secondary school).

## **What strengths and weaknesses do you think that role-playing has as a medium?**

As I see it, one of larps biggest strengths is when it is used as an educational tool. It is a highly efficient and motivating form of teaching, in particular when working with students from different backgrounds.

I have seen students who have problems engaging themselves in a traditional teaching framework, starting to show interest when the material is introduced through role-playing.

A weakness when using larp as a teaching tool is that the students may find it too entertaining. Or said in another way: the content disappears in relation to the tool.

## **Which direction would you like the role-playing medium to move in?**

That's a difficult question. I would, however, like it to be more acknowledged as a teaching method, but without it losing its present spontaneity as a youth-driven activity.

## **Can you use role-playing in your field? How?**

As stated above. It's a great method of teaching.

”Larp is a highly efficient  
and motivating  
form of teaching”

# eli kristine økland hausken

29 years old, Museum Teacher, Bergen Museum

Major in Cultural Sciences with folklore studies, Nordic studies, sociology, religious studies and educational theory from the University of Bergen. Previously worked as a teacher in primary, secondary and upper secondary schools.

## **What is your impression of the role-playing medium?**

The role-playing medium is diverse. It's colourful, playful, creative and is recognised by its participants and their wish to experience new and sometimes extreme situations. It gives people the opportunity to escape the dreariness of everyday life – if they need it. But it's also great fun and a social happening and gathering where one can play and interact with persons and situations ranging from fantasy, sci-fi and historical contexts to in fact scenes from life as we think we know it.

Role-playing in various forms has been popular for a long time, but has mainly seen use as a hobby and recreational activity. In the recent years one can see a clear development towards role-playing becoming more respected and used as an educational tool. The potential of role-playing as a method of relaying knowledge is becoming better known. More teachers and others who work with education and training have started to use the medium. Various techniques where students and others are let to meet other context, asked to assume roles, and act from the premise of the role opens the door for a new way of transferring knowledge. In recent times there has been focus on some students not gaining the proper value from the so-called traditional educational

methods. In these cases dramaturgical methods, such as role-playing, has participated in opening new ways of learning, and it has become clear that other areas of knowledge are available for the students.

## **What experiences have you yourself had with this medium?**

My experience with live role-playing as a method used in teaching, tells me that the medium is good, but demanding. As a teacher you want the students to learn something quantifiable from the role-playing. The amount of time available is also limited, and one therefore has to adapt the medium to educational goals as opposed to purely entertainment purposes. With this in mind, it is necessary to distinguish between larp as a hobby, and live role-playing used as an educational tool. While in the first case, the participants are aware of how the medium works, and knows the different thoughts around live role-playing, what they want, what it means to take on a role, students on the other hand often meet role-playing for the first time. It is therefore essential to provide introduction to live role-playing and have a simple, easy-to-understand and concrete game with secure frames prepared.

## **What strengths and weaknesses do you think that role-playing has as a medium?**

”One can play and interact with persons and situations ranging from fantasy, sci-fi and historical contexts to in fact scenes from life as we think we know it.”

Live role-playing has, in an educational context, a great strength in letting the individual place himself in a different context. The students are giving the opportunity to step into a subject in an untraditional and hopefully exciting manner.

One of the largest weaknesses of live role-playing in an educational context, is that the form is very demanding, both in the preparations, but also in the actual running of the game. It is difficult to estimate beforehand how good the game will be and if expectations can be met. You can have a clear expectation of how the game will progress, but live role-playing is difficult to control. The same introductory presentation will always play out differently with different groups of individual players. On the other hand, this is also one of live role-playing’s strengths, it’s dynamic and unpredictable nature. But from a teacher’s standpoint, it is essential to have a concrete and well-researched introductory presentation where the educational goals are clear, in addition to creating a secure and clear framework for the players so that they will dare to experiment.

**Which direction would you like the role-playing medium to move in?**

I think that live role-playing has a large potential within education and that it should be used to

a greater degree within different educational institutions. The medium lets individual learn actively through action and immersion/empathy, in addition live role-playing can, in an ideal world, engage in, create teamwork and interest in the subject being provided for the participants. Understanding of different cultures, times and places can be difficult to understand. Live role-playing can work as an admission ticket to such understanding.

**Can you use role-playing in your field? How?**

As a museum teacher I definitely think that live role-playing is a good method to teach knowledge. The medium is especially relevant when the subject at hand is historical. An important audience for museums are school-children, and great emphasis is put on offering good proposals for education that gives a different form of teaching and education that what is found in the schools. Live role-playing is a medium that I have used and will use in future educational programmes at the museum. The possibility of letting students of different ages step into a different context and in this way gain knowledge is unique and the feedback from students and teachers are very positive.

# anne mette thorhaug

30 years old, MA, Ph.D. student, University of Copenhagen

Master of Arts in media science focusing on computer games from 2001. Finishes her Ph.D. in the beginning of 2007. A member of the Media Council for Children and Young People as well as the Pan European Game Information's Advisory Board. At the moment working with information technology and communications.

