

PLAYGROUND

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PORN STAR DUNGEONS

FATHER'S ROLE: A GAME

FABRICATED REALITIES



Larpers don't like to think

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I'm sitting on the lawn with a group of friends. It's a birthday party, and we're discussing game theorists. After agreeing that these theorists should stop thinking so much about computer games and focus more on our games, we talk about a recent game that left participants hugging, crying, feeling. Feeling a lot.

I ask «Is emotion in games overrated? It seems like these days it's all about pushing different buttons to give players emotional kicks. What happened to games that involve thinking?»

One guy answers: «Maybe it's to do with the sort of people who go to larps. If you want thinking games, you play strategic board games.»

«What?», I say. «Larpers don't like to think?»

«Or», he continues, «it's just because that's the strength of the form. Larps are very good at bringing out emotions, and designers play to that strength.»

Another guy chimes in. «There are political larps, though! Games based on social criticism, even subversion.»

«Yeah», I say. «But do you think people actually consider these games as criticism? Or do they get their emotions tickled so much that the political points get lost in the thrills?»

«Well», he answers, «that's what debriefing sessions are for. Reflection and afterthought.»

«Rubbish. Everyone knows that debriefing is just an extension of the crying and hugging from the game, a transitional period leading to the afterparty. In the morning, any rational thought will be buried under physical and emotional hangovers.»

«So you're sticking to your original theory, then?»

«Yes. Larpers don't like to think.» ■



■ Matthijs Holter

CORRECTION FOR ISSUE 2

The photographer for the article «Outside the Comfort Zone» was mistakenly credited as Ritva Savonsaari. The correct photo credit is Juhana Pettersson.

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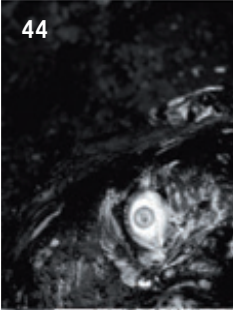
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■ Zak Sabbath's gaming group. From left to right: Satine Phoenix, Kimberly Kane, Stoya and Mandy Morbid. Sabbath himself is in the foreground. Photo: Darren Eskandari.

Porn Star Dungeons

Fine art, porn and Dungeons & Dragons.
Blogger Zak Sabbath tells us about them.

TEXT | JUHANA PETTERSSON

ILLUSTRATIONS | ZAK SABBATH

Zak Sabbath is a man of many careers. He's a painter whose works are part of the MoMa permanent collection. He has performed in porn films such as *Bullets and Burlesque*, with Sasha Grey, and *Hospital*, with Mandy Morbid. He also has a thriving roleplaying game blog called *Playing D&D With Porn Stars*, and directs the popular web video series *I Hit It With My Axe*, based on the adventures of his gaming group.

«One way you could say there's no dialogue between the three», Sabbath says. «In another way, if it's the same person doing all three, they're bound to be influenced by his views. When you put something in front of me, I'll start thinking how can we make this better. Why do we have these cliches?»

Porn Stars and Space Hamsters

Sabbath plays *Dungeons & Dragons* on a regular basis, usually as a game master. His gaming group includes porn stars such as Kimberly Kane, Mandy Morbid and Satine Phoenix, with Sasha Grey, Justine Joli and Gia Jordan as visiting players.

His blog *Playing D&D With Porn Stars* documents his practice as a game master. Reading the blog, the first thing that strikes you is how deeply invested it's in the culture of old *Dungeons & Dragons* games. When he's talking about mind flayers or space hamsters, Sabbath's geek cred is impeccable.

«Updating the blog usually takes about an hour a day», Sabbath says. «I found out a long time ago that my hobbies, in order to be inter-

esting, have to be creative. When I'm not painting, I need a real break, but at the same time it has to be something that will engage my mind. Roleplaying is good because it makes me think, but I don't have to do it in the rigorous way I need for work.»

I asked Sabbath: how do you find players in the porn community? «It's like a lot of other places in that roleplaying doesn't really come up. People don't talk about it.» He explains how after he started his game, other people have started talking about it and how they always wanted to play, especially the girls. According to Sabbath, there's also an overlap between roleplaying culture, science fiction and fantasy and the fetish porn scene.

Since 2010, Sabbath's games have been featured in the web video series *I Hit It With My Axe*, made for *The Escapist* website. Despite the porn star players, everybody who has ever played *D&D* with hand drawn maps and miniatures will instantly recognize the experience.

DIY

Sabbath's latest work is the roleplaying game book *Vornheim - The Complete City Kit*. «It's the city I made up at the beginning of our first game. Whenever there's a city thing in the campaign, that's where it happens. I was talking with [publisher] James [Raggi IV] about what kind of books he would want his company to put out, and what kind of things I might be able to help out with. I was just laying out different ideas: monsters, a campaign, cities... And he was like, I don't know anything about cities.

OLD SCHOOL RENAISSANCE

The roleplaying game was born when two U.S. game designers, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, published the first version of *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974. This proto-roleplaying game had a lot in common with the strategy games from which it evolved. It featured simple rules, lethal combat and a focus on the game-like aspects of roleplaying.

Since then, roleplaying has developed in various surprising and new directions. Nordic larp culture pushes the boundaries of the medium as a political force. The U.S. indie game movement attempts to create rules mechanics for storytelling. Even *Dungeons & Dragons* has changed. Its new incarnation is a massive beast of a game, requiring study and commitment to play properly.

The Old School Renaissance is a movement that started to gather momentum in the mid-2000's. Its message was simple: the roleplaying games of the 70's were fun. Let's make our games more like that. Simple, fast and tactical.

In the Nordic countries, the leading light of the Old School Renaissance is James Raggi IV. Originally from the U.S., Raggi now lives in Finland. He's the designer of the game *Lamentations of the Flame Princess* and also the publisher of Zak Sabbath's game book *Vornheim*.



THE SECRETS OF SPRAWL

Despite the massive amount of material published on the *Playing D&D With Porn Stars* blog, *Vornheim - The Complete City Kit* is Zak Sabbath's first foray into the kind of roleplaying game design that finds its expression in printed books.

Vornheim is a product of the Old School Renaissance roleplaying movement. To someone who's not familiar with *Dungeons & Dragons*, it's almost incomprehensible. It's an efficiently packaged collection of ideas, mechanics and tables designed to work as tools for someone who wants to make a city game, old school style.

Within these limits, *Vornheim* is a nifty little book. Despite the minimal amount of descriptive text involved, the city comes alive as a strange, atmospheric and dangerous place. Its fantasy is based on throwaway ideas and intriguing references to bizarre history and strange beings.

In terms of design, the core of the book is in the Urbancrawl Rules. They're a mechanism with which a game master can improvise dense urban environments. It's simple, elegant, intuitive and works very well.

Vornheim
 - *The Complete City Kit*
 Designer: Zak S.
 Publisher: Lamentations of the Flame Princess.
 Hardcover, 64 pages.



■ Photo: Dennis McGrath.

I've never seen a successful city game. So I was like, I can do that.»

I asked Sabbath whether there's a connection between the DIY aesthetics of the punk and hardcore subcultures and roleplaying.

«I think there is. One is just the time period, early and mid 80's. The things you do to run a game and the things you do to run a scene are similar. There's a lot of individual creativity, hustling stuff up, and figuring out how to use Kinko's. How to do things yourself.»

This is especially apparent in the roleplaying blog scene. It's also inherent in the nature of roleplaying, where everybody has to make creative decisions to make the game work. Sabbath explains that the version of *D&D* he's using combines elements from *AD&D 1st Edition* and *D&D 3.5 Edition*. «The game encourages you to make up so many things.» Once you're

in, changing the game itself is an obvious second step.

You're Doing it Wrong

Porn and *D&D* is a strange combination, and it follows that some of the reactions have been equally strange. «The people who wrote to me were very friendly and nice. Of course, there's people who don't write but talk on forums and discussion groups, who ask: 'Is this real?」

The real weirdness started with the *I Hit It With My Axe* web series. «When we put the TV show up there was a lot of stuff we'd never seen before. Really uncontrolled, misogynistic jerkiness. The reactions of a lot of people were really insulting to the girls. 'They don't know what they're doing, they're doing it wrong.」

Sabbath says that he was aware of this kind of sentiment, but it's easy to forget it when



■ Map by Zak Sabbath.



FLAILCERATOPS

A.C. 6

H.D. 16

Move 90'

AT 1 STOMP and 1 SWEEP
or 1 SPIKED BALL

D 12/12 or 3/12

AL N

■ An example of Sabbath's monster design from Vornheim.
The influence of traditional D&D weirdness is clear.

you're just playing a game with your friends. «I had little experience with the wider scene, so it was a whole new world of obnoxious people.»

Sabbath's blog has also generated a lively discussion about how women are portrayed in roleplaying games. «A lot of the people who write blogs want to be 'good'. They're guys but they want to be fair to women, and every time they see a picture of a chainmail bikini they say: 'That's bad'. They want to be nice guys, but their reactions are exactly the opposite of the girls I play with.»

Sabbath uses the *Vampire: the Masquerade* as an example of how a sexy game can bring a lot of new players into roleplaying, many of them women. «At least with the people I know, the girls want to look at pictures of sexy girls. It's not true for everybody, but it is for a lot of people, and it's not because they're stupid. A lot of the commentary about why women are interested in pictures of sexy women is kind of condescending to them. I have players who are sexy women for a living. This is something I have to talk about.» ■

Repairing Reality

Can a book about games fix the world?

TEXT | JOHANNA KOLJONEN

Half a billion people regularly play digital games. This amounts to three billion hours of gaming a week. The total time invested so far in playing just *World of Warcraft* adds up to 5,93 billion years – currently about 30 million hours a day. A westerner born in the 90s or later can be assumed to have played games for 10 000 hours before reaching adulthood. In 2012 the value of the games industry is estimated to hit 68 billion dollars. And digital games are not, roughly speaking, a threat to child's play, competitions, sports, social games or gambling. These pursuits are growing too, in cultural importance and economic value. We are unequivocally moving towards a more playful world. Or, as Jane McGonigal would put it, a more «gameful» one.

Since statistics like these are terrifying to many, especially in the generations that have not viewed playing together as a necessary social glue, it is liberating to find a broad, commercial book like Jane McGonigal's *Reality is Broken* arguing for the opposite position. Games have increased in popularity, she claims, because they satisfy actual and urgent needs the real world fails to.

Yes, computer games are often escapist, but we don't actually play for the content, for the stories. We play because complex computer games offer us everything we wish for in real life: challenging tasks that force us to work on the very limits of our capacity. A chance of success mostly unaffected by structural inequalities in the outside world. Creative problem solving with immediate feedback. Actual social ties cemented by the feeling that the goal towards which you and your co-players are struggling within the limits of the fiction is has real meaning.

McGonigal argues that the digital games industry, in its first three or so decades, happened to solve one of the most fundamental challenges of any society: how to motivate enormous numbers of people to volunteer their spare time to do frustrating and complicated work. Given the circumstances of humanity today, the threats to the long-term survival of us as a species combined with a lack of organizing ideologies, we now need to apply the insights of the games industry on the world outside the games.

Reality is broken is filled with practical and interesting examples of world- and life-changing games that already exist. Not really being a console gamer, I had previously not heard of the PlayStation 3 players folding protein models for medical research – a project which turns not just the computational power of the consoles but also the problem-solving skills of the individual players into a kind of distributed supercomputer. A *Nature* article with over 50000 authors is one tangible result of this game.

A big part of the book is about alternate reality games (ARG), in which a thin layer of rules and fiction is painted onto what we call reality – the physical world, the internet, and sometimes other media. A simple example is the cleaning competition *Chore Wars*, which has a points system so satisfying that McGonigal now sneaks quietly out of bed on Saturday mornings or runs home during her lunch hour to clean the bathroom before her husband – her opponent in the game – has a chance to complete this valuable ninja mission.

REALITY IS BROKEN

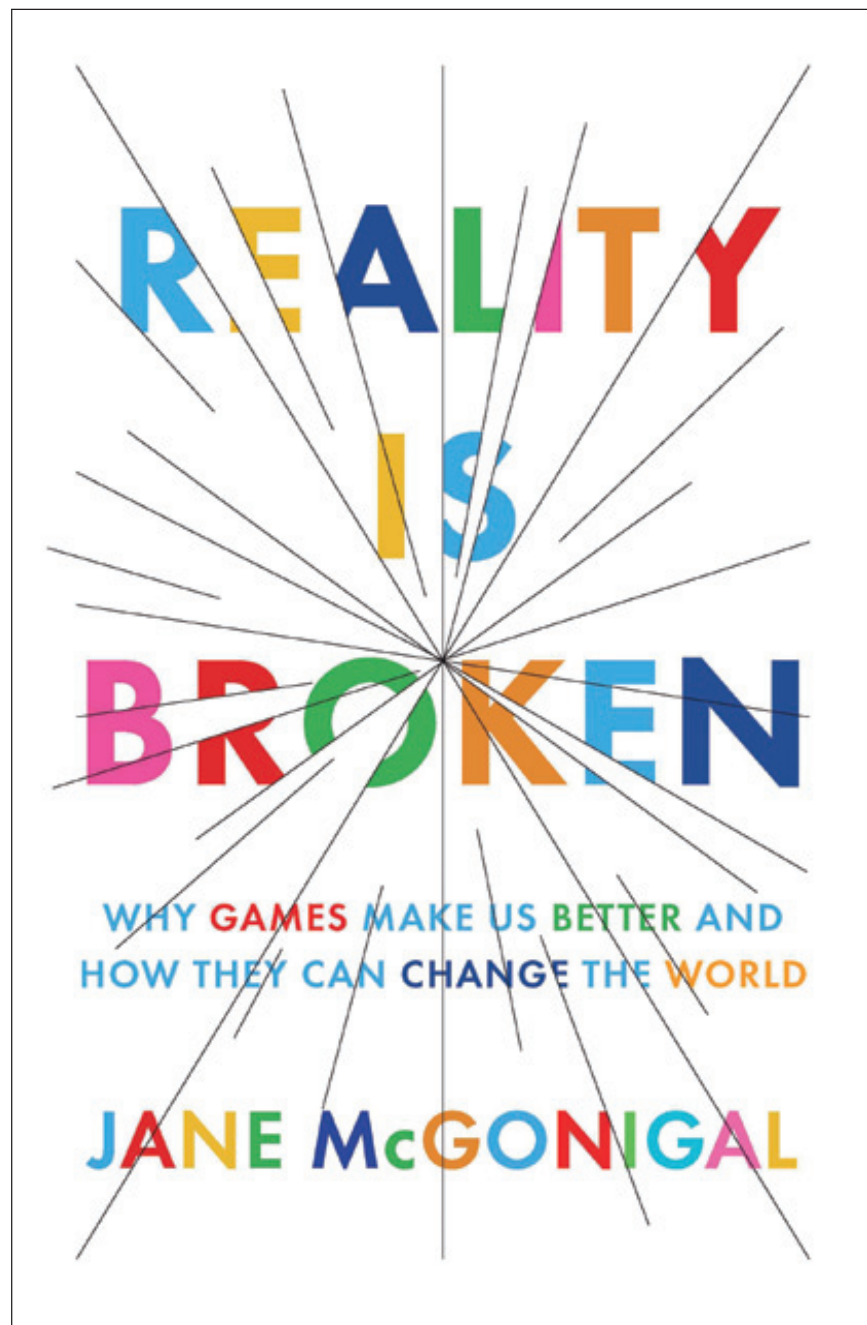
- ♦ Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World
- ♦ Author: Jane McGonigal
- ♦ Hardcover: 400 pages
- ♦ Publisher: Penguin Press
- ♦ ISBN-10: 1594202850
- ♦ ISBN-13: 978-1594202858

An ARG can also be a month-long story coordinating tens of thousands of players all over the world to crack codes, go on treasure hunts for physical objects, interact with actors in real locations and researching both real and fictional material to drive a dramatic plot to a satisfying conclusion. Games like these are usually built around fictions, like McGonigal's *The Lost Ring*, in which players spent the run-up to the Beijing Olympics solving the mystery of a «forgotten» Greek sport. But games can just as easily be designed to affect with real-world conditions. Reality games described in the book focus on finding and mapping defibrillators for emergency services in one's city or on creating long-term food production in a Cape Town slum. Some of these games are built around narratives (earning them, I suppose, that «A» in ARG); others are not.

