

TALK

LARP

Provocative Writings from KP2011

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Edited by
Claus Raasted

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Claus Raasted

Dedication

This book has been made as a part of Knudepunkt 2011 in Denmark.

Knudepunkt is an annual Nordic Larp conference organised by Bifrost, the Danish National Organisation that promotes roleplaying and other creative activities.

The conference, the book and all the other wonderful things happening in conjunction with the conference could not have been possible without the volunteers of the Knudepunkt 2011 team:

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This book was created as part of the Knudepunkt book project for Knudepunkt 2011 in Denmark. If you're interested in hearing some of the thoughts behind the book, read on.

If you couldn't care less, but just want to start reading the articles, burning the pages or jerking off over the book because you're now a published author... be my guest.

Just do me one favour. Make this book matter. Don't let it become a dusty item on your bookshelf just yet. Do something with it first.

And as I've written on the cover... if all else fails, you can always beat someone over the head with it. At least that way it makes some kind of impact. And that's what it's all about.

Claus Raasted, Copenhagen, February 2011

Foreword

So what's this book all about?

It's about opinions, emotions and values.

And I'll tell you why.

This book is written for the Knudepunkt convention and by people who are part of the Knudepunkt "crowd", if such a word can be used in any way.

It's written as it is because of my love for Knudepunkt and for the Knudepunkt books, of which one has been produced every year since 2003.

Indulge me, while I explain a bit about why this book is a book of rants instead of a book of larp theory.

Talk Larp - Provocative Writings from KP2011

It all started with an idea. Usually it does, but when does it ever stop there? I don't know. Not this time, that's for sure.

This time it started with a group of people who wanted to do the book for Knudepunkt 2011. An enthusiastic group. A talented group. A diverse group. A group I was part of.

We started by looking back at earlier Knudepunkt books and found them to be very varied - both when it came to breadth of articles, quality of editorial work and production value. And of course we agreed right away that we wanted to top anything that had been done before. Who wouldn't?

Next step was in defining how we were going to accomplish that (or die trying). And here the first split occurred.

Several wanted to do a book with serious academic pieces. A few wanted to collect documentation on earlier larps. And I wanted to go my own way. Not suprisingly.

Foreword

Luckily for us in the book project, we had a strong organising group backing us. They also gave us a free hand to make any decisions we felt were needed.

So the first thing we decided was to do not one book, but three books. Sure, it was crazy, but it put a smile on all of our faces when someone said "Hey, guys... nobody's done three books before" at one of the first meetings.

This also meant that nobody had to compromise too much on vision. Instead we just went three seperate ways with a vague idea of how to make it all part of a greater whole.

As said, I went my way. And my way was the way of the rant.

My reasoning was simple. I own all the Knudepunkt books and I've read most of the articles written in them. I've also discussed quite a few with both friends and strangers.

But which articles had been the most read and discussed?

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Here, the answer was laughably simple and shows a lot both about the world we live in and the people we are.

Because the texts that I've gotten the most from were manifestos and rants, where someone complained about something that should be changed. Usually these feature somebody saying that she or he is right and everybody else is wrong - often in a humorous way.

Sure, I've read "A Semiotic View on Diegesis Construction" and "On the Transmutation of Educational Role-Play" (both of which can be found in the KP04 book, which has the impressive title 'Beyond Role and Play').

Yes, the texts are exactly what they sound like. Long. Boring.

On the other hand, "Pix or it didn't happen" and "Fun for Everybody" were quite different reads. Both can be found in the KP09 book "Larp, the Universe and Everything".

Foreword

Those two are also exactly what they sound like. Short. Fun. Worth debating.

And that's what I wanted to do with this book. I wanted to gather writings that made people talk.

Some will find statements in this book that they agree with. Others will disagree violently. Some might even go so far as to call some of the authors idiots on internet forums.

Don't worry. They've asked for it. Actually, they've asked you to do something harder - they've asked you to talk to others about what's in this book.

Whether that happens or not is up to you, our reader. But we've tried damn hard to make sure that you'll find something in this book that's worth mentioning to someone. If nothing else, you can shake your head at the guy who used the sentence "jerk off" in a serious foreword. Yes, the editor.

Anders Berner (b. 1982) is a Dane who normally just pokes people until they do what he wants. He's a full-time pro larper by day, political back-room dealer by night and loves beating up kids while calling it pedagogy.

And he actually believes we can change the world.

Stop crying
Or: "Speak up, artsy-fartsy whiners"

Anders Berner

Anders Berner

Stop complaining!

”Ooooh. It’s not fair. Why do people make fun of me? I’m this brilliant artist doing mindblowing life-changing events that will shake the foundations of the universe. And I take myself very seriously. Yes, I do. But the public just thinks that I run around in the forest dressed up in cheap leathers and beat up people.” ... but it doesn’t stop there.

“And no, they don’t think I’m a Manowar fan. It’s worse than that. They think that I’m a fantasy larper. It’s because they don’t know that larp truly is wonderful art. Instead they just think it’s orcs and elves in the forest. Booohooo. Why don’t they understand that MY kind of larp should be talked about instead?” ... and so on, and so on.

Have you heard this kind of talk?

I have. And I can’t stop wanting to puke when I hear it. Sure, in an alternate universe where I was an artsy-fartsy larper, I might even agree with them. But I don’t.

Stop Crying

Because the equation, boys, girls and choose-your-owns, is quite simple. If you want to define your image, you need to tell somebody about it.

And we SUCK at that. Most of the groundbreaking, scene-changing, you-should-have-been-there larps are talked about forever in our little community, but not at all outside of it. And that’s no big surprise, because if there’s one thing we’re good at, it’s keeping things in the closet.

Oh, and also we’re good at crying about it.

In Danish media, larp is mentioned almost every single day. **ALMOST EVERY BLOODY DAY.** But what larps are mentioned?

Delirium style larps?

En Stilla middag style larps?

Hamlet style larps?

Anders Berner

NO! Fantasy larps are talked about. Again. Again. And ag... (wait for it) ...ain. Because the fantasy larpers LIKE to talk about their larps. They LIKE media attention.

They LIKE seeing their organisation mentioned in the local paper, even if they look silly with their green make-up, their bad costumes and their nerdy quotes. And who can blame them? Not me, that's for sure.

It does have some consequences, though. First of all, it makes it easy (especially in Denmark and more and more in other countries too) to be understood when you mention that you're doing a larp. People will say "Oh, I've heard about that... it's orcs, elves and latex weapons! Sounds fun.

But not really something I'd try." NO-ONE will say "Oh, that sounds so avantgarde and hip. It's like the future of interactive art... if I knew where I could sign up, I'd do so immediately."

Stop Crying

Because while some of them might be impressed if they heard about Delirium (probably quite a few would – it was quite impressive) nobody will. Because they don't hear about it.

And that's a crying shame. Mostly, of course, it's the larpers doing the awesome projects who cry about it, and not the public.

So what do we do about it? We talk to people. We do press releases. We invite journalists. We document. We hold meetings with elected officials.

We try to control the message. At least a little bit. Because if we don't, other people will. And they have different views, different priorities and different standards. And since we all (more or less) agree that Delirium was cooler than Orcslayerweekend XXIII, we should probably do something to get that message out there.

Anders Berner

We should stop behaving like a subculture of emos who sit around in the closet alone telling each other how cool they are. We need to stop talking to our friends about saving the world and start talking to other people about it.

And believe me, they will listen. Whether it's journalists, librarians, officials or art critics. THEY WILL LISTEN. The reason they'll do that is that we have something very powerful and very inspiring – and most of the world doesn't know it yet.

But if we don't start getting out there and talking about what we do and who we are, they won't find out. Maybe they'll get some skewed version from other people or maybe they'll just become so sure about what we do that they'll stop listening when we tell them what we ACTUALLY do.

So get out there.

Talk to people.

Make a press release when you do your next larp.

Stop Crying

Invite journalists, bloggers or whoever.

Make them see why what you're doing is even more interesting than what the orcs and elves are doing.

Then talk to them some more. Make them believe.

And make them tell others.

Then maybe – just maybe – one day, something wild will happen. Maybe someday, when I tell someone that I do larping, they won't say "You run around in the forest? Interesting!", but instead they'll say "You do participatory art? Interesting!".

But it sure won't happen as long as we're afraid of speaking up for ourselves. So all you people who do the really cool stuff.

Either start getting out of the (Turku?) closet...

Or stop crying. And don't say to me you want to change the world when you're just sitting in a cage jerking off.

J. Tuomas Harviainen is and looks ageless. He is a Finnish scholar with a tendency to rant in an intellectual fashion. His critics call him sarcastic, mean and offensive, which amusingly enough are words he also uses about himself.

And he can't abide people who don't quote properly.

You're not that brilliant
Or: "Know your history and references"

J. Tuomas Harviainen

J. Tuomas Harviainen

I am sick and tired of self-aggrandizing larp experts - designers, theorists, researchers, whatnots - who are so busy re-inventing the wheel that they can't be bothered to do a simple reference search.

