

Nordic-Russian Larp Dialog

The English Part

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Abstract. This book starts a bidirectional dialog between two larping traditions - Nordic and Russian. The book contains two symmetric parts: the Nordic Way and the Russian Way, each part in Russian and English. Each part consists of five chosen articles followed by two short commentaries by the “opposite” side. We have introduced well-known and experienced larp theorists and designers to comment the differences and similarities in our larp cultures. This collection was gathered with the idea to demonstrate the most illustrative tendencies that are strong in one community and not so prominent in the other, and vice versa.

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The Foreword

The writing tradition of the Nordic larp community is deep and related to the history of Knutepunkts. The Knutepunkt books constitute the monolith of knowledge, terminology and comprehension of Nordic larps. This source is open for everybody: it is easy to download and read the papers or even join the community to understand Nordic larps from within.

The only actual barrier is language. Nordic larps appeared as a result of breaking the barrier by Scandinavian and Finnish larpers when the English was chosen as the universal way of playing and talking about larps. Now the other larp cultures join the worldwide Knutepunkt-centered dialog.

Russians have very close traditions of playing and thinking about larps. We have many texts and enormous number of ideas to share, but they were written in Russian and most of them have never been translated to English. Last several years, approximately since 2010, Russian larpers have been contributing to the Nordic larp tradition – you can find a list of their articles in Bibliography. But this is only the tip of the iceberg: most conceptions and practices remained inaccessible for the English-speaking reader. There is also an opposite problem: few Russian larpers fluently speak and read in English, so most part of foreign achievements in larp theory and practice was not available to Russian larping audience. We started this project to open the door between our cultures in both directions: to break the language barrier and to start the exchange of ideas.

This book was initially planned as bilingual: the content was translated to both languages – English and Russian. The book contains two symmetric parts: the Nordic Way and the Russian Way. Each part consists of five chosen articles followed by the two short commentaries by the “opposite” side. We have introduced well-known and experienced larp theorists and designers to comment on the differences and similarities in our larp cultures.

Our core idea for gathering this collection was to demonstrate the most illustrative tendencies that are strong in one community and not so prominent in the other, and vice versa. We are participants of Russian larp community and at the same time we are quite familiar with Nordic style, so we tried to highlight the distinctive features of both larp traditions from the point of view of the people who can see and compare both sides. We have listed the tendencies and then found particular articles that seemed to express and explain these features in the most appropriate way.

Compared to the Russian community, the Nordic one has deeper theoretical understanding of larp and related phenomena (article by Stenros J.), academic researches on player’s states of consciousness e.g. immersion (Lukka L.), “what you see is what you get” as a primary principle of larp design (Koljonen J.), mechanics of controlling and managing the larp plot and the players’ behavior (Fatland E.) and involves the player’s body into the larp experience as much as the player’s mind (Gerge T. & Widing G.).

Russian community is strong at symbolical representation (models) of any aspect of game worlds rather than in literal imitation of reality (article by Prudkovskaya O.), in implying deep meaning in larps that provokes profound experience and out-of-game insights (Molodykh V. & Rybalko A.), making both characters and their players face unresolvable existential questions rather than managing their behavior during a larp (Semenov A., Sliusarchuk F.), intellectual approach to larping process and preparing a common discourse for every larp (Kurguzova D. & Servetnik V.).

We hope that this book will start the real bidirectional dialog between the two deep larping cultures – Nordic and Russian. We believe that larps could change the world so let the culture join us in the moments of darkness.

The editors: Alexey Fedoseev, J. Tuomas Harviainen and Olga Vorobyeva

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The Russian Way

How to Convey Ideas through Larps

By Vladimir Molodykh and Alexandra Rybalko, Moscow

The main thesis of this article by Alexandra Rybalko and Vladimir Molodykh states that the crucial point of larp creation is its Idea (or the Message). The Idea of a larp is defined as something answering the questions, “What is this larp about?” and “What were the designers’ reasons for creating it?” Having analyzed many larps from the perspective of their ideas and their realizations, the authors detect the ways of exposing the Idea to the participants by means of the diegetic events that have caused a strong emotional and/or intellectual response due to an overexerting action, reappraisal of values, aesthetic experience, or new discovery; the authors call such events “the precedents.” The game designers are able to provoke the precedents necessary to expose the Idea to the participants and prevent the unnecessary messages, controlling the precedents by means of diegetic conflicts, meta-techniques, the larp context, and aesthetics. The article illustrates this concept with examples of well-known Russian larps from the recent decade. The larps with a large number of participants (over 500) receive more attention, being considered the most appropriate representation of the interactions within a larp.