## **What is your impression of the role-playing medium?**

The role-playing medium is first and foremost a very complex medium. It involves some specific rulebooks or a programmed system, but it is the player groups who put these rulebooks and systems into use who decide the actual form of the role-playing medium. In this way, the role-playing medium consists really mostly of the traditions in popular culture and the communicative conventions that the players agree to use as their basis.

## **What experiences have you yourself had with this medium?**

I have done quite a bit of fieldwork in connection with my Ph.D. project on computer games as a form of communication. In that connection, I myself have participated in a role-playing game, and I have

observed two very different role-playing groups playing respectively classical "pen and paper" role-playing and on-line role-playing. It was very interesting.

## **What strengths and weaknesses do you think that role-playing has as a medium?**

One could say that the strength and the weakness are the same. That the players form the medium themselves, but consequently it is also the players who form the medium. The good news is that there is room for improvisation and crazy ideas; the bad news is that the situation can too easily fall apart. This becomes especially obvious when we move over to the on-line role-playing game, where the players come from all over world and do not necessarily have a common idea of what makes a "good game". Here it can be difficult to get real role-playing going.

”It is primarily the  
breadth of the medium  
that is interesting.”

**Which direction would you like the role-playing medium to move in?**

In many different directions. As a researcher, I am primarily interested in role-playing as a form of communication, and in this area, it is exciting to see how different starting points create different communication- and identification patterns. Take the “pen and paper” role-playing and the live-action role-playing which bring with them widely differing social patterns of organisation, player-character relations and narrative dynamics. Seen in this way, I think that it is primarily the breadth of the medium that is interesting.

**Can you use role-playing in your field? How?**

I have already mentioned some of this, but role-playing is a fantastic case because it appears in so many different forms. That has for example enabled

me to compare classical role-playing and on-line role-playing with a view to defining more accurately the functions of the programmed system. As a researcher focusing on computer games as a form of communication, it is simply not possible to avoid role-playing.

# martin rauff

30 years old, writer, musician and game designer.

Martin has, among other things, been the host and storywriter for the improvised TV-series “Barda” for DR1, which won the “Best Children’s TV of 2006” award at the Danish TV-festival.

”I hope that role-play  
and role-players will remain true  
to the art of experimenting.”

**What is your impression of the role-playing medium?**

That it is a diverse entity, ranging from the simple narrative play of kids, over the rule-wielding games of the RPG scene to the free-flowing fictional improvisations of experimental role-play. It is not one thing. It is many.

**What experiences have you yourself had with this medium?**

I have played since childhood, both tabletop and live—predominantly as a game master and writer. Over the past 5-7 years, role-playing has been a part of my professional life in more ways than one, from the concrete to the implicit, from actual game writing to improvisational and presentational tools used in meetings.

**What strengths and weaknesses do you think that role-playing has as a medium?**

Role-playing is a practice of empathy, teamwork and improvisation. Those are great strengths to have—or study—in the world of today. But role-playing is also time consuming and, to an extent, a private process. It requires effort, which is a hard sell in said world of today.

**Which direction would you like the role-playing medium to move in?**

It should remain playful, exploratory and free. While the word “remain” may not signal direction at face value, I believe that it is applicable for the question asked. Any subculture blooming into the mainstream has a risk of getting bogged down in opinionated dogmas and illusions of authenticity. In spite of the commercialization, which “role-playing” as a term

faces in the industries of entertainment and corporate governance, there is still ample room for the art – and fun – of role-playing and gaming to grow and inspire. The process of striving for the idea of role-playing as a common improvisational process of enlightenment, embellishment and entertainment cannot be taken for granted. Becoming popular is a challenge for any subculture, and I hope that role-play and role-players will remain true to the art of experimenting.

**Can you use role-playing in your field? How?**

I write games and fiction, so as such I would be in a different position entirely without the skills I learned playfully through role-playing. I also consistently find that the basic skills of empathy and constructive, collective improvisation are very useful in any kind of group- or team-based work.

# johan peter paludan

62 years old, Director, futurist, Instituttet for Fremtidforskning (The Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies)

Master of Political Science, attached to the The Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies since 1976. The Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies is a self-funding think tank, founded in 1970 by the previous Minister of Finance Thorkil Kristensen.

## **What is your impression of the role-playing medium?**

Initially, I should probably note that my impression of the role-playing medium and its development is seen from outside. I do not practice it myself and has not done so since my childhood, which, in consideration of my 62 years, was quite some time ago.

My impression is that the role-playing model is spreading and becoming more differentiated.

It is spreading by being used in other areas than the original very “play-oriented” area. Especially in the educational area where, I believe, the role-playing model can have an advantage. If teaching needs to increase its productivity—and it does—it must to a higher degree use technology, i.e. information technology. This means that interactive medium are becoming increasingly popular. It is happening partly because interactive medium are cheaper than teachers, partly because they in some situations are able to make the learning and development situation more engaging and tempting. This is called edutainment, and role-playing-based education programmes will probably be an important part of this trend.