Seriously. folks: If someone influenced your paper heavily, why not say that? If you are saying the same thing as people before you, why the hell do you want to pretend they did not exist? And, most of all to the point, if you are building upon the work of someone else, create a chain of continuity. Because if you don't, your own chain will end with you. That girl you neglected giving credit to? She won't quote you in her next paper on the subject either.

This isn't to say that you should kiss ass, or drop names. Hell, no. It's about knowing where your ideas come from, saying that out loud, and then constructing the next step. It's about being a research community, where we learn from one another.

You're not that brilliant

The same thing applies when telling someone how awesome your larp was. Oh, it probably really was, and that's just great. Seriously. But that innovation of yours? Was it really new, or did someone do it before you?

Advertise that which was really new - the innovation's scale, or success, if not the idea itself. Again, I don't expect anyone to read every native-language forum about past larps, especially not before you organize yours. But the moment when you're oh-so-guru on a KP stage, telling everyone how awesome your game was, with a cadre of backup singers around you, it's good to know which things will get you applauded, and which will net you responses of "fuck off, we did that in '98". By people who did it in '98.

Of course it's damn hard. I know it myself. I have read extensively on both larp theory and past designs, local and far away. That does not prevent me from forgetting essential stuff, in both my articles and my designs.

Which brings me to the most important point:

Admit to having done something wrong, when you ignored something. Accident or not - it makes no difference at that point, because your audience will find the argument to be at fault. It is absolutely essential to be able to change your mind on how original you were.

And the next time you write or lecture, add that attitude change, that new knowledge to your repertoire. Do it right, and it will serve you well.

You can then move from "We invented this new fantastic thing" to "We came to this idea on our own, but have now heard others did it in Italy (or Israel, or New Zealand, or the U.S. ...) earlier, too. We just organized that experience for a hundred instead of ten players. But this connection means that we feel that our experiences easily can be used in those other countries as well..."

Which explanation of your awesome game do you think the people will like to hear more? Yup, the former - at least if you're a damn convincing and entertaining speaker.

Because we all know it will sound more awesome in the short run. But if you're someone who actually wants to contribute to the hobby/art/lifestyle, try the latter. Its long-term effects will be far more impressive.

What are you in this for? The glory, the warm beds, or the community? Choosing the last option will net you a little less of the two former, yes, but not so much less that you should really care and not contribute. Trust me on this.

A warning is in order, though: Regardless of my words of encouragement, do not expect any miracles. There will always be knowitalls who will insult larp work regardless of intent, argumentation or reference base. Some will disguise their responses in pseudo-academia (while accusing you of the same), others by saying that your references suck.

Why do they suck? Because they are larp references, and your critics do not bother to read those.

Their logic is this: It is impossible to become an expert on larps. To study larps, you should use an existing approach, even if you are a larpwright, not a researcher. But, if you do, you are studying, say, larp sociology or psychology, not larps themselves.

Or making games that somehow just “do not apply”. Which means that, again, your words can’t be trusted, as you are biased. Don’t believe me? Just go read a larp forum. Especially a British one.

And the other refuters? Those larp designers or researchers who believe themselves that they were innovative, and take offense at being proven wrong. Just as you don’t like hearing that “We did it already”, neither do they. And their technique, way too often, is to deny your knowledge.

This, too, is a reason for you to master your history, to know your references. That way you can be safe in the knowledge that you are right, even if the people to whom you explain it over a beer just pretend to agree with you.

The ones who really should learn their history and references are of course the ones denying even valid critique, but that may be too much to ask.

They will most likely have way too much to lose, in the form of that aforementioned glory and warm beds. If not in reality, then in their fantasie.

And we larpers, we are people who do take their fantasies very seriously. And you can quote me on that.

Simo Järvelä and Niina Niskanen are from Finland. If you ask them what they are, they will tell you that they are fascist spoil sports who take things too seriously and dare to demand things. They are not funny.

Their ages are secret. Their wisdom, however, is eternal.

Stop being idiots
Or: “Learn how to talk to each other”

Simo Järvelä & Niina Niskanen

There are unhealthy and silently approved traditions brewing up in Finnish larp culture. And I'm afraid that Finland isn't unique in this. These "traditions" make it difficult to organize games effectively and worsen the game experience for everyone.

They're detrimental in every larp project and can even ruin them - especially the more serious ones. Let's examine these traditions by a fictional larp case.

Participating in a game is often seen as a second class pastime, some kind of light occupation. The effort put in by the game masters and the time invested by the players are thus derided.

The first typical stumbling stone in the beginning, middle and end of a project are the schedules. In our fictional larp ca. 30 - 70% of the players would miss the fee deadline and some of them would miss also the reminders.

Being late for a game requires great indifference towards the game or a real force majeure but it is all too common. It delays the start of the game for everybody else and possibly ruins the whole time schedule.

Getting feedback - often crucial, especially in campaigns - in time (or at all) is also incredibly difficult and requires tenacious begging. Also the game masters have powers to mess up the game schedules thoroughly.

Too often the character information arrives only a day or two before the game. The players' questions might be answered slowly, rudely or not at all. Game masters seem unable to start the game in time.

Whether the reason is a late player, unfinished props or too little sleep, it is never a good reason to keep the rest of the players waiting. Also, playing the martyr card at the last second doesn't help.

Writing a report or scouting game locations is not necessarily fun, which brings us to the next question: Why should it be fun? Why is it that in larping everything should be nice and wonderful? Anyone who ever arranged a game knows that the job includes unpleasant tasks.

They must however be accomplished to reach the goal, a successful game. The same goes for players; some unpleasant things have to be done and endured for the good of the game. They must pay, they must follow the genre, they must provide content to the game, they must accept the game conducting. A larp is, after all, an advanced art of co-operation. When it flourishes, everybody gets the most out of it.

The next problem appears when co-operation is missing. The players expect powerful experiences in laborious, well thought-out art installations - by just glancing over the given game material, getting a suitable outfit for the setting and showing up. Eventually.

They are spoiled by how much they can get with so little effort. Game arranging suddenly turns to customer service, and that is internecine. Claiming to have some rights as a paying customer is seriously derogatory towards the game masters' efforts and reasons to create the game.

The small participation fees are used for the game and the organizers might get pizzas and a cup of coffee at the most.

The customer service delusion is especially frustrating for game masters who have themselves seen the incredibly fertile, colourful, rewarding results of a well-working collaboration. Let's not be in the service of anybody! Let's strive for the common interest instead.

It might come as a surprise but not every gm or player is equally good. Creating a game and playing are skills that can be practised and learned. Acknowledging one's own limitations and weaknesses is a skill itself.

In an ideal case the GM creates a game she is capable of conducting, recruits trustworthy help when needed and does not act like a martyr under the inevitable pressure game mastering will bring along. In an ideal case the player first considers if the game is suitable for her at all: the genre, the basic practices, the style, the vision.

If the player then wants to come along, she tells openly about her limitations, mentions all weaknesses and strong areas. Thus no one is misled.

In our fictional larp we have a blessing and a curse in one: the friends. Organizers have a huge peer pressure when selecting players. They might have a special insight what players would provide the most suitable combination in this particular game.

But friends get offended if they are not selected. Nobody wants to offend their friends and so the options for the organizer are quite limited.

A tender-hearted GM takes the mates along and perhaps caves in on the vision. The ruthless one prefers the artistry, don't accept the friends and might thus offend them.

In the end it is a matter of principle and conscience. And we must not forget the blessing part: typecasting, reliable help, sympathy and just doing cool things with your buddies.

These problems can be solved with attitude, co-operation and communication. Constant and systemic falling behind must not be accepted nor seen as normal by anybody. We must have a more serious attitude towards gaming.

Instead of customer service we could see gamemastering as offering a common playground for great experiences. We must learn to communicate fluently in better and in worse: share opinions, explain, suggest and understand.

And most important, we must stop being idiots!

Stefan Jordan (b. 1969) is a German larper who often feels that he's old enough to have fought in the Great War. He once did an underwater dungeon larp, looks good with a monocle and has been larping for countless years.

He also hates narrowminded people.

You are not my friend

Or: "I can't believe you're so stupid."

Stefan Jordan

Stefan Jordan

“Isn’t it dangerous?”

“Don’t some people lose it and then they can’t tell the difference between fantasy and reality?”

“But why would anybody want to do something like that?” “It sounds dangerous, for sure!”

We have all had discussions like this – with friends, with family and partners, with neighbours, colleagues, you name it. The first time you don’t know quite how to put it.

How do you explain LARP to somebody who has never played? Even if somebody has played pen & paper rpgs, that doesn’t mean she’s open to LARP. It takes some experience, but after a few trials and errors, refining it, you find your personal way of having that “talk”, delivering that feeling. You know what works and what people don’t get. Isn’t it a stupid discussion?

You are not my friend

It’s tiring for sure, but who can help it? It’s how it is.

But then I had that same stupid discussion with a LARPer when talking about a slightly more challenging and psychologically ambitious event with a contemporary scenario.

Sorry, please come again?

Yes, all the concerns about how dangerous this might be, the questions if people were able to tell the difference between fantasy and reality, people losing it, and so on. First I was confused, then it really pissed me off.

