

The layoutless KPbook 2013

Edited by

Karete Jacobsen Meland & Katrine Øverlie Svela

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The postmodern deadlock

Sergey Kolesnikov

These days, our small community of larpers is full of talk and discussions on various prospects of larps; their development and even on their possible contribution to helping the World become a better place. A popular point of view is that we should first develop larps both extensively – by building active and positive communication with society, and intensively – by improving quality and enriching the content of what we are doing. Then, as larps can be considered Temporary Autonomous Zones where the rules of capitalism are denied (Pohjola, 2004), we will be able to help trigger the process of self-organization in the whole society and, therefore, in the long view, change and improve society from within.

However, it is obvious that society will hardly welcome us with open arms. Generally speaking, a regular person will not care about all our efforts. Why is it so?

Many years ago, our larping was a way to escape from the foul External World. Such escapism was laughed at by a disapproving society. But this very escapism helped us keep the values which had long become archaic in the External World, and to slowly turn larping into a great tool of self-organization and self-education for the players' personalities.

In the meantime, when the Information Tyranny began ruling the world, overwhelming it with mass media and internet, the notorious External World sank into the very escapism it was mocking us for.

People work in order to earn money, money they in turn spend to relieve themselves from the stress caused by their jobs, which they occupy themselves with to earn money. Hundreds of millions of people are chasing their tails locked in this fruitless cycle. Meanwhile, we are continuously being soothed and reassured: “Oh, you feel ashamed you do nothing when children are starving in Africa? Well, send a two-dollar SMS to support them, and sleep peacefully!” So nobody is interested in the real world and real problems. It’s much more fascinating to watch TV, surf social networks, goggle at celebrities, live virtual lives in computer games, focus our attention on mere trifles or simply engage ourselves in alcohol, drugs and extremes of sex. Humanity has stopped, it moves no further, repeating the same idle cycle. We’re all in this together. We’re in the Postmodern Deadlock.

The first to rebel was Art. In the past, it has often managed to suggest to humanity, facing a challenge, some essentially new or unexpected view of the situation, or even propose a solution to it. But contemporary mass media effectively taught us that in the world of postmodernity every art trend could be stripped of its meaning and commercialized. Even art-inspired non-conformist subcultures with alternative values, from punk to cyberpunk, could become fashion. To escape this dreaded fate, artists started competing in creating the most shocking, cruel and perverted work of modern art, as though intended to awaken people from their endless slumber through shock. Alas, to no avail.

Then the real Protesters came. At first it seemed that protesting, denying, even committing a crime against the system could help.

But how can one overcome a political system which states that “all points of view have the right to exist” – including the one contesting this system? In the end, the face of Che Guevara, this symbolic figure of the anti-globalization movement, was printed on millions of T-shirts. The most abominable form of protest, terrorism, became a media phenomenon causing lesser and lesser reaction to its crimes, no matter how revolting they are. And so, the Apathy of Masses (Noys, 2007) came. It seems now that only the Absolute Crime will overcome it; a global catastrophe, the end of the world as we know it. Neither ideology nor any kind of religion may save us from it in the globalized world. There seems to be no exit from the Postmodern Deadlock.

What can our small larps do about this big problem? One tempting idea could be to organize a hypothetical larp on today’s world problems, suitable for politicians, social activists and other people in charge. Maybe they could invent some kind of Exit from the Postmodern Deadlock through larp’s social modeling capabilities, and then apply it to the real world?

Unfortunately, our current larps do not suit this purpose for the most part. They are grounded in postmodernism; they are based on already existing plots and ideas mostly coming from the worlds of history and fantasy. This served as the foundation for escapism at the beginning of the larp phenomenon, and it is also the reason why we cannot derive new meanings and solutions from tired situations, plots and clichés practiced in our current larps. There is a danger that if we start to churn out various community-oriented or commercial larp products in their present form to the general public, they can only hit it big with simple escapists and consumers desiring new sensations – turning larp into merely a form of social entertainment. Larps alone will certainly not overwhelm the Apathy of Masses.

But there is one thing of which I am absolutely certain: larp is a

form of Art. It might be modern, synthetic, and non-classical, but still Art. So, if we want to improve our larps and get help to do so from outside our community, then I think we primarily need to promote larping to people of art, culture, philosophy and humanities, and not necessarily to politicians or other people in charge. But, again, why should they care?

A possible answer lies in the fact that contemporary art theory does not separate *reality* from *diegesis* the way it used to before. A spectator/reader is always to some extent a co-creator of the diegesis, comprehending a piece of art through the lens of one's experience. I consider this even more applicable in larping, where the positions of the author and spectator are completely merged within a participant; co-creating every moment of the individual diegesis in collaboration with other interacting participants and game masters, while at the same time immediately living through it and making it part of one's own experience.

Thus, larps could provide an excellent field for experimenting, practicing, studying, and playing, for the contemporary art and humanities community. In the process we could also learn from them, using their achievements to improve the language and techniques of our larps. Also, let's not forget about the content. Remember that exactly those people – among them Deleuze, Baudrillard and their countless followers and critics – described and studied the current state of postmodernity in their books and essays. They understood the very essence of it but unfortunately, their means of challenging the world and moving it forward have been found to be inadequate. On the other hand, we have our larps, which are nostalgic and postmodern in their present form – but seem like a perfect tool to find the Solution.

We are destined to move forward together. Instead of being nostalgic, larps should become futuristic. Not in the sense of the same old stories decorated with tired sci-fi entourage, but in the

sense of modeling and building our future. To do this, we should concentrate our larps on the modern world and its problems, and to do this right, we should inject them with concepts, ideas and tools from those who deeply comprehend and express the problems of modern civilization – the forefront of the art and humanities community. We should, collaboratively, fight the Apathy and Nostalgia inside and outside of us; we should constantly look for improvements and alternatives to modern ways; ultimately, we should seek the Exit from the dreaded Postmodern Deadlock. And if we succeed in finding one in larping – then we should spread it to the World.

Fitting into the frame

Carl Heath

”How hard can it be?”, I asked myself. I had just been approached by the team leading the work on school development in the municipality, wondering if it was possible to create a larp to tackle some burning issues in the local community. In the past year, there had been a drastic shift in the attitude towards immigrants and foreigners amongst many of the pupils. The team wanted help to create a learning experience: memorable, concrete, immersive and keyed toward the issues at hand. And so, I set out to create this larp. This was the fall of 2001, and a few months later I ran it in a classroom for the first time. I was excited! I had integrated many interesting larp design techniques in the game, the story was closely related to the real and ongoing story of the pupils in the municipality, and at the core of the game was the discussion of human rights. It felt so good. After an hour and a half, it became blatantly clear to me, and the players, that it was an epic failure. What went wrong? The short answer is: just about everything.

This first encounter with educational gaming and larps in formal educational systems was my introduction to a field where I have continued to work until now. For more than a decade, I have had the pleasure and opportunity to design and deploy educational games of all sorts and sizes, including larps, ARGs, boardgames,

card games, role-playing games, simulations and ice breakers in Sweden and abroad. I have stopped counting but estimate that over the years, I have produced over a hundred different games or game-related concepts for schools, municipalities, governments, the EU, corporations and others.

In all the design processes I have been involved in, there are a set of questions and dos and don'ts that reappear again and again. These are tools that provide me with a scaffold in the design, which in turn prevents me from producing as many epic failures as I did in the beginning. I will not delve deep into every technique or perspective – that would be a book in itself. However, I want to present an outline, a rough sketch, of topics which should be given extra consideration when designing larps (and similar experiences) with an educational aim in a school setting.

1. AIM

The aim of most larps is somehow to enrich oneself with an immersive experience. Often, but not always, the aim of the larp is to have fun. But when designing for a formal educational environment, the primary aim isn't that of *fun* anymore.. The fun and the immersive experience is simply a means to an extrinsic goal, namely that of learning. This is a game changer, literally, as the aim is what connects the various parts of the game design and narrative structure to the players and their characters. The aim is also one of the more important motivating factors for players. With the aim shifting from immersive experience to learning, one needs to relate the new extrinsic goal to the other parts of the game. This has broad implications on both game and narrative design, as these parts have to be in tune with each other to be effective. When the aim of the larp becomes learning, it also becomes important to adjust the character design so that all characters participate in the game in such a way that their experience will correlate with the aim. This aspect of the character creation process becomes important to ensure that all

participating players have equal or similar means of learning.

2. ENGAGEMENT

In larp, it is a given that all larpers engaged in the experience want to engage in it. That isn't the case in a formal educational environment. At worst, you are present because you have to be, not because you want to. The prior experience with role-play will also vary a lot. Some will have no experience at all, or very little, whilst others might be more experienced with the concept of role-taking and immersing oneself in an ongoing story. Because of this, it becomes important to design characters and proposed actions in such a way as to invite role-play, while not shutting the door for pupils who'd rather not immerse, but instead take on a more passive or observational approach.

3. ENVIRONMENT

Another issue at hand is the formal educational environment, which at best has drama facilities within the walls of the school. If the ambition is for the larp to be run on several occasions and in different school environments, one has to design with the notion that schools usually have a hard time using other facilities than classrooms, unless one is outdoors. Depending on factors such as the size of the school and the age of the pupils, it can be more or less complicated to run games in environments shared with other students.

4. TIMING

In the formal educational environment, nothing is as important as time, and timing. Depending on age group and environment, the normal length of a lesson will vary. Usually, it takes longer than a normal lesson to carry out an educational larp. Some games have been designed to manage within the frame of a lesson, but many don't fit that frame. This is an important factor when it comes to playability, as all issues having to do with creating special situations and going outside the normal, structured, environment can become a reason not to carry out

the game for the teacher. On the other hand, limiting oneself to designing games for the time frame of a lesson might be an even more problematic situation. No matter which path one takes, it's an important perspective to be conscious of.

5. TECHNOLOGY

If one is to design a technology enhanced educational larp, it is of key importance to carefully study how and to what degree it is possible for the educational environment one has as a target to actually use the technology. The availability and competence levels vary a lot between schools, making this a possible hurdle for the use of a game.

6. TESTING (AND TESTING AGAIN)

As in all design processes, one tends to test concepts too late in the design cycle. When testing larps, there are several levels of testing that can be done independently – specific game mechanics, characters or processes – without having to play-test the entire game. Parts of a design can often be tested through free-form role-play with a smaller group. Does the group understand the concepts? Characters? Plots? Does the aim of the game follow through? Does the game follow other design constraints, such as how long the game takes to play? Usually larps in educational context are written for single school classes, but with rerunability as an ambition. In such a case, it's usually possible to test the complete game on the actual target group, through engaging a school in the design process. Testing, and failing repeatedly before implementing, is one of the most important (and toughest) parts of a design process, as it often means killing darlings.

7. FACILITATION

Another issue is concerning who's going to facilitate the game, or, if you will, be the game master. Should it, with some instruction, be able to be carried out by a teacher? Do I have to carry it out

myself? When designing for a broad audience, it is a given that many have to be able to manage the set up and deployment of the game. With this comes issues such as designing the proper instructional material, describing how the game is supposed to be set up, what the aim is, to what educational purpose the game is designed, and so on. It cannot be emphasized enough how important it is to provide the teacher with good instructional material. Without it, the game won't be played – it's as simple as that.

8. ADAPTIVENESS

How will the design of the larp be able to cope with adaptation and redesign by the teacher? It isn't unusual that a teacher would want to use a game, but not exactly in the suggested manner. If the teacher doesn't have prior larp experience, it will be next to impossible for him or her to actually adapt the game and be sure of the outcome of the adaptation. Helping out by instructing and suggesting various possible adaptations can be a way to handle this.

9. ITERATING THE END

Most larps designed for education will need both pre-planning and discussions with players after the game in order to be meaningful in a learning perspective. One needs to have time for the post-game discussions within the allotted time frame, whilst at the same time providing an ending to the game that correlates with the desired outcome. This doesn't differ drastically from normal larps and endings, but it becomes even more important to reflect, iterate and test the ending so that it becomes a proper bridge into the post-larp discussion of the learning experience. Another way of designing endings is by a triggered end design, where the game ends as soon as some given situation occurs.

As initially stated, the above drafted nine points are but an introduction to a tool box for designing educational larps. Having

said this, it is my strong belief that games produced with the knowledge of these primary concepts, have a higher chance of success – both when it comes to the deployment of the game, and with the actual learning outcome of the game.

Business larp

Jana Pouchlá

Deep in the Arctic Ocean, the alarm sounds in a submarine. Twelve members of the crew suddenly realise that they only have enough oxygen to barely get to the surface. What will they do? Should they descend deeper to their colleagues trapped several meters further down, or should they save their own lives? Calling off the operation might end up costing them billions of dollars!

This is the beginning of two days filled with some unusual training for a group of managers. They are about to embark on an adventure focusing on managing styles, negotiation, argumentation, decision-making, communication under pressure, achieving goals and time management.

YES, WE CALL IT LARP

Descent was originally written as a larp for the larp community. With age comes the need to pay bills, and in 2011 we in the Czech organizer team Court of Moravia made a radical step from focusing on larp for the general public, to introducing it to the business market. We began cooperating with professional trainers and coaches, and modified our games for the business clientele. Then, we changed into suits and met with human resources managers and company directors. Although we altered both our target audience and clothing, we did not change our goal: To create larps with good game-design and strong ideas.

“We are in a hurry! If you can’t agree on your leadership amongst yourselves, we will designate it for you,” declares a voice from the speakers. The discussion starts immediately: Should the soldier lead? Or the technician who knows the submarine best? Or perhaps the one whom least people will mind? Sooner than the crew has settled upon a leader, the speakers are heard again: “We are in a hurry! Decide!”

Larping was an entirely new word for the HR managers. It proved a good idea to call our version of training *larp*, as this makes us new and interesting. At the same time, we do not hide that larp is also a game, and it should be noted that we do sometimes experience difficulties with making our business partners take us seriously. But a number of psychologists and anthropologists could confirm the importance and irreplaceability of games in human lives. And, as the formal educational environment is saturated with serious and frontal trainings, mostly boring and impractical, we propose that larping can prove to be a long-awaited alternative.

What makes larping so different from simulation gaming or experience pedagogies? Primarily, the game mechanisms are not set in a way that enables the participants to win collectively. The goals of the various characters are conflicting and it is impossible for all the characters to achieve success. Put in simpler terms: When someone wins, somebody else loses.

“The sealed case with mineral samples is in the airlock” says the console. The geologist grabs the case and before anybody can stop him – opens it. “What have you done?” the officers scream, “this is pure sabotage of the scientific mission. Now our samples are worthless!”. “Leave him alone. I paid him to do that.” A gentleman who has kept himself in the background the whole time suddenly appears. “So, young man, I’d really like to know: Who is the legal owner of all that oil?”

The different motivations of the characters manifest soon after the beginning of the descent. This causes a collision onboard that endangers not only the success of the mission, but also the lives of all the people present. It is not the collective feeling of satisfaction from a job well done, but rather an intense, often negative experience, that is the starting point of discussion, analysis and looking for solutions in parallel situations in the business world. It is our goal that the discussions will enable the employees to see the perspectives of their colleagues, reflect around these and hopefully understand them better. This fosters an open mind, respect for the work of others, and improves mutual communication.

THE MOOD TO PLAY

This kind of training is not for everybody. The unknown situation of a simulated crisis puts the team members into different roles than the ones they normally take in their company. An employee may play the boss and vice-versa. The success of a game as a development activity depends on the right targeting. We recommend the use of larping to dynamic and communicative teams that want to evolve and improve. When approaching the larp, it is important to be in a mood to play, experiment, and constantly be ready to try out new solutions – otherwise it cannot fulfil its purpose. However, we do not leave this responsibility to the clients, as it is the role of the trainer to contact the group prior to the training and motivate them to participate. One should also prepare them for the game in an active and motivating way when at the training event. The trainer has to be a skilled pedagogue, and know how to deal with initial concerns and mistrust between the participants due to the new situation.

“The solution to this situation is obvious,” the agent says, pulling out a gun. He sees no point in a heroic death, his goal is clear – to survive at all cost. Will he pull the trigger?

LARP IS NOT ENOUGH

When the game ends, it is analysed by professional trainers that have experience in both larps and group coaching. This way, the larp becomes a base for further training, which will be focused on some specific educational topic. We set the aim according to the agreement with the company and the requirements of the group. As participants can hide behind their roles, larps can uncover more than plain assessments or pure simulation. Importantly, it is not the action of the employee during the larp that is considered, but rather the employee's reflections around the role. The employee is never criticised or given negative feedback. The situations from the larp are used as examples for finding solutions with distance and detachment.

Beeep, beeeep. The alarm sounds again. "You've reached the point of critical pressure on the outer hull. If you keep descending, you may risk deformation of the submarine". "We have to keep descending. We are so close!" shouts the officer. "No way, do you want to kill us all?" The technician refuses to operate the console. "Do it, I'm the officer. This is a command." The crew starts to rebel. Red lights are blinking at the control desk.

Initially, we had decided to run this as a one-day long training program. However, it turned out that the reflection needs much more space, and we now recommend a two-day variant. The preparation for the larp, the larp itself and the first phase of the reflection (which focuses on the individual processing of the emotions and experiences) take place during the first day. The second day is dedicated to the analysis of the different game situations, where the team looks for parallels with the working reality of the participants, finds new solutions, and sets new personal goals regarding their educational topic. This second day is lead by our coach in cooperation with the manager of the team in order to achieve applicability in the particular working environment. Evaluation with the leadership takes place after the training, and

in these meetings we provide recommendations for further work with the group, or give material to the internal company coaches.

DO NOT TRY THIS AT HOME

We do not want to discourage anybody. But it is necessary to stress that, although the Descent has been redesigned twice since its creation, it took us a year to improve the characters and their aims, and to ensure their applicability to the goals of the projects. And most of all, a large part of the training is up to a professional coach that we cooperate with. Without him, we would never be able to manage an analysis of the game suitable for the top management of a corporation, considering that they come from a very different target group than what we have met earlier.

Still, over the course of the last two years, we have come closer to fulfilling a great dream of ours: To build a company on something we love to do – larping – and this brings us joy every day.

An uncharted larp arena

Emma Ström

Milsim is short for Military Simulation and started out as a subgenre within the airsoft hobby. It can best be described as a crossover between larp and airsoft activities. The core piece within the milsim genre is that the military experience has to feel realistic. This often induces a shift in focus from the action-packed airsoft scenarios played without larp elements, to more realistic, less action-triggered tasks. Several milsim games have even been played without an opponent, where the effort has been aimed at portraying the full experience of military assignments rather than simply the battle. Milsims also host a number of non-fighting characters, varying from a few to many depending on the game. This could include the local population, refugees, UN-personnel and so on, giving yet another dimension to the game and bringing forth nuances that a strictly military affair would not be able to show.

Today, it seems as if players from the larp community are quite hesitant towards the milsim genre, and organizers of such games find it incredibly difficult to motivate larpers to try it out. The last milsim I attended had sixty larpers booked to attend as non-fighting characters the week prior to the event, but during the course of those seven days all but me and two or three others dropped out. So, during the milsim we were three non-fight-

ing characters and 120 fighting ones. Quite a disappointment for the organizers, as well as for those who had plots and plans with the non-fighting larpers. In order to battle such destructive tendencies, I want to bring to light to, and challenge, some of the common (false) assumptions regarding milsims that seem to be circulating among larpers.

“BUT I DON’T WANT TO BE A BACKDROP!”

Many a larper repeat over and over again that they “don’t want to be a backdrop for the airsoft players”, while some airsofters claim that they “don’t want to be subjected to odd roleplayers acting strange”. This is extremely sad, and has its roots – I think – in complete lack of insight into what the other hobby encompasses as well as how a milsim game actually works. The participants who are present during the milsims are very considerate both of each other and of the game itself, as well as continuously inviting interaction with all co-players, no matter their background.

The part about being a backdrop frustrates me most. During a classic larp, all participants are in some way or another a backdrop to each other, and the game becomes what oneself makes of it. A milsim game is no different; on the contrary it is common that the characters played by larpers get extra space and plots just because of the low participation so far from this group.

The border guards are a problem too, but for them she holds both drugs and some useful rumors to provide in exchange for free passage, should Bogdan’s name not prove enough. The road block is worse; all the way there she ponders and discards a number of options. Everything comes down to who is on duty there, of course; if it is Fenrir, she would probably have to club him in the head and run through the woods instead just to get past. If it is Yellow Hammer, she might be able to make him understand, and the same goes for Xerxes. If the interpreter is John, however, and he has realized that she has given him away... Or if Johnny is there

with his pitying eyes and mild voice, keeping her captive for some higher purpose he thinks he sees... She has information they might be interested in too, of course, or maybe she can succeed in tricking them into sending only one soldier with her as escort to her camp, where she can knock him out without anyone noticing.