The role-playing medium also seems to become more and more differentiated, stretching from the classic

face2face around a table for a couple of hours to still more virtualised, complex sequences lasting years. Some of the games are apparently so complex that rich Americans pay young east Europeans to work the character through the first phases, after which the American takes over the character.

## **What experiences have you yourself had with this medium?**

As mentioned earlier, I haven’t been involved in role-playing games myself apart from those that everyone engage in during childhood – playing cops and robbers or cowboys and Indians. As a curiosity, perhaps I can mention that when, in the beginning of the 1970s, I taught social studies at HF (the Higher Preparatory Examination) and was facing young and vaguely left-wing persons, that I wanted to goad into debating, I developed an, in my own opinion and judging by the irritation of the students, rather good ability to portray Mogens Glistrup, including the Bornholm accent (Mogens Glistrup was a controversial right-wing politician). Maybe you could also say that it verges on role-playing when we at The Institute of Futures Studies work with scenarios (images of the future) and frequently in the presentation of these scenarios allocate them to different colleagues, and then each of them have to fight nail and tooth to defend their image of the future.

”I could well imagine that role-playing  
could be used more in the development  
of images of how the future could turn out.”

**What strengths and weaknesses do you think that role-playing has as a medium?**

The advantage of role-playing is clearly the engaging element and hence the developing element. There is no doubt that it is developing to try out different identities. This must be the reason children do it so much. We all have a role here in life that we play more or less successfully. Children can change roles often where adults normally “petrify” in a given role. The thing that is special about the role-playing medium is, I suppose, that it has prolonged the “playing” phase of life. It may also be an advantage that some people can use role-playing to escape a personal shell and then are able to dare do more things, since they assume an identity and leave it behind again. But this obviously also contains the danger that you may be tempted to never be yourself.

The weakness—or rather the “danger”—in the role-playing medium is perhaps that some people cannot handle this, and so it ends up eclipsing reality. Stories of people who shut themselves up for years and live on role-playing and pizza do occur. In light of the growing obesity epidemic, you could say that the virtual role-plays could be discredited, and they should be developed in the direction of also being physically activating. When still older people are using the role-playing medium it is probably also

due to the fact that it takes people longer and longer to become adults. Some never make it, so you could be tempted to tell the really hardcore users of role-playing: get a life—to which they might reply, that they have one.

**Which direction would you like the role-playing medium to move in?**

We are in a period characterized by polarities. The rich become richer, the poor definitely not richer. The healthy become healthier, the sick sicker. This polarizing tendency could also apply to the role-playing medium, either it has to be simple, clear and actual or it has to be continually more complex and virtual.

**Can you use role-playing in your field? How?**

Apart from the vaguely role-playing reminiscent behaviour I at times use in scenario presentations, I personally have a hard time thinking that I will be using it within my field, futures studies. But this is probably just due to the fact that I am reactionary and not young enough. I could well imagine that role-playing could be used more in the development of images of how the future could turn out.







# contributors

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**Sanne Harder** has been playing and writing role-playing scenarios since 1994 – both pen & paper and larp. She finished her official education as a teacher in 2003, but started teaching role-playing a while before this. She uses her experience as a role-player when teaching and as a consultant. In 2005, she began studying towards an MA in Educational Theory at the Danish University of Education. Contact: [sanneharder.blogspot.com](mailto:sanneharder.blogspot.com).

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**Johanna Koljonen**, age 28, is a writer, television presenter and film critic. She took up role-playing 12 years ago in her native Finland and has since expanded her field of interaction to Sweden, Denmark and Norway. She has organised ten larps and done additional writing for a handful more, served briefly as chairman of a national larp organisation and edited the international larp fanzine Panclou. She shares her time between Stockholm, Sweden, where she works as a critic and comic book author, and the University of Oxford, UK, where she is an English Literature finalist. Contact: [joc@pobox.se](mailto:joc@pobox.se).

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# knudepunkt 2007

## from denmark with love

Knudepunkt is the annual Nordic larp conference. The 2007 convention is the 11th in a row and it brings together larpers from more than 12 countries around the world.

Knudepunkt was first organised in Oslo, Norway, in 1997 under the name Knutepunkt. Since then the convention has been held in all the four Nordic countries, alternating between Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland.

This book is published as part of the Knudepunkt 2007 conference. Knudepunkt is organized by a project group under the Danish National LARP Organization (Landsforeningen for Levende Rollespil). The publishing of the book is funded by Dansk Ungdoms Fællesråd and Liveforum.

The group consists of: Bjarke Pedersen, Jannick Raunow, Jesper Bruun, Jesper Donnis, Kasper Sjøgren, Kristoffer Thurøe, Lene Borgen Bjørhei, Lene Arvad Dam, Line Thorup, Lynne Rahbek-Drageheim, Mikkel Rode, Mikkel Sander, Morten Gade, Peter Andreasen & Ryan Rohde-Hansen and a bunch of valuable helpers.

For more info, log on to [www.knudepunkt.org](http://www.knudepunkt.org).

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