Didn’t I just talk to a LARPer? Didn’t I explain a LARP concept? So what exactly was it that bothered her so much? Did she think it’s dangerous to dive into the psyche of a character? It might trigger some forgotten trauma or even cause a new one?

Right, right.

Stefan Jordan

Is this only true when the scenario is remotely realistic? But it's okay if it's a completely unbelievable reality? Like, Heroic Fantasy or Post-apocalyptic, Wild West, Sci-Fi?

Hmm, yes.

What about Vampire? Got it – the more a LARP scenario is connected to your own reality, the more dangerous the immersion gets, is that what she wanted to tell me? You mean, you better shouldn't get into character at all, because then there is no risk you might forget you are playing.

Oops.

No, surely she didn't mean that, because then she just might mean roleplaying might be a dangerous thing.

Or did she? Let's think about this for a minute. It might actually be dangerous. Are you sure roleplaying is a good idea in the first place? Immersing into a character isn't quite natural.

You are not my friend

You're playing with forces you can't really judge. I mean, you might find something there; deep inside yourself. You might even find somebody there – and you might not like that person. Or maybe not even know her. Maybe you better not go there.

Isn't that utterly stupid? Aren't you missing out on the one thing that LARP can give to yourself, to everybody, maybe even to the world? Isn't that what LARP is all about? That's something I really, really can't understand. Because I do want to find out about me. I mean, sure, I agree there's some dangers involved in roleplaying.

Losing it is part of the whole idea of roleplaying, isn't it? Or at least in what I consider roleplaying. Sometimes I'm scared of what I might find; and I should be, because I don't know if I will like what I will find. I believe it's important to face your fears and surmount them.

To me that's part of what it means to be human.

Stefan Jordan

If you don't want to find out what's in there: fine for me. I'm sure there's lots of people out there who agree with you. I don't. I have always been a bit suspicious about the whole "we're all doing LARP, we're one big cosy family" notion.

Sure, we do share something – at least if you're into getting in character, leaving part of yourself behind and going boldly where no man has gone before. But even if that's the case, we're not necessarily related. On the other hand, you can't choose your family, but you can choose your friends. So maybe we are related?

There is just one thing which bothers me and that is the name of the game. Maybe we should go back to the Three-Way3 model and find out where we all stand and blabla. Or maybe not. Maybe I don't care. Because if you do react in the same way to what I do as non-LARPer react to what you do ("normal" LARPs or whatever we shall call it), doesn't that mean you and me are as far apart as non-LARPer and you are?

You are not my friend

Then I really don't know if what I do should be called LARP. It's live and it's roleplaying for sure.

It usually involves action, as well (we're not talking Finnish introverted cupboard-solo-immersion here). At least I don't think we are talking about the same thing when we say "LARP".

Maybe we should stop calling what you do LARP. Because where's the roleplaying? Where's the immersion? Oooh, I remember, we stopped saying that word a few years ago... You know what? I think we definitively are not playing the same sports. It's not in the same stadium.

Not even the same fucking town. If you don't want to, that's fine for me. But you shouldn't blame me for disturbing your ignorance. So don't add me. Don't follow me. Don't even read my blog.

Leave me alone, 'cause you don't want to know!

Vilhelmine Ozolina (b. 1990) is from the former East-bloc mini-state of Latvia. She is less interested in grand-sounding theories than in changing how we actually larp. She considers herself a bit mad, but quite charming.

Also, she likes cookies and beating up men in armour.

Stop fucking around
Or: “Get out in the real world!”

Vilhelmine Ozolina

Vilhelmine Ozolina

I have been a player for seven years now. When I started to play, I was the youngest one in the group. Most of the players were still single and had no kids (some had kids, but they weren't old enough to be taken to the games).

I discovered larp by myself, and my mother is still kind of freaked out from time to time when I try to explain what exactly is happening in that photo where a girl in miniskirt is hitting a man in full armour with a wooden stick. Isn't it obvious? (and yes, there are games where we still use wooden swords).

Larp in Latvia is relatively new and it came from Russia. We kind of have two separate larp communities (Latvian and Russian) that only recently have found out how to at least try to communicate with each other.

I'm playing in both of these communities, and I'd say that the problems are similar.

Stop fucking around

First, of all, we are full of shit like every other family. We're a small country with a small larger community.

Everybody knows everyone (really, they do). What is even more depressing is that, since we all are so unique and misunderstood, we keep holding on to our little playmates in real life too.

We find boyfriends and girlfriends within this little circle. As a result, during all these years our community has grown only a little bit (1-2 persons/year).

There are not many couples where only one is a player, but at some point that's understandable. Honestly - how many of you have tried to explain what larp is to a complete stranger? Probably some of you have a couple of times.

Can you do it in ten minutes and not sound as a complete nutcase? In Latvia, people can't.

Vilhelmine Ozolina

So there you go. It's just easier to find someone who already knows what larp is. Some of us get married, some of us don't. We just - and sorry for the expression - keep fucking around within our little circle. The result is always the same - some are heartbroken, others don't care.

Eventually all that mess just piles up and we have to put up with it, because there's really no alternative - it's our family of larp buddies. This is our problem and our history and that's why we are full of shit like every other family. And that's just a statement of fact (of course I still love them all).

Strangely enough, I have seen the same thing happening in bigger communities in other countries as well.

Luckily we can do something. We should open up (in all senses). In my humble opinion, to stop being so full of shit (again, sorry for the expression), we should be more open in our minds and our actions.

Stop fucking around

We are arrogant little things, yes we are, precious. We consider ourselves liberal, free of judgement, constantly exploring the borders of morality, reality and imagination, but in fact our quest has become an end in itself.

We have become slaves to our own need for new experiences, but we never apply it in practice. We never make it relevant in a wider sense of life. It stays piled up in a dark corner of our dirty little minds.

We think too much of ourselves, and of course there is no one as cool, good-looking and experienced as a role-player (since there is nothing sexier than a man in shiny armour and a girl in a mysterious long dress, and who else can say that he has lived 10 different lives?).

But that's the reason why we still keep being closed for most of the general society. It's impossible to explain to others what an amazing thing roleplaying is, if you keep looking down on others (and not just because you are taller).

Vilhelmine Ozolina

This arrogance is maybe the reason why we are so closed physically. Why no one else wants to play with us and why we have such an awful image - if they've even heard of us.

So, what we should do is learn from our experiences (all of them), apply them in everyday life, and draw conclusions. We should open up, and the only way to do it is to start with ourselves (I heard that Czechs are doing amazing things, but that's a long way from Latvia).

We shouldn't be self-centred.

This goes hand in hand with my earlier point. In some way this is the hardest of all because even if we do open up and stop being focused on our little problems and who fucked who, there is still a big chance that the world just won't get us. It's a scary thought.

We can be as big as a person can get, and still be laughed at, ridiculed as "those nerds running around the woods with capes", no-lifers, etc. (you know what I mean).

Stop fucking around

So maybe we should step over this fear (just an idea!). The cold and evil world is still lurking outside the window, but maybe we could pluck up the courage and mention our hobby to a colleague. Listen to a stupid foreigner's ideas, then evolve it and turn it into something that's appropriate to your own larp scene.

Rise above petty everyday nonsense of who said what last friday at a pub, and think on a bigger scale. Fuse the two realities and become one with your inner child.

This is the end of my little analysis. We can't change the world to fit our needs, but we probably can try to change ourselves.

Of course, since we are perfect, then the only thing left to do is to take our mighty swords of doom and just kill them all (mwahahahaha). Or at least make them understand that we look good in armour and medieval dresses.

Juhana Pettersson (b. 1980) looks like a Finnish artist, and sometimes he also considers himself to be one. Mostly, he's annoyed that people don't do art for a reason, but justify their crappy ideas by calling them art.

But then again, he has directed porn and called it art.

Take responsibility
Or: "Don't hide behind pretentiousness"

Juhana Pettersson

Let's have a discussion about values. Foreign aid, for example. Some say it's right to help poor countries. Others say that it makes them dependent on us. A difficult issue!

Another great example is rape. Some say rape is bad. Other say that... No, in fact everyone says that rape is bad.

Swedish larpwright Tobias Wrigstad's controversial game *Gang Rape* will let you experience the horror of rape for yourself. It's a game for people who want to experience just how bad rape is. (I'll give you a hint: very bad.)

The core game experience is being peer pressured into participating in a gang rape where you have to escalate the horrors of the rape while being bullied by your co-rapists and even the victim. The elegant design intensifies the reality that *Gang Rape* is a game created to make us feel bad about rape. At the risk of sounding insensitive, I have to ask: what's the point in that?

I suspect that most people who play *Gang Rape* have never raped anybody. The game is designed to make the players feel bad about themselves for committing made-up crimes.

Seemingly, *Gang Rape's* weighty subject justifies creative strategies that break some of the safety features normally present in role-playing games. To express how bad rape is, the game makes us hurt.

Since these bleed-based techniques seem to be a feature of games concerning themselves with serious subjects, it seems that making a game about ethical catastrophes justifies the transgression of role-playing ethics.

There's a certain level of bloodthirstiness in *Gang Rape's* design, as if the weighty subject matter justifies making it as nasty as possible.