(from *Crusaders in Disneyland II*, a game focusing on the border conflict involving the breakaway nation Transnistria, a strip of land between Moldavia and Ukraine, including NATO forces as well as Moldavian troops.)

One comment after *Crusaders in Disneyland II* was that the presence of civilian characters, who didn't *respawn* (regain life) but actually died if they were hit, gave the game a depth that surprised in its intensity. The realization of battle outcome having an impact also on those unable to defend themselves was striking. During the milsim *Fun to be Had*, players felt that just "getting to watch" while larger scenes were acted out between other characters was enough to make them curious and daring enough to try and interact more on their own. Such inspiration is truly catching and getting new larpers into the hobby is of course quite enjoyable.

"BUT I DON'T KNOW HOW IT WORKS!"

There are many similarities between airsoft games and larps, and of course cultural differences that have grown to norms over the years. In my experience, any larper is well set-up to participate in a milsim, and might actually find the game tinged by the thrill of curiousness that comes with exploring uncharted grounds.

Airsoft games, as well as larps, are most often outdoor events that demand some form of understanding of how to adjust to the environment. It seems that players from the airsoft hobby have higher demands on the organizers when it comes to accommodation, transportation and game content, than what larpers usually have. Airsoft is a gadget hobby and there is no end to the comforts available, even in the woods, as long as you just get enough cool stuff. At the same time, players with an airsoft back-

ground expect the game to be ready to use upon arrival, which occurs as close to game start as possible. That there are toilets on site is not certain, however, and apparently not a requirement either. Neither is it uncommon to be asked to bring all your water supplies on your own. This is highly different from the larp hobby, which is much more flexible regarding accommodations, the players' own contribution to putting up buildings or camp sites and input for game plots. On the other hand, larpers would expect the organizers to provide toilets and water.

Keeping offgame content out of sight is something everyone agrees on, but there is an enormous tolerance from the airsofters in regards to this that impresses me. At a larp, the off-game area is often outside the in-game border, sometimes requiring quite a walk to get there. At one Swedish milsim location, the off-game area was a house in the middle of the ingame area. As this surprised me as a larper, those who encountered roleplaying for the first time were equally impressed by the ability to keep things in-game. To cook dinner from scratch (rather than pouring boiling water into a bag of powder) or to remain in-character although you're alone were things mentioned as especially interesting.

The respawn-element in the airsoft part of milsim is another factor to be ignored ingame. When a player is shot, this is marked by holding up a brightly coloured piece of cloth. The player must then get to the respawn area in order to join the game again after a given amount of time. To pass through a battlefield where the majority of the soldiers rest in the ditches with their orange cloths on their heads requires a very good ingame filter. This is an aspect I think there are better solutions for, where experiences from the larp hobby can be used.

Furthermore, I believe that the milsim genre would grow a lot from bringing in more practical elements from the larp hobby as far as pre-game work is concerned (for example workshops,

character connections or joint efforts to build and solve practicalities on site). That gives weight to the partaking rather than the using.

His expression when he sees me is so full of sadness and despair that I must wonder how much of the terror I bear visible on my face. Before we're allowed to say anything to each other, to confirm our respective well-beings, Daud and another intercede him and ask about the US troops' reaction and answer. Jack's words hit me like a sledgehammer inside my skull, vibrating with sounds of death that echo through my body.

"They are not coming. They said that they couldn't compromise the mission for one person".

(from Fun to be Had, a milsim about the conflict between American and Taliban forces in Afghanistan.)

"BUT THE STORY IS WRITTEN FOR AIRSOFTERS!"

The setting, main story and intrigue lines are produced using the larp tradition, meaning there is a set framework and a goal for the event that all characters can relate to, as well as leeway for personal threads and goals. There is often a range of missions running parallel to the main story to be performed by each main group during the game, somewhat akin to a computer game. As in any war-focused larp there are a number of battles and skirmishes, along with numerous non-fighting scenes in between.

Since the players on a milsim come from different backgrounds and with different experiences, the need for direction is varied. The above-mentioned missions are perfect for those who have not tried larping before, in that they provide something to relate to and act upon. However, some experienced larpers could be happy enough with a story-bound framework and improvise their own missions ingame instead. Overall, this solution forms a flow of direction that I like, and keeps the game running no

matter where you come from.

In the larp hobby there is always talk of acknowledging ingame ideas and players. During milsims, this becomes incredibly clear and important seeing as how there are so many participants who've not encountered larping before. This also makes you reconsider your own expectations (wrought from years and years of larping within the same spheres) of interactive responses. In some situations, frustration overwhelmed me as my thrown nets and hooks didn't get picked up by others, or that no one seemed to realize that I held more information than what I first showed. Now, I believe this to be an "early disease" of the milsim genre; when more games have been held with more participants from the larp hobby, those with a background in the airsoft hobby will learn to discern what possible game openings are wrapped in an offered interaction from another player.

Something I wish that milsims adopted from the larp hobby are intergroup-connections and character connections, aspects that today are brought into the game mainly by individual players' initiatives. This is important in order to better include anyone who would like to participate as well as to create more contact surfaces for players.

"Poor Jack must be exhausted from fear and literally carrying my weight all this time, but he stays strong and urges me onward. As I stagger onto solid, flat ground again, everything around me seems to diminish and a wave of dizziness washes over me as I'm at last allowed to stop. Jack is torn from my side despite my desperation and I'm left swaying alone, so alone. I try to gather my wits and look around, to at least see where they are taking him, and the image that leaps at me is enough to make panic rise in a terrible, unstoppable surge.

Jack is on his knees with his face to me, hands behind his head with

elbows pointing to each side. Behind him stands a taliban with his gun pressed to the back of Jack's head, awaiting orders. The picture is so clear, so classic, and I have seen it a thousand times in the news clips. But it cannot be happening here, not to my cameraman!"

(From Fun to Be Had.)

SO, WHAT IS MILSIM AGAIN?

Milsim is not a dangerous, boring or larp ignorant genre. Milsim is a new, exciting arena filled with amazing, prospective larpers, game techniques and frameworks, as well as incredible gear! The milsim genre also provides an opportunity to explore conflicts that we normally only get to experience through the news, and which we more often than not distance ourselves from. It is an opportunity to step inside a safe version of such a conflict and gain an understanding of it in a close-to firsthand experience.

Booze beats safety

Kim Tomas Klevengen

Being dressed in uniform and being a part of a coherent group changes us as human beings. It alters not only the characters we are playing but also the player behind said character. The following is based on my experiences from playing a guard, stationed at *Statens interneringsleir for kvinner, Hovedøya* (The State's Detention Camp for Women), during the Norwegian larp *De fortapte pikers øy* (The Island of the Lost Girls). It was in many ways a mind-blowing experience, and in retrospect rather difficult to deal with.

It did not take long before several of the guards quickly experienced the importance of conforming to the group. The way they acted, walked, and spoke was subject to intra-group sanctions. The respect for the uniform and even the way they pointed out a direction served as an important way of differentiating between the girls and the guards. To quote one of the female workers in the camp: "It is obvious to me that if I point like you [the guards] do, the girls will actually do what I ask of them". Furthermore, typical army pranks were often observed, and even among the privates a hierarchy was quickly established. When on guard duty, swift justice for not appearing on time was observed. Covering for your allies and reporting your enemies turned out to be a common aspect of the game, and definitely to the extent that

one would go to great lengths to procure evidence that could be used as blackmail against the other party. It could well be argued that it was the player behind the character and not necessarily the character itself that arrived late. Thus, a player, or her character, might have become annoyed by another player, or his character, being late. This duality raises questions like “how to be fair to the other players while still playing the guard that is always late”.

As is often the case in Nordic larps a subtle fight between opposing views began. As the game progressed, one could say that this became the main intra-group theme. Inter-group relationships, with guards falling in love, friendships, or indeed hate and fury toward the girls, thus had a large impact on intragroup relations. It is on this note I wish to begin discussing the effect of group-legitimated action. Because as a guard everything you do can be covered behind this idea of the group. When I disciplined one of the girls it was not necessarily the wishes of my character, but merely a function performed by a guard. This led several, if not all players, to perform actions that they as individuals arguably never would have deemed right in any moral way. This in itself might be merely skilled role-playing and approved by all involved parties. However the issue arises when players enacting dominant characters realize that the boundaries between play and reality blurs up; when a character’s fury or discomfort suddenly becomes the player’s.

This brings us to a difference that is obvious yet hidden in most safety talks. The difference between the use of safe-words and their immediate effect, which have been debated back and forth, and the minor events that by themselves does not require the use of a safe-word per se, but nonetheless remain issues that build up over time during the game, eventually cumulating into something quite disgusting in the long-term perspective. The special thing about larping is that even though the setting, characters and situations are fictitious the actions, feelings and players

are very much real. In other words, even though the emotions might belong to the character, the player embodies them. Love, hate, fear, sorrow, loyalty, camaraderie, and power are examples of such feelings, the last one being especially visible during this larp. The need for these elements to achieve the 360° immersion needed for such games, while still guarding against the possibly devastating effects of that same immersion, becomes a big challenge. What kind of tools do we use to tackle these effects? Even if it is plausible that some players will be able to deal with these effects because they are good at analyzing their own feelings, empathic players might still experience strong reactions, forced to light by their own conscience, though based on in-game events. An effective way to combat some of these issues would be to define pairs of players who establish a kind of comradeship before, throughout, and even continuing into the debrief session and after the game.

The interplay between the girls and the guards was the main aspect of this game. Simple measures like requiring the girls to curtsy when passing a guard, to make them sit with their face towards the wall in the dining hall, with everyone else behind them, effortlessly made the distinct separation possible and real. Whilst not discussing the psychological effects among the female players, the effect on the guards was notably quite large. They would push the limits for what they would do (within the framework of the game) further and further as the game went on, to create an atmosphere of constant pressure surrounding the girls. It has been pointed out by several of the guards, and also observed by myself and other players, that the border between character and player became hard to locate. This in itself is not a real surprise, since common sense suggests some people are fonder of exerting control and authority than others. The problem emerges first when the player in retrospect realizes that some of his actions were not brought on by the character but by the player himself. When the lines become blurred without the

player's awareness, there is a risk to the players in the regard of something I will coin as *post-larp stress*.

Understanding that you have in fact found pleasure performing actions that are morally wrong could result in several kinds of trauma. For instance, realising that a trait is undesired by the morals of a society could arguably be life-changing. In particular, the impact on an individual's self-confidence might result in negative thoughts and feelings about oneself. Players might suffer for weeks and even months and years if these fundamental problems are not tackled in a sound manner. It could be argued that it is just a game, but in the Nordic larp-tradition, operating with 360° immersion and even turning bleeding into some form of art, the risk of later stress reactions clearly outlines the need for a proper debrief session. In fact I would argue that the debrief is more important than anything else.

Many people develop in-game relations that continue to be present after the game is ended. This is not abnormal by any psychological standard, nor is it something to be afraid of. One of the ways humans develop close relations to other people is indeed by spending time with them. There is no secret that intense and challenging situations, such as larps, traumatic episodes et cetera, works rather like superglue. The problem arises when we neglect to realize the unconscious feelings that might have arisen because of in-game conflict. These conflicts could be based on actions performed not only by a player's character, but also the player herself. What do we do as players when we realize we have performed actions that we didn't think we were capable of? How do we tackle the hatred against a fellow player that is no longer just hatred between characters? How do we deal with in-game actions that have changed our real life views of other players?

In a game where extreme themes are put up front every player is challenged physically, but even more importantly every player

is challenged psychologically. As organizers we would never put the players' safety at risk. Why then do we all too often minimise the role of the debrief? A tool, which by itself might turn out to be the decisive factor determining a player's psychological well-being? The debrief could, and I would argue that it must, be a tool for reconciliation. All too often the organizers of games I have been to have had their focus on anything but the debrief. Their attitudes have often been to pack up and get out as soon as possible, leaving debriefing to individuals at the after-party. The players are not free of guilt either. Often they care more about how fast they can get the liquor out of their bags or how fast they can get to the after-party.

The ultimate debrief would obviously bring every player through their experiences, talking about their reactions. How do we cope with the player's realisation discussed above?

It could actually be argued that the conversational topics at the after-party often serves more like a debrief than the actual debrief itself. I am not convinced this is the right way to go. Will every player actually have the possibility to discuss what he or she needs to go on with his or her life? How do we cope with players that are on the introvert side? The debrief from *The Island of the Lost Girls* was arranged as a circle where every player could say a few things each concerning important events for their character. Where was the widely used group discussions, or the set time for individuals to actually solve problems they might have? In the end, only a very few psychological experiences was put forward, and though recent research claims that talking too much about a recent traumatic event might in fact produce post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), there has been no argument made that supports not talking about the reactions to said event. Luckily for us, we have not stopped hugging fellow players right after the end of a game (!).

It is no secret that this larp's attempt of a debrief was lacking at best. It is neither a secret that several of the players reacted to this fact, nor is it a secret that most of the players had a great game experience overall. I do not want to diminish the game; I loved it from the start until the (for my character) bittersweet end. Still, it raised important questions and created situations that just might have spurred on the debate concerning the role of rough psychological play, the debrief and the aftermath of tough games. Hopefully, I can count on the more experienced players out there to take this debate to the next level (Kapo/1942?) and that organizers might see the debrief as a just an integral part of player safety as making sure that no player takes a long walk on a short pier.

Psychotherapeutical role-playing

Lauri Lukka

Knutepunkt articles have rather comprehensively explored and described role-playing as a societal phenomenon, leisure activity and a tool in education. However, there are only a few mentions about role-playing used in psychotherapeutic settings to remediate mental disorders, and those anecdotes are vague and brief (see for example Stenros & Hakkarainen, 2003; Larson, 2003; Waade & Sandvik, 2007) – even if mental disorders are commonly used as game themes (see for instance Korhonen & Virtaperko, 2012). My aim here is to explore how the concept of mentalization can be used to describe some of the psychological processes role-playing improves and how role-playing can be used as a psychotherapeutical technique.

Mentalization refers to our ability to both unconsciously and consciously reflect on our own and other's thoughts (cognitions) and feelings (affects) (Choi-Kain & Gunderson, 2008). Asen and Fonagy (2011) define it as a skill for seeing "ourselves from the outside and seeing others from the inside". Mentalization is sometimes referred to as a theory of mind or metacognitive skills. Its other conceptual cousins are emotional intelligence, insight, mindfulness, affect consciousness (Mohaupt, Holgersen, Binder & Nielsen, 2006), empathy and psychological mindedness; but also concepts such as introspection (latin for *looking*

inside) and self-reflection. All of these concepts include some dimensions of mentalization, while excluding others.

The function of mentalization is to facilitate social interaction and communication. Without these mental skills our interaction would be full of misconceptions and conflicts. Mentalization skills develop throughout childhood and adolescence, and there is evidence that we mentalize as early as 18 months old (Frith & Frith, 2003). While mentalization is believed to have neural basis in our prefrontal cortex, it cannot fully develop without a safe and consistent attachment relationship between the child and her caretaker (Fonagy & Bateman, 2007; Larmo, 2010). There is a correlation between the lack of mentalization skills and some psychological disorders, which has led to the development of psychotherapeutic methods specifically for these skills (Larmo, 2010).

I propose that mentalization is a prerequisite for role-playing a character. Without understanding one's own and others' mental states it is impossible to affect and alter how one perceives, interprets and reacts to one's surroundings. During a role-playing game, one constantly exercises and pursues immersion in a fictional character and in the diegesis, the game reality. This immersion may first require conscious (explicit) attention, but during the game it can become more automatic and unconscious (implicit), leading to deeper immersion. While immersed in the character and the game reality, the player mentalizes on multiple levels through the eyes of both the participant and the character.

A PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC TECHNIQUE

Some psychotherapies already use role-playing as a technique. For instance, it can be used in individual cognitive psychotherapy for children to develop divergent problem solving and emotion naming skills (Fredriksson, 2011). It has also been used in family therapeutical settings (Asen & Fonagy, 2011). Role-playing has originated from theatre and psychodrama (Flood, 2006).

The latter may still be the most prominent group therapeutical application for role-playing, even if it is argued that psychodrama may not be suited for treating all psychiatric diagnoses (Aitolehti & Silvola, 2012).

Modern psychotherapy schools each have their own repertoire of techniques reflecting the underlying theories and principles that ultimately aim to increase the patient's well-being. Recently, it has been proposed that the common factor between all effective psychotherapies is that they all lead to the development of mentalization skills (Larmo, 2010). Role-playing could be used as a complementary technique fitting into many schools such as cognitive, behaviorally oriented or solution based therapy. Role-playing and immersion could be used to, for instance: 1) increase patients' understanding of the reasons behind their behavior by helping them to see themselves "from the outside"; 2) give patients tools and training to be able to name their inner states, both thoughts and emotions; 3) teach patients ways to distance themselves from acute stress; 4) which, in turn, can help them control their emotions and impulses; 5) correct patients' distorted interpretations about themselves, others and the world; 6) develop patients' social cognition, that is to promote understanding of other people's feelings and thoughts, by perspective taking; 7) help patients find more effective reactions in challenging situations by mental and actual training, and 8) aid patients overcome their social inhibitions by training social skills. Rather than developing all aspects of mentalization, it is important to clearly define which dimensions are in focus, as the concept of mentalization is both broad and multifaceted (Choi-Kain & Gunderson, 2008).

Role-playing techniques can be used in both individual and group therapies to increase the patient's understanding of social situations and the capability to function in them; as role-playing is, at its core, social (Gade, 2003). Both individual and group

therapies have their own advantages and limitations, and the best results may be achieved by combining both methods. For instance, in individual therapies role-playing can be used to deeply explore past or anticipated events in scenarios or to train social skills in a safe environment. Role-playing could very well complement family therapeutical methods by facilitating and repairing the communication in and between the generations through perspective taking.

Because role-playing in itself can only train implicit aspects of mentalization, the key in therapy is to bring these processes to consciousness. Clear instructions of what behavioral or mental skills are trained and focused on, and appropriate debriefing afterwards, facilitates and supports the learning of new skills. When using role-playing as a therapeutical technique, role-play theoretical concepts – such as diegesis, immersion and character – can be used to clarify the process and the methods employed, as long as the patient understands them.

However, it is unclear to what degree role-playing and immersion actually improve mentalization – or if they merely put to use the skills we have acquired in our childhood and adolescence. This is especially important when using role-playing techniques to treat people with moderate or severe mental disorders who may be much more likely to have problems in mentalization and in overlapping fields such as empathy, affect consciousness and mindfulness, which all make immersion harder to achieve. Due to the deficiencies in some or all dimensions of mentalization they have been unable to develop these skills in spontaneous social interaction. This brings up the question: are people with weaknesses in mentalization skills unable to benefit from role-playing exercises or should we attempt to make the steps to lower the threshold for them to participate?

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

Having weak mentalization skills is one factor predisposing to and complicating the rehabilitation from psychological problems. Role-playing that includes immersion in a character and interaction within the diegetic frame requires the player to engage in many forms of mentalization, which in turn may develop those skills if they are later reflected on and brought into consciousness. Perhaps this is an (un)conscious motivator for aspiring role-players to take up the hobby in the first place? Additionally, one explanation why some people find role-playing more natural than others may be the differences in our mentalization skills.

To this day, role-playing games and exercises have been used quite marginally in psychotherapeutical settings, but they could be incorporated to complement many individual psychotherapies and especially group psychotherapies. Their primary objective could be the training of mentalization and other related skills such as empathy, perspective taking and mindfulness. Role-playing techniques may also make therapy more engaging, ecologically valid and active. Importantly, using such techniques effectively in treatment requires appropriate training in both fields and the methods should be clearly incorporated into the therapy given.

Müller (2011) describes how larping has developed from a marginal subculture into the mainstream consciousness in Denmark. Games have been ever more popular in the 21st century and prejudices against them diminish by each generation. Role-playing has already made some establishments in education and it is possible that it makes new openings in the field of mental health as well. Before that, more research in the field is necessary for mapping who most likely benefit from role-playing techniques and for confirming what specific skills they develop and which psychotherapeutical schools could benefit from such new techniques.

Trampled by the herd

Lizzie Stark

Larp designers could learn a lot from the former mayor of Bogota, Antanas Mockus. He's a larper's politician. He famously dressed in spandex and appeared publicly as Supercitizen, and he reduced traffic fatalities by employing mimes.

Yes, you read that right. Mockus hired 420 mimes to direct traffic in the chaotic city capital. They followed and physically mocked citizens who jaywalked and handed out thumbs-up and thumbs-down cards to drivers. Their presence, together with stars emblazoned on the pavement where pedestrians had been killed, dropped the city's traffic fatalities by more than half, according to a piece in *The Telegraph* (May 2010). The mimes effectively took the common practice of driving and walking irresponsibly and de-normalized it using shame.