McGonigal works from philosopher Bernard Suits' useful definition that «playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles». Game design can be understood as the art of constructing these obstacles, of limiting the players' agency in interesting ways. The fundamental principles are not very difficult to grasp and this book is an excellent introduction. Games should be voluntary and include choices; the tasks should become progressively more challenging and be clearly connected to an overarching and meaningful goal. That goal can actually benefit from being astronomically difficult to reach, or as gamers would describe it, epic. Failures should inspire to immediately try again; successes should be rewarded, preferably in a symbolic currency like positive feedback and the respect of other players.

Where these criteria are fulfilled, people will want to participate in a passionate, earnest and focused way. McGonigal observes that, for instance, the volunteer culture which sustains Wikipedia has structural similarities to long-term MMORPGs like World of Warcraft. We can and we want to achieve the impossible together, she argues, as long as our interactions are designed to be satisfying. Game design tells us how to make it so, and for this reason the

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■ In her new book, Jane McGonigal claims that games have increased in popularity because they satisfy needs the real world fails to.



We can and we want to achieve the impossible together.



■ *Jane McGonigal is a games researcher, a game designer and the world's leading gamification evangelist. But does she address any of the challenges that have been put to this gospel?*

GAMIFICATION

From Wikipedia:

In behavioral economics, gamification is the use of game play mechanics for non-game applications (also known as «funware»), particularly consumer-oriented web and mobile sites, in order to encourage people to adopt the applications. It also strives to encourage users to engage in desired behaviors in connection with the applications. Gamification works by making technology more engaging, and by encouraging desired behaviors, taking advantage of humans' psychological predisposition to engage in gaming. The technique can encourage people to perform chores that they ordinarily consider boring, such as completing surveys, shopping, or reading web sites.

next frontier of game design must be to design games that can change the world for the better. The book culminates in a vision of a game to save the world that humanity would come together and periodically play for the next thousand years.

McGonigal is a games researcher, and also a game designer. The latter makes her more credible in the sense that her understanding of the effects of games mechanics on controlling player behaviour is nuanced and always lucidly communicated. It also makes her less credible, because she has an agenda which obviously must include marketing her skills and those of the institute she works for; her customers range from the World Bank to McDonalds. For proprietary reasons, or to save space, or because the results were perhaps not always mind-blowingly impressive, her own design projects are not always described in the detail an industry reader would hope for.

McGonigal is also currently (much thanks to this book and the speeches it is based on)



McGonigal is currently the world's leading gamification evangelist.

the world's leading gamification evangelist. It is not surprising that she does not address any of the challenges that have been put to this gospel, although as a researcher she must be aware of them. But she also quotes uncritically from the increasingly questioned field of positive psychology, although she mostly uses it to prove that playing together makes people happy. Referring to universal experi-

ence could have achieved the same in significantly fewer pages. Academic readers are likely to be pulling their hair, and they are welcome to: this is just not their kind of book. It is intended to be a bestseller and its primary audience consists of professionals only now becoming aware of a revolution that has been happening around them for a generation.

The third omission – the lack of historical context or indeed even the slightest nod to the humanist tradition – is much more serious in my mind. It is difficult to judge whether it is an oversight or stems from an economic need to write fast and deliver something that fits in the business books section. But given the scope of her vision, this omission is difficult to defend. The power of games as described by McGonigal, and I agree with her analysis, is so great that it should raise questions about the grounds on which it is wielded. She would have needed, perhaps, to talk to some philosophers and not just quote one.

When it comes to modeling choice and agency the games medium is superior to all other arts. What Reality is broken beautifully illustrates, without ever quite coming out and saying, is that reality games that are large and complex enough are indistinguishable from societies. We are all controlled by arbitrary rules and focus, to whatever degree we can, our efforts in different arenas, choosing to live different «games». That makes global ARG design a very serious business indeed. What is this universal good for which world-changing games should strive? Whose better world are we to build? My answer may not be the same as yours, or McGonigal's, who seems to assume that these issues are not contentious.

It would have been helpful of McGonigal to define the word «reality» when she decided to use it in the title. And it would have served the book immensely if she had elaborated on the differences, if she thinks there are any, between

temporary social roles in fictional and non-fictional environments. I worry that she may not have considered this question at all; her disinterest in role-taking as a game mechanic is astonishing. Roleplaying games, other than in the context of MMORPGs, are not mentioned in the book at all.

The motivational mechanisms that McGonigal describes and that the games industry has experimented on for decades on a massive scale are naturally the same that help people in general to achieve difficult things together over

long periods of time. Cults, the military, progressive schools, businesses whose employees volunteer to do 80-hour weeks, the early labour movement – all of these can be broken down into game design schematics, reward loops, character levels. And the dream of a thousand-year game to make the world better could be said to already have come true in the Roman-Catholic Church, which should illustrate some of the challenges of such a design.

Ultimately Reality is broken rests on a kind of circular reasoning. Reality does not motivate us for greatness, except for the parts which are structured like games. Games are satisfying because they give us something in reality;

games that interact with reality are even more satisfying. Therefore we must re-frame parts of reality and call them games. It is ultimately unconvincing. At the same time it is also hugely inspirational.

As a practical guide for readers in the business world, in the educational sector and in NGOs, this book can save lives, change organizations and revolutionize political collaboration. McGonigal may have landed backwards in some of her arguments and she is rather cavalier about the potential consequences of the society-changing machines she suggests we build. But she has ideas, and they are empowering and exciting. And when it comes to the tools, her knowledge is solid: everyone interested in repairing reality will benefit from reading this book. ■



The dream of a thousand-year game to make the world better could be said to already have come true in the Roman-Catholic Church.



■ Female captain at Danish War Larp in 2009. Organizers were intent on positioning more women in high status characters which meant that new storylines were made possible in a setting where both men and women went to war.

Gender Equality

Why are female players left at the stove, while the men are having all the fun?

TEXT | JOFRID REGITZESDATTER

PHOTO | PETER MUNTHER-KAAS, JOFRID REGITZESDATTER

For years now, Danish larpers, including myself, have debated, discussed and argued about gender, equality and larps. How do we attain gender equality and is there even an inequality problem? Until now, no-one has been bold (or maybe arrogant?) enough to write a «how to-guide» to gender equality and larp, and debaters have been left frustrated with the lack of action and ever rising amount of conversation. Well, no more. I have decided to throw out humility and academic approaches

My focus is on the fiction of larps, the *diegesis* – a term put forward by Hakkarainen and Stenros in their 2003 article «The Meilathi School» to describe the fictional world in which larps take place. The term also encompasses the rules that are the expression of the fiction. I want to discuss how the diegesis and *characters* of a larp can be modelled to have a gender equality ethic and/or a gender equality purpose.

On Cake and Roleplay

Gender equality within fictional game worlds is often connected to problems of *exclusivity* and *inclusivity*. Exclusion and inclusion shape a participants opportunity for play within a larp

and the two are too often connected to the gender of the participant.

I will now describe some of the way a roleplay can become exclusive and diminish a participant's opportunity for play, and also present how I think these problems can be resolved by creating an inclusive diegesis with more possibilities for play for all genders.

The biggest problem concerning exclusion within roleplaying culture is what I call the «roleplay is like cake» problem. This is the notion that, like cake, there is only so much roleplay to go around, and that it is therefore possible to «take» play from others. This is not so.

One expression of this problem is a discussion on chivalry that took place in Denmark last year leading up to a war larp. It was argued that in order for some participants to play knights, there simply had to be participants that played damsels in distress. Some feminists opposed the idea that a group of participants were only present to aid the play of another group while portraying characters without any real agency. Some of the participants playing knights then argued that all their chivalry and courtly behaviour would be useless unless there was someone they could save.

«JOFRID»

Jofrid has worked with gender equality and larp for almost 5 years, but has larped for nearly 11. Her more academic work can be found in the 2011 Knudepunkt book *Think Larp* where she discusses the connection between gender and larp by performing a poststructuralist feminist analysis of the two, looking at language and bodies. A short video introduction can be found at <http://vimeo.com/channels/kp2011>.

This clearly expresses the idea that the play of the participants portraying knights was dependent upon other participants giving up their play, that these participants would be stealing cake from other participants if they demanded agency for their character. This is an exclusive process, as it excludes groups or types of participants from certain actions within the larp and makes it less attractive for that group to participate in the larp.

Why not have cake *and* a bro-mance?

During the aforementioned discussion I proposed to instead aim the chivalry and romance of saving a loved one towards their fellow knights. In this way they could have spectacular «bro-mances» (the group consisted solely of men at that time) and save each other from danger on the battlefield without demanding passivity from another group.



Historical roleplays will almost always contain elements of female oppression.

This is a much more inclusive way of building a fiction, as more players are given more agency. It was also a way to, perhaps, introduce a more diverse sexuality in an otherwise very heteronormative group. This solution is relatively simple; alter the fiction and style of play to incorporate more play for more participants.

But the everyday consequences of the «cake» problem still makes participants and organizers assume that if we give up the characters that are dependent on the sacrifice of play by other participants, we are losing something. Someone has stolen our rightful piece of cake.

I would suggest that enabling more participants to play more actively with their characters creates more storylines and more plots, and that we as a community gain two things: Firstly we gain more play. Instead of having only a few players who are responsible for moving the story forward, we demand of all participants that they contribute to the stories and plots. This will undoubtedly result in more «action» for more participants. Secondly we improve the odds of every participant, regardless of gender, furthering their possibilities for play.

I would like to give two examples of how this problem manifests.

Waiting for Him to Play

Most good characters have both pro-active and re-active traits. Pro-active parts of a character are those that result in the character's agency. A pro-active part of a character has agency to alter social circumstances by having access to conflicts, relationships and to influence the storyline of other characters when the participant wishes to do so. Re-active parts of the character are those that are dependent on the play of others to «release» storylines or to get new input.

A successful character has both traits, enabling it to be both dynamic and responsive in the interaction with

other characters. A character that is merely pro-active becomes self-centered and difficult to interact with, and a character that is only re-active becomes boring to play and play with.

What I consider problematic is the way female roleplayers are often locked in mostly re-active characters. The classic example of this is the role of the daughter awaiting marriage to a man so she can act out a story of despair or love. She waits for male participants in the larp to be pro-active and act on the storyline of the marriage so that she can react to it. This not only makes for really dull play for the participants involved, but it also reproduces the idea of passive women and active men making it more likely that the next larp will be designed with this in mind, to the detriment of future female participants.

Solution; get a job!

The solution is to be aware of whether participants in a larp either assume, or are given, characters that are only re-active. One way of «curing» this problem is to do larps where all roles have a function within the diegesis. This could be a job or storyline to play out where they have to be the one «kick-starting» the action. It is also important to be aware of family structures within the diegesis where either men or women have all the deciding power over participants of the opposite sex and that they have only have the family as their point of departure for play. This can be negated by letting play revolve around several social arenas such as work, friends or religious beliefs that exit independently from the family structure.

Historical and fiction rigid larps

The second problem is one of Historical larps and rigid adherence to counter-productive fiction. Historical roleplays have the constant disadvantage that women's status in the last 500 years is widely considered to have been considerably lower than now, and so these types of larps will almost always contain elements of female oppression. This results in larps that focus on male protagonists and almost always take place in patriarchal societies. This leads to

women
oc-
cupying
re-active
characters
and also being
responsible for the
historical accuracy of
the game.

This way female oppression becomes a marker of how true to history the larp is, and how willing the participants are to invest in this accuracy (Tabletop and semi-larp gamewright Morten Greis argues this point in his 2011 blog «Plan B» in which he says writes that women's oppression as a means of stating historical accuracy within a fiction often results in female participants sacrificing agency within their character to maintain historical accuracy even though the rest of the setting more often has many other inaccuracies that are not dealt with).



What I consider problematic is the way female roleplayers are often locked in mostly re-active characters.



The notion that, like cake, there is only so much role-play to go around, and that it is therefore possible to «take» play from others. This is not so.

I find it to be counter-productive to gender equality when female participants are excluded from certain roles, restricted to re-active roles and asked to invest their opportunity for play in order to maintain the fiction.

Counter-productive fictions are those that somehow limit all participants in participating equally. When adapting a fiction as setting for a roleplay or larp, being true to the original work can sometimes overshadow that the fiction contains misogynist or oppressive elements that limit the play of participants of certain genders. When an organizer becomes unwilling to change the fiction to be less oppressive, it becomes a rigid adherence to a counter-productive fiction.



A problem that concerns both historical roleplays and counter-productive fictions is how they reproduce, and often even exaggerate, the heterosexual matrix. The heterosexual matrix is a term coined by feminist author Judith Butler to describe the structure that supports heterosexuality as a basis for gendered identity. Because western culture exists within this matrix, our characters at larps do as well. By portraying heterosexual families and a heterosexual ethic, these games exclude participants who wish to work with transgender, transvestitism or homosexuality by denouncing these as in opposition to the norm. This only allows for sexual minority characters to act out stories of oppression and humiliation within the diegesis, and it also limits the idea of what a gender is to a very poor dichotomist caricature that kills interesting play.