On the following page is an example:

Juhana Pettersson

“And just maybe, or so I imagine, you might find nuances of things here that actually turns you on. For some, control can be a great turn-on. Naturally, I am only saying this to raise the stakes of playing.”

Wrigstad mentions the possibility of gang rape fantasies, but doesn't offer any kind of constructive way to incorporate them into the play experience. They're merely brought up to “raise the stakes”.

Finnish game reearcher Markus Montola has studied people who have played Gang Rape as part of research into “positive-negative experiences” in role-playing.

Sometimes we play games that make us miserable because we feel it's worth it:

“I think I was shaking towards the end of the rape part and I couldn't stop during lunch afterwards.”

Take responsibility

Gang Rape is a game of existential shame, based on the idea that we are all guilty. The problem is that when it comes to rape, we are not all guilty. Indeed, the game seems to subscribe to a philosophy of collective punishment: because rape exists, all must pay.

Frederik Østergaard's Fat Man Down is a game about how we treat fat people badly in our society. This was not the lesson I took from it. What I learned from Fat Man Down is that I'm glad I'm not fat. Being fat sucks. People treat you like shit when you're fat. I think I need to go back on my diet.

The official interpretation of Fat Man Down is helpfully spelled out in the introduction to the game. “Weight is not an indicator of skill, character or intellectual acuity, but it is being viewed as such by the vox populi. Fat Man Down is about exposing this broken discourse, and making the players of the story see the injustice.”

Juhana Pettersson

Yet role-playing games are ill suited for communicating a message. The player participates in the game as a co-creator. In the end, she's responsible for her own experience. This experience might not jibe with the official intentions of the game, no matter how pure they are.

There is no form of art quite as susceptible to subversion as role-playing. Role-playing games beg to be subverted, because they cannot be played without player participation. Thus, from Gang Rape I learn that rape is fun and from Fat Man Down that fat people are miserable.

It might be possible to make a socially responsible game immune to player subversion, but that game would also be immune to player participation. Supposedly controversial games like Fat Man Down and Gang Rape absolutely wallow in their social responsibilities. Fat people should be accepted! Rape is bad! Role-playing is about preaching to the choir about our superior moral positions!

Take responsibility

I would argue that the only way to justify the vindictive artistic choices of Gang Rape would be by making a bunch of rapists play it. For Fat Man Down, maybe the editorial team of Men's Health.

Next time, make a Fat Man Down that's about bringing fat men down. It might be evil, but at least it wouldn't be sanctimonious. Less politics, more art.

Fat Man Down and Gang Rape cause controversy because people don't understand them. In general, the people who object to these games hold the same views the game has been made to express.

So why not make a game that causes a controversy only when people do understand it correctly? I want games that are weird and perverted. I want games that subvert morality. One of the great joys of role-playing is that you can enjoy evil things in a safe setting. Why feel guilty about that?

Juhana Pettersson (b. 1980) is the same Finnish guy who also has an article earlier in this book. He wasn't content with just writing one roleplaying-related rant. Some would say it's because he's passionate and dedicated.

Others would say he's a human rantbox. Both are correct.

The Neccesary Zombie
Or: "Obscure participatory art sucks ass"

Juhana Pettersson

Juhana Pettersson

I've made art larps for people at art festivals, for random gallery audiences and for the role-playing crowd. One thing has always remained the same. If you combine the words "art" and "larp", people react with fear and panic. The prospect of participating in an art larp is the stuff of horror, a terrifying experience best avoided.

Why do people react this way? Because they know they're expected to participate, yet have no idea what they're supposed to do. Some people thrive on uncertainty. Most don't.

This is a problem at two stages in the life of a game. First, of course, is the problem of attracting players. If the game seems too foreign, the player cannot imagine herself contributing to it creatively. She won't sign up.

The second problem comes up during the game. If the player cannot understand the creative framework of the game, she can't participate in it in an effective way.

The Necessary Zombie

To play in a dynamic way, you need to have an idea of how the game works.

It's not exactly easy. And yet I still have a vision.

Larp is not a medium for the vision of an individual artist. The people who run the game are not the only people whose vision influences the game. This is role-playing's greatest strength, but it is also the reason why making unapproachable artistic choices doesn't really work.

In traditional, static arts I can make a piece as incomprehensible as I want to. Maybe it's understood only by my closest friends or the most well-read of critics. Maybe it's understood by nobody. Maybe I made it hard to get on purpose, just to fuck with people. The philosopher Paul Virilio contends that texts must resist their readers. The reader must invest himself, must really prove his worth in front of the text to be granted the gift of understanding.

Juhana Pettersson

I can see how this works in philosophy, but I doubt Virilio would have much of a future in game design. I've seen a number of art games fail because they seemed to be designed to be almost intentionally obscure, Virilio style.

This kind of game fails to take into account the fact that participatory art always requires a certain element of populism in its design.

A participatory piece such as a larp must be understandable and approachable. It must be communicated to the players in such a way that they feel engaged and at ease with the material. The participant must be seduced by the game. To make that happen, the vision has to be something every participant can relate to.

The problem with the description "art larp" is that it doesn't really offer the participants any information about how to play the game.

The Necessary Zombie

Compare this with the traditional larp genres. Most people, even non-larpers, know how to act in a historical drama or a fantasy game. They know the conventions of cyberpunk and Cthulhu horror.

I've found that players are willing to accept bizarre and experimental creative strategies in genre larps. You can do all kinds of weird stuff in Vampire games because the players are comfortable with the basic tenets of the game.

Every game needs something that makes the participants feel comfortable, creatively speaking.

The easiest and most common way to do this is to include familiar genre elements. I call this element the Necessary Zombie. While the zombie might not really bring anything new to the game, it makes it approachable and easy to understand. Exploiting genre is one strategy for helping people come to grips with bizarre game design, but it is not the only kind of Necessary Zombie out there.

Juhana Pettersson

But I've come to realize I like fun.
Since 2007 I've publicly been "pro-fun". And I'm not alone.

Everybody loves to have fun. When you're doing something you want to do and enjoy doing, it's easy to accept all kinds of strange things.

I've experimented with making physical or psychological pleasure into the Necessary Zombie. Larp and tabletop can be seen as a way to give people excuses to do fun things they wouldn't do otherwise. Under this kind of cover, other kinds of experiences can be smuggled in.

In Muovikuppi, a game I made, the main method for expression emotion was breaking coffee cups on the ground. Since destruction is fun, I felt that this would make the game more approachable. It was an excuse to break stuff.

The Necessary Zombie

A second and more basic version of this idea is to simplify the starting point of the game to such a degree that absolutely everybody can do it.

In the participatory installation Portaikko, by me and Katri Lassila, the people were told that they only needed to knock on a door, and the game would take it from there.

Undoubtedly, there are other Necessary Zombies than the two outlined here. The language of role-playing games is still being developed.

Perhaps in the future, we come up with design solutions that will make even the most obtuse of games approachable for all participants.

Mike Pohjola (b. 1978) embodies Finnish art larp and is the man behind the infamous Turku Manifesto. He's also written plays, helped start the legendary Company P and refuses to clothe his son Aslan in anything but purple.

He used to be considered weird. Now, he's just eccentric.

You're in charge of you

Or: "Be your own game master"

Mike Pohjola

Mike Pohjola

Let me tell you about how you can game master yourself in a larp. In a tabletop roleplaying game it's easy for the actual game master to work on pacing and theme and mood and so on, because she sees the whole group pretty much all the time, knows what's happening where, and controls the entire environment.

In a larp that's much more difficult. You might have run-time game masters, but they probably won't be able to focus on all the players at the same time.

They have to take care of the big picture, the main plotlines, the secret NPCs arriving in time. So who's there to take care of your pacing and theme and mood in a larp? That's right. No one, but you.

Before I tell you about how you can game master yourself, let me tell you about my character. I was playing in Sweden, and decided to play only in Finnish.

You're in charge of you

None of the Swedes would understand me, and I would rely on my limited Swedish skills to get what they're saying.

There were a few other Finns in the game, and I could communicate with them, and they could communicate with the others in English or Swedish if they wanted to. But to make things interesting for myself and others, I'd decided to speak only Finnish.

The game was Moira, a modern-day fairytale with different sorts of gnomes, trolls and elves from Scandinavian mythology. Faerie courts, aesir and vanir, the weavers of fate, changelings, humans no longer believing in the supernatural and so on and so on.

There were five mundane modern-day humans in the game, who had been captured in the land of the fairyfolk, and their disbelief soon turned to awe and alter maybe into fear.

Mike Pohjola

I was one of the vittra, who were sort of the nobility of Nordic critters. There were about a dozen vittra in the game, all mad as hatters, and we had frequent meetings and discussions and debates.

Everyone else spoke Swedish, I spoke Finnish, and everyone nodded as if they understood what I was saying. Occasionally Joc Koljonen, the only vittra who could understand me, repeated some of my comments in Swedish, if she felt it would serve her interests.

Martin Ericsson was playing one of the humans, a surfer dude clad in bicycle attire, and I started tormenting him for my own pleasure. He didn't believe in faeries, and wanted me to show him around. I explained things to him, in Finnish.