But rules and shame don't always work so clearly or so one-sidedly. Stephen Dubner, one of the authors of *Freakonomics* and host of its eponymous podcast, outlined the experiments of psychologist Robert Cialdini in a radio spot called "Riding the Herd Mentality," which also profiled SuperMayor! Mockus. Cialdini explained two of his studies. The first looked at how to increase energy conservation in San Diego. His team handed out four different flyers on energy conservation to a neighborhood, and

then went back later to read their meters and tabulate the results. Three of the flyers gave homeowners direct reasons to conserve energy – to save our resources, to save the world’s resources for our children, or to save money on bills. The fourth flyer told homeowners that most of their neighbors were already reducing energy consumption. As Cialdini told Dubner, the latter “was the only message that significantly reduced energy consumption in the home.” Yet homeowners rated that message least likely to reduce energy consumption. Sometimes, we’re not the best judges of what will influence us, but again, shame is a powerful motivator.

The technique can cut the other way, though. Cialdini also told Dubner about a study he did in Arizona, at Petrified Forest National Park. The park has a problem with visitors stealing petrified wood from the forest floor. So Cialdini’s team salted some paths with petrified wood and marked them with the standard sign, which said that so many people were stealing wood that it was compromising the integrity of the forest. They found that posting a sign almost tripled the rate of theft, because it unintentionally reinforced the idea that everyone was stealing wood. And if everyone is already breaking the rules, why can’t I? The sign’s message became a self-fulfilling prophecy by normalizing bad behavior.

The upshot is that group behavior influences us, whether or not we think it does, so it’s wise for larp designers to think about what sort of group behavior they are promoting, intentionally and unintentionally. In a larp, an imperfect group dynamic has consequences, for example discouraging people from using cut words in practice, even while extolling them as a safety measure. Whether game play normalizes torture for the characters isn’t as important as the type of behavior it fosters in players, because of course, we often aren’t worried for the safety of our characters – dying can be fun and rewarding! – but stuff that happens to you

as a player happens for keeps. The problem is that the distinction between character and player isn't clear-cut, so the issue becomes finding a way to socially support individual players who might need a way out.

You can think of larp safety on two levels – the individual level and the group level, with designers wielding two sets of tools – in-game tools (system and setting) and off-game tools (social tone, workshops, community). It seems to me that Nordic larp focuses on off-game tools and group safety, while US roleplaying focuses on in-game tools and individual safety – perhaps there is a causal connection between the two, or perhaps it's mere coincidence.

Rules can be a very good thing. Much US larp relies on rules and regulations, and there often isn't much structured community-building out of game. (Note: the US is a huge country with lots of disparate larp and roleplaying scenes, so your mileage may vary.) Rules can create sneaky social work-arounds. For example, many American larps are very concerned about off-game drama erupting between players. Rather than addressing relations between players themselves, boffer larps sometimes bypass the issue by prohibiting player-versus-player combat, since character fights often lead to real life fights.

Of course, some bleed – mixing of player and character emotions – is inevitable whether the rules prohibit in-game conflict or not. Rules-heavy games may also seek to protect each individual's personal boundaries through making rules equally applicable to everyone. (Someone got naked and ran-through camp? Let's make a rule that costuming must be "decent". Some people aren't comfortable with touching? No touching.) Ultimately, though, if community spirit doesn't back up the rules, the rulebooks get longer and more baroque, but leave victims of bleed (why'd your ex-boyfriend's NPC perma-kill me?) without the tools needed to work out their differences.

In contrast, Nordic larp excels on the group level and with off-game tools. It relies on implicit communal bonds already in place, a set of assumptions that includes playing to lose, playing for others, hardcore individual responsibility, emotional openness, and sensitivity of and tolerance for the difficult experiences of others. It's difficult to import Nordic larp to other areas of the world, I think, because this assumed understanding, this assumed community doesn't yet exist in other places. As I learned from running the Norwegian larp *Mad About the Boy* in Connecticut this year, to run a Nordic larp somewhere else, first one must foster community, and that's a tall order.

Running a Nordic larp elsewhere is a little like vaccinating a community – once you get enough people on board, the group develops herd immunity and can carry a few people who haven't been inculcated into group culture. Danish larp organizer Claus Raasted agrees with me. As he put it, "It's a matter of having a 'core of the herd' that's strong or weak. Written rules work well when the core is weak. Unwritten work best when it's strong." Of course, the dark side of having a core play culture is that it can bully people when things go wrong. At Solmukohta in 2012, a big topic of discussion was the social pressure not to use safewords or other safety measures, to be "hard core" to not ruin immersion for the rest of the players.

Another problem with unwritten rules, the seedy effect of all this negotiated consent, often hashed out in the moment, is that there's no final barrier to the extent of roleplay, no hard rule pulling people back from the abyss. That is both exciting and dangerous. And depending on where you are in the world, if players miscalculate what they can handle, you can damage them and they can sue you. When we talk about larp safety, perhaps we are talking about helping people accurately calculate what they can handle and giving them the tools to enforce that boundary.

So, how does Nordic larp help individuals figure out what they can handle and assert their own boundaries in the wake of herd mentality? Through transparency, cut words, and the off-game room. Transparency is the practice of allowing players to read all game materials or otherwise understand every aspect of the game's plot before the game, which helps potential players decide whether to participate. Organizers equip players with cut and brake words for use during the game, and there's an off-game room players can enter whenever they need a break.

But those safety measures are not enough, according to clinical neuropsychologist Dr. Maria Schultheis, because "the reality is that we know from a psychological perspective that you have no way of predicting how you're going to respond when faced with a stimulus that triggers something in you." I spoke with Dr. Schultheis, a professor at Drexel University, about safety measures in Nordic larp because her research deals with Virtual Reality and using it to help improve the lives of people with disabilities. I explained to her that some of the games deal with heavy topics such as abuse in prisons, homelessness, AIDS, gender identity, oppression, war, and even rape. As she put it, "If you combine a very immersive environment with somebody who might already be emotionally primed for the experience, something like rape, or death of an older person or murder or watching that, I think it's very hard to predict what kind of response you're going to have." In other words, organizers ought to take into account the individual emotional makeup of players.

The missing component in Nordic larp safety, Dr. Schultheis suggested, is pre-screening for vulnerability in the pre-game questionnaire and in person. She noted that in hard-hitting larps, "You run the risk of doing more damage to somebody who may have something in their past that you don't know about and they're not revealing." Transparency, of course, can help individuals decide whether taking the risk is right for them. If I am

broken up over the death of my grandfather, I might choose not to play a game that has the death of elderly people as a theme. But transparency is not enough; psychologically, some people are more vulnerable than others, Dr. Schultheis said. If a game includes rape scenes, a person who has been raped is going to have a “different vulnerability” to those scenes, she said. And sometimes, people think they’re going to be OK and then they aren’t.

To help mediate the risk, she suggested an optional addition to the workshop. “They have a debriefing session, so it’s almost like you’d set up something analogous on the front end, so you offer that opportunity for somebody with a rape history to have the option of going in there and talking with somebody about what they might experience. It’s fine if you do this game, but it might bring up memories and emotional reactions – to have somebody to talk to about thinking through, ‘if I put myself through this, I might be experiencing harm.’” She suggested it might even help certain people be better prepared to use the cut words, “as opposed to going in there feeling put off by their emotional reaction.”

She likened playing Nordic larp to going on a roller coaster. Before you get on, she said, there’s a whole long list of warnings about pregnant people, people with cardiac disease, and so on. The warning doesn’t tell you not to ride, she said, “but it tells you that you could experience it differently than someone who isn’t. These games, because they can be emotionally intensive and they can be so realistic, they might need a warning label. [...] These things are not benign. And I think that’s the biggest misperception. These are pretty intense games.” Perhaps a movie-style rating or warning label might help players choose whether or not they want to opt in to a particular game.

In some ways, Dr. Schultheis’ advice sounds familiar – these games are intense, they should be done thoughtfully and sane-

ly, and they're not for everyone – but too often, I think that last admonition goes unenforced. Nordic larp does a great job of facilitating community expectations, but sometimes it can leave individual concerns by the wayside, particularly for people who are not steeped in the culture around these games. Wrapped up in this idea is how to facilitate an environment that will be psychologically safe for everyone. If there's an off-game room in a larp and nobody uses it, does it really count as a safety measure?

When we talked about why people don't use cut words, Dr. Schultheis had some practical advice. She said that organizers need to really train their players to use the words. "If you have good training," she said, "the evidence is that they're more likely to use it. Likelihood to use it is more likely linked to knowledge and acceptance of the cut word." This gets back to the herd mentality – the more the use of cut words are normalized through practice and usage, the more individual players will feel empowered to back out of intense scenes in the face of social pressure. And perhaps the more prepared players are to know what sorts of scenes might require them personally to say cut, the more likely they will be to recognize a scene gone wrong and utter the words.

Asking a whole battalion of psychologists, in addition to Dr. Schultheis, would probably be a good way to craft more successful safety practices. Maybe an explicit rule or two, correctly phrased, could help. Maybe pre-game therapy would help. Or maybe, like the city of Bogota, Nordic larp just needs a few good mimes.

2027 - a larp that tried

Annika Waern & Peter Munthe-Kaas

2027: Livet efter kapitalismen was designed as a utopian larp. Its society was formed from several modern political ideas: the Parecon economic system as an alternative to capitalism, farming according to permaculture principles, and the idea of collective learning centres replacing classical schools. 2027 was a larp that set out to change the world. So, what happened? Did 2027 create any kind of change, and if so, what did that change look like? We participated in the larp ourselves and interviewed some of the players to find out.

THE DESIGN

The larp was designed as a transition into utopia: although the trajectory was pre-set, it would be the players who would construct their utopian society throughout the larp. The hub of the larp was a collective learning centre, which would be formed through workshoping during the first day of the larp, and to which new groups with very different backgrounds would arrive during the second half of the larp. The idea was to create constant tension and need for change.

The setup was a combination of a sequence of pre-planned events (such as going to work on the farm Änggärdet, and fugitives arriving at the learning centre) and off-game workshops. Before

the larp, players were free to form their own characters and core groups, based on a rough description of six different cultures (representing similar but different visions for the future). After the first day or two of workshopping (depending on which group you were playing in), the larp played out in a quite realistic 360° illusion (Koljonen, 2007) setting, that was broken off twice for additional workshops. The second occasion was used to fast-forward time, so that the larp ended about five years after the time when we first went in-game.

WHAT HAPPENED?

The larp did not play out as intended. One particular element the designers intended to use in the larp, the Parecon system (an economic system using participatory decision making to guide production and distribution of goods) became a backdrop rather than something that was actually tried out in practice.

From the designers' perspective it is of course always disappointing to see a larp play out in a way you did not intend. But our wish is not to focus on why this happened but on what happened instead, and on how that affected the players.

THE INDIVIDUAL STORY

For every player we interviewed after the larp, the main experience was that of a journey of individual development. There was no consensus of main highlights or turning points of the larp – everyone had their own and they were closely connected to their individual storylines. Many of the participants most likely shared the goals expressed by D, an experienced roleplayer:

“I don't just want to travel to a transition conference and sit and discuss permaculture, I want to experience an adventure. And when I say 'adventure' I primarily think about an inner journey, that's what I am looking for in a larp.”

The story arc that D developed is a good example of a successful larp story. His character started as a rich and selfish man. At the beginning of the larp, he lost everything including his self-esteem in the economic crash. Arriving at the learning centre as a refugee, he was adopted into the “family of friends” collective, and eventually married into the family in a beautiful ceremony created in-game by the group. D talks about his experience as “larp magic at its best”.

Given that larp as a medium puts focus on the individual experience, the major changes that players recount are at the personal level. The report from I is characteristic:

“This larp has resulted in more knowledge about my personality and what choices I have to make the next time, maybe (...) I learned a lot”.

THE VETERANS

One storyline that emerged during the larp was the story of the veterans. It originated in the pre-designed storyline, with the two groups of players that arrived to the learning centre as refugees from Finland (which had been become a tribal anarchy) and south Sweden (which had turned to fascism). Both groups played on war traumas, and despite the well-meaning efforts to welcome and integrate the newcomers, the newcomers and original centre members did not manage to merge, neither culturally nor socially. The newcomers created a social circle of their own which was named the veterans. The main activities of the group were to provide aid to the resistance movement in the south, and provide support for each other in dealing with war trauma. Socially the group kept to themselves, alienated from the sense of security and peace that the learning centre offered which they perceived as false. During the last act, they participated in a centre celebration event with a demonstration. The experience of feeling

excluded, by the set structures of a completely well-meaning society, was a major takeaway for some of the players and one they wanted to play on.

The demonstration during the final celebration was particularly interesting from this perspective. As players, we danced together with both veterans and the dance group, and when the dance ended one of the larp organisers (in character) thanked the performers – omitting to thank the veterans. Whether it was an oversight or a sign of her ignoring a case of larp hacking we don't know – but we suspect it contributed to the sense of being made invisible that Oliver Nøglebæk (2012) recounts when writing about his experience in a blog post:

”I can imagine how this mirrors why ghettos form. Where the anger at society starts. How much easier it is to fight and break things. How painful it is to be unable to explain yourself. How there's no room for your way of life, even in the most accepting of societies. How much work it takes to bridge the cultural gaps and understand each other. How little things can trigger negative emotions.

I've come to the realization that why these insights are so strong, is that they were unintended. There was no special focus on it, on the contrary we were told to make our stories utopian. There was no active attempts to make us feel unwelcome, we did not set out to disrupt the utopian. But we still ended up feeling very much us-and-them. And they probably feel that we were an unwanted interruption, ungrateful and abrasive. All things I see every day in the immigration/integration debate”.

THE NORM DISCUSSION

If the storyline of the Veterans was an unintentional case of larp-hacking, the norm discussion was a more intentional diversion from the original larp design. The norm discussion was

initiated by a group of politically active players with no previous larp experience and who also were active members of Magasinet, the communal house that was used as a learning centre. In-game, they recruited a group of players that would study the norms enacted within the larp, and later organized a norm discussion where their observations were listed and discussed.

One of the reasons why the norm debate was enacted seems to have been a case of bleed between the off-game organization of the larp, and the perceived in-game power structures of the larp. In all preparations preceding the larp, one of the organizers took a strong leading role, both concerning the artistic vision for the larp and the practical arrangements. This form of organization stood in stark contrast with how the in-game community was supposed to function, and something that some participants reacted against. The power structure persisted in-game, as the central storyline of the larp was pre-scripted. The organisers ran an in-game group called *the infopoint*. This group was responsible for spreading information around the learning centre, and in practice, it timed the storyline events. In-game, a rumour spread that the info-point was not only gathering and spreading information, but also taking decisions on its own. This rumour could potentially have been a good dramatic tool, as the control over information is a means of power and could well become problematic in an anarchist society. But due to the bleed between the in-game and off-game roles of the organizers it became very hard to keep it in-game.

Another origin of the norm discussion was that even in-game, the larp was enacting gender and race norms from our society today, rather than those that would be likely to exist in a post-capitalist syndicalist society. The only general meeting that actually was played out in-game went badly for this precise reason. Hence, the norm discussion resulted in a list of observations that more reflected the power structures of the larp organisation

as a whole and norms of our society today, than the power structures and norms enacted in-larp.

GOING FURTHER – LASTING CHANGES

Although many of the participants in 2027 are themselves active in various political movements, the larp itself was not a political movement. It did not leave any lasting changes (apart from the fact that Änggärdet got their potatoes harvested and Magasinet got running water in their kitchen), and neither did we as players learn much about how to change the world. The emergence of the norm debate also shows that we enacted an anarchistic community rather poorly. The meetings that were acted out in-game were unorganized and unconstructive in a way that gave some of us with an activist background uncomfortable flashbacks. The learning that people recounted in our interviews were personal, related to their individual storylines, and most had little to do with the utopian theme of the larp.

Still, the larp maintained an explorative and escapist rhetoric (Montola & Stenros, 2010) and this is reflected in our interviews. As most larps do in some way or the other, the larp provided an opportunity to experiment with the personal experience of living in a physical and social setting that is not accessible in ordinary life. And this seems to be enough: many participants still left 2027 with a sense that it is possible to change the world.

Despite all the changes that the larp went through, we shared one core experience. For two or three days, we lived in a sharing society, taking equal parts in physical and intellectual work, helping each other when needed, and aiming for a culture where every voice could be heard. Even if each player explored an aspect of this that was most important for that particular player, the collective experience was that it is possible. We let D have the final words:

”We are all traumatised, in some sense of the word, by the capitalist time we live in today. And even if we at an intellectual level want to put ourselves above it, it is a large and tough thing to do in practice. You have to see it and work on it together and individually, so that you develop as humans. Then, you can also develop as a group. I had ideas about this before the larp, but here I got to experience it emotionally”.

Being an anarchist for 15 years

Morgan Jarl

2027: Livet efter kapitalismen (2027: Life after capitalism) was organized as an attempt to examine an alternate post-capitalist society. We wanted to explore this using positive power drama (Wieslander, 2004) and constructive solutions to conflicts as the general goal. We also had a pedagogic goal; and contrary to what many thought, it was not to say that “this is a solution, this is THE WAY”. Rather, it served to show that there are alternatives to today’s hegemony, and that we can have a different future with a different economic system. We wanted to inspire hope and change, action and empowerment.

The main setting of 2027 was a learning community, called *Magasinet* (The Warehouse). We played a 15 years span from today until the year 2027. Several major events occurred in the world during the story arc of the larp. Oil became much more expensive, and international trade slowed tremendously. Economies became more localized, and the Swedish government fell apart, which led to Sweden being split up into four different regions. The learning community of The Warehouse was in a region called Fria Mälardalen, an area surrounding Stockholm. It was a libertarian socialist society; a participatory economy with ecologically regenerative permacultural means of production. Another in-game place was the farm *Änggärdet*, also located in

Fria Mälardalen. Additionally, the characters had to deal with a Fascist occupied Scania (Skåne) and Denmark in the south, and a Finland thrown into the chaos of tribal anarchy in the west.

Personally, as one of the designers, I also had an artistic goal, inspired by the epic theatre of Bertold Brecht. I saw a clear parallel to the utopian goal of our project and the epic model of telling stories, and I wanted to explore this connection, while at the same time doing some artistic experiments with how to design stories in larp.

Unfortunately the two did not merge well, mainly due to practical design flaws rather than an intrinsic animosity between the concepts.

DRAMATIC, EPIC, POETIC

To understand what I mean with epic dramaturgy and epic larping, it is necessary to discuss the difference between the epic, the dramatic and the poetic in classical literature theory. Except for the fact that they are performed differently; poetry was sung, drama was acted and epics were narrated; they also differ in how they deal with time, what kind of stories they tell, and how they are told. It can easily be summarized like this: Dramatic literature is unified and immersive, epic literature is spread out and narrative and poetic literature is thematic, emotional and abstract. Due to the scope of this article, the focus will be on dramatic and epic dramaturgy.

The action of a dramatic play should be taking place within a 24-hour period, in the same place and with few or no subplots, focusing on a main story, usually with few characters. During the action of the drama we get to see the fall of the hero: As the hero sees his flaw and redeems himself, the audience experiences catharsis, a sort of emotional or spiritual cleansing.

An epic, on the other hand, is not confined to this unity of time and space. The classic epics were long stories stretching several years, with a manifold of plots and subplots, enacted in vastly different locations. The stories are narrated, with a clear narrator voice, compared to the dramatic literature which usually tell stories or events that are important for the identity of a nation or a people with a main hero as the focus point. According to Bertold Brecht, the cathartic effect in dramatic plays only serves to remove its audience from their sense of what is wrong, and to rob them of their will to revolt against this. Many of his techniques, developed to make the audience actively reflect on what they see, are being used in modern day jeepform and meta-larping.

DRAMATIC AND EPIC LARPS

The dramaturgy for a larp is obviously not the same as for literature or film and theatre, where there is only one story and a few characters. A larp is a multi-story event, where each story is told from the perspective of each character, each having their own dramaturgy. These stories are usually more in the control of the players, while the general direction of the whole game is the organizers' domain. Therefore, we have to think separately of the dramatic versus the epic from a player's point of view and an organizer's point of view.

Most larps are set in a single location, within a unified space of time, and dealing primarily with a story with few or no subplots connected to a few characters. On top of that, most people play for some level of immersion into the story and for bleed, which I would argue is a form of catharsis. From an organizer's perspective the stories are multifaceted of course, but the design also supports dramatic playing; 360° illusion, 1:1 scale in time and space, set in one place to create immersion in the illusion over a continuous time, and with a dramatic highpoint at the end of the game.