Thirdly it is problematic that the core of a role is dependent on their gender. If men are the norm, and a patriarchy the basis of play, women's characters, if pro-active, will always be in opposition to the norm, and this also limits the female participants opportunity for play as they will not be able to shape their character as they wish but must assume an oppositional «underdog» position. It is of course essential for all participants to be able to choose the character they want to play, and not to be limited by gender denotations that lie well outside the diegesis.

But what about my 1100th. Century Viking larp with real-time play, realistic setting and a completely accurate historical fiction?

So is there a solution to this problem? Is there a way to incorporate pro-active female roles and

sexual minorities in historical roleplays? No, there is not. My recommendation would be that any organizer gives up the idea of doing a historical roleplay and instead insert elements of the aesthetic or setting in a more inclusive, gender equality oriented fiction where all participants are given an equal opportunity for play.

If one is intent on producing a historical roleplay the following could be considered as ways to further the opportunities for play for all participants. Firstly; try making oppression the focal point of the storyline. By letting the main storyline (I use this term as it is put forward by Barkholt and Trier in their 2009 article in *Lifelike*, where they state that the main storyline not only is the storyline acted out by some principal characters, but also the focal point of the storylines of all participants, thus shaping everyone's experience at a larp) centre around exactly the problematic oppression of women, all participants will be involved in making this play interesting.

Secondly the organizers of this thought up game should invest considerable resources in creating upstairs/downstairs play so that both the oppressed and the oppressors will have opportunities for pro-active play within two different social settings without interfering with the general theme of a patriarchal society.

But surely my exact reproduction *Game of Thrones* larp will be a joy to all participants?

No, it will not. If a fiction is counter-productive to gender equality and limits the opportunity for play for certain participants because of their gender, it is not a good setting for your larp. The solution is simple: change the fiction. If it is broken – fix it. Kill your darlings and accept that participants will not enjoy a fiction where they are restricted from exploring characters freely within the diegesis just because Georges R. R. Martin thought women to be nothing more than wombs and vulvas.

But then what?

I have now described some of the problems concerning gender equality within the diegesis of larps and roleplays. The suggestions put forth are aimed at coordinators, storytellers and game masters who are in the middle of creating or planning a roleplay.

But what to do if you find yourself at a gender-oppressive larp? Well to borrow a phrase from Norwegian game-wright Erlend Eidsem Hansen, you should Larp-hack. Larp-hacking is when participants in a larp, either alone or together, alter their characters, fiction or the materiality of

the game to make it more interesting.

When gender-larp-hacking, I recommend thinking about the modern queer activist term; subversive acts. These are acts that aim to alter how people perceive gender by performing gender in new ways. It is difficult to make concrete suggestions as I have no idea what larp you will be playing in next, but some things to consider are these; work outside heterosexuality, incorporate both traditionally male and female characteristics in the same character, involve allies in refusing to portray characters as oppressed solely because of gender, involve the character in acts that it is banned from because of gender and remove it from acts that it is restricted to because of gender.



Larp-hacking is when participants in a larp alter their characters, fiction or the materiality of the game.

So there it is, some ranting, some suggestions and some ideas of how gender is incorporated in larps from my point of view. My ideas are aimed at organizers, storytellers and game masters who are in the middle of creating or planning a roleplay. When I give lectures on larp and feminism, it is not uncommon for some participant to approach me afterwards and tell me that they don't share my view of a certain issue, that they have never been negatively affected by, for instance, oppressive fictions. If this is true for you, then congrats! If you think this article is in no way relevant to your participation in larp, then you are hopefully in a fantastic larping community with some equality oriented «colleagues» and you can skip my entire rant.

So even though I in no way claim this essay to be of general interest to all larpers, I hope that my essay will provide larpers affected by repressive fictional structures some ideas on how to identify problems areas and deal with them in a way that will ensure more interesting and inclusive larps. ■





■ Beggars and prostitutes are still a common sight in Oslo's main street. The costumes have changed, though. (scenes from the game)

This summer, a group of roleplaying activists staged a game as a political protest.

TEXT | MATTHIJS HOLTER

PHOTO | SIGVE INDREGARD

LØSGIÆNGERAKTIONEN

What: Public larp as political protest

Website: www.lausgjenger.org

Organizers: Martin Nielsen, Trine Lise Lindahl, Martin Andresen, Frida Sofie Jansen, Sigve Indregard, Elin Nilsen

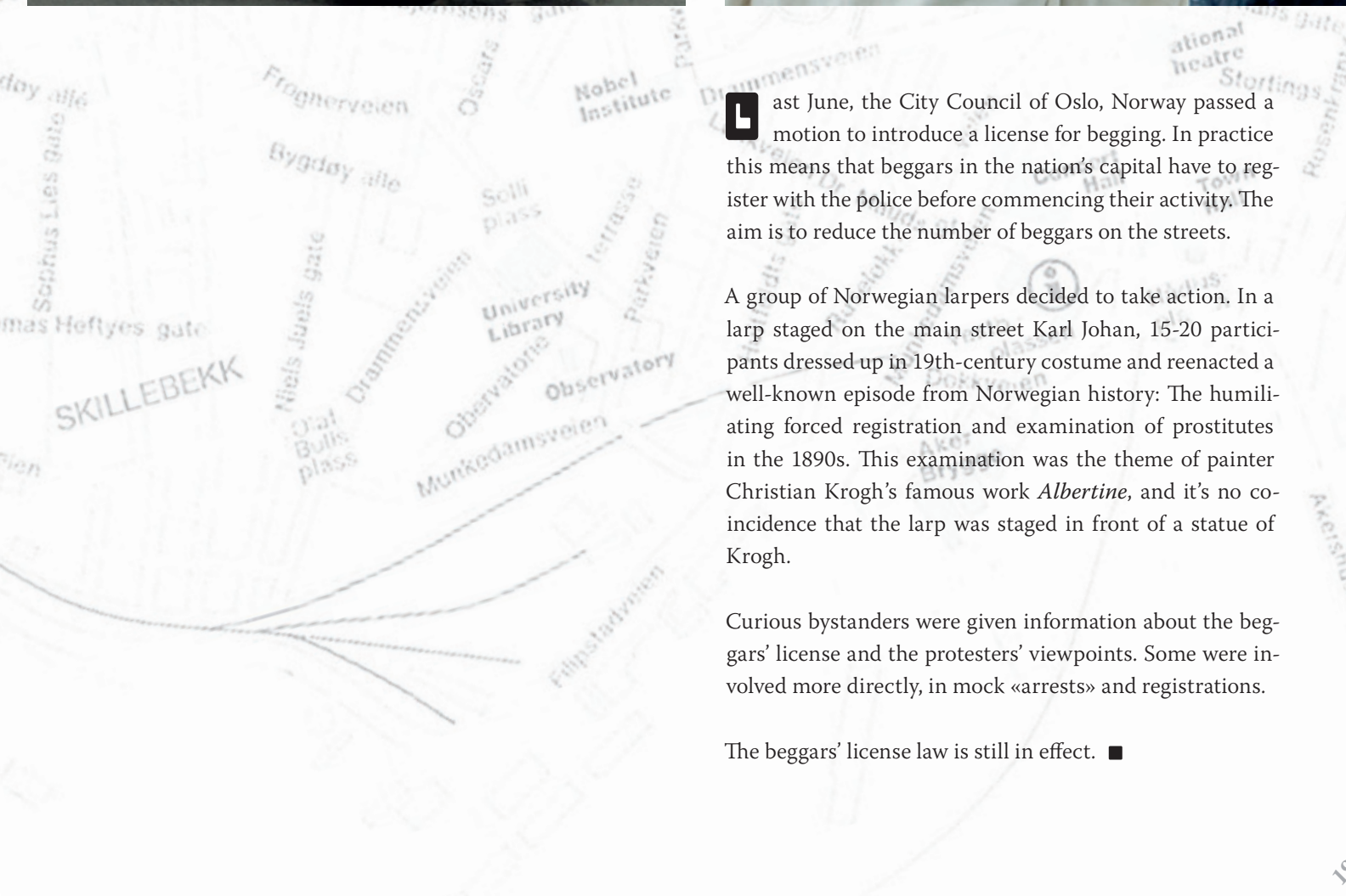


▲ Albertine, Painting by Christian Krogh. (inspiration for the game)





■ The sign says: «Registration of Vagrants - see the Police Doctor»



Last June, the City Council of Oslo, Norway passed a motion to introduce a license for begging. In practice this means that beggars in the nation's capital have to register with the police before commencing their activity. The aim is to reduce the number of beggars on the streets.

A group of Norwegian larpers decided to take action. In a larp staged on the main street Karl Johan, 15-20 participants dressed up in 19th-century costume and reenacted a well-known episode from Norwegian history: The humiliating forced registration and examination of prostitutes in the 1890s. This examination was the theme of painter Christian Krogh's famous work *Albertine*, and it's no coincidence that the larp was staged in front of a statue of Krogh.

Curious bystanders were given information about the beggars' license and the protesters' viewpoints. Some were involved more directly, in mock «arrests» and registrations.

The beggars' license law is still in effect. ■

Nordic Larp

This thing is massive. It would be a coffee table book, except for the fact that it would break your table.

TEXT | ANDERS NYGAARD PHOTO | LI XIN

TITLE: NORDIC LARP

Editor: Jaakko Stenros & Markus Montola

Writer: Jaakko Stenros, Markus Montola and 29 others

Publisher: Féa Livia

Cover: Hardcover

Language: English

Published: 2010

Number of pages: 320

ISBN: 978-91-633-7856-0

Thirty live roleplaying games. More than 300 full-colour pages with 250 photographs: Blood-smeared medieval warriors. Horned fairies drawing their bows. Dieselpunk spaceship captains. Norwegian wartime fishermen. Frightening glimpses of green-glowing indistinct figures moving through dark corridors. Members of a radical collective. Asylum inmates curled up on a bank of surveillance screens. Gruesome nosferatu vampires leering at the camera. A Scandinavian refugee camp. Cyberpunks worshipping before what appears to be a broken TV. They've managed to get a sample of just about everything, and are still apologizing for the stuff they had to leave out.

«Souvenirs of alternate realities», they say
- I love that term; it could form the basis of

an artistic career all by itself. There's a hint at what this book might be trying to convey: it is part of the richness of roleplaying experiences that they leave whole worlds, new, fresh minds, ideas and viewpoints in their wake like nuclear fallout; dynamos of inspiration.

But both the framing essays are still wrestling with the weirdness that is roleplaying when viewed through the lenses of more marketable arts. This might get boring to those who have listened to this kind of thing before, since the inevitable conclusion is the same as always: Roleplaying just doesn't *fit*, and trying to make it fit makes it not roleplaying anymore. But this is a book by people who have decided to communicate the glory and wonder of their style of roleplaying to people who have never heard of it, and so it is not surprising that they give a bit of priority to this eternal dilemma. How do you give a fair representation in book form of what is essentially a process, an individual and communal experience, where the border between audience and creator soon evolves into something strange and twisted in eye-watering Escheresque manners?

So here's how they solved the challenge: This book is a collection of fragments of the past sixteen or so years of the Nordic live role



They've managed to get a sample of just about everything, and are still apologizing for the stuff they had to leave out.



Souvenirs of alternate realities.



playing tradition, salvaged, collected and told by people who were there. It's grotesquely well done, so well you hardly notice the artifacts of people writing and editing outside their native languages, the slightly confusing front page (or maybe that's just me?) and the weight - oh the terrible, terrible weight and sheer thundering gravitas of the whole thing.

There are plenty of glimpses into the process of planning and organizing these games in here, but also haunting, inspiring images of the engineered and emergent experiences people had, and the stories they later congealed into. The stories are approachable, engaging, and sometimes unforgettable. Somewhat disappointingly, the Nordic debate

on game documentation seems to have fallen firmly on the side of reporting and collecting artifacts, rather than providing blueprints or recipes. But this book might just redeem the victorious archeologists. It might even work as a starting point for those who want true blueprints; several entries seem, to an enlightened amateur, to reveal enough of the basics. Those who find that they now need to go play with the fairies, or fight shoulder by shoulder for the true emperor, or face an unnameable horror in the depths of space, could conceivably reverse-engineer some of these games, though they would probably be better off contacting the organizers for a numbered list of parts and tasks. I know it made me want to. ■

Standing in line

www.ipn.gov.pl/portal/en/



The Polish Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) produces board games for historical education purposes. One of their games, *The Queue*, tells a story of everyday life in Poland at the tail-end of the communist era.

- At first glance, the task of the 2 to 5 players appears quite simple: they have to send out their family, which consists of 5 pawns, to various stores on the game board to buy all the items on their randomly drawn shopping list, says Katarzyna Hołopiak.

- The problem is, however, that the shelves in the five neighborhood shops are empty...

The IPN is the biggest archive in Poland. The basic tasks of the Institute include: gathering, assessing and disclosing of documentation cre-

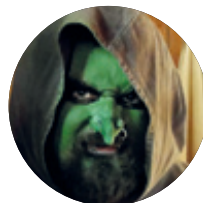


▲ IPN produces games because historical education is our priority. Therefore, we create materials that can engage the young generation, attract their attention and arouse interest in modern Polish history, Hołopiak says.

ated by state security agencies in the years 1939-1989.

Leaving Mundania

Keep your eyes out for the tentatively-titled *Leaving Mundania*, American journalist Lizzie Stark's account of the stateside larp scene. The book, which is aimed at a mainstream audience, takes readers inside long-running convention and boffer larps in the US, and explains terminology, history, and game mechanics. She profiles many gamers, from the long-haired Republican who runs one of the eastern seaboard's most successful boffer campaigns, to a retired military man and devoted larper whose every hobby involves war. Due out from Chicago Review Press in spring 2012.



▲ From *Knight Realms*, a larp the author attended recently. Photo: Kyle Ober

Norwegian Maoists. Yep, they exist

www.rodoktober.no

Rød oktober (Red October) is a larp about the Norwegian Maoist party AKP(m-l) in the 1970s. The players will assume the roles of activists on a party gathering at a secret location somewhere in Norway.

- We hope to use this larp both to explore the historical phenomenon of AKP(m-l) and the shaping of consciousness and ideology in tight-knit groups, and generally to have fun, says Even Tømte, one of the organizers.

The Maoists movement in Norway grew out of the broader youth rebellion of the 1960s, and probably was the best organized and most politically rigid of the lot. While they

never got a significant political following, they exerted an influence far beyond their actual numbers, perhaps particularly in cultural life. This made them not just a fringe group, but a quite important phenomenon in post-war Norwegian history.