He didn't understand a word, but I kept explaining. He challenged me and confronted me and attacked me, but I would remain mysterious and inexplicable.

You're in charge of you

The game went on, and eventually Martin's character saw too many strange and wonderful things to remain skeptical. He started losing his mind, and I tormented him to make things worse. At one point I stole his bicycle helmet, and that seemed to be the tipping point. He went over the border, and realized everything he'd believed in was false.

Martin's character started searching for answers, and I kept talking to him in Finnish. If nothing else, he at least wanted his helmet back. He was desperate. Towards the very end of the three-day game, he begged of me to tell him what was going on, to help him, to protect him, to give him back his helmet.

He would do anything. Anything! Anything? I asked in Finnish. Anything, he swore in Swedish.

That's when I spoke my only line in Swedish. I smiled, and looked deep into his eyes. "Dyrka mig", I said. Worship me. He fell on his knees and bowed his head.

Mike Pohjola

My character had gone from zero worshippers to one, and his from a skeptic to a believer. An hour or two after this transformation the game was over.

Years later sitting in a bus in the suburbs of Stockholm, I talked with Martin about larp. I claimed I never thought about the dramaturgy or any external factors like that when playing in a larp. I was in character, and only did what the character would do.

”In that case you must be really, really lucky,” Martin said. For him such great scenes as our final one in Moira, only come through focusing on the drama of the events.

We discussed our views, and I admitted I probably created quite dramatic characters so that I could focus on the drama while staying true to the character.

You're in charge of you

Of course, the character wouldn't know when the game is about to end, and when is the perfect moment for final farewells or the romantic first kiss. That's all me.

We came to the realization that one must be one's own game master in a larp. When the game is running, the game master won't have time to guide us into playing the themes or the moods or the plots or the drama we want. We have to do it ourselves.

Whenever we see interesting developments that will enhance our story, our experience and our character immersion, we have to jump at the chance to engage with them. Otherwise we're not doing anyone any favors.

In a larp you should be your own game master and help your own character immersion by building a better game for yourself.

Claus Raasted (b. 1979) from Denmark could have written anything he wanted to in his bio, since he's the editor of this book. Instead he chose to present himself by quoting somebody else. He's annoying that way.

“Claus is not a person. He's an event.” - German saying

More sex, love & rock'n'roll

Or: “Never forget your roots”

Claus Raasted

Claus Raasted

"We are now pro-fun".

Well, personally I've always been exactly that, but the man behind the statement (an artsy-fartsy elitist Finn complete with weird hair and pretentious projects) usually isn't. He – and a host of other larp trendsetters – have been larping for art, beauty and truth for a number of years. But for fun? Not likely, kiddo.

And yet now that's changing. To quote a dedicated Norwegian larpess in the prime of her life: "The last years I've gone to larps to feel pain, suffering, hopelessness and strong emotions in general. But now I just really want to find some orcs and kick some ass!"

For obvious reasons, both the avantgarde Finn and the masochist Norwegian will remain unnamed. I mean, who of the true artists of our scene would ever admit to doing anything for fun and still remain worshipped, idolised and mysterious?

More sex, love & rock'n'roll

The answer is maybe "more than we'd think".
And therein might lie our salvation.

Because we've spend the last decade probing at borders and exploring the media, and hopefully we'll keep on doing that forever. But perhaps it's also time for us to take a good look at ourselves in the mirror and consider what's happening to our community. It's about time.

And while the rest of you are busy indulging your narcissist leanings, I'll sum it up briefly and tell you what this is all about. The gap is widening. The cracks are spreading. Or put less eloquently, but far more understably... the difference between the old guard and the new is becoming more and more apparent.

Of course there are variations based on region, country and scene, but the unavoidable fact is that where we once were one (or at least just a couple) of communities now we are many. And that's not necessarily a bad thing at all.

Claus Raasted

The problem is that communication between the avantgarde and the masses isn't exactly at optimal levels.

I've heard a story about a Finnish mainstream larp where they actually wrote "We don't want elitist assholes coming and ruining our game". I've learned the hard way that Sweden is divided between revolutionary experimentalists who swear by all things Nordic while the majority of Swedish larpers think the world's only international larp convention is just people getting drunk and sleeping around.

Ok, they're right about that one, but that doesn't mean drunken people having sex don't also come up with brilliant ideas. In Denmark many people still use arguments like "Can't you just realise larp's just a fun hobby and stop treating it like some serious?"

And no matter what they do in Norway, I'm sure that I can make that fit into the scheme of woe if I put the right spin on it.

More sex, love & rock'n'roll

Well, at this point, if you're one of the pro-Nordic crowd (and you might be, since you've gotten hold of this nice book) then you're probably nodding your head a little bit and thinking "Ok, International Man of Mystery, now tell me something new!"

If you're not, you're probably just shaking your head and wondering about why crazy Danes who don't know shit don't just shut up and stay at home.

To steal freely from a rather well-known song: "The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind." What that means I'm not sure, but since I usually leave the Windtalking to pros, I'll come up with an answer that may not be THE answer, but at least is one.

Because most of it's our fault. And it has to do with the currencies we trade in – sex, love and rock'n'roll.

Claus Raasted

We pay each other in sex. We pay each other in love. And we all love rock'n'roll. But apparently we're not paying enough, and we're forgetting how we got here. We need to give out more love to the youngsters who think it matters if elves have two or three hitpoints. We need to give out more love to the old farts who think larp isn't good if it's not based on a poem by Wislawa Szymborska.

We need to make it sexier to do adequate projects than to talk about doing brilliant ones. We need to make it sexier to go to mediocre larps and help make them shine instead of staying at home and calling them names. And we need to play more rock'n'roll. We need to re-create the avantgarde as benevolent heroes instead of as arrogant villains. And we need to realise that boy-meets-girl is still popular because it works.

We need to remember our roots. All larp cultures started with the sword, and some of the old guard are slowly starting to take it up once again.

More sex, love & rock'n'roll

Not as an alternative to art, but as a supplement to it. And we need to begin thinking of bridges instead of evolution.

Because the continents are drifting further apart and if we don't tie them together soon it'll be rivalry and not cooperation we face. We don't have to stop being artists.

Because the pen may well be mightier than the sword, but it's a lot more fun molesting someone with a sword than with a pen. And if you keep your pen in one hand while you fight like it was 1994, there's a good chance that one of the grunts in line next to you will look wonderingly at your artistic tool and ask "Can I try that?"

To chisel out my point in stone, what I'm saying is this:

If we want a bridge between the mainstream and the avantgarde, it's not going to work if we think it only goes one way. And it's about time we remembered what colour the grass is on the other side. It's the colour of love.

Juha-Pekka Rantalainen (b. 1982) is Finnish with a capital F. He hates snobbishness, democracy and light beer and is tired of how we use so much energy patting each others' backs instead of making larps better for everyone.

And with everyone he doesn't mean you and your friends.

Fuck the cool stuff
Or: "You've done nothing that matters"

Juha-Pekka Rantalainen

Juha-Pekka Rantalainen

I hate cool games.

During conventions we see tons of different “cool” games. They are experimental, psychological, world changing, fantastic and oh-so-very-unapproachable by your generic local larper.

And we pat each others backs, hand out golden paper-towels of Prestige and Power, telling the world “Damn. We really did something here!”. Actually, we didn’t.

WE do not represent the larper community as a whole. We represent those who take the extra effort and travel abroad to hear about these things. So, unless it serves the vast majority that is not US, WE didn’t do anything.

What we are telling them is “We invented Wheel 7.58. How about that?” and all this time they have been searching for Wheel 1.1. Perhaps it would be a time for us to really be WE and help them out with that.

Fuck the cool stuff

The international society of European Larpers has defined what they think is a good larp and worth mentioning. It usually doesn’t have anything to do with the games that are played by the majority.

D&D style hack’n’slash isn’t stylish, political court games are so 1990’s and Harry Potter is for fangirls. These larps do not change the world, better the environment, teach kids to be democratic (never mind how to do algebra) or even provide serious bragging rights for people who make them.

And still, the typical young finnish young larper would nominate Generic Harry Potter Game 27 to be the biggest thing ever. Those a bit older might go for Turku City Games and True Elders (tm) of the scene would vote for the celtic fantasy larp Druid to win the Golden Anthill (even more tm) of the year.

These larps are fantastic for them. There is a reason why your everyday larper goes to these games.

Juha-Pekka Rantalainen

And we should be happy.

Because as we write our imaginative games for our cultural friends, we should remember that the everyday larper is the person who keeps this scene alive. Without them, there is no one to hear us call from the mountains of Norway or the relatively flat suburbs of Denmark.

Unless there are people to write better games for those who are not impressed by our academic merits, Emmy-winning TV-series that incorporate tiny amount of roleplaying and 1000% realistic shamanistic rituals of Ugandan goatherders, there won't be a next generation of larpers.

What we should do, is write larps that will impress beginners and johnsmiths. First you have to blow off their socks with some good old fashioned adventure gaming, *then* introduce something else a few years later - if and when they are ready for it. And no, you can't do an adventure larp that is also artsy fartsy approvable.

Sorry mister, you are out of the game. Sadly.