Thus, an epic larp design should be using more of the following tactics: Several locations, time jumps, and a technique for players to get an overview of the development of several stories and plot-lines. Perhaps also encourage a playing style where the story is in focus, enabling you to narrate parts of the story, particularly the time jumps, for instance by telling the stories of a future group of people, a nation or an international movement. This way, each player would still be the main character of their storyline, like in all larps, but with a sense of the bigger story.

COMBINING EPIC DRAMA WITH UTOPIAN VISION

We wanted to make sure people got the experience of a vision for the future, rather than trying to see whether it worked or not. To do this, we felt that an understanding of how we got to the utopia was important, to make the here and now playable and engaging for the players. We wanted to let people feel that they had helped build the utopia.

Hence, we designed an epic structure that spanned 15 years of transition, where the characters to different degrees got to experience the transition from our society to that of 2027. At the same time, we wanted to make sure that the players spent enough time in the utopia, in order to truly experience it. Thus, the first one or two days were spent in a blackbox, either workshopping or playing scenes, and the last two to three days were comprised of longer 360° acts and long-term blackboxing.

What we unfortunately failed to take into account, is the extent to which the *fog of larp* affects the player (Fatland, 2005), and how one uncritically jumps onto stuff that is familiar if you can't see the attractors to lead you through the fog. Eirik Fatland suggests that when we enter a larp our minds get clouded, we enter the fog of the larp, and what leads us to action is what he calls attractors. Attractors signal a direction of action in the fog, things we can grasp onto and play on. Organizers can set

up attractors using plots, groups, cultures, props and workshops before the game, but there will also be several attractors that come from convention, assumptions, and personal preferences and experience from players. As organizers, we compete with these attractors to guide the player through the fog towards the larp dramaturgy we want. In 2027, some of our attractors were positive drama, epic dramaturgy, the organization of the educational institutions and the ideologies the game world was built on. These were not strong enough to be seen through the fog unless you were already familiar with them in some way. Several examples of this can be seen in comments from participants, mentioned by Annika Waern and Peter Munthe-Kaas (2013).

There were several players telling stories that were utopian and positive; a group marriage was celebrated, eco-farms were planned, norms were discussed and worked on, and people engaged in the future and pedagogies of the learning community. Generally speaking, the larp moved through the intended dramatic highpoints, with the organizers doing some not-so-gentle directing during breaks. Unfortunately, perhaps as much as half the larp ended up focusing on the conflict with the fascists in the south, and the opposition between immigrants and those who were building the utopia. We saw more conflict-oriented gameplay than the utopian, positive drama we wanted in our vision, and we had to remind the players of what world they were in, and what the intentions of the vision were, while at the same time allowing for and encouraging people's own stories.

During the game, some players had a hard time with the time jumps and epic dramaturgy, whereas some were blackbox extraordinaires with a great interest in developing characters in this way. They found their individual stories easily, without problems with time inconsistencies and story gaps. However, not everyone who handled the epic dramaturgy well got the positive drama down too. This is one clear example of our failure to get the uto-

pian larping to the forefront of all players' minds, partly due to the epic structure, partly due to story and background choices.

The biggest dramaturgical problem was that which came out of the conflict between the immigrants and the resistance. The immigrants were introduced too early, and the utopia hadn't had time to gain enough stability amongst the players yet, causing the immigration to influence the mood of the game too much. The first two waves of immigrants should probably have been eliminated, since we wanted to focus on the utopia and not the transition. We had a game design ratio of one immigrant per three or four original members and ended up compromising our vision due to popular demand with a ratio of two to three, a clear mistake from the organizers' side.

In conclusion, I would like to say that I do not think epic dramaturgy and utopian larps are intrinsically incompatible, but putting so many layers of complications for the players to deal with in one game did not help. Our design mistakes of bringing in resistance fighters and immigrants at such large proportions and so early, is in my opinion the main factor that broke the intended vision. The game became about the transition, not the utopia, because we did not prepare the players properly.

Less larp in edu-larp

Michal Mochocki

When you design educational larps, you want learners to develop skills and knowledge. In political larps, you make people rethink their political/ideological/social positions (or you just try to impose your own views on them). The underlying idea is the same, anyway. Whether you aim at skill/knowledge building or personality/worldview formation (I've done both), the larp experience should result in specific learning outcomes (as edu-theory calls it). Your main concern is how to produce a lasting change in the minds of the participants. And the more experience and research I get, the more convinced I am it cannot be achieved with larp itself. Larp can only make a short-term change – if you want it to be lasting, you must focus less on larp and more on follow-up activities.

GLIWICE CONFEDERATION

My first large-scale larp was *The Gliwice Confederation*, a campaign promoting Dzikie Pola historical tabletop roleplaying game. We put strong (if tongue-in-cheek) emphasis on the development of national identity based on the Sarmatian cultural heritage. (Like *Albion* for England or *Gallia* for France, *Sarmatia* is a nostalgic name for the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of 16-18th c.: a unique socio-political mixture of feudalism and republicanism.) For many of us it has become a deeply trans-

formative experience, its influence still to be seen 10 years after the project ended. I wrote about it in my paper “Reliving Sarmatia” in *States of Play* (2012). We tend to use archaic language and historical honorifics; frequently refer to Sarmatia-themed films, music, fiction and games; and re-enact some 17th-century social interaction codes when we meet. And we are not roleplaying when we do all that. It has become part of our real-world identity (yay, this is as much bleed as it can get!).

But what worked with some of us didn't work with others. Some people came to one or two games and that was it, never getting involved in other fandom activities. The “permanent Sarmatisation” is typical of those who combined larps or tabletop role-play with writing texts, organizing events, online play, etc. That's why I think a single experience, even if emotionally intense, in the long run brings nothing. Null. No effect. Especially with teenagers, who casually try different hobbies and styles, getting overenthusiastic with one thing and soon dropping it for another. A game can definitely light a spark of genuine interest – but the spark will quickly die out without fuel.

SOME THEORY

Okay, I have heard about one-shot games becoming life-changing eye-openers. But I believe it's possible only in exceptional cases. Emma Wieslander can tell you why:

I believe that one of the key factors in what is called “bleed” [...] is that the game events sometimes tie in to our personal myth, “the story” that we tell our self, in a way that fuels the story.

(Wieslander 2012: 129)

Like I said: the spark needs fuel. Sometimes the right fuel is already there. If the game content reacts with your personal myth, then yes, it may have the power to produce a lasting change single-handedly. But that's not something we can guarantee or

predict – it's accidental. Maybe you could make correct guesses about people's personal myths in a well-known target group. But with general school audiences, don't count on it.

Beside these personal-myth exceptions, I'd argue larp doesn't transform people – it opens for transformation. A well-designed game can be a great beginning, but no more than a beginning. It has to be followed either with more role-plays in order to make it a repeated, not single, experience – or with equally well-designed reflective and creative activities.

Edu-larp research is getting increasingly aware of it. See e.g. Aarebrot & Nielsen's report of two extreme cases. One teacher used their larp as the basis for extensive in-class discussion for a long time. Several weeks after the game, students:

participated very actively in the discussion and used their own [game] experience [...] showed both an intellectual and emotional commitment [...] allowed previous attitudes to be discussed in the light of the new experiences [...] almost all the pupils participated on equal basis.

(Aarebrot & Nielsen 2012: 28-29).

Another teacher just moved on to another topic as if the larp hadn't happened. Results?

the class seemed unable to relate their own experience to the larger issues at hand [...] not realizing the strong link between the game and current day matters [...] did not transfer their experience to other situations [...] saw the game as an isolated event.

(Aarebrot & Nielsen 2012: 28)

A hard lesson for larp educators: if you stop at the larp itself, your work will often be a waste of time. I'm not the first to claim that: Aarebrot & Nielsen (2012: 29), Karalevich (2012: 42) and

Henriksen (2010: 235) have made this point earlier. What I want to emphasize is the severe consequence it has for edu-larp design: follow-up activities should become an integral part of it, reaching far beyond the immediate debriefing.

THE DEMOCRACY PROJECT

We stepped in this direction with the *DEMOCRacy Project* (2012), funded by the Swiss-Polish Cooperation Programme and organised by the historical reenactment society *Polpolite Ruszenie Szlachty Ziemi Krakowskiej*. It reached 1100 15-year-olds in 64 larps structured on three levels. Firstly, 56 classes in junior high schools took part in larps simulating 17th-century sejmiks (local assemblies), each electing 3 members for the second-level games. The 168 elected representatives met on 7 general sejmiks (assemblies for larger regions), again electing 3 representatives for the national Sejm (parliament). In the final third-level larp, these 21 middle-schoolers formed the House of Representatives, while 11 historical reenactors played the King, Senate and royal court staff.

The primary concern of DEMOCRacy was not history but civic education. We targeted communes with the lowest voting turnout among the youth, the aim being to inspire civic-mindedness and encourage voting participation. Going back to 17th century was a trick to shield the organisers from accusations of political propaganda. Had we made schoolchildren reenact the present-day political scene, we could have been accused of campaigning for this or that party (strictly prohibited in schools!). Besides, this century is the core period of our reenactment society. And, guess what! Some of us had been involved in the above-mentioned Gliwice Confederation. Sarmatised as teenagers or young adults, in late twenties/mid-thirties we are still far from letting it go: yet more evidence for the lasting effect on identity formation.

Anyway, we wanted both: repeated play experience and carefully

designed follow-up activities. Given the limited time and resources, we had to curb our ambitions. We had fiddled with the idea of ongoing online play with a weekly updated storyline and gamified forum. Students who wouldn't have been elected could still be active in the game, supporting their representatives all the way to the final Sejm. Unfortunately, we didn't have enough staff to handle that. We did maintain a website with a new diary/blog entry and bookmark on a map added after each game, but it lacked the participatory quality we had envisioned.

In the schools, each first-level game was preceded with a multimedia talk and followed with a discussion, covering it all in one 3-hour meeting. I think any long-term edu-benefit for first-level players would be possible only if their teachers had skillfully built on the experience in subsequent weeks (and I regret we didn't have detailed lesson plans for them).

Second-level games were different. We ran follow-up group tasks introducing main concepts of political theory and facilitated full-blown debates, the quality of which frequently exceeded our expectations. Details will be forgotten over time, but I am convinced the 160+ players will long remember that Polish parliamentary traditions have roots in the sejmiks and Sejms of noblemen's democracy. And I bet they won't quickly forget the satisfaction of being elected in a public vote!

Even more so, if we think of the 21 who made it to the final Sejm. An unusual view, 15-year-olds listening attentively to professors discussing history and political science, made us realize we had done a damn good job.

FINAL THOUGHTS

We have to face it, friends. Transformative larps need 50% of larp design and 50% instructional design. Examples? Organize or outline additional meetings. Create online (e-learning?) content

to extend the experience. If your larp is about politics and social activism, contact the players afterwards and make them involved in real-world action. If you target schools, write ready-made lesson plans for teachers. Ouch! All this will cost additional time and effort, while not carrying the creative thrill of scenario writing. But if we take our educational objectives seriously, I don't think we have much choice.

Air castles built on concrete

Evan Torner

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

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

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

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

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

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

The answer to the question lies, however, in precisely in the anxiety that it raises: the Almighty Bottom Line structures our play in ways we can only perceive in retrospect. We live in a post-industrial society. Our lives are now controlled through bizarre ecologies of information metrics, service sector employment, and distantly outsourced labor and material-resource harvesting within global networks of power and capital circulation. These all leave bloody footprints on any artwork we create. Larps and other "serious leisure" activities take place at the intersection of a collectively created fictional imaginary (Jones, 2012). Material conditions permit this imaginary to exist. Payment for the site, provisions, sufficient vacation time from work, and medical care are all factors in letting the fiction unfold. These banalities become increasingly important in a world where scarcity reigns as a means of human control. We as designers and players seek to circumnavigate these scarcities.

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

SOME WORDS ON POLITICAL ECONOMY

Political economy is the notion that power, structured by material relations, manifests itself in our cultural products. Capital, as wielded by distinct persons and institutions with propertied interests, exerts rhetorical pressure on us to dream a certain way. As game designers, we believe that our systems and environment are primary forces acting upon our larpers. But to some degree, we are in fact unconsciously expressing a non-neutral stance about how the material world works, about how one acquires power and privilege and/or the means to resist it. In classic Marxian discourse, the material relations are what one calls the *base*, and the *superstructure* is the culture that rests upon it. The base and superstructure are always acting upon each other. Material relations produce the kind of cultural consciousness they require (not the other way around), which impacts material relations again. What resources are available produces the limits of what can be thought about those resources. If we read our larps as texts to be interpreted in retrospect (as per Stenros, 2004; Ilieva, 2010.), then do they not also reveal the choices made about resources at the time?

In the rest of this essay, I examine the material conditions of three larps in order to find their emergent political valence. I give a brief summary of the local conditions producing the larp, then a fleeting description of the larp. I conclude with my own observations about the conditions impacting the fiction.

CASE STUDY 1: WMILS

On December 1, 2012, Western Massachusetts Interactive Literature Society (WMILS) organized an adaptation of Meg-uey Baker's *1,001 Nights* as a larp to be held at an art space. This shift in venue forced us to charge \$10 per person, split

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

CASE 2: INTERCON

Intercon is a theater-style larp convention held annually over a weekend in Waltham, MA for about 250 participants. They are big enough that they have to deal with expensive hotels, and thus have to leverage their ability to fill rooms with hotel guests against the environment offered by the hotel. Intercon moved from a smaller to a larger hotel in 2010: the expensive hotel Westin Waltham Boston. The hotel was located away from reasonably priced, healthy eating options; it charged \$7 for a slice of pizza. This did not align with the cultural and economic expectations of the Intercon larp crowd. After the overwhelming complaints about said hotel, the convention switched back to the old (but bursting-at-the-seams) Radisson Hotel in Waltham.

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

Our ship crashed that night due to sabotage performed by a player-character whom I thought had left the game to get food, but who was actually around the corner whispering poison in a GM’s ear. That is to say: our wicked villain characters were actually in a state of poverty, bleeding feelings of player poverty about the corporate hotel. The game became about how we would most gloriously commit suicide. The high price of the convention led to high expectations from the game, and the game itself could not accommodate for the strictures imposed by the hotel.

CASE 3: FASTAVAL

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

subsidized for its basic (and capacious) space needs. On the other hand, it's subservient to arbitrary whims of the state. Naturally, this had an impact on play.

At Fastaval, I assisted Julia Ellingboe in running her larp *What to Do About Tam Lin?*, a courtroom drama based around the old faerie ballads. The group that showed up was about twice as big as the space that was available. So Fastaval organizers led one-half of the group down to a new playing space: a small hallway in a basement. Due to the Danish government intervention, we were now playing a larp about a faerie court next to little kids' jackets and a couple of benches in a hallway. The hallway ensured we had a fairly brief and intense round of negotiations before the court drama. Space limited diffuse character interaction. The hallway became our context: we were interstitial characters having a tiny spat, rather than main characters holding an epic debate. We of course received profuse apologies from the Fastaval organizers – everyone suffered that year – but the question of money and power came surging into our diegesis as we co-created it.

A BRIEF AFTERTHOUGHT

The above anecdotes illustrate some ways that resource allocation can haunt the play and plot outcomes of larps. Political economy is a mode of discourse about culture, but is by no means a predictor of fulfillment of larp goals. Returning to the US *Mad About the Boy* example, the play outcome of that game (for those who could make it) saw a women-only community built among the characters that was then torn asunder by the same when the last man entered the play environment. Players had mixed emotions about watching their organically formed community torn asunder by a surprise ending, though such an ending is not atypical for weekend-long larps trying to lure players back. Was this a result of the time, space and finances allocated to the larp, or simply a generic component

of the larp's design? I have no room to judge, for I was not there. But our investment in our characters is never purely fictional; it's also material. My final word is this: in order for us to politically analyze a medium that emphasizes first-person audience, we have to both take note of the hard resources required to make a larp happen and then our embodied player experiences as we experience the effects of these resources. We must recognize that there's a man behind the curtain, while also seeing the spectacle of Oz and reacting as our characters. Is it possible?

Looking back to move forward

Goshai Daian & Leonardo Ramos

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

The answer for *why* is simple: why not? *How* is indeed a more interesting question. It asks for creative adaptations in order to fit a genre to an environment, from the physical and fictional scenarios to the local player's community profile. Medieval fantasy larps have a different accent in Brazil. Our medieval larps are out of time. They are not tied to something from our past; rather, they are set in completely fantastic and fictitious lands for swords, sorcery and epic tales.

The motivation behind making medieval fantasy larps in Brazil came from the same sources as everywhere else: from literature,

theater, RPGs, television series, movies, and so on. In 2001, we conducted an *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* larp campaign called *Holy Mount* on a small ranch outside our town. This was the same year as the release of the Portuguese translation of D&D 3.0 and we soon moved over to it. Back then, we were all RPG-players before we became larpers. We used a single wooden box with an acrylic top, where we rolled dice for all the players spread out on the field! It was truly a huge mess, especially after dark. Combat was played out as “live steel,” with heavy swords and axes of wood or iron, and no physical contact at all. But combat was not really the focus of the larp. What the players really enjoyed was to eat with their bare hands, walk around for an hour without seeing any houses or electric cables, feel how heavy the equipment they were carrying was, how uncomfortable it was to sleep with complete armor on, how difficult was to be dressed in it, to keep track of time without a clock, and to be awake during the night watch.

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

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

Making the roads as we go

Asbjørn Rydland & Kristian Spilhaug

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

Originally, the plan was to make a short series of larps building up to *Løgnens Rike* (the Realm of Lies) in 1997. *Løgnens Rike* was a high-fantasy larp with many recognizable elements. It had its own rich mythology and unique background, but from a story and organizing point of view there wasn't much to distinguish it from other Norwegian fantasy larps at the time. There were lots of magic, the theme was the impending end of the world, and most of the players were somehow involved in plotting to save it. We all know how these stories go.

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

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

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

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

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

The goal was still creative collaboration. To make this new age

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

Because few people had shown interest in pitching prior to the invitations, the Guides adopted a more controlling function than they had originally planned. Anticipating a need for them to be the driving force, they kept much of the story power in their own hands. This left the country owners with less influence than many of them had signed up for.

Despite this the Veiskille world flourished. Country owners and others threw themselves and their creative ideas into the project, some committing more time and energy than most Guides. This period saw some of the most defining larps of the setting taking place, but one thing gradually became more and more apparent: Despite the best intentions, influence and story power was not fairly distributed. This led to a growing tension between some of the active contributors and the somewhat less active Guides.

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

Since then there has been little or no formal structure to the network involved in the Veiskille world. To maintain some

continuity and make sure ideas don't get left behind, one of the original guides still maintains a coordinating function. Other than that, each person with ownership to a country or culture is the final arbiter on ideas or developments that involve their area of responsibility. Where areas overlap, agreement is usually reached fairly quickly. Mutual respect for each other's ideas and a common understanding of the flavour of the game world make it a dynamic collaboration. Ideas regularly spark new ones and events and conflicts in the world appear in response to perceived needs or happenings in other larps. From one perspective, the goal of an open, collaborative larp setting has been met.

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

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

This has led to Veiskille larps getting a reputation for little action. What has been known in the network as *a day in the life of*-style larps are particularly good examples. These larps typically, but not always, take place in a tavern, with travelling characters stopping by and spending a day or two before moving on. There

are no plots, very few relations outside of each player group, and the only drama is caused by the various character encounters. It is a form of larping that demands strong and uncompromising culturally based roleplay, and the intense and lasting experiences happen on a small scale. Consequently, there are no big scenes, and it is even more boring to watch than the average larp, which in turn may have had an adverse effect on recruiting.

Another factor influencing recruitment is the amount of information. Veiskille has been shaped by a large number of people's ideas and visions, which was the intention ever since Løgnens Rike. However, over the years as each larp brought with it new thoughts and additions to the game world, the setting became so diverse it got hard to keep track of all the information. Even veterans found it difficult to stay on top of everything, and for first timers it became almost impossible.

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

The solution was a wiki, a web page which could be edited by any registered user. The *Veiskille Wiki* was established in 2006, and most of the available information was added by the initiator. Contributors quickly joined in, and soon the wiki became the primary online source of information for the setting. Everyone who had ever been to a Veiskille larp were encouraged to write up an article of their own character, the area he or she was from, particular events or cultures they had knowledge of, and so on. The country representatives naturally had a responsibility for

making their country information available, and slowly but surely the setting details were all gathered in one place.