- Recent Norwegian history is obviously the most important source of inspiration for us. The organizers come from different political backgrounds, but all of us have worked for the revolution at some point in our lives, and some of us perhaps still do. Exploring conflicts and dynamics on the left, the idea of revolution and the seductive call of revolutionary ideology are to varying degrees also connected to our own personal experiences, says Tømte.

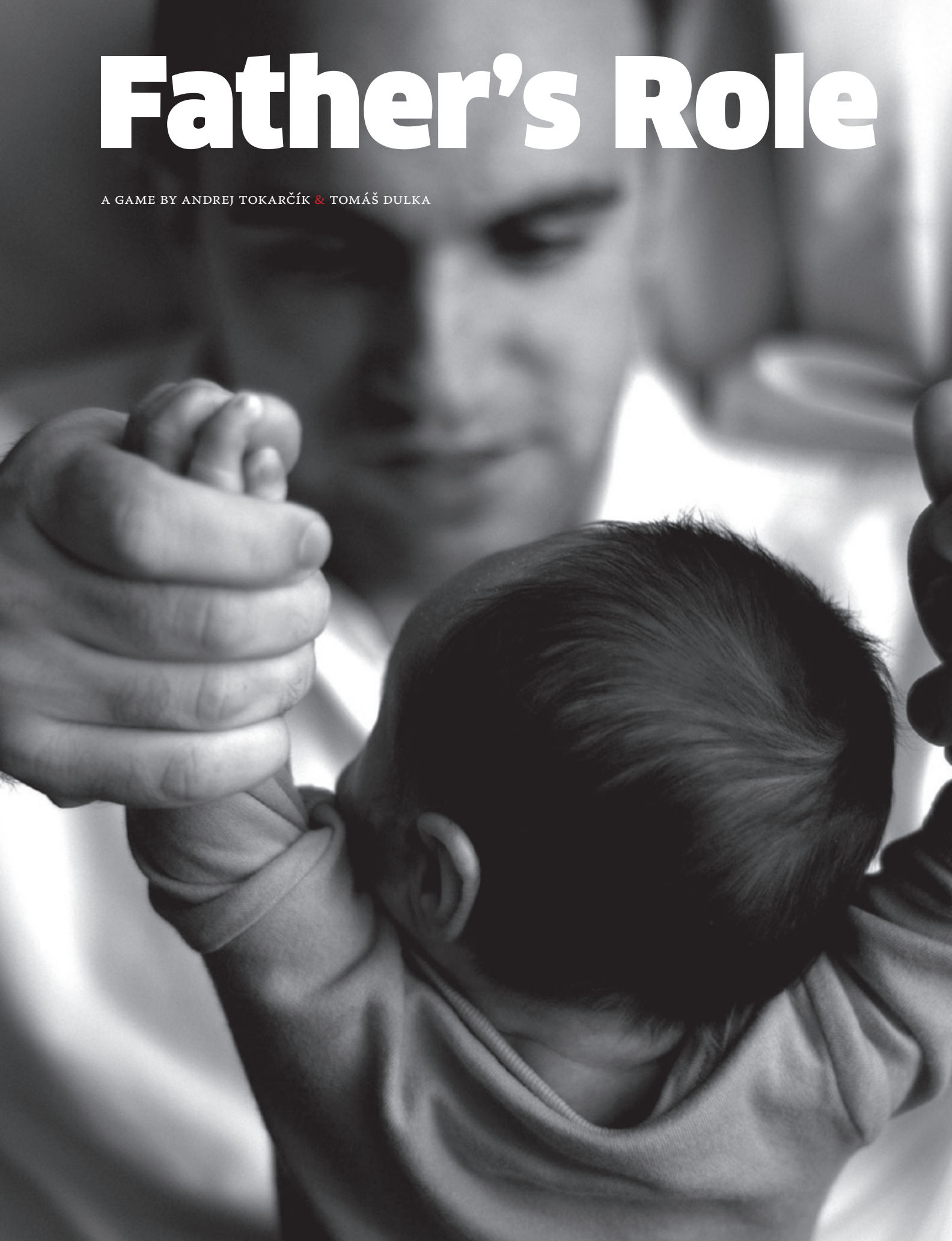
To be played primarily in the Norwegian. 21-23 October, near Oslo.

◀ AKP(m-l) dissolved itself in 2007, but their legacy lives on in the small left-wing party Rødt (Red). Image: Interwebs/People's Republic of China.



Father's Role

A GAME BY ANDREJ TOKARČÍK & TOMÁŠ DULKA



Introduction

Father's Role is a game about the relationship between a father and his son. The game concerns a father's efforts to raise a copy of himself and his son's partly futile resistance against these efforts. It aims to convey the idea that the son will never be like his father wishes, but he can't get rid of his father's heritage.

The game should be taken seriously.

Before commencing play I recommend running several improvisation exercises for warming up and lowering barriers between players. You can find interesting exercises at for example <http://improvcyclopedia.org>. Also you should make up one scene to practice *inner monologues*, an important technique used in the game. It is described further in the text.

After the game it's good to think and talk with others about your experience.

Father's Role is a *structured live freeform*, in which you participate in your own story. During the game you will improvise and play out the actions of your characters. At the same time you are also the creators of the enacted story. Your dramatic performance is an instrument to express your shared creative process.

The game is played without costumes, and with the use of *symbolic props*: Things of common use can be used to represent other objects. A pen appearing in the game can be used like a pen or – if it is applicable – a knife.

The game is completely transparent. There are no secrets for the players in it, and they can – or even should – read it all. In case they don't (for example if the game was read only by a game master), it is necessary to explain it before starting to play. The game should run continually with only the shortest breaks.

Setting up the game

1. The players decide who will play whom – one player will play the character of the Father, one player will be the Son and rest of players will portray supplementary characters. During the game the player of the Father plays only the character of the Father and the Son plays only the Son. Players of supplementary characters can switch characters between scenes.
2. The characters of Father and Son are the main characters, but other characters are important as well, because the characteristics of the main characters are expressed through interaction with them.
3. The player of the Father chooses the most expressive negative attribute of his character (impassibility, greed etc.) You should remember it or write it down.

Game structure

The game is divided into two acts, which are again divided into scenes. In both acts the players play the Son's birthday celebrations, which are each a single scene. There are always a few years long gaps between scenes. During the game the game master and/or players decide how long the gap to the next scene will be.

A scene can end in two ways. The game master has the right to cut a scene with words «After X years». This scene ends immediately and another begins (after X years). Another alternative is that the Son blows out the candles on his birthday cake. This alternative gives players the option to drive a scene towards its end in-game.



First act

The first scene of the game is the celebration of the Son's birth. The player (and character) of the Son is not physically present in this scene. In this scene the Father celebrates the birth of his only son together with his family and friends (played by supplementary characters). He imagines what his son will become and idealizes their shared future.

The other scenes in this act are the Son's birthday celebrations, where he is present.

A birthday celebration is a place where all the family is gathered and discusses important matters which couldn't be resolved during the past year. As the Son becomes older it is the only time when he talks with the Father for more than few seconds.

The biggest focus in the first act is on *building the conflict* between the Father and the Son. The Father has unreasonable demands on the Son and isn't satisfied with him, while the Son objurgates the Father's bad characteristics (mostly the central one, as defined before the game) and tries to distinguish himself from the Father at any price. It is important to start building this tension slowly and escalate it to the end of first act. The problems between the two grow bigger as the Son gets older.

In this act, players of side characters play members of the family or close friends – mother, grandmother, uncle, sister, the Son's girlfriend and so on. They should support and develop the conflict between Son and Father with their creative input. They also have the option not to take part in a scene, or to come on «stage» during the scene. While they are outside the game, they can think about their next actions to enrich the game.

As was mentioned, players of side characters can change their characters between the scenes, so it is important for them to let other players know what they are playing. They can tell it before the scene starts or somehow indicate it during the scene (for example by saying «Hi nephew» to the Son, the player of the side character implies that he is playing Son's uncle or aunt).



Techniques of the first act

It is not easy for the Son to survive his nerve-racking birthday celebrations and stay calm. He has to sit for hours with his boring relatives and withstand comments from his annoying father. He feels constrained and there are a lot of emotions and thoughts that he is unable to express because of politeness or for other reasons.

To bring the Son's real opinions into the game we use technique of *inner monologues*. When the Son is standing, he is in the world of his own thoughts. All other characters are frozen in place, they don't play. Only he can move and say things that he wouldn't dare to speak aloud. When he sits down, the game continues from the point where it was interrupted. You should try this technique in the pre-game exercises.

End of the first act

The first act ends when the Son can no longer handle the conflict with the Father. During an argument he'll simply stand up, hit the table, yell at the Father and leave the room.

NOVYPOHLAD.SK

It is a non-digital roleplaying games research and development project by Slovakian designers.

CREDITS

Cover photo: flickr.com/photos/kevygee

Above: Bohdan Widla



Second act

In the second part of the story we continue to play the Son's birthday parties, but this time he is celebrating with his colleagues and friends. From the beginning these parties may seem more pleasant than those with the family, but the Father still (albeit not physically) meddles in the Son's life. He is part of who the Son is and is not able to get rid of him.

The Father's main character attribute starts to appear in the Son's behavior in this act. Players of side characters should try to build situations in scenes and start conversations on certain themes so this attribute can appear. For example if the Father's flaw was greed, side characters will start conversations about money or ask the Son for a loan. The player of the Son should focus on playing how the Father's heritage is slowly taking control over him.

Techniques of the second act

In this act the character of the Father isn't physically present in the game. The player of the Father stands behind the Son's back as a metaphor of the Father's influence and has the power to step into his life. He can whisper in the Son's ear and has one more power – he can lay his hand on the Son's shoulder and speak through the Son's mouth. In the game fiction

these words have now been said by the Son. They were his thoughts, although deeply hidden. He can apologize for what he said, but he said it and he meant it. The player of the Father should use this for forcing the Son to behave like the Father .

It is still a rule that when the Son is standing, he is in the world of his thoughts, but now the Father standing behind him is also present in this world. Thereby besides inner monologues there are also dialogues with the metaphorically present Father.

End of the second act

Analogous to the first act, second act is ended by the Son at a moment he finds appropriate. He stands up again, seats the Father on his chair and moves aside.



Then the final scene begins – another birthday celebration. It passes in absolute silence. On the stage are all the players except from the Son.

After a short moment the Son comes on stage and says only one word: «Father!»

After this word, the scene and the game ends. ■

Summary

Preparation

Dividing of roles and deciding the most expressive attribute of the Father's character.

First act

Begins with the celebration of the Son's birth, continues with the Son's birthday parties.

Building of conflict between Father and Son. Side characters playing members of the family support this conflict.

When the Son is standing, he is in the world of his own thoughts. Other players are frozen in space and time. This part ends when the Son has had enough and leaves home.

Second act

The Son celebrates his birthday with friends and colleagues.

The Father stands behind his back and can whisper to him, tell him what he thinks. He has the power to speak through the Son's mouth.

Again when the Son is standing, he is in the world of his own thoughts, but this time, the Father is present there too.

The Son starts to behave more like the Father in this act.

The game ends on the Son's initiative. He stands up, seats the Father on his chair and leaves. After a short moment he comes back and says only one word: «Father!» Thereby the game ends.



Larp-informed art movie

French artist Pierre Huyghe his film *The Host and the Cloud* at the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York this spring. The artist has been unavailable for comment, but the gallery confirms that «he definitely used these methods for directing the actors in *The Host and the Cloud*, LARP (Live action role playing) but also ARG (Alternate Reality Game).».

www.mariangoodman.com/exhibitions/2011-01-28_pierre-huyghe/

▼ Still image from «*The Host and the Cloud*» video installation. Marian Goodman Gallery.



The Belarusian Larpwriter Challenge

The competition invited Belarusian game authors to contribute short, re-playable larps discussing human rights and society. The best games will be played at the international larp festival Grenselandet 2011 in Oslo this fall.

▲ The winner will be announced after the jury has played the games at a larp festival in Minsk later this year. Photo: Rick Harris.

What's it like?

Norwegian company Relevant Film AS has been granted funds to do a pilot for a series on Norwegian larps and larping culture.

- The idea came to me a few years ago, when a former colleague told me about the larp «1942 – Someone to trust?» Her story of how she experienced being part of this larp, and how emotionally engaged she was when telling about it, made me curious, producer Hilde Nerland says.

- Who are the people who do larps, why do they do it and what's the scene like?

If you're interested in participating, please contact hilde.nerland@gmail.com or director Mari Finnestad at mari.finnestad@yahoo.com.

▼ Relevant Film aim to distribute their series on larp to a broad audience via one of the larger tv channels



Building a space ship

Swedish Project Horizon (projektet Horisont) aims to create an immersive and believable spaceship-interior for use in larps.

- Apart from the technical construction part of the project (building a spaceship), we are making a number of larps in the module, which take place in a post-apocalyptic, gritty,

low-tech and dark sci-fi-setting, says Joakim Andersson.

The module will be constructed in Stockholm, Sweden, but is planned to be deconstructable and movable, to run larps and games in on other locations in the future.

www.immersionisterna.wordpress.com



▲ Concept artwork and sketches for the ship's interior. Illustrations: Projektet Horisont



▲ Photo: Court of Moravia

www.larpvikend.cz/en

Follow Court of Moravia on Facebook or Twitter

Larpweekend

Larpweekend is an international chamber larp festival in Brno, Czech Republic. Its eight volume is going to take place on October 28th-30th and you can expect a wide range of games hosted in Czech or English from both local and foreign organizers.

This year, you can look forward to several new games including *The Rocker*, a game about a rock band behind the stage, and a still unnamed game about pirates and treasures with a spark of humour.

Dark Dungeons

Check out the blog «*The Blind GM*», in which the author relates the challenges of being a blind tabletop role player, including finding PDFs that are accessible to the visually impaired.

www.theblindgm.wordpress.com

▼ Photo: Flickr.com/Will Merydith



Shakespeare's System

TEXT | MATTHIJS HOLTER



■ Improvisation requires planning.

Nothing survives the social hierarchy of a theatre company - not even the elevated poetry of the Bard.

 t Knudepunkt 2011, I participated in «The Grand Mechanism», a game about a theatre company faced with an immediate crisis. The game entailed running around on a make-believe stage, highlighting the absurd status hierarchies of the company, reciting selected Shakespeare monologues, and dying. Luckily, death wasn't usually permanent.

We asked Johanna MacDonald, co-developer of the game, to describe the concept. Sit down awhile; and let us once again assail your ears.

– The world of Kings and slaves is mapped on to a theatre company: the Artistic Director is the King, then comes the Director, Producer, Designers, Actors (who are divided into lead actors and bit parts), and the Assistant, who is basically everybody's dog. These characters attempt to do what they do best: put on a Shakespeare performance. However, a crisis in the working conditions leads them to start plotting, collaborating, and overthrowing each other in their attempt to survive. Eventually, the Artistic Director is found guilty and is executed. A new Artistic Director takes control, and they begin all over again. Lather, rinse, repeat.