Fuck the cool stuff

Now, let's speak a bit about what the people are looking for. The actual content might differ a bit from country to country, but the message is the same. They want to be entertained by our games. And to entertain people, we have to reach them at their level of doing things.

Most 15 year-old teenage boys do not want to spend their weekends as corporate managers, trying to present their productivity reports in best possible light. They'd rather play werewolves drooling over goth teen chicks.

I also claim that people who are corporate managers in their daily lives would want something different. And it is also quite pointless to offer a larp about going to dentist for Sailor Moon-addicted animegirls.

If we ask the player base, they might want to see their usual town larps done bit better. Well defined plots, nice props, surprising intrigues and a different view on the typical battle between Good and Evil.

Juha-Pekka Rantalainen

Well written and logical background material with bit more than just rip offs from Tolkien, Eddings and the best-selling fantasy author of the day.

If we can build something esoteric and psychologically challenging, it should not be a problem to do all the “basic” stuff well. These are the things we should be able to do in our sleep. And while we are add it, we should also make sure that the logistical parts run smoothly. Location, food, finance, transportation.

Your typical larper won't care about your Golden Ameba trophy if he has a warm bed and a good meal for a few euros and a well written game to go with them.

That's Wheel 1.01. We have been there when it was still Wheel 0.5 or even Wheel Alpha.

Fuck the cool stuff

Let's try and complete this one thing for those larpers who weren't there. They pay for our big conventions and provide the silent mass of hobbyists who, in the end, enable us to be LARP elite.

But by misunderstanding our responsibility towards the next generation and the one after that, we just become larp elitists who want to win Oscars for the worst egoistic experimentation of the year.

So people, I challenge you.

Make a larp for the larpers, not for those people who will end up reading books about larp theory.

Then I'll be the first to say:

“Damn. You really did something here.”

Not before.

Syksy Räsänen (b. 1973) is a roleplayer and a member of the Finnish branch of The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions. ICAHD, not TICAHD.
He is quite amusing, but dislikes crass humor.

And he has only twice been asked whether he is a magician.

Dancing around apartheid

Or: "Taking a stand"

Syksy Räsänen

Syksy Räsänen

I am not attending Knudepunkt 2011, for the same reason I have not attended since 2007: I am not comfortable sharing the event with people working for apartheid, colonialism and occupation.

I have not considered my non-attendance to be a boycott, nor a political statement. However, there is a bigger picture which does call for political action, and as Claus (the editor) has invited me to contribute my thoughts, let me frame it with a few words.

Israel is an apartheid state, upholding “a State-sanctioned regime of law and institutions that has the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group of persons over any other racial group of persons and systematically oppressing them”, to quote from the 2009 study by the South African Human Sciences Research Council. As in South Africa, apartheid is not simply a matter of government policy.

Dancing around apartheid

The supremacy of Israeli Jews and inferiority of Palestinian Arabs is pervasive and touches on the life of every individual. This state of affairs is maintained by constant and routine violence, primarily perpetrated by the Israeli military. Israeli Jews have compulsory military service, with annual reserve service mostly for men.

The matter was discussed in passing after Knudepunkt 2007. Apparently none of the Israeli participants had refused military service. People who serve in an apartheid military are not passive bystanders. They are active enforcers of a system that is “violent, racist, inhuman, illegal, non-democratic and immoral”, to quote Shministim, a group of Israeli teenagers who refuse to serve.

Israel is a militarised society, and refusing conscription can result in social ostracism and imprisonment. Compared to the killing, maiming, forced malnutrition and other horrors inflicted on the Palestinians by the individuals serving in the military, such costs may appear trivial.

Syksy Räsänen

Nevertheless, it is one thing to criticise actions from the outside, and quite another to make choices in an environment of everyday moral compromises.

But the difficulty should not be exaggerated to become a justification: dissent is possible. There are many courageous and principled Israeli Jews working for justice in organisations such as ICAHD, New Profile, Zochrot and so on.

According to the presentation on larp in Israel given at Knudepunkt 2007, the larp community, in contrast, has warm relations with the military. It is perhaps indicative that the first larp swords were made from tank steel, and the Israeli larpers prided themselves on working with the military so that roleplayers would not be rejected from service.

Dancing around apartheid

Given the difficulty of making moral decisions in a setting where the ethical compass is rigged towards ethnic supremacy, outside pressure is crucial. The most important moral, non-violent way of providing this pressure is boycott, divestment and sanctions.

They provide a clear signal that apartheid and the inhuman acts committed to uphold it are unacceptable, and impose a cost on continuing these actions. These effects created a strong incentive for change in South Africa, and are increasingly doing so in Israel.

Knudepunkt is not a neutral event: the Nordic larp community has grown to become political. We have taken a stand against dictatorship in Belarus, the scene is awash with larps exploring political issues, we design Jeepform games to make us feel bad about rape. And we gather to plan and celebrate these noble actions with people who take part in state terrorism.

Syksy Räsänen

There is a comprehensive call for boycotting Israeli academic and cultural institutions by Palestinian civil society, via the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI). However, PACBI does not call for a blanket boycott of Israelis, and since people come to Knudepunkt as individuals, not as representatives of organisations, attendance is not covered by the call.

This does not mean that no individual Israelis should be boycotted. As PACBI notes, Israeli cultural workers who actually participate in human rights violations should be treated like all other such offenders, not better or worse.

One Knudepunkt case is an Israeli major who, according to himself, took part in the assault on Gaza in 2008-2009, which involved both deliberate and indiscriminate attacks on civilian targets, as documented in the Goldstone report of the UN Human Rights Council in 2009. At Knudepunkt 2007, he requested not to appear in pictures, due to having been part of a group that “killed the wrong guy”.

Dancing around apartheid

Drawing a line at murder and other vile acts seems straightforward. After all, would Knudepunkt accept a rapist, or someone involved in non-institutional atrocities? The issue of people who perform regular service in the apartheid military, taking part in horrible acts probably only indirectly, though possibly directly, is more complicated. And of course, we should not reject Israelis who are working for justice.

I do not have a clear opinion on what should be done; the issue is up for debate. But not thinking and not making a choice implies the decision is made for you, and turning a blind eye means normalising oppression and rewarding the perpetrator.

Are we to have our deliberations, dances and dreams alongside individuals who have acted and continue to act to oppress and dispossess an entire people? For my own part, I cannot do that. There is politics, and there are things beyond politics.

Jannick Raunow (b. 1977) hails from Denmark and is both a formally trained actor and a larper with tons of experience. He dislikes fun and most people who demand nothing more of life than to be entertained.

And he'd rather be naked and crying than "mildly amused".

I am not like you
Or: "What you do is not good enough"

Jannick Raunow

We're not all the same any more. We never were.

The term “role playing” has become too broad. There is a world of difference between larps such as Delirium and those like Mythodea. Considering the types of larps I've participated in for the last 6-8 years, I feel next to no kinship with fantasy campaigners. Are larps like Delirium closer to the world of theater then?

Not so much. Actors performing on stage are not role playing. However, somewhere on this axis there is a space for the specific subtype of larps, of which Delirium is a part, as opposed to the main types of larps, which take place throughout the world.

One of the main characteristics, as well as forces, of role playing, is its accessibility. Everybody is able to play a role. Contrary to this, acting is ultimately an elitist discipline which requires training and skill. Role playing is not acting. Yet somewhere in between there is a space.

You CAN be a GOOD role player. There ARE skills you can learn to make your experience stronger, the merge with your character better, performances and interactions more fruitful and so on.

There is a common space where the aforementioned subgroup of larps and a certain level of participant skill and experience meet. We still call them “role playing games”, but neither “play”, “game”, or for that matter “act”, really fits as an illuminating descriptor of this space. I want a new word. I am not role playing.

And I am not performing either. “Role”, however, fits well, but we need something extra to specify, textualize and put into terms what we do.

We commit ourselves to these activities out of a selfish will to experience something we would or could not otherwise. Doing so through the role permits us to do so. We want self development and emotional experiences.

Jannick Raunow

I think we succeed in doing so through merging with our role. Not “becoming” the role, but by receiving our sensory input through the role as a filter to our inner personal selves and again projecting our actions and reactions out through the traits and habits of the role and into the interactive world around us.

With skill you can create a stronger merge. Your inner self will still be omnipresent, but you will have intimate understanding of your role’s patterns of thought and action and you can commit to even half subconscious traits of habit that you yourself would never do.

Anyone can play a role. And anyone can pretend to be Jack Sparrow or Raistlin Majere. But years of experience and continual dedicated commitment to improvement DOES make a difference.

We want the experiences to feel true. We want the illusion to be thick. We want immersion, life, completion.

I am not like you

Virtual experiences, virtual truth, virtual ups and virtual downs. We virtualize our roles. We want to make it almost real. We will always know it’s not, but the closer it gets the better. It is Live Action Role Virtualization: LARV.

I am fed up with the young, unengaged, unskilled, self delusory, self centered, dull, depthless people. I am fed up with buffer swords, paper thin narratives, half hearted work, wannabe nobodies, apprehensiveness, fright and the complete and utter absence of passion, depth and true dedication.