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

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

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

The last few years we have seen an influx of dedicated play-

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

Double D's and dragons

Andrea Giargiari

The larp community in America tends to be a very male-dominated sub-culture. However, it is not one characterized by masculinity; role-playing is neither masculine nor feminine. This creates a very unique gender paradox. To men, it isn't manly enough; there's nothing tough about sitting around a table imagining yourself as a powerful hero, or worse, dressing up in wizard's robes. Male larp participants often find an image of weakness imposed upon them by the mainstream. At the same time, there's really nothing feminine about rolling dice with a group of guys all night, or suiting up in a full set of leather armor and sparring with latex weapons. Larp is outside the feminine norm, and often calls for female participants to act strong and masculine. Role-playing is a geeks' hobby, and is ridiculed as such by the mainstream. This leaves everyone involved feeling that it says something about the inadequacy of their identity, and what aspect of identity is easier to attack than gender? I have lived this paradox for much of my life, and I find that the identities we invent in-game and perpetuate off-game have a lot to say about the gender norms of American culture.

It takes a certain level of self-confidence, or at least self-acceptance, to openly talk about larp with non-gamers in everyday life, as there is understood to be a stigma attached to such hob-

bies by most people. It certainly sounds like a child's game of make-believe by description, and it tends not to help that the archetypal fantasy geek is a socially-awkward, intellectual, young man. "[Guys larping] tend to be intellectuals, and less [...]overtly hegemonic than in general populace," one male player observed, "There are fewer *jocks* involved in the larps that I have been a part of, and typically, intellectual superiority reigns over physical dominance." The primary larps that I participate in have a reputation for being particularly combat heavy, which has created a healthy respect for the most skilled fighters in that branch of the community, but I find that elsewhere in the American larp culture this remains true.

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

This setting can also have the opposite effect. There are a number of stereotypes surrounding girl culture that are often seen

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

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

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

struggle to distinguish myself from the common idea of what femininity should encompass, and to suppress any tendencies from within myself that I find to be too feminine, so it is almost refreshing to let out that steam by playing a very dependent, feminine character.

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

Interestingly, though he may be overlooking favoritism, he is also not wrong. Externalizing failure is one of the many factors that play into the opposite social phenomenon; gendered discrimination. Whereas both men and women are often oblivious to favoritism, women who have experienced discrimination are acutely aware of its presence. “Polite means you’re a pushover, assertive means you’re a bitch, attractive means you’re a slut or ditz, not attractive means you’re butch or ugly,” one girl reflects, “It’s hard to separate people from the real world, which is sexist.” This description of female social challenges quite clearly mirrors the backlash

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

I find it quite interesting to examine the variations of gender identity that are practiced in the larp community, both in- and off-game, because they often bring to light ideas about gender that are so dominant in the mainstream that we do not even stop to think about them. The struggle to meet the unnatural standards of the macho man, the idolization (though as an object) of females, and the impossible need for equilibrium between all of the conflicting feminine standards are all very deep-seated concepts in our culture. Yet, I also believe that larp provides a unique treatment opportunity for the symptoms of hegemonic gender identity. A man can get away with wearing a gown, and a woman can be said to have more balls than most guys. Larp gives us a place to experiment with our gender identity in a way that also distances our true identities from any impressions we might make, giving us a chance to try and become comfortable in our own skin. I study the way that hegemonic gender is portrayed in the media, but I find that these moments outside of the mainstream experience give me hope for a true equilibrium to be reached.

The horse as a revelation

Juhana Pettersson

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

The game was about the wedding of a Norwegian man and a Palestinian woman. The game venue was a music school masquerading as a hotel, but sometimes we had to go out among the non-playing population. In the bathhouse, the border between larp and reality became very blurred. Palestinian players told me that the game was only an approximation of a real Palestinian wedding with its hundreds of guests. But for me, the bathhouse was very real. I had never been in Palestine before, and didn't know enough to say what was realistic and what was not.

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

who discreetly corrected me when I was about to break them.

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

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

TRIP TO BIR ZEIT

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

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

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

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

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

SPECTATOR LARP

I never thought of larp as much of a spectator sport, but some of my favorite moments happened during the preparatory workshops on the day before the game.

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

In a later scene, the Norwegian father of the groom visited the father of the bride, and I was there with Nader supporting him.

Normally, the father of the groom should be accompanied by relatives, but when those were not available, the bride's Finnish former boss and his local colleague had to pitch in. The father of the groom had to do things according to unfamiliar Palestinian custom, and one of the rules involved the placing of a glass on the table. The scene, like many of the workshop scenes we did, was funny but also surprisingly intense. I was staring at the glass, almost not daring to breathe, thinking: "Please don't make a mistake with the glass, it would be so embarrassing."

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

THE HORSE

The line between fact and fiction began to blur even before my trip to Palestine. In Finland when I go to a wedding, I never wear a tie, but with a fictional Palestinian wedding, I experienced surprising clothes-related anxiety. I needed two fancy dress shirts and two ties that went with them, so I went to an upscale department store and asked the clerk: "What kind of a shirt would you recommend to a Palestinian wedding in the summer?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

PROVINCIAL ME

Many players, both Palestinians and Nordic, played characters who were slightly (or a lot) more provincial than themselves.

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

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

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

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

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

Doing self-dissection

Fatima AbdulKarim

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

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

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

Discussing tradition was doing self-dissection. From both ends,

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

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

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

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

Life after death

Alexey Fedoseev & Diana Trubetskaya

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

Almost every large larp (more than 100 players) in Russia allows competitiveness, a common practice since early days. Challenges, wars, and adventures with fighting, killing, and the death of one's characters were frequent events in all larp cultures. Eventually, some cultures (for instance, the Nordic one) took steps to remove some aspects of traditional larp such as gaming and competition, and also went on to remove character death. Russian larps took another path: playing out life after death became a universal practice. Mortality plays an important part in our larps, and the first LoD appeared as a reply to the question, "Now that I'm dead, what am I supposed to do?". Nowadays, rules for a traditional combat larp include at least one paragraph devoted to

the situation around a character's death (what to do, where to go, what to expect).

At first, we only wanted to play and didn't really care how or why. All "dead" players were usually gathered at a specially allocated place – the Land of Death – close to the organizer's camp, where they were to spend some certain period of time out of the game. To reduce this waiting period, it became common practice to help the organizers, for instance, by playing an NPC for a certain period of time. Usually there were a wide range of opportunities, from the partially railroaded character, to a full-time NPC intended for a particular task. Such characters may perform tasks like putting new information into play, introducing some characters to one another, gathering information, attacking civilians as abstract monsters (e.g. zombies), and so on.

As time passed and games became more profound, organizers began to think about the philosophical and cultural issues of the larp, and not only about the conflicts in players' plots. Around the middle of the 1990s, a new idea emerged: one could use the Land of Death as a layer of play, too.

RELAXATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECT

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

Some organizers choose to speak to their players, and some use methods from psychodrama. For example, during the larp, *On the Civil War* (2008), devoted to the Civil War in Russia in 1919, the dead players went to a LoD that looked like a jail. They ended up in a prison cell with dead characters from both sides

of the front – ex-comrades and ex-enemies. They had some time to talk, confess military secrets which were of no use anymore, leave signs and signatures on the walls, and so on. After some time the players were taken from the cell one by one and asked some questions under the pretext of the final interrogation. Later on they were condemned to execution. As a last favor, they were allowed to write a letter to their loved ones. After the end of the game all the letters were returned to the authors, so the players could re-read them any time they liked and, maybe, to trigger player reflection.

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

Sometimes an organizer's goal is to create a clear distinction between the player and the character, and he or she uses rather harsh methods to accomplish this. For instance, at the larp *The Raven's Nest* (2007), devoted to the story of Dracula and medieval vampire legends, the players whose characters died were actually nailed up in a coffin and covered up with soil for some time.

A PART OF THE DIEGESIS

There are many game worlds and settings in which life and afterlife hold equal importance. A good example is the world of Middle-earth, as rendered in J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings series; most of the first large-scale Russian larps were based on his books. They describe in detail what happens to elves leaving the mortal world. After death they go to Mandos where they

can, if they'd like, keep interacting with the Valar, the creators of the world, or with the elves who are still alive and come to visit them. This approach to afterlife makes Mandos a mandatory LoD in every Tolkien-based larp, with varying implementation details.

There are many other examples. For instance, in larps based on mythology (such as the myths of ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, and Scandinavia) a character can end up in the world of the dead and continue playing there. The world of mythological ancient Greece features gods, titans, and heroes wandering around Hellas, and this was simulated at the larp *Greece* (2012). Dead characters went to Hades where they continued playing until the end of game. The living characters could try their luck and descend to Hades in order to rescue their loved ones. This fitted the game world perfectly (remember Orpheus who went to Hades to rescue Eurydice) and presented an interactive dungeon where other, living characters could come, play and look for adventures.

DISCUSSING THE INHERENT MEANINGS IN THE LARP

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

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

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

The Black Company (2005) used LoD in a similar way. The larp was based on the books of Glen Cook and combined the themes of a pointless war, and the lust for power and immortality. The two fighting parties – the servants of the Lady and the followers of the Circle of Eighteen – destroyed each other ruthlessly during the game, making the death rates very high. After a short rest at the anteroom of the LoD, the players were taken to a specially arranged space where they were placed as chess pieces on a large chessboard; an eternal game of chess was going on. The players had to obey two NPCs impersonating chess-players and could do nothing but try to speak with the masters and influence their decisions. In the end, all the pieces ended up either sacrificed or exchanged. Thus, through the LoD, the organizers once again underlined the pointlessness and perpetuity of such a war.

AN ART TECHNIQUE

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

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

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

When the larp was over, all the players gathered at the theater to see the final show. This show was an important conclusion, as the play was, in fact, based on the game events. For instance, during the play the Prince of Verona was killed; thus Shakespeare's story changed through the larp. Unlike the previous rehearsals, and as an unsuspected twist for the watching players, the performance

setting featured the modern style of *Romeo + Juliet* film. This way the organizers managed to highlight the third layer that was incorporated into the larp. This larp tried to touch the specter of Shakespeare's works that have reached us through the centuries; and the LoD, which may have consumed just as much energy as the larp itself, became the focus point for the creation of such an awareness.

A PLACE FOR EXPERIMENTING

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

Mad about the yankee

Eleanor Saitta

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

To recap for those unfamiliar with the game from its original runs in 2010, MATB is about women surviving in a world where all men have died, set "three years from tomorrow". The women have come together from separate households and communities in trios to apply to the government for the sperm in the remaining sperm banks, to decide who among them should become a mother, to decide what family configurations should look like, and, implicitly, to decide what being a mother means now. The game is intended to explore sexuality, power, and relationships between women, separate from men.

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

last, greatest piece of art the world would see.

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

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

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

During online preparation for the US run and in pre-game workshops, the organizers emphasized the notion of playing to lose and for dramatic effect and talked about co-creating the story. In the Nordic runs (especially the all-women run), the first act of the game centered on the process of characters becoming a collective to make decisions in the second act. In the US runs, this didn’t happen. While the characters formed functional work relationships and separate family units became group identities,

these group identities were what interacted, a dozen separate teams. During the first act, most player engagement was spent networking – trading putative favors, weaving details irrelevant to the nature of the world inside the room. By contrast, in the Nordic runs, the players spent more time building a shared story.

This primacy of the collective story above individual stories is the most distinct difference between the Nordic and US runs of MATB. Much (but not all) of the US larp tradition has come from a lower-middle class and escapist background – players with just enough money to have time to play but not enough agency in the world to not need the escape, as described in Lizzie Stark’s “We Hold These Rules to be Self-Evident: Larp as a Metaphor for American Identity” in *States of Play*. American games usually run as “pure” competitions, divorced from player skill and on a nominally fair playing field. Game balance means ensuring equality of starting point. *Playing to lose* is foreign, as gaming is seen, in part, as a chance to exercise agency in the world one otherwise doesn’t have. Here, authorial access to backstory must be policed because it represents unequal agency in the world’s structure. By contrast, in a Nordic game, emphasis is likely to be on equality of outcome, ensuring players have equally interesting experiences. How much agency each character takes is less relevant, to the point that higher status characters often have less effective agency as their actions could prevent the collective story from functioning as all parties intend.

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

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

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

The individualist perspective may have been a defense mechanism for some players. For all but a half-dozen players, this was the first game they'd played that asked them to take on this much emotional weight. Playing the story as an adventure provided an escape valve, turning internal tension into adrenalin, and was also the perspective supported in the tradition most players were used to. This isn't to say that some – or even many – players weren't heavily emotionally engaged with play.

I was expecting a complicated relationship with the subject matter and my character. As a woman of trans experience, playing a cisgendered character (whose internal and performed gender identity matches their medically assigned-at-birth sex) means

simultaneously negating and validating things that are formative for me; likewise, separate from that identity, I've never considered being a mother. Initially, I wasn't sure if this game was for me – I've considered and decided against other high-profile games (like *Kapo*) because they covered subjects too close to home. This is standard in the Nordic tradition – not every game is for everyone.

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

The narrative assumed, loosely, that the Event killed everyone with a Y-chromosome, including almost all trans women. While chromosomal selection is epidemiologically implausible and does not represent the (lack of a simple) biological basis for sex, it's no more implausible than the basic premise. The authors state that this was a significant, but intentional simplification given the areas they wanted to explore. A more complex notion of who lived would be no less contrived and would shift focus toward how gender is defined or sex constructed. By using naïve categories, a more focused but still somewhat inclusive story could be told. Playing with emotional depth requires picking one story, and that means excluding others.

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

Exclusion comes with real costs when some stories are always selected, and it was unfortunate that the first game Nordic game to come to the US left players feeling outside. The Nordic scene

is homogenous, even compared with the society it grew from. It's telling that in the fifteen plus years Nordic games have run, the larp *Just a Little Lovin'* was the first specifically gay larp – and this in a community with many respected gay members. Even in that game, the racial dynamics of the New York gay scene were abbreviated at best. I understand why; in part, they're complex even for New Yorkers and - as in MATB – they weren't the focus. In the interests of a stronger collective story, if your identity isn't important to the story, there often isn't room for it. If you, the player, are left-handed, no one questions your character's left-handedness – it's hard for a player to change and rarely gets in the way. If you as a player are queer and it's not a game about queer identities, you may be seen as hijacking the story if you don't normalize your character into a straight identity.

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

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

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

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

Crossing the Alps

Thomas B.

International larp conventions can be fun and inspiring, but these benefits are often reaped by a minority of well-traveled international larpers. So after attending GNiales in France, Knudepunkt in Denmark and Solmukohta in Finland, I thought the local Swiss larping scene, with its game diversity and local talent, also could benefit from such an event. The one thing about the Swiss larp scene is probably its division into two highly segregated linguistic and larp-style zones. In the western part of the country, the larp scene is influenced by France, while there are more German influences in the center and the east (for more, see my talk at Knudepunkt, 2011). Therefore, as a French speaker I didn't even bother checking whether the German-speakers had a con and just decided to create a local one. With a 15+ years tradition of discussing, experimenting and documenting, Knutepunkt felt like the ideal inspiration. But after a few informal discussions with Swiss larpers, the concept of talking instead of doing met with some resistance. Why would anyone want to meet and talk about larp, instead of, you know... actually play?

PROBING THE WATER: THE 2011 ROUNDTABLE

These reactions meant I needed to start small, and not even aim for a full-day convention. I needed a hook, some sort of immediate benefit to convince both organizations and unaffiliated

larpers to attend. Since there is no Swiss larp federation, and the main online portal was pretty much dead at the time, larpers needed to either be friends with organizers or go to each group's website/Facebook page separately to find out about upcoming events. This fosters inbreeding, and so the idea was to get all local larp groups in one room to introduce themselves, their creative agenda and present their games. This way, local larpers could learn about the groups, shop around for games, discuss differences live and hopefully cross-fertilize. Some groups were very positive to the idea, other less so.

“Those who feel a passion for doing, yet have a dislike of studying, tend to also dislike all analysis and theory relating to what they do. It is seen as someone else trying to impose rules on their art and craft” (Harviainen, 2013). The most extreme version of this type of reaction came from one of the leaders of the largest fantasy larp group. Upon receiving my invite, he opened his e-mail reply with direct threats to the person who gave me his contact info. He then turned his written anger towards me, with choice sentences like “thanks in advance for never contacting me again for sterile debates or the mental masturbation you seem to like so much” and “I don't have time to waste with such bullshit”. While this was not representative of his group as a whole (they did attend the event), to this day I still wonder what prompted so much hatred considering we barely knew each other.

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

The meeting was divided into three one-hour sessions. The first was “Larp in Western Switzerland”, i.e. the actual roundtable, the

next two were a soft introduction to Knutepunkt-like elements. After a presentation of larp outside of Western Switzerland, I offered two options: either a screening of larp videos or a debate on a controversial topic. I felt the latter would be more interactive and offered a topic suggestion: “With the combined influence of mass battle larps and MMORPGs, is Swiss larp turning into live-action video gaming?”. Several individual larpers commented against the debate, saying that it would degenerate into a flame war, and that flame wars were one of the causes of the coma of the larp online portal. This was the first hint that unlike France, my country of origin, consensus in Switzerland is not reached through fiery public debates, but rather through series of one-to-one meetings in smaller, private settings. So videos it was.

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

As planned, the last two items included a soft introduction to the Knutepunkt spirit, opening local larpers to the diversity and weirdness of the larp world. Few had heard of Nordic-style bleed or seen its more literal Russian re-enactment combat equivalent. Sharing experiences from their scenes of origin, an American Vampire larper explained some of the more gamist motivations, and a Belgian larper explained that her scene was not only about Avatar, even though it got the most exposure due to sheer size. After so much talking, the video session showed all of this was real. Local Swiss videos provided some fun regional team spirit and past Knutepunkt events were great sourc-

es for shock value (from the Russian video saloon at KP2011 to the *Delirium* documentary).

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

RELEASING THE KRAKEN: GN'IDÉE 2012

I benefited again from the local tabletop gaming convention Orc'Idée (a pun with ork, orchid and idea) and created GN'Idée. To keep the dubious pun theme, GN means larp in French, idée means idea and its French pronunciation roughly sounds like "I have an idea". The larp con was embedded in the tabletop con, so if it sucked people could still leave and go for a pickup game of D&D next door. The format was expanded to a full day with two tracks, one practical, and the other theoretical. I wanted to keep the KP spirit where it's perfectly ok to brag about your own game and go on crazy brainstorming or rants. However, I knew that if the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, a way to a Swiss larper's heart is through her or his gear, from props to makeup. For this part, the GNiales French con was a great inspiration, as its technical workshops are more numerous and hands-on than KP's.

The con opened with short presentations of new games for the

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

The original plan for the evening was to have a mini larpwriter masterclass, with experienced larpwrights explaining tricks of the trade to the next generation, but no young larpers signed up. This item thus turned into a roundtable where organizers just shared how they created games, from the original idea to scenario writing. The debate went in all directions, including an impromptu introduction of the Gamist-Narrativist-Simulationist (GNS) theory by visiting French larpers. Considering this was the first time locals sat down to discuss larp writing, discovering each other's priorities, I'd call it a success.

MANY BORDERS TO CROSS

GN'Idée 2012 definitely enabled some border-crossing. It took two years and did not convince everyone, but now a sizable chunk of the local larp scene knows the benefit of just talking about larp for a day, without actually larping. Sixty participants

for a region that boasts less than two million inhabitants is a pretty good turnout. Of the attendees who provided written feedback, 83% found the con very good, 17% good. Several larpers who were suspicious of the concept had fun, and some volunteered to provide a much needed help in logistics. Even pure tabletop roleplayers were inspired, now wanting to do a similar thing for their hobby during Orc'Idée.

GN'Idée 2012 was not perfect: not enough time was given for discussion, meaning people had to rush from one item to the other. Some workshops filled up very fast. Speakers are still overwhelmingly male and experienced larp organizers. I would love more gender balance, and more player feedback. I am still looking for a way for players to talk about their experiences and hopes for local games, without either pandering to or trashing organizers in public.

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

The missing link

Johannes Axner

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

Nordiclarp.org is meant to be this missing link, the glue to fill the spaces between the different parts of the community and complement the Knutepunkt conference, its books and other physical meeting places and publications.

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

HOW IT CAME TO BE

After Solmukohta 2012, it became clear that it was too hard to take in the collective knowledge of the Nordic larp scene. Read-

ing the Knutepunkt books is quite tedious, and they don't provide the complete picture. Frustrated with the lack of a central online knowledge base about Nordic larp, I decided to start it myself. So, on April 20th, 2012 I set up the first version of the *Nordic Larp Wiki* and started inviting my friends from the Nordic larp scene to edit it. Since then, it has grown to become a lot more.

WHAT IT IS

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

The first part is a blog where we report news, opinion pieces and re-publish interesting writings about Nordic larp from around the web. Ideally, you should be able to keep track of news, what games are coming up and what people are saying about them, without having to look around at dozens of other websites, forums and blogs.