Before the game, all the participants rehearsed chosen Shakespeare monologues. I went for a piece of Hamlet - the one that starts with «What a piece of work is a man!» One of the high points, for me, was the opportunity to recite Shakespeare - while people had to shut up and listen. (Oh! Will nobody understand us wannabe actors?)

– Without the monologues, Grand Mechanism the game is a comedy. The elevated, poetic, and tragic language can zap a scene from silly hilarity to incredibly touching pathos. It's quite astounding when it works, but one of the things we're trying to work out is how much players should have to prepare in order to play the game. Obviously learning a Shakespeare text is a bit of work. We're also considering whether another player offstage can speak the text for the player onstage, so it becomes a clear commentary on the situation.

One thing I struggled with at Knudepunkt was the tiny stage. Trying to keep within the confines without crashing into the other participants, attempting to face the audience (which was all around me), all the while keeping my attention on the game itself.

– The small, strange stage is a huge feature. It mainly arose from the desire to play in the round plus the reality of our very small, very low theatre space. In the end, the frankly masochistically small proportions of the stage had a massive effect on how the game worked. It limited the number of people onstage and made us create theatrical rules based on people's physical locations in the space. >>

THE GRAND MECHANISM (SUURI KONEISTO)

- ♦ Performance concept
- ♦ Designed by director Jani-Petteri Olkkonen, with Johanna MacDonald and Aarni Korpela.
- ♦ First performed on Night of the Arts, 2005
- ♦ Will be published as a handbook for game masters



The world of Kings and slaves is mapped on to a theatre company: the Artistic Director is the King.



▲ Even if you choreograph the fight, you might still end up losing.



What a piece of work is a man! How noble in Reason!

I was surprised, after such a mostly light-hearted experience, to hear about the designers' inspirations and influences.

- Some of the early philosophical bases included Nietzsche, the man working to overcome himself and morality. Also there was Jan Kott, a Polish writer whose book «Shakespeare our Contemporary» was a large influence, particularly his take on the history plays. Kott saw the mechanism of power in these plays, a staircase that one climbs and climbs until one is finally pushed off the edge to destruction; a cycle that repeated endlessly and without real variation.
- For Grand Mechanism II, director Jani-Petteri Olkkonen added ideas from the works of the french historian Rene Girard concerning violence, mimetic desire, and the scapegoat. In a nutshell, there's the idea that in a society, desire for objects, people and status is born out of seeing others who have those things. Gradually, everyone desires what everyone else desires, but because not everyone can have it, violence ensues. Normally, a social hierarchy keeps this mimetic desire from getting out of hand, but at some point it becomes too much and the hierarchy flattens; everyone takes what they can, and chaos reigns until someone is blamed: the scapegoat. The scapegoat is sacrificed, order is re-established, and the cycle reset to run again.

In the Grand Mechanism, the scapegoat is the Artistic Director. Hence the earlier title of the game, «The Artistic Director must die!»

It's a very tightly structured game, with more rules than your typical impro game. I had some trouble keeping track of everything at Knudepunkt, and was happy to have the instructors there to remind us of the details. They seemed to know everything by heart, but...

- I am the queen of forgetting the rules. One nice thing about playing it, though, is that I'd always forget the rules but come up with absolutely wild plot elements, whereas someone else who might not be so flash with ridiculous plots would be good at making sure they kept things like time and place consistent in the game. In the end, both people help the story equally.
 - One thing we've noticed is that it's easier for people to play if there are about two people who are experienced at it - and it's best if they play the highest and lowest status characters, because the fate of both of these is more or less fixed, and they are most useful to the story in providing suggestions and plots. It's everybody in the middle who has to watch their backs for real!
- So is there a difference between playing with larpers and professional actors?
- If we're talking about imagination, fun, ability to tell stories, and general entertainment value, there's not much of a difference at all. The main differences I see are mostly technical: actors, having spent a lot of time rehearsing, playing, and improvising with each other, become much better at reading each other and playing as an ensemble, but if



▲ The higher the status, the more amusing the fall.

a group of larpers played Grand Mechanism consistently, they'd also do this. Another main point is the fact that in the game, nobody is watching who is not also playing. This engages the «audience» in a completely different way. Our rehearsals felt much more like play to me, whereas in the performances there was real pressure to deliver something amazing all the time, never ever to lose the plot or make a mistake, and to play together beautifully. It was as much hell as fun.

– Another thing we were also able to do as actors was rehearse certain things to a reliable degree — for instance, the stage fight. We had a stick fight, and even that was a bit improvised, because we had three different choreographies, and you communicated which one you were going to do to your partner by the location you were standing onstage. Also, it meant that some Shakespearean dialogues were possible.

Even though the actors rehearse extensively, the performance is fully improvised.

– This is what amazes people: the only thing we fixed at the beginning of the show was who was going to start it and which entrance to the stage they used. The first person had time to think of an opening crisis, but never told the others



Everyone takes what they can, and chaos reigns until someone is blamed: the scapegoat.

what it was. We had doubles of all the costume elements placed near all the entrances so you could grab the Artistic Director jacket or the Director sweater in a flash and run onstage. The timing varied wildly even though we tried to keep it tight - we always did two rounds plus the prologue, and it could have run anywhere from almost two hours to nearly three.

– There was no audience participation in Grand Mechanism II, although we were often very close to them and speaking intimately.

What sort of disasters do people come up with?

– One of my favourites had to be an Artistic Director who flooded the theatre when his massive, secret aquarium burst, killing the poor mermaid (object of his sexual perversity, of course) who had lived inside. There was a child porn ring, a designer who moved an entire suburb to house the show in a canyon, a reality TV crew filming the lives of the theatre workers; someone outsourced the whole company to China, someone sold the whole company to China, there were cyborgs... and I seem to remember some disaster involving an entire stage covered in butter. Someone fell into the tuba in the orchestra and died on the way to hospital. And, not least, plain old back-stabbing ambition.

If you're lucky, you were one of the participants at this year's Ropecon - which takes place as this article is being written. Whether you were or not, you might be able to get your hands on the handbook, which is being published in the near future.

*But let this same be presently perform'd,
Even while men's minds are wild; lest more mischance
On plots and errors, happen. ■*



Polish Steam Pulp Fantasy

Wolsung: Steam Pulp Fantasy is a roleplaying game of cinematic action set in the daring times of the Magical-Industrial Revolution. The setting is an alternative Earth in the fantastic 19th Century. The game is due in English from Studio 2 Publishing, probably sometime in the 4th quarter of this year.

www.steampulpfantasy.com

◀ A brave RTKA agent stands against the remnants of the Undead Reich. Illustration: Piotr Szot

Can I Be With You?

Sweden-based artist Oak Wattanai Chanakot is performing a «participatory process work where individuals are invited to experience a close relationship of their choice with me for a short period of time».

- The participants, who answer an advertisement posted in public forums, describe the plot and the character that I play. The setting of the performance can be in personal private or public places, the artist says.
- The goal of the performance is to be together as in a close relationship. After each performance, my participant and I would discuss and reflect on our experience.



▲ I have done several roles since June 2011. - For 2 hours to a weekend, I had been a brother, a friend, a boyfriend and something in-between!, Chanakot explains. Here seen in one of his performances.
Photo: Oak Wattanai Chanakot

www.klyth.com



The Dream of a King and other tales

- The scenarios competing in the Danish role-playing convention Fastaval are reputed to be among the best in the world, yet they're rarely played outside Denmark because they're mostly in Danish, says editor Juhana Pettersson.

Unelma Keltaisesta kuninkaasta ja muita tanskalaisia roolipelejä (The Dream of a King in Yellow and other Danish roleplaying games) is a collection of Fastaval scenarios translated into Finnish. It's the first time Fastaval scenarios have been published as a collection in any foreign language.

◀ The cover of the book, by Joel Sammallahhti, based on the game Arken by Alex Uth.

Mittelpunkt 2012

Mittelpunkt is the international live roleplay conference of the german LARP association. From 13th to 15th January 2012 in Mainz (near Frankfurt/Main).

Some of the program items will be held in English.

www.larp-mittelpunkt.de

The Danish Node

Forum, 16-18 September, is the Danish version of Knudepunkt.

www.forum2011.dk

Social Observance

A game about the lives of strangers

TEXT | ALLY NAUSS

ILLUSTRATION | KARINA GRAJ

Each player begins with five points.

Characters: Each player chooses one person in the local vicinity. This is your character.

Stage One: Name your character. The other players vote on how well your name «fits» the character (Example: Older gentleman with cowboy hat and mustache could be «Wyatt», «Bill», or «Senor Montoya»). Each player gives a point of approval if they would like to. Players may bid points to change the name or add to the name. Their addition is truth if the player takes the points.

Stage Two: Backstory. Where is your character from? Name a state, province, country, planet... whatever you best feel describes the origin of your character. What do they do for a living? Add a detail about the person's home life for color. «Wyatt is a horse-rancher from Montana. He has a large family, though his children are grown and have gone on to become doctors, lawyers, or politicians. Only Wyatt and his wife, Lenora are left on the ranch.» You may use up to five sentences. Each other player may give you one of their points if they liked the premise. Add the points to your score, but be sure to keep track of where the points came from.

Best served in a coffee shop, on a train, in a park, or any area in which you can see and converse about people without them necessarily knowing. I am not responsible should anyone be injured by strangers which DO overhear you. Play at your own risk.

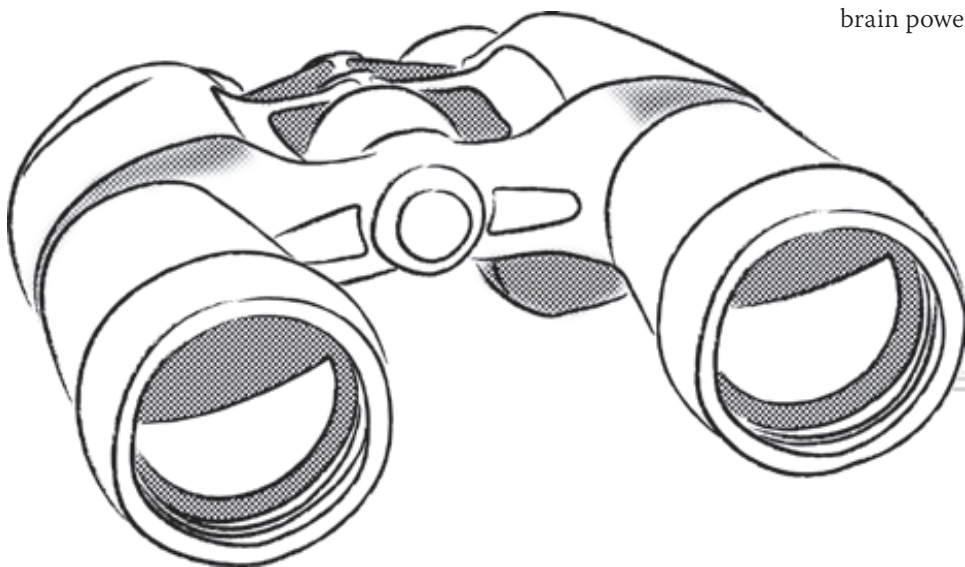
Stage Three: Inter-connectivity. Choose another player's character. Tell how that character is involved with yours. Julie, the budding art student, met Wyatt's daughter in college. She learned that Wyatt was in town to see family and is meeting him to ask for Wyatt's daughter's hand in marriage. You may take a point from that

player. If the player objects, they must spend two points to propose a different story. The other players vote in this case for the best story by casting their points.

Stage Four: Future of the character. Choose another character. Decide the character's fate! Mark the architect continues to numb his pain through alcohol. He becomes an alcoholic, destroying his life from the inside out. Ten years later he is seen at the train station asking passers-by if they have a quarter. Take a point from that person. This player may not object directly, but he or she may petition or bribe another player to propose an alternate end. That player may then spend one of his or her points to tell how their character changes the course of events.

Tally up the points and brag to your friends about your creative brain powers!

*+ Every player who got at least one point from every other player gets 5 bonus points
+ Every player who got points from all but one player gets 3 bonus points
+ Players whose character's future is grim receive 2 bonus points*



Recipes for Revolution

Participatory magic, screaming and mad science:
The reports on 2010 are in.

TEXT | ANDERS NYGAARD

DO/TALK/THINK LARP

- ♦ Editors: Lars Andresen et alii; Claus Raasted; Christian Bierlich et alii
- ♦ 217/139/237 pages
- ♦ Copenhagen, Rollespilsakademiet 2011
- ♦ www.knudepunkt.org
- ♦ www.rollespilsakademiet.dk/kpbooks

The Knudepunkt books are strange birds in the world of books. They're hard to get, but downloadable for free. Idiosyncratically and sometimes erratically edited, of no fixed publisher or printing house. An annual bibliographical vagrant. An academic microcosm for a form no university would harbour.

There's been one anthology every year for a long time now. To those without a headful of extreme live roleplaying, their usefulness is somewhat limited by physical accessibility, jargon, and focus. A few bits and pieces kept trickling out to the hoi polloi, often with the serial numbers filed off. Creative agendas, little tricks, grand dreams.

I've mostly been sitting in my basement pretending to be an elf while other people were doing all this important work. But I have absorbed the impression that people expect these books to reflect what's been going on in the European roleplayer community. And even if they really do not, there are bound to be fresh ideas in them pages. Having decided to get in on this thing late rather than never, I navigated to the download site for this year's Knudepunkt book.

Turns out that this year, there are three books. Even better: These three books do not agree. The editors all want different things, and the contributors are even less inclined to conformity.

There are some big bad fuck-you's, some needling, a bit of whining, but also a lot of standing together as a coherent whole. This little stack of books has the friendly meanness of the *badkhn*, the ghetto jester that would one day give rise to the social train-wreck humour of Seinfeld.

Let's have a look at them one by one. They're collected in the themes *Do*, *Talk* and *Think* - texts about organizing games, texts expressing opinions about games, and academic texts on games.