I’m too old for this shit! I want honest, bold and fascinating people. Blood, sweat and tears. Courage and trust. True emotions and real scars.

AND I want the ability to discern between fact and fiction and, whenever needed, the balls to talk it through afterwards. These things take a strong psyche, a lot of experience and plenty of skill.

	Untrained Role players	Trained Role players	Professional Actors
Mainstream LARP	<i>Is this you?</i>	<i>Or maybe this is you?</i>	<i>I don't think so...</i>
“Avantgarde” LARP	<i>Or you?</i>	LARV	<i>Say wut?</i>
Theater Performance	<i>NOOOO! The horror!!!</i>	<i>Amateurs</i>	<i>Al Pacino</i>

I want organizers to make demands of their participants.
And I want consequence. I want the right participants cast
for the right roles.

I want casting sessions and training. Preroling and deroling.
And, heck why not...
Live video recordings: PEOPLE ARE LOOKING AT YOU!!!
You NEED to do your BEST!

We are larvers. Let the larpers do their thing.

We don't play.
For us it's not a game.
It's true.
And it's almost real.

So if you're not one of us, go back to the playground. Baby.

Martina Ryssel (b. 1981) is a German larper who likes to yell at people that they're wrong. But in a sweet voice. She's larped extensively outside her own native habitat and doesn't really understand why people everywhere are fools.

And she hates Vampire larpers.

Pride and Prejudice

Or: "Why do we all hate each other?"

Martina Ryssel

Martina Russel

I hate Vampire larpers. Really, I can't abide them, and I swear you can recognize them from two miles off, in the dark (in fact, especially in the dark...). Well, maybe that's only German Vampire players, and maybe even only SOME of them, but I like my prejudice the way it is.

Don't you hate some larpers as well? Those horribly authentic re-enactment-style larpers, those classical fantasy nerds, those who earn their money with your hobby or those who take the fun out of it by wanting to feel bad in their games? Most of us have developed at least one arch-enemy among the larp archetypes during our larping career. And why aren't we all just one big happy family?

Why aren't we happy that we know a few people with the same hobby as us, who understand our nerdiness, our love of detail or our need for the big emotions?

When I started larping in the late 90s, I knew of nothing but simple, plain fantasy larp.

Pride and Prejudice

I wouldn't say there wasn't anything else in Germany, but I didn't know of it. So I identified with the fantasy players and their "special" way of larping.

In those early days, there was already a growing community, but it was still small, and it was still us against them – against all those parents, authorities and schoolmates who thought we were Satanists, fleeing from our sad little lives, spending ridiculous amounts of time and money for our adventuring equipment and probably only doing it because we didn't have a sensible boy- or girlfriend to keep us in real life.

But it came as it probably always does with an activity that comes out of its shadowy existence to attract more and more followers, and to get more and more attention: suddenly, there were people larping who had never played a tabletop game before, who had watched Lord of the Rings (twice even!) and thought themselves knowledgeable in fantasy, who had not taken part in the early shadow days.

Martina Russel

And the growing community, predictably, began to split up. Some whined after the good old days and some adapted and exploited the newcomers. Some thought of the chances it offered, of new genres explored, new opportunities resulting from growing acceptance and attention. Some went on, and some stayed behind. And some played Vampire larp.

But the point, I think, is this: at some point, it wasn't us against them anymore, and then it turned into us against us.

We didn't have to stick together anymore to be united against the evil outer world, and so we began to cluster together to be united against Vampire players. Or commercial larpers. Or people who write rambling articles for the Knutebook to see their names published inside.

The same happens in many growing communities, whatever unites them: The Gothic community alternately hates romantic Goths, industrial Goths or Emos.

Pride and Prejudice

Karate has split up into so many different styles that it's become hard to count them, and most of them despise each other to some degree. Star Trek hates Star Wars, lifestyle S/M practitioners hate "players", vegans hate vegetarians, gouda people hate camembert people and I hate Vampire larpers.

I think I might have mentioned that one before.

Is it because we don't like to see our hobby developed by others? Because we feel that the way we do it is right, and why on earth would someone in their right mind want to do it differently?

Are people who do it differently threatening our way of "that's how we always did it"? Are they threatening our reputation, our standing in society and the way people on the outside see us?

Martina Russel

Yes, they are. Yes, yes and yes.

But the real question is: why do we care so much?

Why do I care whether there's a Karate style where eight-year-olds can hold a black belt?

Why do I care if Star Trek nerds tell the world about beaming, when I know that nothing will ever be faster than the Millennium Falcon? And why do I care if people style themselves as the Prince of Lower Insignificant-Ville and rejoice in a few half-naked followers kissing their feet, when I don't have to play with them and can get my fun at other games, far away from their pointy teeth?

The answers to that are probably as various as the communities themselves: We compare ourselves with others and don't want to look bad. We think we are in the right and can't understand why other people just don't see it that way.

We care about how others see us and think the people we hate spoil that reputation.

Pride and Prejudice

Most of those answers, really, are not very advantageous towards ourselves.

Because we don't really have to care at all. We could just be tolerant and leave them to their bad ways, their mistakes and their false assumptions.

If we can't be one happy family, we could at least remain remote acquaintances who greet each other on the street and write Christmas cards once a year. But we don't.

Because we all like our prejudices the way they are. Because we need someone to despise, so that we can feel better. Even if we know it, and even if, deep in the rational parts of our minds, we think it's unnecessary and maybe even stupid. We still keep at it.

And I still hate Vampire larpers.

Kristoffer Thurøe (b. 1982) Kristoffer Thurøe is a Danish journalist and games producer and is slowly turning in to an old fart. He is the producer of System Danmarc, Totem and Delirium and has both written and lectured on larp.

Most of all, he thinks larps are cooler than documentation.

**1000 vultures on
1000 typewriters**
Or: "Don't just write. Do stuff instead"

Kristoffer Thurøe

Kristoffer Thuroe

We're expanding. Not yet to the same extent as the great British Empire or a with the speed of a well orchestrated zergling rush, but it is happening. Due to the enormous effort put in to documenting and spreading the thoughts from the north. Documentation has been the second hottest topic in the Nordic countries the last few years and now we see the result. People are documeting like crazy.

Some people even stopped doing things altogether and are now just documenting. Fuck that shit. Stop documenting other people's games and start making your own. If everyone is only documenting, then who the fuck is making the games?

Knudepunkt has spread across Europe and you can now venture to magnificent conferences in Germany, Italy, Czechia and even in the states. Conferences with lectures describing, analyzing and documenting games from all over the world.

1000 vultures on 1000 typewriters

In 2009 we even had Nordic Larp Talks. TED-style documentation of some of the groundbreaking thoughts and games from the community. Streamed out into the stratosphere directly and live.

Not to mention the books. The annual Knudepunkt book has been around for ten years. Book after book filled with everything ranging from dogmas to theoretical theses.

This year the book is overdoing itself and is not just one book, but THREE. And not only do we have the Knudepunkt books. Now we have our own Nordic Larp book. Camouflaged as a photo book this heavy weight champion documents more than 25 Nordic style games through the last 20 years.

And if that is not enough, we can now add a magazine about Nordic Larp to the listd. How fucking awesome is that? Our own magazine where we can spread the ideas and games from the north.

Kristoffer Thuroe

Oh – and on top of all this there is hopefully a Larp Database on its way which will catalog and document as many games as possible with help from organizers, game designers and players across the world.

And the target groups? It's everyone. Heathen game designers, innovators and media connoisseurs, the stupid public in our own countries, the municipality, governments and the EU, companies, corporations, conferences and even ourselves.

No one should say the words innovative, trans-media or gamefication and not know what Nordic Larp is and how fucking awesome we are.

So world domination it is then. But as much as I love evil overlords and I like the idea of taking over the world, I would also like for us to consider what this means for our community and especially the games we're documenting.

1000 vultures on 1000 typewriters

Look at Delirium, of which I was the producer earlier this summer. From the beginning of the project we knew that we would have to document it in some way.

With experience from System Danmarc we decided to produce our own 25 minute documentary describing both the process, the player experience and the vision of the game and top it off with 'something for the Knudepunkt book'. This in itself should be enough documentation to let the game live on epically for the next ten years.

But in these days that is clearly not enough. Delirium has been documented on Swedish Radio, in all three Knudepunkt books, gotten a plce in the Nordic Larp book, is the basis for an article in the Playground Magazine and is in lectures at both Nordic Larp Talk 2011 and on Knudepunkt itself.

It's not that we don't love the attention.

But all this energy and time that is put into creating and filling these books, lectures, magazines and videos is put into it by the people who are some of the the most knowledgable on game design and game theory.

Some of them are so called “researchers”, who only write about games. Some also produce games when they don’t use their wisdom and knowledge to create documentation of old games instead of making new ones.

The amount of knowledge and skills in the broad “Nordic larp” community is increasing every year. People get better at their specific tasks and the general understanding of how we make awesome games is increasing. But the amount of groundbreaking games per year has not developed much over the same period of time.

This last year the buzz was all about two games: *Mad about the boy* and *Delirium*. Both games that handled documenting themselves quite well.