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

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

HOW IT'S DONE

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

We're organizing everything in a Facebook group, talking about what and how we want to do things. The blog is really the only part with any sort of editorial work, as the wiki and forums are controlled by those who choose to contribute to them. The idea is not to be a centrally controlled entity but to let the scene decide what comes forth.

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

HOW TO CONTRIBUTE

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

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

The diegetic horse you rode in on!

J. Tuomas Harviainen

“When someone turns my hobby into a science, I’ll quit,” said a friend of mine, who used to organize larps. True to her word, she has stopped making them, but I believe it had more to do with her schedule than any research. Her point nevertheless stands, and is witnessed time and again in action.

As in many professional areas, a one-way gap exists between those who do theory, guidebooks, and analysis, and those who create actual works. Whether in engineering, education, or larping, the same rule too often applies: Those who feel a passion for doing, yet have a dislike of studying, tend to also dislike all analysis and theory relating to what they do. It is seen as someone else trying to impose rules on their art and craft. In larps, surprisingly enough, this also goes for documentation, not just analysis. As larp documentation has come to encompass not only a few photographs and a short description of sporadic, memorized events by a player or two, but rather entire books, this is a dramatic isolationist attitude.

When I addressed this issue to some degree in the KP2011 rant book (Harviainen, 2011), I expected the problem to be much smaller. I was sadly mistaken. Evidence has repeatedly arisen, on internet fora, in chats, and in personal discourse. What first

seemed like a gap between habits and patience has revealed itself as a gap between play cultures.

Excluding certain very useful practical tools like the *Ars Amandi* method, design inventions do not seem to spread much, despite the fact that people are in direct contact with each other, or are even friends. Though this does not seem probable, it is actually quite natural. Role-players have a very strong tradition of wanting to create their own game systems and fictional worlds, one that may rise from the wargaming roots of role-playing games (see e.g. Peterson, 2012), even when they derive material from other games and popular fiction. This emphasizes the “auteur” aspect of larp design – everyone wants to innovate on their own and come up with the credit for inventing something great. What we need is a willingness to try out the new inventions elsewhere, to break the auteur-mold in some parts while sticking to it for the larger vision, and we’ll be fine. Just look into the widening success of *Ars Amandi* and its descendants, as a guiding example, and you’ll get a good idea how it’s done.

I have come to expect something between an aggressive knee-jerk statement (starting with a statement containing the word “pretentious”) and the very rare maximum positive “OK, interesting, but not something I’d do myself” from certain very vocal people. Many, but by no means all, of them come from the British larp communities. These reactions appear when they are exposed to either anything relating to larp theory (mostly hostile) or to documentation (mostly indifferent). Yet this undercurrent has also existed within the Nordic scene. It seems to me that it went into hiding when the Knutepunkt scene managed to agree to disagree and start look for commonalities, around 2006-2007, but it has recently resurfaced.

I believe the reason for that is the increase in documentation, particularly very thorough, stylish documentation seen in books

like *Nordic Larp* (Stenros & Montola, eds., 2010), *Do Larp* (Andresen et al., eds., 2011) and *The Book of Kapo* (Raasted, ed., 2012). A small but vocal group of larp organizers has interpreted this as, “we’re more interested in promoting and documenting than in making good games”. In other words, diversification of larp-related tasks is seen as a loss of focus and a waste of energy. This is highly reminiscent of the critique leveled against many larp theorists and analysts, who have been perceived as coming from an ivory-tower angle, as they are not themselves larp designers or organizers. The rare few theorists who do design, myself included, get complaints from the same people about design bias in what they write about. It appears that, for some, the very act of analyzing larp causes a taint, the taint of misplaced scientific thought that worried my friend.

The recent reception of my traditional, popular Knutepunkt presentation, which summarizes each year’s academic larp publications and key documentation epitomizes this. Unable to attend the event this time, I sent a proposal to the program team to do it by way of video. They asked some extra questions and promised to respond the next week – and then completely forgot about the whole thing. While just one occasion, this illustrates the way many people still ignore research and documentation they themselves do not see as worth adapting. Or, on the other hand, it may be just an accidental omission, the reception of which reflects the paranoia that a researcher develops regarding potential audiences. So take my words with a grain of salt.

Nevertheless, improvement has been seen – outside the Nordic countries. When things expand outside our own circles, people suddenly start to pick up ideas and play with them, improve them, and so forth. This goes way beyond just individual emissaries. We are seeing a new wave of influences, as the concepts reach new hands and develop. What we know as *Nordic larp* is currently developed in an inclusive way outside its places of

origin. Its strongest new ideas are neither appreciated by us, nor applied by us, but by non-Nordic readers who have an interest in putting the good parts to actual work. Just look at some of the examples in *States of Play* (Pettersson, ed., 2012) or *LARP: Myśli i Skice* (Chmielewski, ed., 2012). Whereas we tend to stick to, say, our favorite template for creating larp plot structure, someone out there is reading our descriptions on the various ways we each do it, and choosing which ideas to apply for what game, and how. Meanwhile, we just bicker on which of them is best.

We have lost our edge because we are content to ignore the wider world represented by the growing corpus of literature. Perhaps it's time to change that.

Naming the middle child

Anna Westerling

After play-testing my latest scenario for the Danish role-playing convention Fastaval, one of my Swedish larp friends said, “This was a great larp.” To me, the scenario was clearly a freeform scenario, but to this young Swedish larper it was clearly a larp. Why did we view it so differently?

I will sort out the origin of freeform and its many names, how it has crossed borders both between different gaming cultures and different countries, how the crossing created new ideas and hybrids with new names, and how that makes it harder for us to communicate about what we do. I have been a part of both the larp and the freeform scene for over 15 years and I have watched what once began with players throwing out their rulebooks, later became an important part of Nordic larp.

TERMINOLOGY: TABLETOP – FREEFORM – LARP

I see role-playing games as a continuum, with tabletop role-playing games at one end and larps at the other.

In a tabletop game, you sit around a table while a gamemaster tells you where you are, what the world looks like, what happens when you do different things, and so on. You have characters that have different skills and qualities and it is up to you as the player to man-

age these skills and collaborate with the other players' characters to win the adventure of the game. The players push the game forward by telling the gamemaster what they want to do next. Games may have more or less competition, tables and dice, or drama and interaction between the players. Each game session usually takes four players and lasts about four hours, although the same characters may appear in multiple episodes over a long period of time.

At the other end of the spectrum, you have larps, where players physically embody a character in a 360° setting. You walk, eat, sleep and dress as your character and everything you see is part of the game. There is no gamemaster or skill sheet, but rather a character, some relationships and your own improvisations and interpretations based on them. Larp focuses on interaction with the other players and the environment. The number of players is infinite and in theory, the game can last forever.

Somewhere in-between these two poles, we have freeform games. Freeform games use a gamemaster to tell the story and set the scenes. Typically written for four people, a freeform game features collaborative storytelling, lasts about four hours, and takes place in a neutral room. The play focuses on telling a good, predefined story through improvisational playacting. Scenes are played "on the floor" – four chairs easily become a car and a banana a gun. Most often, the scenarios deal with contemporary problems in a realistic setting.

THE ORIGIN OF FREEFORM AND ITS SIBLINGS

In the 1980s, tabletop role-playing was big. *Dungeons & Dragons* was everywhere, including toy stores, and the tradition of role-playing conventions in the Nordic countries began. Gothcon, Sweden, began in 1977 and Fastaval, Denmark, started nine years later. Somewhere around that time, people started writing games.

A tabletop game is part of a system, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Vampire the masquerade* or *Call of Cthulhu*. The players drive the scenario so there needs to be both a world and an extensive set of rules to handle the scope of the players' ambitions. The systems must be able to handle this variety, and provide tables and dice to resolve every possible eventuality. When writing a scenario, or adventure as it is called in tabletop gaming, you choose a system and world for it as a base. When registering a scenario at a convention in Scandinavia, you specify which system.

When people started to write scenarios without a predefined system there was a problem when registering those games to conventions. The scenario without a system became freeform. So freeform is originally literally that; a role-playing game which is free of a form or a system. In Sweden it was called freeform (Sw. *friform*) while in Danish it was systemless or ruleless (Da. *systemløst* or *regelløst*).

When conventions wanted to hold competitions in role-playing, from a tabletop point of view it was natural to let teams compete in how well they managed the adventure and this is how it is still done at Swedish conventions. However Danish Fastaval took a different turn by introducing a scenario-writing competition in 1992: the Otto prize. Fastaval acknowledged that the scenario writers were the most important contributors and rewarded writers of new freeform scenarios, to motivate the making of even better scenarios in the future. (Bach Petersen, 2011)

There were some regional variations, for example, Emma Wieslander visited Fastaval in the early 1990s, and brought the idea of a scenario competition to Sydcon, Sweden, awarding the first Emmie prize in 1994. As a result, Sydcon became the center of the Swedish freeform scene, since it focused on scenarios rather than teams. The different ways of rewarding games created two

very different cultures.

A game being signed up to a convention under the term system-free or freeform, could include anything from an unpublished dungeon crawl, to a game based on acting and improvisation. The fact that the term was so wide became a problem. Around 2000 a community of experimental game designers began to form in Sweden and had a hard time explaining what type of games they designed. Freeform was too wide a designation, so instead they dubbed their style of game jeepform. You could google it, and it was their own term. A few criteria for jeepform are presented at jeepen.org. In short, it revolves around scenarios that have a message or premise – something the game is about – rather than simply a setting. In jeepform, restrictions foster creativity and let the players know where the story is headed, and designers trust the players to make the game a rewarding experience. Jeepform has since influenced the way we see freeform so what I describe above as freeform – “on the floor”-play with improvisational elements – also describes jeepform.

In order to specify different types of games on the scale between larp and tabletop, even more terms have been introduced. In addition to freeform, the Danes also use the term semi-larp. The word originates from when larppers arrived on the Fastaval scene (traditionally the province of tabletoppers) and brought elements of larp and improvisation into the games, the result being semi-larps. Semi-larp overlaps with, or perhaps belongs under freeform’s wide umbrella. When the tabletoppers edged toward the middle of the spectrum, they called it freeform, and when the larppers did so, they called it semi-larp.

The ironic thing is that despite being called free, freeform differs from both tabletop and larp in that the players do not drive it. Freeform relies on a predefined story, with the gamemaster

setting scenes based on written material. In both larp and tabletop it is possible to end up in a situation where the gamemaster asks, “What do you do now?” When it comes to story, freeform stands out for being the least free and having the most restrictions.

FREEFORM SNEAKS INTO LARP

So why did my young Swedish larp friend call my jeepform freeform roleplaying game a larp?

When I joined the Swedish freeform scene around 2000, the Swedish freeform operated on the side of the ordinary scenarios as a strange, artsy thing, in contrast to Fastaval, which incorporated freeform. But around 2003 the freeform scene at Swedish conventions died. Only a few people wrote freeform scenarios, and after they left the convention, no one else did. After Danish designer Frederik Berg Østergaard visited Sydcon, he simply brought jeepform and its frontman Tobias Wrigstad over to Fastaval, which still had a robust freeform scene, since the Danes had chosen to encourage writers.

I stopped visiting conventions when the freeform scene died, but by then I had learned that a four-hour game in a classroom could deliver a game experience as good, or better than a four-day larp. I wanted hard-hitting games that delivered a good emotional experience; fewer people and a shorter time made the story tighter.

I still loved larps, and decided to mix the forms. In 2007, I designed *A Nice Evening With the Family*, which combined freeform and larp. I got Tobias Wrigstad, who by then had spent four years on Fastaval, into the organizing team. *A Nice Evening* used jeepform and freeform techniques. We used preset stories – seven different Nordic theatre plays – forbade secrecy, used acts to pace the game and let players work in

small groups with a gamemaster. We had freeform improvisation based around the story both in a mandatory one-hour so-called meta-hour, and in a voluntary black box. We focused on telling a tight story that would touch us all.

This tradition of the meta-hour in larp continued at the convention Höjdpunkt (2008). Admission was free if you contributed a game, workshop or other non-lecture experiment. Mostly populated with A Nice Evening players, many attendees experimented with stuff dubbed meta after the meta-hour. We continued to mix larp and freeform and started the whole convention with a jeepform game that all participants played in small groups.

FREEFORM HITS THE NORDIC SCENE

The main organizers of the Norwegian Knutepunkt 2009, Trine Lise Lindahl and Tor Kjetil Edland, also attended Höjdpunkt and incorporated the idea of opening the convention with a freeform scenario. The following year I served as the main organizer of Knutepunkt 2010 in Sweden, and opened the convention with a freeform game written by veteran Fastaval-writer Mikkael Bækgaard. This was important since the Knutepunkt and Fastaval scene until then had existed separated from each other, both exploring progressive interactive storytelling in what they saw as different forms; larp and freeform. This was yet another way of bringing them together. In all we made the structure of Knutepunkt 2010 very game-influenced with a show, don't tell theme and lectures limited to 45 minutes.

The freeform games were now an official part of the Nordic larp scene, although the organizers of Knudepunkt 2011 in Denmark chose not to continue the game track, arguing that they had their games at Fastaval, and Knutepunkt was for something else. But freeform games, metatechniques, and A Nice Evening had already made their impact in Norway, influencing the design of 2010's *Mad About the Boy* by Tor Kjetil Edland, Trine Lise

Lindhahl and Margrete Raaum, and 2011's *Just a Little Lovin'* designed by Hanne Grasmø and Tor Kjetil Edland. Both larps used acts to pace the game, refrained from having secrets, and included a black box for meta-scenes; in other words, used improvisational freeforming as part of the game. They also included the classic larp technique of total freedom for the players, thereby balancing the games between script and freedom, control and chaos.

Meanwhile, in Sweden, tape-larp was born, an offshoot of the experiments born out of Höjdpunkt and the larp convention Prolog, which began in 2009, and had access to many large black boxes. Many of the experiments were done in the style of the movie *Dogville*. Players and organizers put tape on the ground to denote different play areas.

So when my young larp friend, who entered the scene around 2010, called my freeform game a larp, she wasn't totally wrong. The Swedish freeform scene died in 2003, and what I once knew as freeform has long since been adopted by the Swedish and Norwegian larp scenes, and incorporated the same techniques into the Nordic larp tradition. At Fastaval, my scenario still counts as freeform, but they also see big inspirational potential in the international larp scene. In Fastaval's 25th anniversary book, Danish designer Max Møller wrote "It would be fantastic if Fastaval became the boiling pot for the meeting between Danish scenario culture, American indie role-playing games and Scandinavian larp" (Bach Petersen, 2011; my translation).

What began with some players throwing out their rulebooks is now some kind of hybrid that goes by a myriad of names – freeform, semi-larp, tape-larp, jeepform, indie games, role-playing and so on, depending on what culture and country you are in. It is not larp and it is not tabletop, but rather something completely different. We need to find a common name; otherwise, how will

we communicate about the sorts of games we make? We still have borders to cross in terms of finding a common language.

The narrative paradox

Bjørn Flindt Temte

If you've ever ventured into the more academic regions of interactive storytelling literature, you have undoubtedly come across the term *Narrative Paradox*. This paradox describes the clash between player agency and auteur intention, which is only too relevant for the digital interactive narratives. If you give the player total freedom to choose his or her actions within the story, it is utterly impossible to also have a controlled and thus great narrative. At least, this has been the general conception within the academic community since its inception. But, while the narrative paradox may very well hold true for normal interactive digital narratives of both game and non-game variety, is it also relevant for larps?

In my opinion, role-playing games have long been the most effective medium for interactive narratives, and I believe that they hold the solutions to many of the challenges within the academic interactive narrative community. Nevertheless, I do think that role-playing games are also affected by the narrative paradox, and that we have more or less consciously been finding solutions through our scenario- and character design. For instance, while frowned upon, railroading is a most natural reaction to players exercising their agency in ways that disrupt the organizer's planned narrative path.

Railroading also, to me, symbolizes the key difference in approach between linear and interactive narrative authoring. Authors of linear narratives, be they writers of books, films, TV or even games, approach the task with an attitude that they are the creators and mediators of the *story*, and it is merely a question of conveying this story optimally to the reader or viewer. Reversely, I have found that the most effective approach to writing (or rather, constructing) interactive narratives is to be more of a facilitator. The best interactive narrative *writer* is thus not a storyteller, but a story *enabler*, focusing on creating a structure and character set which allows the most possibilities for meaningful player agency. Each of these should allow the players to collaboratively create an effective emergent story. As soon as you start to believe that you know the best way a role-playing scenario will be played, you're leaning too far towards storytelling. Reversely, rely too heavily on the players to be able to create a good story, and you risk giving them a disengaging experience with an aimless and disinvolved story. So, whether you pre-write the characters for a larp, or host character creation workshops prior to actual play, you have probably experienced the difficulty in striking a balance between play opportunities and tight plot structure, especially if you desire to convey a strong theme or concept. Fortunately, by becoming aware of the narrative paradox, you can take several measures towards striking a balance that few other mediums afford. Ask yourself the following questions when preparing a larp, and the answers should help you give more agency and a better story experience to your players.

What's your authorial approach? Do you have a strict story progression in mind, with a clear opinion about the story evolution? If yes, then you should consider either adding more plot strands to the story, using some of the other tools mentioned here to allow for greater agency, or maybe just consider letting go of the reins a bit. Maybe run two playtests, one with a tight structure, and one where you sandbox it and observe how things evolve?

What's your setting framework? How much does your setting restrict the player agency, and is it done through narrative or game mechanisms? The players will usually be much more forgiving towards restricted agency if the story world has internally consistent logical explanations for these restrictions.

Are your characters set up with internal and external conflicts, and will these naturally create story opportunities? If you rig your characters too rigidly, with character descriptions that almost dictate how the player is to react in any given situation, you effectively restrict player agency. Reversely, tightly rigged characters, when done right, are a great tool for evolving the story in the intended direction without resorting to more drastic means.

Do you have any planned instigating story events that can be used to propel your story forward? These can be used to rein floundering stories in if the players are going too far off course. But use too many, and you risk effectively railroading your players. Ideally, create a number of instigating events, then select and introduce the most relevant ones when the time is right.

Lastly, don't forget that all the meta-aspects of the game, from contents on the website to the way you're behaving as you introduce elements to the player, all put the players in a specific mood. If everything is tight, cool and professional, your players will go into the scenario with a very different starting point compared to a more loose and casual approach.

The narrative paradox, like bleed, is defining a core characteristic of RPGs and larps, yet one which we haven't had a term for until quite recently, at least not in our community. Nevertheless, it has affected so many of our role-playing experiences, that we're long overdue with a debate on its precise implications and remedies. So, let us.

Beauty or beast

Laura Mitchell

In academic studies of monsters and the monstrous, monsters have two purposes. They are the Other against which order may be defined and simultaneously, the deviations from the order, the potential for a new and different (potentially horrifying) world (see Botting, 2003). Monsters offer possibilities, but they also endanger the present systems. In UK larp, the term *monster* is used to describe volunteers who assist in running a larp. This includes performing non-player characters or just helping behind the scenes. The organizer tasks of recruiting monsters and determining their compensation are considered both very important and somewhat sensitive, as some monsters can turn out to be incredibly helpful larp citizens, and others a great burden to organizers. I suggest a possible three-tier category system of the types of monster roles or activities common in UK larp, and would like to ask: does labelling these volunteers monsters emphasise their role as beauty, or as beast?

MONSTERS IN UK LARP

Most UK larp relies on a crew of volunteers to run, often known as crew or monsters. These volunteers may help with anything from digging holes, to acting out the roles of bad guys, refereeing game regulations or providing first aid. They are usually reward-

ed in some way for their time and involvement, either through in-game benefits, or out of game perks such as free food, indoor accommodations and the like.

To be more specific in the use of the term: although volunteering to monster, or “going monsterring” may refer to helping with any backstage task to facilitate the game on behalf of the organizers, in most cases it refers to performing a costumed acting role according to a specified monster brief. A brief comprises a rough guideline from which the volunteer may improvise an appropriate script of dialogue or behaviour.

MONSTERS AS SERVANT OF THE GOD-LIKE MASTER

Where a player in a larp game may have full control of their actions and dialogue, subject to the restrictions of their embodied capabilities, monsters can be understood as lesser people, subject to the whims of the organizer or referee. Some monster roles may involve representing cannon fodder such as weak little goblins or gretchen tasked with inconveniencing players, who in turn are obliged to slaughter the beasts and reaffirm their status as heroic figures – the larp equivalent of removing a household spider from the bathtub. There is little opportunity, in such roles, for the monster to act autonomously or to sway the course of events.