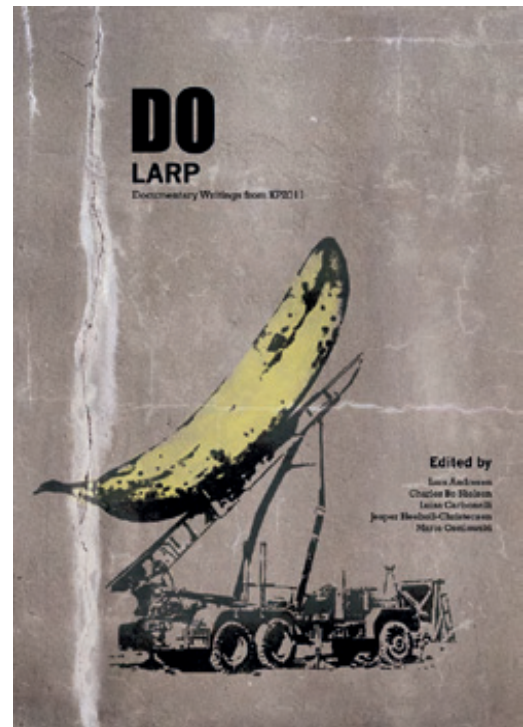
Doing

These are reports on a number of experiments in live role-playing, with a wide variety of agendas: Improving the player experience of a standard-issue Danish fantasy game, combining a pervasive-gaming marketing stunt and the activation of a set of political ideas, a poststructuralist experiment in the mechanics of the exercise of power, and so on and so forth. However, I suspect that if you lap up every page of this book, it will at first be out of curiosity, not to learn how to stage your own game.

Even a dice-fondler like me has heard and talked about some of these projects, and seeing them laid out like this is like having a curtain finally torn away. The book is packed with fairly well-written and extremely useful reflections on gaming techniques in practice. If I could want anything more from this, it would simply be even more detail, and some more concise comments pointing forward, to reapplication and remixing of the major and minor achievements made by these projects. This book will be genuinely useful, if organizers can be persuaded to make use of it.

The editors say that they want blueprints, presumably on the pattern used in tabletop games - texts you can pick up and use to stage your own. It's a doable, if unorthodox, challenge for live roleplaying.

«Unorthodox»? Compare these attempts at producing game blueprints to the equivalent texts for tabletop games.



The genre has spawned countless publishing businesses. They build games for resilience and durability by emphasising an almost authoritarian flavour of designer and organiser control, where the «game» becomes completely identified with the text as a piece of merchandise. In contrast, the role of designer in a live game easily disappears, dissolved in or replaced by a collectives of organisers - there is no vacant space for a pure designer in traditional live games. Even so, tabletop and live organisers are surprisingly often in agreement, identifying the game as the act of playing; only tabletop designers and publishers appear to think of the game and the documentation as the same thing. Something to learn for practitioners of both genres here. >>



The role of designer
in a live game easily
disappears.



Organising a game is not a customer service job.

Talking

This feisty little thing comes off as a kind of self esteem exercise for the network of organisers and players who attend the Knudepunkt conventions. It's exactly as ranty as promised in the foreword, sometimes politely, sometimes internet-post-like, sometimes the True Thing of hell-fire and damnation. An avalanche of ideas. I'm an easily swayed soul, and feel myself thrown and buffeted by new and contradictory convictions every other paragraph.

Buck up and stop your whining, it says. Know where you stand, and where you come from. Do games, do participatory art, not sociology or performance art. The constant problem of social inbreeding is addressed; leave your circle, get out in the real world, apply what you have found in the game. Do art for a reason.

The participatory aspect of gaming comes up again and again; you have got to be your own game master, take responsibility for your own fun. It shouldn't be necessary for Simon Järvelä and Niina Niskanen to point out that organising a game is not a customer service job; that a game demands player participation. Gabriel Widing even tries to pull our little escapist noggins out of our collective rec-tum to look at the greater picture, wiring the potential of roleplaying into a dream of making a difference in a failing world. There are good points there, but the writer sticks his head back in before forming any clear opinions on anything beyond the circle of games. Good start, though. Games are big. Games are important. You, yes, you, dear reader, can do great things using games.

An article telling me to Take Responsibility slaps me awake; roleplaying is eminently susceptible to subversion, so, yeah, fuck those games where all you do is wallow in social responsibility, gorging on misery. Design for the form. Games are there to be hacked; if they are hacker proof, they are no longer games. Maybe a zen of creative agenda

is needed; do not try to impose an agenda, for it will be subverted.

The Non-United Larp States of America provides a snapshot of the surface of an alien planet. Live games became something different in the US, and they kept failing in spectacular ways. Why do I so seldom hear about European larp disasters? Are they but whispered legends at the meetings I don't get invited to? There's that long shadow of inbreeding again, cast across the field of discourse, obscuring it.

Are we seeing the growth pains of a formerly closed circle? Symptoms of the development of genre and style preferences, of unbridgeable political and artistic differences? Or a widening generation gap, with the older gang pulling up their ladder before the new guys can get a hold? Or is there an old school revival coming on in live roleplaying? If so, do talk to the tabletop guys; they've got a whole stable of people who have been doing that thing with a worrying, paladin-like zeal for years. It sure surprised me that the art is now old enough to have forgotten techniques and old perspectives left discarded at its roots; surely there's more material to work with and reinvent there.

Among the the more introverted contributions, you will find texts using the dictionary of factionalism; texts which try to draw up borders between roleplayers and the mainstream, and between groups of roleplayers. These are good too; certainly important in their own way. However, I suspect they can get a bit boring for those of us who do not give a single fuck about this or that circle of happy weirdoes. This kind of thing is an exercise which seems meaningless in the puddle that is participatory art. People would never get this way about book genres or pictorial art forms, would they? Or if they did, it would be a bit creepy.

Oh. Okay, they do, and that is a bit creepy. Should roleplaying be different? Is it?

Thinking

More people should read academic articles. Really; if you ignore the footnotes, and make sure you take regular breaks to avoid falling asleep, they're the most interesting and useful stuff you will ever get at. Do it, and you might just get to watch and marvel at all the minuscule cogs and gears of the great machinery of human knowledge at work. Perhaps begin to understand the vastness of the grand conversation buzzing all around you, across the centuries, maintaining the little circle of firelight known as human civilisation.

Here's what seems to be an oral history of Danish larpdom. Someone's been talking to the Japanese about roleplaying, and actually found real answers that are not entirely hot air and orientalist speculation. Here are the strange and complicated unwritten rules of gender-bending in roleplaying games, and roleplaying seen through the not-always-but-sometimes-helpful filter of performance art studies.

The thinking book is clearly about doing things to roleplaying, not with it. The editors have called for papers describing roleplaying using established scientific disciplines, not the specific subset of game studies concerned with live action roleplaying. Well done.

This is the real thing. Closed call for papers, peer review, proper annotations; and in reading, it quickly becomes clear that there is a lot of Science to be done to roleplaying. The contributions suggest that roleplaying may be a rich source of data for researchers, data which cannot be had in any other way. If I was a social science guy, I'd be busy designing a swarm of sadistic little experimental designs with roleplaying right now.

Come to think about it, who cares about qualifications? Let's just throw the switch and see what happens. ■



There is a lot of
Science to be done to
roleplaying.



Fabricated Realities

The art of playing inside a work of art

TEXT | MATTHIJS HOLTER

PHOTO | GRACE DUDA, BEN ROBBINS, LUKAS MYHAN



It's not real roleplaying if there isn't a castle to pillage. Uh, defend.

Behind every great game master, there's a lion! Or a zebra.



Board game time! The rhino disapproves.
«THIS IS NOT ART!»

FABRICATED REALITIES

What: Roleplaying event held in an art studio

Where: Olympia, Washington, USA

When: This past June - but there's talk of doing one next year

Web: www.fabricatedrealities.com



«**R**etreat to the city of Olympia. Inhabit, for a weekend, these fabricated realities.» For three days in June, roleplayers were invited to The Procession of the Species Studio in Olympia, Washington, to play inside works of art. Local artists had created a collection of fantastic environments, such as a crystal cavern, a dark forest and a post-apocalyptic café. Within each setting there were gaming tables.

How did the physical surroundings and the context of playing in a gallery affect the roleplaying experience? One player recounts on the Story Games forum how their game involved a «naturalist aesthetic movement that was corrupted and overthrown by Atheistic Art Anarchists.» Says

another, «How could we *not* make a game about art transforming society?»

The small event (with «extremely limited space») attracted a varied crowd. There were experimental game designers running their latest creations, fun-loving gamers who just wanted to hang out and play, and first-time roleplayers. A fruitful mix, apparently - says one first-timer: «It is refreshing and exciting to be around such smart people... and of course people who are a bit outside of society».

We can only agree with this summing-up from one of the people who weren't there: «Dude, I have no idea what is going on in these pictures. But I want to come next year.»



Some games played at Fabricated Realities

The Dreaming Crucible

Growing up is trauma. Maturity is bought with blood. You will find it – in a land where magic dwells and enchantment rules.

www.storybythethroat.wordpress.com/games

Microscope

Explore an epic history of your own creation, hundreds or thousands of years long, all in an afternoon.

www.lamemage.com

Monsterhearts

Most teenagers get to grow up without encountering anything more alarming than gang violence, cocaine overdoses and chlamydia. Too bad you're not most teenagers. You're something much worse.

www.buriedwithoutceremony.com/games-in-playtesting/monsterhearts/

Fuck Youth

Imagine that you draw the essence from your own youth. You boil out the juices of the billowing leaves and make an elixir that gives you all of it, refined.

www.norwegianstyle.wordpress.com/2007/12/06/fruit-hangs-heavy/

Kagematsu

A wayward ronin fleeing a troubled past comes to a village in danger. Several young women conspire among themselves to win his affections and steer him to their cause...

www.sites.google.com/site/creamaliengames/Home/kagematsu-the-rpg

The First Time I Ever



TEXT | SANNE HARDER

PHOTO | BJARKE PEDERSEN, JACOB MØLRIS, RASMUS HØGDALL

Games and death walk hand in hand. Why do we love dying?

I experienced my first death in 1997 at a Danish larp called *En Saga fra Evigheden IV* (*A Saga from Eternity*).

I was a young gypsy woman, and I was trying to add a deeper narrative to the otherwise fairly meager story arch. I had spent the better part of the game cooking up an improvised prophecy that somehow related to the pantheon of the game world, and had gleaned from some of the organizers' conversations that there was going to be a big battle towards the end. So I carefully devised an epic ending that would shatter the heavens and tie up all the story lines I had put into play.

However, on my way to the battlefield, I ran into (or rather: Was run into by) a small, obese fellow with a crushed velvet robe and baby pink latex gloves. His hit and run routine included yelling «die» into my stricken face, before he slammed his gloved palm against my back and continued towards the next unsuspecting victim.

Furious and on the brink of tears, I left the game. One of the organizers heard what had happened, and tried to persuade me to come back. He knew the wizard who had so nonchalantly put an end to my character's life. «He's an

asshole», he said by way of explanation. I'd been the victim of bad roleplaying.

But I couldn't go back to the game - it just wouldn't be the same. I knew in my heart that my gipsy girl was dead.

Dying again and again

Dying has always been an integral part of roleplaying, be it larping or table top games. This is something roleplaying has in common with most computer games. Death might be the ultimate failure - and yet by the time you have played for as long as I have, you will have experienced countless deaths.

Julian Dibbell, acclaimed writer and contributing editor for *Wired* magazine, has dedicated his career to cultural studies of digital societies. This April he gave a lecture on death in games at the Center for Computer Games Research (an institute at the IT University in Copenhagen).

«Dying is an exhilarating experience», says Dibbell. Naturally he's not referring to actual dying, but dying in games.

Dying as part of a game is a fairly new invention, which came with the first computer games in the late sixties. Julian Dibbell attributes

>>

BOLVAERK

- ♦ www.Bolvaerk.dk
- ♦ Danish larp
- ♦ **Date:**
3.-5. October 2008
- ♦ **Organizers:**
Kasper Friis Hansen
Anders Rasmussen
Søren Ebbehøj
- ♦ **Organization:**
Rollespilsfabrikken
- ♦ **Participants:**
45 players
42 helpers/NPCs
- ♦ **Budget:**
App. 7000 Euro



Dying is an exhilarating experience.



Dying is a better experience than killing.



this to computer games originally being developed in a military context. The same goes for early roleplaying games such as Dungeons and Dragons, which developed from war games, which again were originally table top re-enactments of battles.

Diegetic death

Historically, death was not part of the games themselves, but a consequence of losing. In gladiator fights during the Roman era, the loser was often punished with death. The same was the case in Mayan football: A risky deal, which ended with the losing team sacrificing one of its members.

In recent times, death has become somewhat less literal. But it has also become diegetic: That is, it has become an integral part of the game itself. When space fighters in EVE online fly across the heavens, they can expect to be shot down in large numbers. Only by attempting to reach your goal again and again will you get to that spectacular moment, that one time out of many, where you survive.

The ultimate kick

What is it that draws us to death? Niklas Ravaja, PhD, from Helsinki School of Economics has lead a project called «The fun of gaming: Measuring the human experience of media enjoyment» (FUGA), in which the test subjects' responses to playing computer games was recorded and classified. In short, the objective of the project was to map which elements of gaming are the most fun! Oddly enough the project con-

cluded that dying is a better experience than killing.

Neither Dr Ravaja or Julian Dibbell have any real explanation to why dying is so much fun. «The tension of being hunted is released when dying», says Dibbell. Maybe the sheer pleasure of being off the hook releases endorphins. Or maybe it's the feeling of adrenaline pulsing through your body.

The mechanics of death

In computer games, you distinguish between two types of death.

One is the kind of death where your character will be resurrected soon after his death. Usually there's a period between death and resurrection where the avatar is outside the game. You become invisible to the other players and maybe even unable to communicate. The other, however, is perma death – the permanent and irrevocable death of a character. The latter is so hard to deal with for the player that he/she might give up on the game. In roleplaying perma death is usually practiced in table top campaigns or in one-shot scenarios.

While the avatar or role does not necessarily reflect who the player is, there is always a bond – an emotional investment that makes the death of a character difficult to cope with.

Playing to lose

Getting the player's consent before you kill him is a way of handling perma death which makes it easier to handle. Contrary to most computer games, roleplaying isn't necessarily about winning, and the intentional death of a character might even enhance the experience of playing if it happens under the right circumstances.

While there are still xp (experience point) contests held on and around gaming conventions, most roleplaying is moving towards becoming a lesson in co-operation, where players need to overcome a mutual enemy. In the Scandinavian tradition, roleplaying is gradually sliding from the end of the game part of the spectrum towards a more plot-

oriented praxis. With this the focus shifts from winning a game towards telling epic stories. And what could be more epic than death?

At the Danish larp Bolvaerk in 2009, the whole concept of the game was for the players to lose their lives in an epic, yet gruesome manner. Players who signed up for the larp were prepared for this and even looked forward to the experience of dying.

During the larp, the players spent the first day as soldiers marching through an uninviting landscape. When they reached their destination, a fort, they found the bowels of their predecessors distributed all over what was to become their final refuge against the enemy: An enemy that turned out to possess supernatural powers, and in the face of which the characters were helpless. At the end of the scenario, almost all 45 characters had reached the initial goal: They had perished.