Larps creation is a fascinating, yet labour-consuming process that usually requires great time, financial, and emotional contribution. So, what makes people organize larps every year? We think that one of the major reasons is the opportunity to implement one’s ideas and to embody one’s conceptions.

We define the complex of ideas that organizers put into their larp and the goals they want to achieve by organizing that particular larp as the larp idea. Additionally, we can say that a larp idea comprises a set of reasons why the organizers create this very larp. Thus, our article is devoted to larp idea implementation.

However, before exploring this issue, we think it is important to say that our experience is derived mostly from conveying ideas at larps where the number of players exceeded 500 people. Far from everyone considers these kind of events to be full-fledged larps: for many people, large-scale games, more likely, provide an opportunity to meet their friends, to show their costumes in public, to eat some barbeque outdoors, and to sit near a bonfire; at the same time, the larping aspect at such games is something optional that can be easily ignored. We disagree with this approach. In our opinion, large-scale larps have a great number of merits.

Strictly speaking, the very topic of this article has arisen thanks to the fact that we organize large-scale larps. When organizing a larp for a small number of players, the organizers can afford, on the whole, not to deal with “boring” theories, but to implement their concepts and ensure high game density by the individual approach: with detailed character plots, carefully developed conflicts between the characters, long conversations with the players, etc.

However, these tools work poorly at a large-scale larp. There are many players, so it is difficult to provide everyone with a detailed personal character plot. Microconflicts often stay unfolded, as at the most inappropriate moment, the character you need according to your character plot turns out to be at the other end of the larping area, or even in the Land of Death.¹ All of it means that large-scale larps need essentially different tools.

It goes without saying that prior to implementation of the larp idea, it is necessary to define and state this message. In our experience, we can say that short slogans are most convenient here. The idea itself can be rather comprehensive, so it is small wonder that many organizers can speak about their message for hours and hours. However, every idea has some essence that can be put into a single sentence. We denote the essence of

¹More information about the Land of Death (LoD, mertvyatnik) can be found in Fedoseev & Trubetskaya 2013, Vitkevich 2012, and Vorobyeva 2014.

the larp idea formalized in a single sentence as the **game focus**. Thanks to the game focus, every member of the organizer group can “synchronize their watch” and see if they have added something unnecessary to the larp idea or have forgotten something crucial.

Besides, the game focus is very convenient when you need to provide the players with a short answer to the question, “What is your larp about?” Certainly, organizers do not always declare their reasons and goals to the players, but it is extremely important for the organizers themselves to understand them; moreover, it is crucial that the messages embedded into the game by different organizers do not contradict one another.

Larp ideas can be rather different; it is evidently shown by the example of larps by “Stairway to Heaven,” our game masters team. Thus, when developing the larp *The Witcher: Something More* (2005), the organizers wanted to reconstruct to the full extent the world of the books by A. Sapkowski and provide the players with the possibility to immerse into it. The organizers also set out to prove to the larping community and to themselves that a large-scale larp (1000+ players) can be a full-fledged role-playing game, not a festival or a zarnitsa.²

Creating the larp *Constantinople: One Spring More* (2007), the organizers intended to show the players the moment of the fall of the Byzantine Empire and to draw a visible allegory to modern Russia, this allegory being crucially important, as the Russian culture has inherited much from the Byzantine one. The organizers also wanted to make the players think about what we should do in a similar situation.

The core idea of the larp *XVI: Step to Immortality* (2009) was to show the conflict of the national values when every European country presented at the larp tried to force the world to develop according to its particular way.

The idea of the larp *Cost of Living* (2011) was worded as follows: “to problematize in detail for our players the crisis of a postmodern society; to find out the reasons of the crisis and to comprehend the motivations of the people of this society, as these motivation have led the society to a dead end.” We managed to send this message during the larp. Besides, the larp also had the “ultimate goal”: to find a way out of this dead end, and not only for a single person, but for the whole society or for a considerable part of it. This particular problem still remains unresolved.