Even in more developed monster roles, such as reoccurring appearances of evil masterminds or other knowledgeable figures that interact with players, the detail of the brief and the abilities associated with the role lie firmly in the hands of the organizers. Monsters, then, are in this sense the indentured servants of the fantastical performances constituting larp events, with organizers and plot writers their masters. As creatures without free will they are not fully human, but stunted individuals subject to their Machiavellian overlords. In a sense, they are pitiable monsters, unable to reach the status of a fully autonomous player. These

servants constitute the difference between a heroic player figure and the meagre monster. By their existence they create the order of the game and also highlight the possibility of a terrible enslavement, which in many ways describes the everyday and mundane life the game may be trying to present an escape from.

THE OUTSIDER, THE ANTI-HERO

A depiction of monsterring as serfdom is one many players would likely reject as inaccurate and derogatory to the volunteers who put in time and effort to make the game possible. Like any labour, monsterring is often a process with tangible and intangible rewards. To paint a picture of monster volunteers as shackled servants would be the same as stating that the ticket sales clerk at the cinema, or the teenager in costume at a Harry Potter attraction is in some way monstrous. While some sociologists would likely take such a view, it is worth exploring the potential rewards of monsterring more thoroughly.

In most games that require significant numbers of monsters, a select crew of volunteers will be recruited for the whole period of the event. The event may offer several enjoyable elements, such as successful role performances, social camaraderie and broader exploration of the fantastical world experienced through the perspective of the bad guys. In return for being the unpopular villain, monsters are often provided with free food and/or board. In persistent game worlds, monsterring may likely confer benefits on the volunteer's player experience, through transferable advantages or items which have a particular effect in the game. These are often tailored to the volunteer's preferences by way of a token exchange system, so those playing fighting characters might "buy" a special weapon, while knowledge based characters might buy access to libraries of information on languages or herbs.

Although in theory monsters might be paid in *real* coin for their time, I have never encountered this or heard of it in the UK

larp context. The closest such exchange I have come across has been payment “in kind”, in the form of monsters being offered the ability to keep game costumes or props for personal use, or discounts on such items from affiliated traders. However, there are distinctly intangible benefits accrued through regular monstering. Experienced monsters gain expertise in many aspects of the game such as the rule mechanics, the makeup and costume presentation of particular monster types, and in the improvised portrayal of diverse and sometimes complex roles. For this reason, regular monstering is often recommended to new players. In each of these areas stalwart monsters acquire a level of kudos or respect from the community, and are often consulted on difficult situations or recruited to show new volunteers “the ropes”. Such veterans are often identifiable by their extensive repertoire of stories about earlier experiences, accounts that often figure the storyteller in a significant (and at times even maverick) role. It is this social approval of the volunteering role that perhaps lifts the monster from wage-slave to contributing citizen. Rather than beasts, monsters are understood to be beautiful inside. By their otherness they highlight the importance of heroic players, and their possible mentor role offers the possibility of heroism outside the conventional means of the game. Monsters, then, do not only highlight existing systems (of play) by their otherness, but also teach us about the limitations of those systems.

However, as I once discovered, rejecting payment as a monster is considered unacceptable, as such behaviour undermines the status of monsters as a whole as no more than the servants described above. As much as such community members may be applauded, monsters must remain outsiders, just as the anti-hero must disappear into the sunset.

THE INVISIBLE MAN, THE TERRIFYING UNKNOWN

The function of monster roles in larp is to introduce or advance moments of dramatic tension as part of the narrative encoun-

tered by players. However, when they appear in the game, it may not always be apparent that they are a monster. Some games make frequent use of planted characters under the control of the organizers, either to add drama to the game or simply to add colour and assist with creating a particular ambiance. Although referees and “backstage” crew are frequently easy to spot by specific markers that denote them as outside the game world (high-visibility jackets, specific costumes or coloured markers are often used), many in-game monsters are carefully costumed to be indistinguishable from a player character. Although in many circumstances players within the game can identify monsters by their lower costume standards, or by recognising the volunteer, monsters which are concealed as players or simply well-costumed and prepared can pose an invisible threat.

A key aspect of this lies in the function and status of a monster. These monsters are dressed as players, in the same space as players, indistinguishable from them, yet their intentions are unknown, and may be threatening. These double agents may be less attached to their roles than players, and as they are under the control or direction of the organizers their motivations are unpredictable. Should a monster die, they are likely to still fulfil their function by adding to the drama of the game, yet for such an occurrence to befall a player undermines their position as key agents or heroes in the narrative. Monsters are, in this sense, a threatening beast, different from players and yet seemingly the same. In this sense monsters truly are monstrous since they illustrate the arbitrary distinction drawn between player and game-world. At the same time as their presence heightens and draws attention to that boundary, their task is to artfully conceal it from players; to promote a sense of reality in the construction of the fantasy. Yet in some cases monsters do not remain under the control of the organizers, but may “go rogue”, interacting with players on the basis of outside commitments and diverging from the game intentions. These beasts with a beautiful face threaten

not only players, but also organizers and other monsters attempting to maintain the boundary of the game world.

A DOUBLE-EDGED EXPERIENCE

To be a monster at a larp is something of a double-edged experience. The very existence of monsters, as of the back-stage crew in general, is to perpetuate the dominant fictional narrative. Yet in the liminal space they occupy, this in-between world that separates the fantastical construction from the mundane one, monsters highlight the fragility of both those worlds. Combining the view of monsters as servants and as anti-heroes, monsters may well be both beauty and beast in the possibilities they offer. However, as the unknown, monsters embody the psychological terror of what may be. This perhaps explains why organizers are often very careful in how they recruit their monsters, even to the extent of cliqueness, as the best beast is the one you know to be beautiful.

The poetry of playfulness

Tomas Mørkrid

All game-design is based on the players' ability to use a game; their will and ability to make it their own. A design is a proposition for play; an invitation to playfulness. The goal of all game-design, implicitly or explicitly, is to inspire, prepare and help the players. A game is a framework for directed playfulness.

So; when designing a game we may ask ourselves:

WHAT DO THE PLAYERS NEED?

The answer is simple, and challenging; the players need to be told how to play the game, and how to play with each other. Even though they may know each other well, a game purports to transform them into strangers, and thus they need to be given a clear method of interaction. The purpose of the method is to make the game something special; something that removes the players from their own life and world, and puts them into characters that partake in a different life-drama.

Whatever game you make; whatever drama you aim for; your players will need a method.

WHAT DO THE PLAYERS BRING TO THE GAME?

The designer is not alone in bringing a game about. The players

will help themselves in playing the game, with their insights and skills. If you let them, the players may bring a wealth of interactive tools to the game!

People are interactive all the time, in their everyday life. From a very young age an average human is trained in interactive practices. As adults we command a vast arsenal of gestures, postures, words, phrases and intonations to be used in any game of role-playing.

Players come with a system of ethics too; a sense of right and wrong, and an insight in the connections between choice, action and consequence. They bring with them their experience in trying to be good human beings. A role-playing game may be viewed as an exploration of ethics, and as such any adult participant is equipped with tools to make it work; an ego, the strong will, the good will, the higher will, and most important; the imagination of empathy.

Most people even have hands-on experience with the process of taking on different *characters*, both in children's play and in different social functions; within a family, at school and work, or in hobby-groups. Different social arenas place demands on us all the time, and meet us with character-inducing expectations. I am a different "I" in the various arenas I perform.

Your challenge, as a designer, is to have players make effective use of these abilities, in your game. It is not given that the players will manage to do that. It depends on your success in making them feel "at home" within the framework of your game. The more seamlessly you make them step into and make use of your method of play, the more they are likely to perform to the best of their abilities.

I believe this to be the single most important factor of success of

any role-playing game; an open mind; playfulness; the great YES. Being playful, open, positive, is a sure sign players are empowered, and the road to successful game-play.

A POETIC FABLE

Muu is a Norwegian pen and paper RPG published in 1989. The game consists of a map “The World of Muu” and a character-sheet. That’s it.

Most of the character-sheet is a tale of Muu awakening. It works as a portal to the game, by giving the player some basic language to understand the world of Muu, and by enticing the player to open up and wonder; “What is this creature?” and “How do we play such a fable?”

The instructions on how to play the game were not written down, but were given in a one-day Muu-leader course, led by the designer. The only way to buy the game was to participate in such a course.

The game plays out in a minimalistic setting; a glen in the woods, with a small lake and a brook. The muu doesn’t do much in this place; it sleeps, eats, bathes, dreams. That is about it. Next to nothing is actually happening.

Although Muu is a strange little game, players took to it. They laughed at the clumsy creature the game had them transform into. They loved the way the game forced them to see the world as a muu. It made them clumsy, curious, harmless. It helped them to create Muu’ish dreams about “Sunberries”. It helped them into “Allmuu”, and the mutual sharing of emotions. It drew them into the meditative state of being “Muu”, exploring a world made magical by a carefully and poetically woven point-of-view.

The typical reaction to a game of Muu is laughter, and a mixture of awe and puzzlement. After the typical game-session, players tend to lean back, to share calm and content smiles with each other. A strange and simple game, Muu is.

THE DIALOGUE

Muu was a marvel to me. I did not understand it when I wrote it, but slowly the game revealed to me that we may express ourselves through game-design. Anyone may do so. And more; Muu made it clear that players use role-playing to express themselves. As if they were storytellers, actors, jazz musicians...

The jazz in Muu is of a special kind. When the Muu-leader start weaving the spell of the game, with a calm and reassuring voice, using words like “Allmuu”, “Bigtree”, “Starmoss”, “Sunberries”, “Pricklyspring” - it is easy to become a “muu”. Nine out of ten players fall into a spell of naïve muu’ishness.

WHY?

Due to the dialogue. Dialogue is the heart of a role-playing game like Muu, and words are the heart of dialogue. A designer may work with words and dialogue, directly, giving the players key phrases in a new terminology, enticing them to change the way they speak. To view the dialogue as part of the method, and work it, is a way to make your game produce unique fiction in the hands of the players.

The one defining element of a game of Muu, is the way the dialogue is formed during play. The character-sheet delivers the key phrases to the players, so these are at hand during the whole game. The muu-leader makes use of the phrases in ways that connects them with the muu-world, and expand the poetic terminology with additional phrases to make the dialogue become even more muu’ish. While doing so, the leader inspires

the players to adopt the naïve language; so the group is enabled to build a unique fiction with strong narrative logic, by the use of practical poetry.

The key is to inspire players to play with their language. You may work with poetic, cool or funny phrases, fictional names included, to help players give color to their fiction. If you succeed in influencing the way players talk, they may weave a powerful spell on themselves, happily magicking themselves into the fantastical identities and relationships buried in your game. It is not the only way to great fiction, but it sure is exciting to work the in-game language of role- playing games.

AN EPIC IN TWO HOURS

Autumn of Life is a LAP; a *Live Action Pocket-play* game. Live Action Pocket-play is a new way of designing for interaction, a hybrid of verbal and live action RPGs. Playfulness is the primary design-principle of LAPs.

Autumn of Life was designed in 2006. It starts out with simple premade characters, and dives into the deep end of understanding the life and soul of a human being. The epic focuses on a group of old friends. One by one they die. The game plays out at their funerals. The vision of the game is to explore emotions connected to a long life; hope, disappointment, sorrow, longing, bitterness, fulfillment...

The easily understood setting (our own world), the simple characters (five short paragraphs describing each of them, no numbers) and the well known social situation (sitting at a table after a funeral), makes for a game that may be prepared and played with ease. There is virtually no threshold of rules or other things to understand; the game is based almost solely on the social skills of adult people, and on the ability of the game to incite playfulness in them.

The game leaves the players to improvise lifelike characters during play, inspired by the short paragraphs, and to develop realistic relationships in the same way. A very simple and intuitive method is used to support the interaction and to give direction to the drama, ensuring that the game is indeed a tour-the-force of friendship and remembrance.

Game-play is simple, almost as an ordinary dialogue. There is little effort to this way of playing. And still the theme takes hold of the players. Players are touched by the game; the grave beauty of life and death, the painful insights, the simple identification with character.

Autumn of Life is a simple game, that allows players to be playful in a serious way, weaving a two hour epic of astounding complexity.

THE BARE NECESSITIES

To make complex interaction, we need inspired players, and a method that gives direction to their gameplay. The basis of any method is the social skills of the players. The more you are able to tap into those skills, the more your game will benefit from it. Keep in mind that people are ready to use those skills anytime, so it should not be hard to do.

To keep players in the blessed state where they are ready to use themselves, you need to be simple and expedient. Make use of the bare necessities, and trust them to make your game work.

SELL YOUR VISION

Players come with curiosity. Transforming their curiosity into inspiration is your first task as a game-designer. The best way is to ease them into the method, carefully introducing the elements needed to create the interactive drama, carefully establishing

your vision. You need them aboard, inspired, energized, ready to play!

KEEP THE ENERGY

Complications in the set-up saps energy from game-play. Bad communication erodes the will to play. My advice is to keep rules simple, and focus on player skills. Keep the players happy, lead them in long strides towards game-play, and let them loose.

TRUST THE PLAYERS

Face it; interactive design is dependant on the skills of the players. The players are the ones fulfilling your vision, by the power of their social skills. They are well versed in dynamic co-play. It makes sense to let them use themselves in a game, fully and freely. If you do, the players will fulfill your dreams of a great game. The result will be a rich and engaging fiction.

ENGAGE!

A role-playing game is an invitation to play. There is no play without playfulness.

Trust is essential to playfulness. Keep a smile on the faces of the players, and you keep trust with them. Smiles will make them trust each other too.

Give light rules, easy to read and understand, obviously useful in substance, and easily implemented.

Give clear and inspiring information that lays out the theme for the players, and ensures that they invest in it right from the start.

DIRECTED PLAYFULNESS

The instructions of a game should engage the social skills of the players. People tend to feel good when they are allowed to make use of their own faculties. It gives them a feeling of mastery, of

being whole, beautiful, and empowered.

Ideally you want players to use their own skills as fully and wholly as possible, in a happy state of directed playfulness.

The immersive pen

Nathan Hook

Much has been written in the academic field of creative literary fiction writing on concepts and approaches used by writers. These concepts are compared and contrasted with larp play, design and writing, to search for techniques and approaches used by writers that can be adapted to be of use to larpers.

IMMERSION, FLOW AND RAPTURE

Virginia Woolf (1953) described creative writing as “the greatest rapture known to me”. Along these lines the psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (1996) expressed the notion that “creative achievements depends upon single-minded immersion” which relates to *flow* – timeless concentration.

While immersion is a well-known concept for larp playing it is not normally spoken of for larp designing. This raises the question of whether it is the action of designing a larp or the action of playing in a larp that best equates to the activity of a creative writer. The division that appears natural in larp is seemingly not present in creative writing.

Some experts advise new writers to think of themselves as receivers and suggest methods for “harnessing the unconscious mind” (Anderson, 2006) to overcome the conscious trying to censor

creativity. Examples of these methods include free writing (spontaneous writing without preplanning or editing) and clustering (drawing spider diagrams of connected ideas and concepts). The tools and techniques developed for creative writers when facing writer's block may also be useful for larpwrights when faced with writer's block. This approach of writing in the moment without preplanning also compares well to the nature of conventional larp play – acting in the moment without preplanning – and stands in contrast to more pre-scripted traditions of acting. As noted earlier creative writing equates to both larp design and larp play.

Research has found evidence that creative writing is of a higher quality when done for intrinsic reward such as personal enjoyment rather than extrinsic reward such as for praise or publication. It may be worth reflecting that much of larp design and larp play is done for intrinsic motivations.

In another parallel between creative writing and larp playing, writers often speak of using “special rituals and different locations” (Anderson, 2006) as part of the process of writing. This compares well to the ritualised entry points of entering the magic circle of a larp play space; the intention in both cases being to induce a particular mental state by using features of the immediate physical setting. Perhaps the same techniques that some larps already use for beginning play may be relevant as tools for larp writers when beginning the design process.

CHARACTER CREATION

“Characters pre-exist. They are found. They reveal themselves slowly – as might fellow-travellers seated opposite one in a very dimly lit railway carriage” (Bowen, 1948; quoted in Allen, 1958).

Both creative writing and larp writing involve character creation. However some writers such as Bowen in the quote argue that the term *creation* is misleading. Some larpers agree with this and

speak of characters revealing themselves, while others completely reject the idea.

Nevertheless, creative writing experts identify four main approaches to character creation, and it may be helpful for larp-wrights to consciously reflect on their choice of approach. These four approaches are autobiographical, biographical, inventing from scratch and a combination of these approaches.

In larps where players write their own characters they naturally tend to use the autobiographical method of using an aspect of themselves, as discussed by Bowman (2010). The character shares many of the physical attributes of the player-writer and much else besides will bleed-in. Even if the organiser writes the character brief, how that brief is interpreted and developed still means that a large slice of the player is autobiographically written into the character. The jeep tradition of *playing close to home* might be viewed as a reinvention of the autobiographical method used by writers. Another example of this is when organizers typecast players to particular parts that fit them.

The biographical method refers to basing a character on a person known to or researched by the writer. Historical larps and vampire larps featuring actual people from history would be explicit examples of this. Another example would be *Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum* (2006), where players played themselves possessed by the ghosts of real life historical figures.

Invention to fit the setting is certainly used in traditional larps where a character may be defined by their profession (e.g. priest, warrior) or a choice from a race of stereotypes (e.g. a fantasy race).

Increased awareness and a conscious choice of approach would be a helpful tool for larp writers, as it is for creative fiction

writers when creating characters. Conscious use can provide a tool to create a set of characters and spark creativity when faced by writer's block. The choice of creative approach can also be explained to players as part of the documentation to help them relate to the material. For example, a pre-written character could be compared to a known historical or fictional person as a quick way to convey their personality and concept to the player. An example of this can be found in *Vampire: The Masquerade*, where "Queen Anne, the vampire prince of London" is modelled on the real life Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (whose career Queen Anne fostered in the setting).

Aristotle (1996) used the term *consistent inconsistencies* for characters that have internally conflicting personality traits, such as an extrovert who is secretly shy or someone dominant in some contexts and submissive in others; modern experts advocate using this principle to add conflict and depth to characters. Some tabletop role-play games require players to define personality traits, with the expectation of dramatic internal conflict when different traits push towards different courses of action as well as external conflict between strongly motivated characters. Examples include *Pendragon* (1985), *Ars Magica* (1986), and *A Song of Ice and Fire RPG* (2009). Larp characters briefs tend not make use of this in this way – however, explicitly stating the character's core personality traits can be a good, concise way for a larp writer to convey a character's personality to a player, or for a player to convey a character they have written to the organiser. It can also be a good way to ensure the character's personality meshes with the overall wider themes.

STORY, PLOT AND GNS

Role-playing writers have developed the gamist-narrativist-simulationist (GNS) model, describing three contrasting creative agendas – playing to win, playing for a story, and playing to explore a setting. Although we might expect creative writers to favour a

narrativist approach, I find that many experts actually argue for a more simulationist approach to writing.

Creative writing experts define a story as a “narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence”. *Plot* is a story with the addition of causality; the reasons for those events happening are given. Some experts argue there is greater dramatic potential where plot includes mystery; events happen for reasons that become known later. If we accept these definitions, then the term plot should be reserved for simulationist approaches that aim to create internal causality rather than approaches that play for external reasons such as playing to win or playing to create drama.

Applying this approach to larp writing suggests that writers should not plan events directly but instead use causality as a writing tool; establish a web of causality from which events can organically develop and ideally include a natural mechanism in which hidden causality can become revealed later on. Narrativism is poor at creating mystery since it does not create underlying reasons that can be revealed later.

Character and plot are interlocking. Events emerge from character or the characters attract certain events. This resonates strongly with the approach currently popular in UK larp of *player-led* or character-driven larps, where the player characters, as opposed to NPCs or impersonal forces, are the prime movers in the setting. In this tradition characters are given access to readily apparent means to affect the wider campaign setting. Some creative writers argue for focusing on what a character will *do*, sometimes presented as *character + conflict = plot*. From the perspective of the GNS model this argues for a simulationist approach of plot arising as a property from the natural interactions of characters. Some writing experts go as far as arguing for the Stanislavski method of acting to be applied to fiction writers writing about characters.

In contrast, fantasy writer Ursula Le Guin (1998), whose fiction inspired the larp *Between Heaven and Sea* (2003), argues for the validity of other approaches outside this simulationist stance: “Plot is merely one way of telling a story, by connecting the happenings tightly usually through causal chains”. As this quote illustrates, creative writers vary in the importance they attach to plot.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS

Creative writing, larp design and larp play are all inherently creative processes that involve bringing characters to life. All three activities offer the possibility of achieving an immersive flow state and draw upon writers’ or players’ biographical, autobiographical and imaginative resources to create characters. A surprising number of creative writers argue for immersing in the creative process and applying simulationist principles to their activity.

What can larpwrights take away from these creative writing concepts? I suggest that they should reflect more consciously on the writing process. In the same way that some larps begin with rituals, is there some personal ritual that helps ignite the process of larp writing? Would techniques such as free writing or clustering be useful to developing ideas?