What's with the death drive?

Julian Dibbell asks: Why are gamers so focused on dying? He revisits a term from ludology called «ilinx», which was coined by French sociologist and philosopher Roger Caillois. Caillois worked to map the common denominators between games in different cultures and contexts, and found ilinx to be one such element. He defined it as a sort of vertigo; a voluntary attempt to destroy the stability of perception, and a panic inducing state. We experience the thrill of ilinx when driving at great speed, or when smashing up things.

Apparently human beings like to be pushed over the edge. Maybe it makes us feel more alive. The challenge is to remain in control in the face of absolute loss.

Death in the future

Computer games and roleplaying games give us the possibility of toying with death – of living out the ultimate challenge. «They allow us to play exactly the kind of games we want», says Julian Dibbell. «This ultimate simulation challenges the idea of mortality». He toys with thoughts of the future: Maybe we will be able to upload our consciousness, William Gibson-style, go die a physical death just for kicks, and then grow a new body. ■

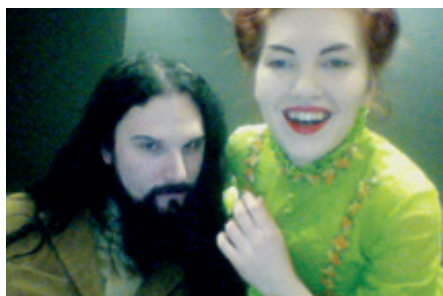


What could be more epic than death?

FLATLINER

A term coined by American cyberpunk writer William Gibson. It is used in his bestseller *Neuromancer* about an uploaded consciousness.

What's new in transmedia?



Martin Ericsson has left The Company P to establish Bardo AB.

- We will be writing, designing, mentoring and producing hard-to-define, live, pervasive or transmedial games. Preferably stuff that makes people want to cry, fuck or blow shit up, says Ericsson.

Bardo is Martin Ericsson (a.k.a. Elricsson) and Adriana Skarped (a.k.a. Daggenfelt), the creative couple behind International Emmy Award winning participation drama «The Truth About Marika» (produced by SVT). Martin has

worked as a creative director and designer with Christopher Sandberg's The Company P for almost five years, writing, designing and running game-like projects.

Bardo has been contracted to produce and run «quality participation» (including a documented larp, some live events and an online mystery) for The Artists (see Playground #2).

www.bardo23.blogspot.com

◀ Ericsson and his partner in crime Adriana Skarped. Photo: Martin Ericsson

Understockholm

Swedish Understockholm is a larp campaign inspired by Neil Gaiman's Neverwhere.

- We aim to tell a dark and urban fairy tale about the part of Stockholm that lives in the shadows, the tunnels, the forgotten alleys and beneath, above, around our everyday Stockholm, says organizer Sofia Stenler.

It's possible to play groups from other cities, eg the Danish East Indian Company, as well as English speaking groups from Understockholm.

www.understockholm.se



◀ ▲ An Understockholm-dweller at Plattan, central Stockholm. Photo: Niclas Lundborg



▲ The next Board Game and RPG Cruise will depart from Texas on January the 21st, heading for Mexico.

www.gameradventures.com

Gaming at the High Seas

Ever dreamed of combining your passion for role playing and board games with a Caribbean cruise?

- Gamer Adventures began as a experiment about taking games on vacation. It has developed into a full-service travel agency that caters to gamers and their families, says Kimberly Maita at Gamer Adventures.

- At this time, we are organizing 3 to 4 cruises per year in addition to land tours.

Got Things?

Please let us know at

tips@playgroundmagazine.net

No Dice, No Table

TEXT | MICHAEL WENMAN

Is it a larp? Is it a roleplaying game? No! It is... Australian Freeform!

“

There is a game with a few vacancies at a role-playing convention. You haven't booked anything in for this session, but the game is a bit different from anything else you've tried before. You read the quick blurb; the description of the game involves a cross-over between two American television shows that you are reasonably familiar with, *Stargate* and the *X Files*. The game's organiser is looking for two or three extra players, but they could handle an extra dozen if anyone's interested.

You decide to play; it can't be that different to anything else you've played during this convention. Besides, you've heard the screams, cheers and raucous laughter that have come from games like these in the past. Through those doors you can see at least twenty people, some of them dressed up in costume, some not; all of them wearing name badges and reading through pages that look like film scripts.

Roleplaying comes in many forms. In Australia, the dominant form of roleplaying revolves around the traditional concepts of sitting around a table with a game master, using dice (or cards or some other randomising mechanism) to tell a story. The vast majority of games take place in people's homes, but there has been a thriving community of conventions across the major cities of the country, some of these

conventions having a history stretching back over 25 years or more. It is at these conventions where Australian game design has tried to publically push new boundaries, and it is here where new play styles are put to the test with groups as small as one or two players, or crowds of a hundred or more. At the larger side of these groups are the «Freeforms».

Most players don't know much about these other styles of play when first introduced to the style known as «Freeforming», but this style of play draws many newcomers to its doors, with players often deciding to take the plunge if they have a session to spare at a convention. Within a matter of hours they are taught a very different type of roleplaying.

Freeform is free:

Most of the information included here is anecdotal. Research into the field of Australian Freeforming can prove difficult because the very nature of the genre is not to use established rule sets. Every game is different, often a standalone story with a specific set of interlinked characters and possibly a quirky mechanism used to resolve supernatural abilities or physical conflicts. If you want more information beyond what is provided here, the best method of research is probably to visit some Australian roleplaying game convention websites to find contact details for freeform writers; most freeform writers are more than willing to share their games or information about them.





In larger games there may be a dozen or more game masters.

The head GM gives you a list of available characters, and once you've made a selection, she provides you with a character sheet describing a local cop who has seen strange and unexplained events. No, she actually hands you three sheets. One with a description of the settings, one with a description of the people your character knows and what is thought about them, and a third sheet describing your objectives for the session. You look for a list of skills, maybe some attributes or any kind of numbers, but there is nothing... so you think about the way a character like this might be portrayed on the television shows and you read between the lines. There are a few people who have beaten up your character and for that reason you don't like them, so it's probably safe to say that this character would seriously get hurt if a fight broke out, but the character sheet says that you have a gun and you've been given six cards indicating that they are «single-use bullets». On an X-Files episode, this character would probably be portrayed as a minor clue in the series of interviews conducted by the field agents, on a Stargate episode they'd probably be a part of the unnamed masses fighting against an alien menace. So you could probably

play this character as a low profile figure, but you know that this character has good problem solving abilities. There seem to be a few good story hooks that could make this character pivotal in the story. That gives you a bit of a strategy and a way to achieve your objectives.

Freeform Inspirations

Australian Freeform roleplaying draws from a very different range of inspirations to its tabletop cousin. If tabletop roleplaying derives from dice, miniatures and wargames,

freeforming derives from improvisational theatre and re-enactment groups like the Society for Creative Anachronism² with their costume and drama. Because of these different origins, freeform games often feel different to tabletop games. If traditional tabletop games are driven by adventure and combat, with characters defined through their combat prowess, numbered attributes and equipment lists, Freeform games tend to be social affairs where characters are primarily defined through their relationships, then by their objectives and finally by their preferred methods of achieving those goals or reinforcing those relationships.

The genre of Australian Freeform roleplaying is a style of roleplaying that certainly isn't for everyone. Those players who thrive on drama tend to do well in a freeform situation, while those who prefer to play a game and roll dice find themselves lost in a freeform gaming environment because there are no rules for them manipulate or hide behind.

In Australia, the style of play known as Freeforming rose to prominence at roleplaying conventions in the 1980s¹, though there are anecdotal stories of earlier events which may have evolved into the style. Over the years, freeform roleplaying and tabletop roleplaying in Australia have fed into on another, creating a spectrum of play styles ranging from tactical miniatures combat where a player controls a single figure, through to the tabletop styles where figures aren't used, then onward through to styles where players act out dramatic scenes, live games with occasional fallback onto dice or cards as a randomising mechanic and through to «real» freeforming where costuming is encouraged, and dice aren't seen at all. In the late 1990's, with the rise of the world wide web, Australian Freeforming came into contact with other live roleplaying traditions around the world, at a similar time White Wolf's «Mind's Eye Theatre» brought tabletop style rules to live action roleplaying (much to the annoyance of many Freeformers who had been enjoying the creative freedom of live gaming without rules for over a decade).

■ Costume is optional, and most of the set is in the players' heads.



Mastering the game

To many people, Australian Freeforming is closer to a young boy's games of «cops and robbers» and «cowboys and Indians», a young girl's «garden tea parties», or the more recent adult phenomenon of «Cosplay». Freeforms have very loose and informal rules (if they have rules at all), and for this reason physical conflict within the story is typically avoided. Freeforms do have gamemasters (GMs), but unlike traditional games where GMs spend their time arbitrating rules, weaving story and entertaining players, a Freeform's GMs can focus their attention on facilitating play, regulating the economies and social networks. In an Australian Freeform the GM is not a storyteller, they are an event manager; the story evolves directly as a consequence of the interacting players. The closest that these games have to a storyteller is the designer, it is in the design of the game that the character are assigned objectives, the history is set into place and the events of the game are put into motion.

In most cases, the game's designer is the ultimate arbiter of the event. They have pre-written all of the characters, they have decided when specific events might occur to change the dynamic of the event, they act as a coordinator and head GM. But once the event begins, anything can happen; the GMs and designer try to ensure it stays consistent and true to the genre conventions of

FIGHTING!

In a traditional tabletop game, the most complex rules often come from resolving moments of physical conflict, so many Freeform games reduce the need for traditional rules by conflict by setting the scene in a specific location where violence will cause more problems than it solves (perhaps they are in a prison setting and the only weapons are held by the GMs who also act as prison guards within the story), others may be more heavy handed in their approach by clearly defining a reason why characters must interact socially rather than violently (perhaps they are gods who cannot physically harm one another, and must deal through their mortal followers or must wheel and deal favours with one another). A GM in this style of game is intimately familiar with the characters, their relationships, the intended direction of the plot and their word is final; they often resolve any conflict based on their understanding of the characters, the entertainment value to the surrounding players and the direction that the story might take based on the outcome of the conflict.



Many consider freeforms to be an advanced form of roleplaying.

the setting, and hold the reins in an attempt to prevent the game from going too far off course. In smaller games, there may be two or three GMs, each talking to one another when they aren't resolving some kind of query or dispute; in larger games there may be a dozen or more GMs (the typical ratio is about 1 GM for every 5-10 players, plus the designer/head GM). Depending on the games design, each GM might be assigned a specific location within the game («You look after the police station», «You look after the crash site», «You look after the graveyard», «You act as a roving GM to cover everything else»), or GMs might be assigned a specific type of conflict to resolve («You handle the combats», «You handle the financial side of things», «You handle changes in character status»). Many times, players will handle some of these GMing duties as per their character instructions; the player of a courtier in a medieval freeform might be assigned the task of manipulating status, the player of the local banker might handle financial matters. Allowing players to take on these added responsibilities gives the remaining GMs more chance to shepherd the game toward an interesting dramatic outcome, rather than having them caught in minutiae. A good GM in this style of play is often considered to be the GM who does nothing but answer questions and help out when players need assistance.

In this style of game a few things are expected by the players, the GMs and





Pacing can make or break this style of game.

the designer. Knowledgeable players expect a play experience that reflects their understanding of the game's universe, novice players expect that they will learn something about the game universe by interacting with those more knowledgeable; both expect their actions to have some impact on the game and hope to have moments where their character will be prominent in a scene, or where their character actions will change the course of play in some way. GMs expect players to remain true to the characters they have been given, they have typically discussed the setting with the designer/head GM, they know how certain characters should be reacting toward one another and they have an understanding of how tasks completed might change the objectives of the players within the game (a freeform is a dynamic form of play, constantly changing throughout the session and things rarely end up the way they appeared at the beginning). The designer expects their GMs and players to keep the game running smoothly (to these ends they will often pick specific well-known players to take on certain key roles within their game, as well as having lengthy discussion with their GMs to plot out the most commonly expected event paths for the session).

You read through the setting for the game, it's fairly closely based on the

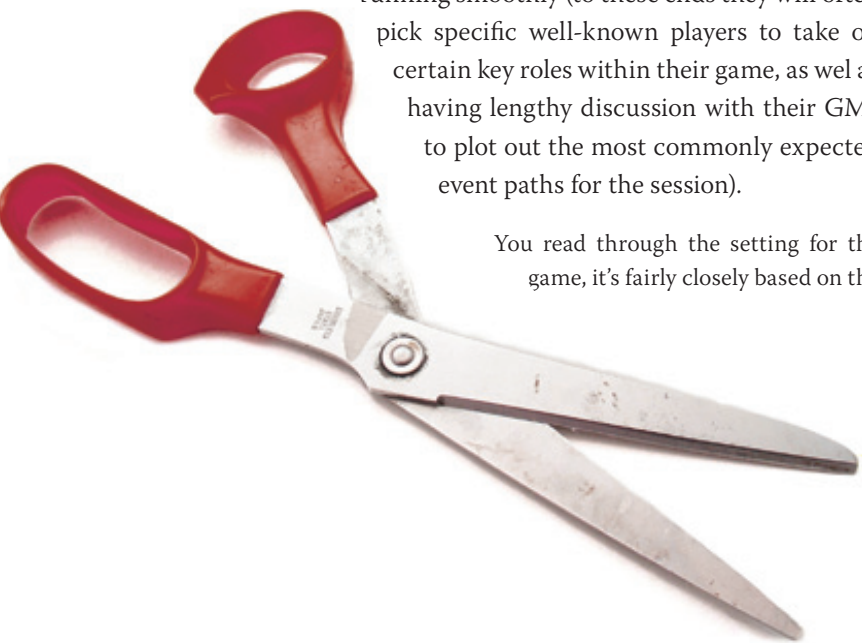
television shows you recognise, but a clever little justification is given to explain why the two TV shows are crossing over. You look at the relationships that your character has to the other characters around them and you look at the name badges that different players are wearing. The GM's have designated a few parts of the room as key locations in the two television shows...a local bar, a school, a coffee shop. You've still got a few minutes before the GMs call «Action» and the game properly starts, you think about the TV show and where your character is normally seen. You do a quick cross reference and see that a few of your favoured relationships for this game have gathered in a specific location. As you head across to those players, they look down at their character sheets and double check how they should be reacting to you.

Know your enemy, and whether you have any friends

Freeform games begin with a carefully constructed web of relationships, they may contain anywhere from ten players to over one hundred. To keep things manageable, most Freeforms are written in such a way that characters cluster together in factions. The players may be divided into factions sorted by family, religious ideology, occupation, sporting team, criminal ties or something else appropriate to the games genre. In some games, character may find themselves conflicted by loyalties to two or more factions or they may not be divided into factions at all.