If the energy put into documenting these by others was put into creating new games we would have at least one more awesome game a year. Instead we are busy yelling and screaming on a global level that we have the holy game design grail when we only have one or a few games a year to prove it. That is not nearly good enough.

I understand the urge to tell everyone about Nordic larp and get on the trans media wave while it is still rising. But this should not happen on at the expense of making the games we brag about. As stated in the beginning; if everyone is only documenting, then who the fuck is making the games?

If I promise you that designers and organizers of the high end games can handle the basic documentation of their own games and that the documentation on all other games is increasing slowly but steadily, will you vultures then promise me to get off the god damn typewriters, get on the floor and start making your own fucking games?

Aaron Vanek (b. 1971) is a dreamer, but he's not the only one. He secretly wishes that everything was free, people traded by barter and those who could not starved to death. Sadly, he feels the world is not ready for that kind of truth.

On a side note, he's married and can quote Marx with ease.

The Non-United Larp States of America

Or: "Larpers of the USA, unite"

Aaron Vanek

Aaron Vanek

The American larp community resembles a garden of gaudy wildflowers, resplendent in all shapes, sizes, and colors, scattered over fertile soil. We demand attention with showy fronds and petals and scents. But there's one thing we're sorely lacking: unity. I think I know why.

Table-top roleplaying games developed around a massive, central tree trunk: Dungeons & Dragons. Unique in combining character roleplaying with wargaming, D&D's fantasy-based system grew to be mightiest. TSR, Inc., creators of D&D, also nipped America's larp growth during a crucial developmental stage. TSR ran GenCon, one of the largest gaming conventions in the world, for decades. It's a Mecca for gamers and the launch point for many games publishers. A good showing at GenCon could start the next great RPG.

Yet GenCon willfully blocked larp and even costumed attendees from 1979 to roughly 1993, the year White Wolf's Vampire: The Masquerade breached the castle walls.

The Non-United Larp States of America

Harold Johnson, designer and TSR/WOTC executive from 1979-2001, says:

“The policy to hold off permitting live action roleplaying to take place at GenCon was primarily mine. When James Dallas Egbert went missing, one of the things being suggested by the media was that roleplaying was a game where you put on costumes and you ran around being somebody else. You act it out. You actually cast spells. You actually pull out swords and fight each other. You were not playing a game in your imagination—you were playing in reality... I felt that live action roleplaying gave our detractors an opportunity, a chance to point to it and say, this is what roleplaying games are.” (from 40 Years of Gen Con, edited by Robin D. Laws, pub. by Trident, Inc., 2007)

Thus, at the moment live action roleplaying was quickening, larpers were denied a beacon to sail by, refused safe harbor where they could meet and discuss past voyages.

Aaron Vanek

There was no corporate marketing or distribution, no central hub for reports, no public Internet.

Instead, many American larps became cults of personality: a visionary in one location would independently start a larp, ignorant or uncaring of visionaries elsewhere. This group would grow and prosper for a number of years only to fall, fracture, or fail due to infighting and incestuous player pools, rules, and locations.

This tendency, with some variation, has been the norm of American larp for the last thirty years: Amtgard and Belegarth split from Dagorhir (with threat of lawsuits).

NERO Alliance split from and sued NERO International (New England Roleplaying Organization).

The Non-United Larp States of America

The Interactive Literature Foundation dissolved and became LARPA and NEIL (New England Interactive Literature).

The Masquerade runs amongst the Camarilla, One World by Night, and the Garou groups, and recently here in Southern California, LARP Alliance separated from Wyrd Con after only one year.

Without a predominant entity like D&D to either ride with or react against, larp groups in America are mostly left to fend and forage on their own, largely devoid of any institutional support.

Larpers are shunned by many in the fan world, including table-top gamers. The flowers close themselves to outsiders, leading to more internal conflict by way of homogeneity.

This is the era of Mike Young's Five Stages of Larp Group Development, which breaks down the attitudes toward larp by groups and individuals as can be seen on the next page:

Aaron Vanek

1. *Our (group) is the *ONLY* LARP. (less common with the Internet)*
2. *Ours is the *best* LARP.*
3. *There are other LARPs out there, but I prefer this one. (majority of U.S. larpers)*
4. *I enjoy playing many different LARPs.*
5. *I not only enjoy many different LARPs, I actively seek out and try to find new LARPs to play to expand my experience.*

However, in the last ten years, it has been nearly impossible to ignore larp in America. With exposure in movies like *Role Models* or TV shows like *Beauty and the Geek*, larp is reaching the mainstream. Many times that audience asks: “That looks cool. What is it?”

We’re now in a fight for this new blood to reinvigorate each separate larp group. Rather than share players, props, knowledge, etc., many larp groups have become even more proprietary and protective of their rules and resources.

The Non-United Larp States of America

Rather than sharing larp techniques, styles, theories, players or props, data is hoarded and safeguarded by lawyers.

Yet...

I believe we can use this furor to fuel a Golden Age of larp, not just in America but around the world. If more of us statewide can quit the petty bickering and lawsuit-saber rattling, if we can accept that larp is ancient enough to predate all of us and broad enough to include mock trials, model UN clubs, military simulations, ARGs, psychodrama and more, maybe we can blossom.

If larpers in America can work together in an open-source environment, respectful of criticism and unafraid of cooperation or collaboration, we can nurture the renewal of larp and truly harvest the bounty of diversity and creativity that thirty years in the wild have brought us. I hope and believe so.

Gabriel Widing (b. 1983) is a Swedish visionary who's helped bring many words to the world; words like anarchitect, interactivist and deltagerkultur. Some call him a crackpot while others idolize him.

And usually he's too busy fighting reality to notice it.

Enjoy it while it lasts
Or: "Maybe we should plan for the worst"

Gabriel Widing

Gabriel Widing

«In all our projections, future oil production by 2030 will have decreased from present levels. The world appears most likely to have passed the peak of global oil production and to have entered the descent phase.»

(Alekklett, et al. 2009)

In 2007 food prices doubled in many parts of the world. In 2008 a financial crisis hit the western economies. At that time the price of a barrel of oil had raised to a price of 147\$, six times more than what was predicted by the international energy organs a few years earlier.

The American industry and economy could not handle such high energy prices and we went into recession, which is still going. The United States is completely dependent on cheap oil due to their way of life in suburbia and the extensive interstate highway system.

Enjoy it while it lasts

Europe is not as bad off, we can tap the veins of mother Russia's "natural" gas for some time – but still, oil is absolutely necessary to our transportation, industrial production and food system.

According to recent research from Uppsala University's Global Energy Systems it is quite probable that those days in the summer of 2008 was historical. We reached peak oil, which means that more or less half of the world's oil supplies has been depleted.

The heydays of cheap, easily accessible energy are over. During 150 years of oil usage we have multiplied the world population by six, using energy condensed from thousands of years of sun energy input.

Oil is the blood of the modern society, it made globalisation and everything else we take for granted possible.

Gabriel Widing

In live role-playing there is a tradition of dismissing modernity. I have written extensively on this in a the short piece “We Lost Our World”, trying to outline the anti-modern aesthetics of (pre-modern) fantasy and (post-modern) sci-fi scenarios.

Fantasy larps effectively makes us go back to basics, putting handcraft, shelters and making food centre stage. Post-apocalypse is of course just another take on how to escape the dull and repressive features of our modern societies.

Post-apocalypse means post-modernity, post a collapse of our petroleum based industry, transportation system, agriculture and housing. It resembles a fear for a situation where we can no longer sustain our present living conditions.

That kind of fear is not unmotivated.

Enjoy it while it lasts

Peak oil does not necessarily mean Apocalypse. There is plenty of more to burn off and although disastrous global warming is at the threshold chances are good that we burn all accessible fossil fuels (oil, coal, gas) before we stop. It just has to be done (in the name or profit).

But the question is for how long it's profitable to extract it. Peak oil means that we have reached a point where growth is not ensured the way it has been since mid-19th century. It's sad when you think about the 20th century from that point of view.

Humanity had access to almost free energy, that enabled almost any fantasy to come true, but still spoiled the situation in every possible way.

So I'm not saying that Apocalypse is coming, but everything will turn more expensive, all travels will be harder, social stability (whatever we had) is over.

Gabriel Widing

So if we had trouble to create a nice community pre-9/11 it will be a lot harder from this point. Some practise could do. People are very unprepared for this gradual decline of the material conditions for life.

Our christian culture has two modes of thinking: progress or apocalypse. Slow but certain destabilisation and decay for the rest of our lives does not seem probable at all to us.

But the long term consequences of peak oil might not turn out very different from the results of space invaders, meteor impacts, nuclear war, zombie famines or what have you roaming around in the cultural production.

Thinking and practicing a post-industrial, post-sustainable life in the safe and playful context of live role-playing might give us an idea of how social life can evolve without the welfare state and the consumerist bonanza of global capitalism.

Enjoy it while it lasts

“The ship is losing altitude; let's take it down in a smooth way.”

G. Widing, 2011

This is a book about opinions.
It's not supposed to make people wise.
It's supposed to make people talk.

So we challenge you to do exactly that.

Read it. Talk about it.

If all else fails, at least hit someone with it.

- Claus Raasted

Rollespils Akademi



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