When creating characters, one should also be conscious about what mixture of invention, biographical or autobiographical approaches is being used and how that awareness can be used in communicating the character to a player. It also can be worth reviewing characters to see if they include consistent inconsistencies.

When writing a story or plot think your approach to causality and to what extent you support it. Consider how to structure

plot elements so that as events unfold the underlying causes for earlier events are initially hidden (creating mystery) but are likely to be later revealed.

The mixing desk of larp

Martin Andresen & Martin Nielsen

The Mixing Desk of Larp is a framework for organizing your thoughts about larp design, originally developed for the Larp-writer Summer School in 2012. Look at it as a pedagogical tool more than a theory of larp design – it is an aid in visualizing the most important design choices a larpwright makes.

The mixing desk serves mainly two purposes: raising the awareness of which design opportunities exist and making you more conscious about your default design choices. The main idea of the Mixing Desk of Larp is that a larp designer can be thought of as a technician controlling the lights or the sound of a concert or theatre performance. At your disposal, you have an array of faders, increasing or decreasing the amount of lights of different colors or the volume of specific sound frequencies. In the same way, you can adjust the faders of the Mixing Desk of Larp, changing the larp you're designing. For example, you need to set the level of transparency, decide on the responsibility for the character creation process and make a choice on whether your scenography should be minimalist, 360°, or somewhere in between. With all of these decisions, you probably have a *default position*, a way you or your community usually design games. Thinking in terms of these faders is a way to become more aware of the possible choices one makes when designing a larp.

On the next pages, you'll find a short description of each fader and their maximum and minimum positions. For most of the faders, the maximum and minimum positions are mostly theoretical concepts, impossible to reach in practical larp design. They nonetheless serve to illustrate the possibilities of a larp designer.

Of course, there are endless numbers of faders that could possibly have been adjusted on the Mixing Desk of Larp. We have no intention of covering all possible design choices, but have focused on some of the most important parameters that can be adjusted when making a larp. The choice of faders is based on Nordic larp in 2013, and might have been others in 2000 or in other larp cultures. We hope and believe that other larpwrights will add their own faders and remove the ones they don't find fruitful when using this framework. Happy twisting!

OPENNESS

Is information about the game – such as character descriptions or events that are going to happen – secret for the players or can anyone read it? Is it actively facilitated that you share secrets before the game start? Transparency can make it easier for players to help each other play and create a stronger drama, but it will ruin any surprises for the players. There are also intermediate possibilities where there are secrets for some of the players, but not all, or where the players themselves choose what to reveal.

SCENOGRAPHY

How does your larp look? Do you aim for a 360° illusion, where everything the players see around them is part of the larp? Or do you use a minimalist approach, where you only pay attention to the objects that have a function in the game? Do you accept that an object represents something else than what it really is?

CHARACTER CREATION RESPONSIBILITY

Who creates the characters? Do the organizers write them? Do the players? Or maybe they are created together during a pre-game workshop? Combinations of these are also possible; for example, where the organizers create the characters, but the players develop them during a workshop before the larp. Player-created characters might make the players more attached to the characters and relieves the organizers of some of the work. On the other hand, organizer-created characters might make it easier to create a setting and fiction coherent with your vision.

GAME MASTER STYLE

Some organizers consider their job done when the larp has started; then, they leave everything in the hands of the players. Others influence the game in different ways as it goes along. Are you an active or a passive game master? Game mastering might also be of different sorts: the discrete ones, like sending instructed players into the game, or the extremely intrusive ones, like stopping the game and instructing the players to do a scene again differently.

STORY ENGINE

What motivates the players in your game? Having something to win or a goal to obtain, be it individually or collectively, can be an easy way to motivate players, especially for beginners. This is the competition approach. On the other hand, you often get more interesting stories and stronger player experiences when the players collaborate – for example, by deliberately getting their characters into trouble, i.e. *playing to lose*.

LOYALTY TO SETTING

Larpwrights often have to consider the tradeoff between playability and plausibility. When making a historical game, for example, having a female factory owner might be highly implausible. However, it might be very playable – creating lots of

interesting drama and intrigues for the players to use in the larp. In most games, you leave out the characters that have nothing to contribute to the drama, even though it would be plausible to have them there. Sometimes, you make unlikely twists to make the outcome of a story unpredictable. How true will you be to your setting? A plausible story might be a requirement for players to believe and immerse into the fiction. But, the players also need drama and often the least plausible setups create the most drama.

BLEED-IN

Do you use elements from the players' real lives in the game (close to home), or do you deliberately try to create a barrier or distance (differentiation) between the character and player? Using the players' own experiences or background might create a stronger emotional experience, but also has its downsides: making the game less larp and more reality. It can divert focus from the story and the emotions the story creates to the emotions the players bring with them into the game. Taken to the extreme, you might have the players play themselves, just in an alternative setting. Are you willing to lessen the player-character divide?

COMMUNICATION STYLE

What kind of communication style does your larp encourage? Is the natural way to interact in the game through talking, or through physical action and body language? Communication style can be adjusted through the characters, through workshops, through scenography design, or through simply telling the players what you want. A physical communication style might be more thrilling, letting the players immerse more through using all of their senses, but a more verbal game might be easier to involve new players in, as well as being more realistic in many settings.

REPRESENTATION OF THEME

How does your larp represent the reality of the setting? Is realism your goal? Or do you use abstract or even surrealistic elements to focus on the feeling and atmosphere of the setting or to highlight a particular aspect of the game? If the goal of the game is to create the atmosphere of a prison camp, you might do this in two ways: by trying to simulate an actual prison camp or by using abstract or surreal elements to create the feeling of one.

METATECHNIQUES

Metatechniques are techniques for giving information to the players, but not the characters, during the game. Examples can be “inner” monologues that are played out during the larp. The players can hear these, the characters cannot, but nonetheless, they can be an aid for creating stronger drama. If metatechniques are used in a game, they might be intrusive or discrete. Examples of intrusive metatechniques are techniques that force all other players to stop while it happens, while a more discrete technique might be, for example, having access to a special room where players can go to act out scenes from the past or the future. This fader illustrates the combination of the amount of metatechniques used and their degree of intrusiveness.

PLAYER PRESSURE

There are some things in larp that are difficult to play out. Hunger, violence, sleep deprivation, drinking, sex and drug use might be examples. If you want to include these elements in your game, how do you do it? Do you put the pressure on the players as well as the characters by using with hardcore methods such as real alcohol, real food deprivation, and waking people at night? Do you shelter the players from the pressure on the characters by using replacements like boffer swords, fake alcohol, and telling the players to pretend to be hungry or sleep deprived? Hungry players will, of course, feel what it is like to be hungry, but their

ability to role-play and enjoy other aspects of the game might be hampered.

FINAL WORDS

The Mixing Desk of Larp is a work in progress. It's a pedagogical tool aimed for presenting and structuring some of the most important design choices of larp in a convenient form. We thus believe there are plenty of other faders that could be part of the Mixing Desk, and would emphasize that the framework is open to extensions.

Some of the extensions and design choices that we have been playing with for a future version of the Mixing Desk are more faders that deal with metatechniques (amount vs. type); chronology and representation of time; degree of pervasiveness; utilization of random elements; and player freedom. Probably, there are other faders that are much more useful that we just haven't thought about yet. Use your experience and imagination and adapt the model to your own larp writing style!

Out of our hands

Hanne Grasmø & Tor Kjetil Edland

How do you ensure that all the participants get the experience they were promised when they signed up, and still enable strong participatory power? Dealing with this seemingly impossible contradiction turned out to be a key challenge when designing *Just a Little Lovin'* (JaLL), where we wanted to realize our vision while at the same time provide the players with the freedom to shape their own characters and stories.

All larps are about the co-creation of stories. Two runs of *Just a Little Lovin'* has showed us that it's possible to design a larp in a way that ensures a high probability that all participants in the larp experience the central themes as envisioned by the designers. This can be done without sacrificing the high standard of participatory agency expected by most larpers. In the two runs, many of the character interpretations and the way individual stories and relationships unfolded, varied substantially. But no matter how different the individual stories and fates of the same characters became, all stories unfolded within, and reflected, the overall narrative of the larp.

THE STORY OF AIDS NEEDED TIME TO PASS

The concept of the larp is a story about people in the gay community in the US in the 1980's, when the AIDS epidemic hit. Still,

we wanted to make a game on issues and themes with contemporary relevance. AIDS, with its connotations of sex and death, has a strong potential for telling stories of universal themes that would genuinely touch the players; to further provide an experience from which our participants could reflect on questions of identity and “how I want to live before I die”. Through the development of the characters and the on-site workshops, we sought to create a dialectic between desire (symbolized by gay culture and alternative lifestyles) and the fear of death (symbolized by HIV and cancer). These two were in turn balanced by strong and multifaceted friendships. We also promised to ensure that the participants could feel safe enough to step outside their comfort zone, both as larpers and as human beings.

In order to tell these stories, it was necessary for time to pass in the narrative. We compressed the timeline of the epidemic somewhat for our story, and decided to divide the larp into three acts, reflecting both the passage of time in the lives of the characters, and also the different stages of the early years of the epidemic; ignorance, paranoia and response. All the acts took place at a 4th of July party, three years in a row. Before each act, we expressively told the players which themes each act should focus on, and left it up to them as a group to decide exactly how their characters would play out these themes. The breaks between the acts also facilitated that each participant individually, as well as the ensemble as a whole, got the chance to reflect on their own story so far, and what would be good to emphasize in the next act in relation to the three main themes.

DIRECTING THE THEMATIC FLOW OF THE GAME

We wanted to let the characters become multidimensional beings and evolve beyond aesthetic clichés. Hence, we held workshops the same day as the game started, and in the act breaks, where we worked together with the players to develop their template char-

acters. While we were the main creators of the narrative outlines for the first act, most of the storylines were out of our hands after the first year had been played out.

Creating true stories of desire and friendship, touching the hearts and desires of the participants, could not have been done without placing responsibilities for the continuous story in the hands of the players. One of the reasons for this is bleed. We don't believe that the strongest emotions are created when you stay in character 24/7 with as few distractions as possible to break the illusion. We see bleed as a better tool, and taking breaks from the fiction can enforce the story and your emotional experience of it.

But, how do we maintain the vision of the game when the players are free to create the narratives? Much of the solution lies in the use of meta-techniques. How we focused, created and executed these techniques were one of the most important design decisions in realizing the larp we envisioned.

THE LOTTERY OF DEATH

In lots of larps there is plenty of death; mostly characters killing each other. We searched for a way of portraying death of characters that had the potential of tapping into our universal fear of the fact that one day life ends for all of us. We understood that this meant the players could not be given the power to decide whether their characters became infected with the HIV virus or not, or if, and when, their characters would die. Our "Eureka!" was to re-discover certain randomizer techniques, much from the childhood of larp and roleplay. We imagined that a lottery would serve to copy life itself.

Death arrived in a meta-scene, played out at the end of every act, 11 o'clock in the morning. Two characters played by the organizers, embodying "cosmic funeral agents", arrived at

breakfast to host the Lottery of Death. The instructions were as follows: “Write your name on the tickets, at least one, maximum five, and put them in the hat”. The number of tickets should be in accordance with how your character has put himself at risk of becoming infected. Every year, the funeral agents picked out approximately 10 people, randomly drawn from the tickets in the hat. This created some very strong reactions from their friends and lovers as they walked away.

But the lottery wasn't conclusive. Chosen randomly, some of the 10 ended up in the coffin in the year between the acts, while others got grave news from their doctor.

THE PHALLUS METHOD

On both runs of *Just a Little Lovin'*, nearly every character had sexual encounters portraying a great variety of emotions and situations. We had a vision for a meta-technique for sexual play that would be visible, direct and which could easily portray gay sex and *anonymous* sex. The Phallus Method challenged our players, but at the same time made erotic play safe. Most importantly the meta-technique had a great impact on HOW the stories unfolded in an erotic way.

The scenes of sexual encounters were about much more than horniness. In the larp, we used sexuality as an engine for a wide range of emotions, relations and rationalizations. Most people experience powerful feelings while having, or trying to have, erotic interaction. There are perhaps negative emotions like rejection, suppression, shame or loss of control, but also positive ones like true connection, holiness, strong friendship, and the feeling of being appreciated. If you dare to play out horniness, lust and desire, you gather courage to open you heart for other emotions as well.

The Phallus Method can shortly be described like this: Keep

your clothes on (at least your underwear). Have a phallus ready. The phallus is gender-free, so everyone can use one; and it will simulate hetero and lesbian sex, as well as gay sex. For the first run we made soft leather-dildos, for the second run they were wooden with bright 80's pink paint. To simulate sex, there must be physical contact between the phallus and both bodies: hands, hips, legs, face. It can be theatrically simulated between the legs, but only if the participant agree to do so. We told the players that it was important to negotiate between them exactly how a scene should be played out, to achieve both a safe and intense experience. As this was a story about HIV, one of the reasons we needed phalluses was to make it possible for the participants to easily portray whether they chose to use condom or not. This is, after all, a story of a sexually transmitted disease.

A very important part of The Phallus Method was having a monologue to end the scene. Every participant should say out loud, one by one, the thoughts running through their head at the end of the sexual act: How does (s)he feel now, how was it, describing something that felt especially good or bad. When all monologues were done, one went out of the meta-moment, and back into the regular flow of the game.

We hope that the collection of tools we arrived at were the right ones, giving our participants maximum freedom within the inevitable frame of historical events in which we placed the characters. We arrived at the techniques mainly by considering which techniques would serve to portray this period and our universal themes,. So, the design of the game was specifically connected to the theme of the first years of the AIDS epidemic. We do, however, cheekily want to share this little canon with you, believing it might have points on larp design that are relevant beyond our specific game.

THE LITTLE LOVIN' CANON

1. *Vision before design*

Your vision makes design demands. The vision is the horse, the design the carriage. Good techniques can be wrong for your game.

2. *Love creates conflicts*

Love and desire are better motivators than revenge, and most of us have more experience with those feelings, than with the desire to kill someone.

3. *Emotions are the driving force*

Larp is a unique art form; no other art form creates the same degree of personal experience. Enforce the universal emotions: (such as) desire, fear of death and friendship.

4. *Hands on the steering-wheel of the narrative*

The designers shall be strongly involved in creating directions and storylines in pre-workshops and act breaks. This includes more than creating a sandbox in terms of a fictional world for the participants to play around in.

5. *Participatory creativity gives stronger immersion*

Tight design rather than loose frames creates participatory creativity. Plan your workshops for participatory creativity.

6. *Breaks provide space for actions and emotions*

Incorporate act breaks, meta-breaks and time passing where nothing happens. When the character is allowed to “sit on her own shoulder”, understanding arises, emotions immerse and new paths of the story unveil. You don't have to stay in character the whole time to have a strong larp experience.

7. *Randomizers copy life itself (and death)*

When the larp starts, the designers' tasks have ended, and they

should not set themselves up to fail by trying to micromanage the stories of the characters. When the larp has come to life, let randomizer techniques and the decisions players make take over.

8. Repetition builds a lifetime

If the same kind of event happens repeatedly, the character will feel they have a fuller life, yesterday, today and tomorrow.

9. Explicit sexual meta-techniques create safety

Sexuality is a useful instrument for creating other strong emotions. When meta-sex has a clearly developed technique, which includes pre-larp training, people feel safer daring to play out explicit scenes. Having an audience is an advantage. Public sex scenes feel safer than private ones. Safety is felt in your own body through developing familiarity with the tools for playing out erotic feelings.

10. It is impossible to make the larp in advance

Right here, right now. Extensive demands on players to read long texts about the game world, or countless meet-ups before the game, often results in some of the players being unprepared while others are super-prepared. The right moment to begin the real preparations is when you all meet for the larp. Workshops and larping are two sides of the same experience, and should be held in the same week(end).

Moment of truth

Yaraslau I. Kot

Throughout all the larps I've participated in, the silent moments have brought me some of my greatest experiences. These are the moments where nothing is spoken or nothing unusual is done, yet when you look around you don't see players in character, but characters themselves. Moments when nothing pulls you inside of the plot, and yet you are already deep in it.

My aim is that mentioning these silent moments, and recollecting some of my personal experiences, will aid other players in acknowledging them as they happen, notice their beauty, and experience them more clearly.

...What a beautiful moment. The dawn is about to break. Our jeep with dark, opaque windows is standing at ease at the edge of this little park. It is quiet. What a beautiful moment. I simply walk. Enjoy the taste of morning air. The taste of dawn; the faint taste of sun. The park is quiet, and yet a few others can be seen in the gray misty morning air. I know who they are and I am not bothered. The Prince with his men look like a Halloween crowd. I walk alone. What a beautiful moment. Arkadiy catches up behind me, holding an umbrella above my head. I am lucky to have his loyalty. We walk without a word. What a weekend. All that has happened: rumors, Sabbat, ancient prophecies, Lidia, rituals, the visit of Ar-

hont, and other stressful circumstances, which led us all to this museum of ancient stones. All those close and dear to me remain, and the Prince fears and trusts me even more than before. What a beautiful moment. All is done and the White County of Belarus will be as quiet as before... In such moments I miss the times of breath. Arkadiy opens the car door for me. The dark interior of the expensive car looks unusually unappealing. One last glance upon the emptiness of the park. What a moment. The door slams shut. The moment passes as the vehicle takes us away from this peaceful place – back to the luxury of the Asylum...

Sometimes, there are in-game moments where you do nothing but walk, or stand still and perform some trivial task... And suddenly, you are flooded by the intensity of this imaginary setting that you and your fellow larpers have created together. Thinking back, this particular moment becomes prominent: the moment where you sensed the truth around you, when doubts and preconditions faded away. When you feel that you are exactly where you should be, and this place is *here* and *now*; in a space shuttle lost in some interdimensional loophole with a bunch of aliens, among Robin Hood and his merry men taking care of the forest hideout camp, stalking the night with kindred hunting for blood... Wherever it is, you feel that you fall in place with the world you created. Perhaps we are larping to find our place at least in some world; like cross-dimensional dervishes or gypsies, seeking a time and place we can call our own?

...I cannot feel my legs... We've walked for weeks now. Lost count of how many. The jungle turned into the womb of some fable monster, which consumed all survivors. Now, draining our life force, it relishes each drop of it. No! I will not allow it to end like this. Take a step. One more step. Two more. Up the hill. Look around and check if everyone who started walking in the morning remain on the trail. All. Only yesterday there were more of us. My friend Bharat. Don't think of it Bhanu, don't think. You are the

village's Elder. You have no right to show weakness. You have no right to show doubt. For these people you are the future, it is your place in the world. Every death feels like a drop of burning tar that sticks to my heart. Every death of a loved only works to strengthen the chanting: "You have no right to show weakness. You have no right to show doubt." Ancestors, give me some more strength! Give me some more dreams! Savitri follows unquestioningly, which means that I am walking the right way, which means that the ancestors have not left me, they have not left us. Green jungle walls surround us, like vultures, waiting for our weakness. Teasing, whispering, inviting us to stop and become a part of the Great Jungle, making us forget all worries. Begone! Nonsense! Our people will live! One step. Another one. One more. Don't break the rhythm. Around the bend there will be a little meadow. Then there will be a swamp, but I know where to cross it. Don't slow down. I can't feel my legs... My head is spinning from the fatha root – but without it I will not know where to go. All warnings have been given dozens of times. Pramila, when he elected me as his successor, said: "The day when you will overpower yourself – you will find the answer to all questions." Others remained... All those who could not... We learned how to say goodbye in silence, often and forever... Step. Another step... I can't feel my legs...

Have you ever noticed how silence could be an even more powerful larp tool than the most intensive debate? When you hear your thoughts, and you discover that they are not yours anymore... They belong to your character. And her or his worries are now filtered through your heart, leaving trace of a life you never lived, a trace of worlds that never existed and the memory of heroes never remembered.

...We approach the village where, within the cabin, my beloved Maria with her mother and many other noble women of the county of Minsk have gathered for Christmas fortune-telling and empty conversations. If she has gotten my message we will have a se-

cret meeting later... For now we have to leave our horses and cross the field afoot. All is white, the snow is everywhere around us, two hussars of the Alexander regiment, crossing the field. Black uniforms with ornaments of silver cord melt with the colors of the winter night. We are moving toward the thin gray line at the horizon. The sun is rising but it is not seen, and the clouds are as white as everything else that surrounds us. No one can be seen around, only the field and the anticipation of the secret meeting with our loved ones. The morning has awakened the mist, which swallowed us whole in its milky abyss. Silence is white, all around us, above and under. Here we are, drifting, up to our knees in soft and dry snow, as if within a rift out of time and space... I stop and take a deep breath. 1811 indeed. I am here and my love is right through this veil... A bright future... Till death do us apart...