Factions are often defined by closer relationships, though these relationships might come in the form of stronger friendships or nastier rivalries. Members of a faction also have a tendency to share links to a specific goal, perhaps they want to build an objective, destroy it, steal it, control it, prevent it from occurring or maybe they are conflicted about their attitude to the objective and they begin the game needing to decide on a course of action. Traditionally, a character will have three or more objectives for a session, one will be to gain an objective, another will be to keep an objective (or protect it), while a third will be to destroy an objective. Each of these will ally the character with certain others, and make them enemies among other characters.

This is not America: Australian Freeforming also encountered other roleplaying traditions called «freeform», creating a manner of confusion for people trying to create a standard lexicon for the hobby across the world. The North American definition of «freeform» roleplaying is used in some circles as a condescending term toward a style of gameplay employed by writers of fan fiction who take on a first person voice when writing their stories, among other groups it is simply the loose play style when players get into character and avoid rolling the dice.



Factions, relationships and objectives define the starting points of a Freeform game, but it is the choices of the characters and the unfolding events of the play session that push a story toward its climax. Some Freeforms are carefully written, aiming characters toward one another for dramatic impact, or to set up specific vignettes or scenes that will drive the narrative for the other players. Other Freeforms are written with specifically timed trigger points, perhaps an earthquake hits one hour into the session, or a portal to the spirit realm opens at the two hour mark. Events of this nature may prompt certain reactions from characters, perhaps forcing characters to make decisions about loyalties, creating moral dilemmas, or simply bringing new options to the table. If a character finds that their objective to protect an item is rendered irrelevant because it has been destroyed, now they must decide what to do about it...Does the character simply focus on their other goals? Do they seek revenge? Thus the players have to make decisions for their characters, and the choices they make could have repercussions that spread out across the remaining players. In most cases when a player finds that one of their goals has been rendered irrelevant by another player's actions, they have two or three other goals to pursue and these become more

important, or perhaps the loss of one objective triggers a new objective for the character. The situation and the play changes, the characters and their relationships evolve; the end of the session comes one step closer.

A well written freeform evolves these scenes naturally through the interaction of characters and players, such sessions require no intervention on the part of the GMs. In such games, the players always seem to have something to do, agendas to pursue and reasons to interact with other characters. But a well written freeform needs good players to achieve its maximum potential. If one player ignores their goals, it may make things harder for others to achieve theirs (or they may make other goals easier to achieve and thus cause certain events to trigger too early). Maintaining the flow of events is probably one of the hardest jobs of a GM in an Australian Freeform, and pacing is one of the factors that can make or break this style of game.

A good session can be still be achieved with a poorly written freeform if the GMs are enthusiastic and willing to run with the twists introduced by the players, prompt events of their own or coerce players into following goals that will lead to specific outcomes; these tend

to be less reliable in producing good story outcomes though (and this is where many players feel that they are losing control or becoming deprotagonised).
Poorly written Freeform



Here's Sydney. Sydcon and Eyecon take place here

Phenomenon is held in Canberra

In Melbourne we've got Arcanacon

Big Name Designers

The list of prominent game designers changes frequently. But some names have earned an almost legendary status with the Australian Freeform community. Foremost would be Robert Prior (who is reputed to have developed and refined the genre into its current form), Kyla Ward (who developed a number of well-remembered events in the mid 1980s when the genre was developing), Michael Hitchens (who ran the Necronomicon series of conventions where Freeform games were pushed to new heights and depths, depending on their degree of success). To get in contact with the current crop of Freeform writers, it is probably best to locate the website for a current convention (such as Sydcon or Eyecon in Sydney, Phenomenon in Canberra, or Arcanacon in Melbourne), then contact the game event organisers. These event organisers are typically the writers and designers of the games.

sessions run without enthusiastic GMs have the most erratic outcomes and often rely on the most extroverted players to drive a story forward (though sessions such as these may end up with wildly different climaxes to those originally intended by the designer), such sessions are usually those with the most dissatisfied players but they are often the sessions that teach a new GM or designer the most about the play style.

The session has been running for a while, it's about half over. You spent the first half hour traveling between locations where your character would normally be found (the local bar, the police station and the quarantine site), gradually trying to work out who had the same goals as you and trying to carefully work out who might be opposing you without revealing your true intentions. It has been a delicate game of cat and mouse, but you think you've seen someone from the crossed-over TV show who also shares some of the same goals as you. Do you risk chatting to them and possibly blowing your chance at succeeding in your goals?

Different players seek different things from their freeform experience. Some go into a session with a very competitive spirit hoping to achieve all of their goals, others might have a favourite character and they simply take part in the session to immerse themselves in that character's world, and then there are the interested observers and those who are brought into the session at the last minute just to make up the numbers. Some players may like the emotional torment of failure, while others pursue the heights of success; some may play up the drama, while others prefer to watch. With these different player agendas, characters can have their motivations changed. The same freeform may be run two or three times with wildly different outcomes due to the attitudes of the players portraying the characters; none of these would be considered a failure or a bad outcome, just a different resolution to the scenario.

Over the years, a number of informal rules have developed around Australian Freeforms. These are probably better described as general guidelines that have stood the test of time and tend to create better play experiences for participants.

The guidelines are as follows:

1. All Freeforms should run with a ratio of one GM to every five players.
2. All characters need histories to show where they've been and objectives to show where they're heading.
3. All character objectives should be achievable within the Freeform. If an objective needs to be fulfilled within the game, ensure that a player is tasked with the objective



The game master is not a storyteller, they are an event manager.

(don't use Non-Player Characters to fulfil objectives, as there are more than enough players looking for things to do in freeform games).

4. Keep character sheets short, the longer the character sheet, the more details will be missed.
5. Make sure to write a decent number of characters who are not integral to the story, but make sure all characters have enough to do to fill their session effectively. While this may mean that some characters within the session will be considered «bit parts», everyone should have the chance to add to the drama of the session. (This is a delicate balancing act that many writers spend years trying to achieve).
6. A Freeform needs definite bounds by location (eg. a locked building, a mystical realm) and by timeframe (eg. a time loop, a single night).
7. Safety first. Feel free to use props, but make sure they are safe and everyone uses them appropriately (the common restriction of «no touching» is often a guideline in freeform play, but two consenting players may freely break this rule if they trust one another and they feel this could add to the drama of the moment).

Many of these rules can be found in one of the few recorded documents about Australian Freeform Roleplaying, a seminar at the roleplaying convention Necronomicon in 1995³. Some experienced freeform designers have been known to break one or more of these rules to give their players a more memorable experience, others deliberately choose to break one of these rules in every game they write (almost as their design signature).

How to become a famous freeform writer

Due to the high number of players involved in Freeforms and the lack of specific direction from GMs, many consider them to be an advanced form of roleplaying. Someone attempting to write a game of this type should certainly have a good grasp on the conventions of regular tabletop role-

playing, narrative storytelling and social dynamics (or at least two out of the three). The high number of players mean that without a good series of interconnected objectives, a Freeform game can really stagnate if a critical mass of players don't start moving the storyline in a specific direction. It can also mean that the story can get out of control if too many players start moving in a direction not intended through the original writing of the session. Some writers can handle this in their games, others can't handle their works of art being compromised in such a way (to the point that many writers work with the axiom that «No plot survives contact with the players»); this may be reflected through game designers incorporating specific events that push the overall narrative in a direction regardless of player actions, or GMs taking on a more active role in guiding players and shepherding them toward specific event sequences.

With experience, and with knowledge of the guidelines, a Freeform writer can create rich social worlds very different to those portrayed in tabletop games. With dozens of players each focused on their own agendas, and no rule systems to hamper their interaction, economies of favour, influence and friendship develop. But a lot of a Freeform's success hinges on the skill and actions of the players. Active players have the opportunity to take control of the events around them, possibly pursuing the tasks assigned to their character at the start of a session, or taking a complete different and unexpected path. Passive players find that they are drawn into the action because their help is often needed to accomplish specific tasks. The sheer weight of numbers in a game of this type tend to reign in rebellious elements, maintaining an environment keeping within the game designer's vision. But there have been notable games where a single player has gathered enough influence to completely drive a freeform session in a direction unexpected by the original designer and GMs (whether this is considered a success or a failure typically depends on the enjoyment of the players as the situation unfolds). There have also been notorious games where two players with disparate goals have completely torn apart a freeform (against the best intentions of designers and GM); events like this are uncommon.

Since freeform games tend to run for a single session, they can prove a great way to step out of a regular routine and play something completely out of character.

The game draws to its conclusion, you've accomplished two of your three goals and that has brought you some enemies among those who have been thwarted by your actions. Tensions have escalated and weapons are being wielded. Is this the point where people will start dying? Or will someone step into the breach and defuse the situation? You do have a gun, and the authority of a cop. What do you do?

Freeforms are typically written to avoid physical violence; this can be handled in many ways. The most common way to deter violence in a freeform game is by choosing a specifically non-violent situation for the game such as a festive ball, a diplomatic event, or a meeting of gods who are physically incapable of harming one another. Another common way to deter violence is to create richly entangled webs of relationship between the characters; in this way a player thinks twice about harming another player's character because they know vengeance against them could be very serious. It's also considered



■ There's a significant crossover with the steampunk scene.



A good session can be still be achieved with a poorly written freeform.



■ Some GMs put a lot of effort in their handouts.

bad form for one player to kill another player's character during the early stages of a freeform game, each player has often paid money to take part in the event so it isn't fair to have them denied entertainment (once half of the session has passed, this unspoken rule begins to disappear and as the session reaches its conclusion endings can become very bloody). Finally, freeforms tend to have very simple rules for combat resolution...if a player points a gun, and uses up one of their expendable bullet traits, the victim is dead. Sometimes a character may have an expendable «evasion» trait to avoid a single incoming attack, but in most cases there is no chance of avoiding this fate; the victim's only consolation is that someone else will probably take vengeance on their behalf.

Ending the game

Most Freeforms will end with one or two scenes where multiple plot lines are tied together and resolved, with multiple GMs each may handle a specific climactic end scene. Such scenes may not make sense to everyone, and some may run concurrently, so that certain players only encounter specific end points to the session based on who they are with or what they may have accomplished during the course of the game. During the course of play, a Freeform doesn't need to resolve all the storylines, with some making it a point to only resolve the plots that gained traction among a significant number of players, while others deliberately leave certain plot lines open for sequels.

Sequels and series are a common part of the genre for Australian Freeforms. Some designers have devised ongoing games of an episodic nature, running a session each year an annual conventions for five years or more. In games of this type, a single character may be played by two or more different players, but designers tend to have a preference for using the same players in the same character roles to ensure continuity throughout their series. Coming into one of these series as a new player can be incredibly intimidating, but returning to a second game in a series is like returning to a familiar world.

A common tradition to end an Australian Freeform is a post-game wrap up.

The post-game wrap up begins with the GMs declaring the event immediately following the conclusion of the session as the players sit in a circle. With all the players seated, everyone takes turns revealing their true intentions for the session and how well they managed to accomplish those goals. This gives the GMs a chance to catch up on what happened during the session and take these secretive events into account when they decide the final outcome of the game. The wrap up is considered one of the most important parts of the freeform, because it is at this time that confusing events start to make sense; the agendas of enemies are revealed, and other players working at cross purposes explain their actions. The experiences within a freeform can lead to highly emotional situations, intense hatred between characters and powerful melodrama; but the community of freeform players are fairly close and many have been good friends for years. The wrap up almost allows players to ritually close off the session, thus ending the stories of their characters and allowing the players to resume their daily lives. Enmities between characters are resolved, friendships between players are reformed.

Once everyone has revealed their actions for the session, the GMs and the designer provide a final wrap-up describing events that could have occurred during the game or clarify the events of the game where player descriptions may have been confusing. With this out of the way, the designer considers the events of the session, what went wrong, what went right, and then write their sequel for the next convention. Unless they think they're done exploring the potential in this oeuvre, in which case they'll write a brand new game.

As everyone leaves the session, there are a few people you've become fairly close to in the highly tense situations that have just unfolded. Some of these people you know the names of, others you'll know by their character names for the rest of the convention. ■

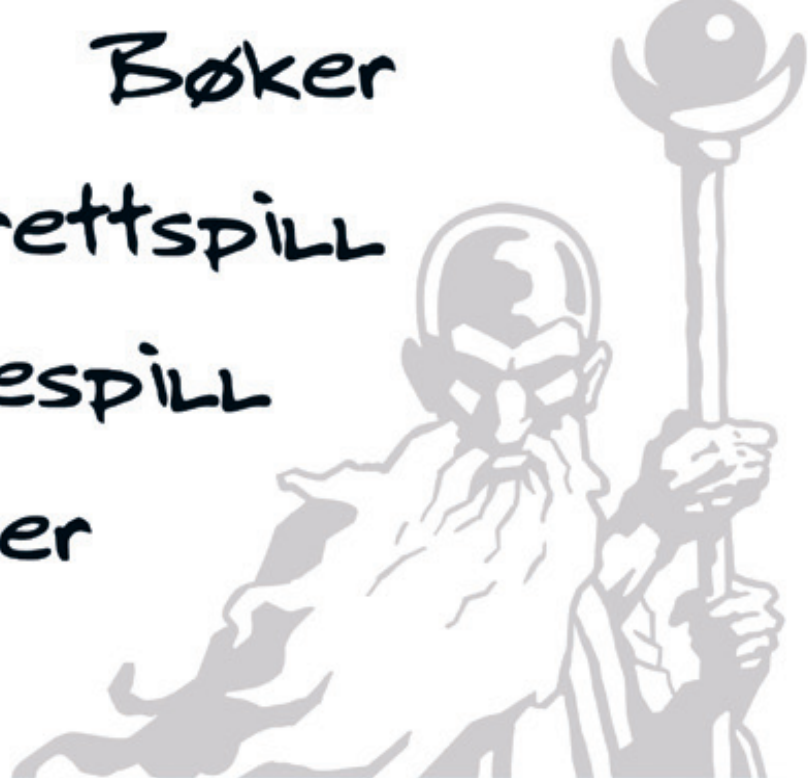
Footnotes

1. Scanned copy of the first public evidence of the Freeform genre - <http://arcana-con.org/1983/page10.html>
2. SCA website - www.sca.org
3. Transcript of seminar on Freeform Gaming; Necronomicon, Sydney 1995 - <http://members.ozemail.com.au/~tarim/rpg/seminar1.htm>



■ Even if the freeform is all in one room, players can «visit» other locations on the map by talking to a GM.

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