The larp *To Die in Jerusalem* (2013) devoted to the Crusades, was, on the contrary, about the clash of values and ideals that were followed fanatically and without the doubt that was inherent for the postmodern society of *Cost of Living*. The larp was about the people who did not choose a faith suiting them best, but rather adjusted themselves and the surrounding world according to their faith. Therefore, giving proper respect to the romanticism of the Crusades and to historical events, we emphasized this particular possibility to play such a fanatic character to the full extent, to be this character for some time.

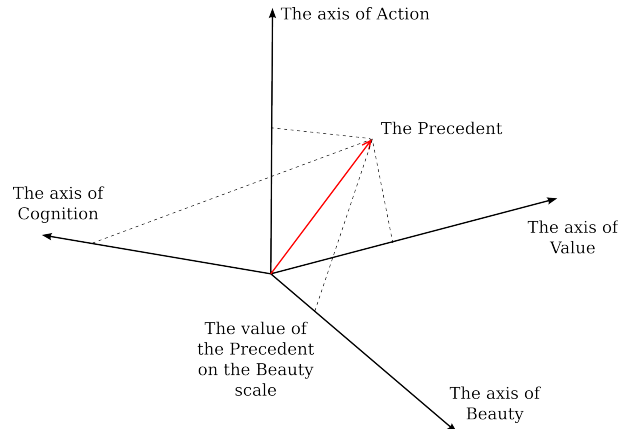
Precedents

The larp idea can be said to have been received by a given player when, from a certain moment of the game onward, he or she starts to feel and/or understand the idea embedded into the larp by the organizers. We have defined such deeply moving moments of the game, leading to a strong emotional and/or intellectual response from the player as **precedents**. Accordingly, an organizer’s task is to manage the precedents: to create conditions for them to take place, so that the precedents will help to convey the larp idea to the players (or to groups of players).

It should be noted that the emotional response to a precedent can be not only a positive, but also a negative experience; an intellectual response can contain not only pleasant, but also depressing new knowledge. Moreover, there are some cases when the insight takes place not during a larp, but after it. For instance, during a larp, players were captivated by some activities, performed deeds, and made decisions. Remembering their actions after the larp, the players can reconsider them and, for example, be horrified by their character’s behaviour, think over their character’s motives, and understand something new about themselves or about the world.

The definition of a “precedent” appeared after the larp *Constantinople: One Spring More* in 2007, when our organizer group decided to structure the gained experience. We wrote out the cases when some of us felt deep emotions at a larp, comprehended something seriously, and understood something new about ourselves or about the surrounding world – in other words, the moments we wanted to remember, to think of, and to experience

²“Zarnitsa” is a team military and sports game for pioneers (a kind of scout organization) in the USSR; the game simulates combat operations and this simulation looks like a military exercise.



again. Then, we carried out 110 qualitative interviews with our players, enriched our list with the cases that happened to them, and, as a result, got more than 300 positions. Thus, the notion of a “precedent” appeared.

Having analyzed the precedents, we divided them into 5 categories; later on, these categories were successfully applied in the work of our organizer team:

- Atmosphere/beauty: For instance, carefully reconstructed atmosphere of one’s favourite book, film, or historical period.
- Value/sacrifice: The comprehension of the true worth of some idea or value, for example, of being a patriot, fulfilling an oath, being loyal to one’s city, etc.
- Inception of an idea/knowledge/comprehension: For instance, comprehension of parallels between the game world and real life. Accordingly, some precedents of this type stay within the definition of “bleed”, meaning “bleed-in”, if we speak of such an insight happening during a larp, or “bleed-out,” in case it takes place later (Montola 2010, Bowman 2013).
- Affect, or strong emotional experience: For instance, a moment of fear or despair, a victory over superior enemy forces, a long-expected crowning or wedding, etc.
- Choice: Every moment when characters have to choose between two options that are both valuable for them: either to fulfill an oath or to keep friendship; to achieve the dream of their life or to stay with their beloved ones; to go and fight for freedom on the barricades or to save themselves for the sake of their sick mother and little children, etc.

We had been operating with these categories more or less successfully for five years; however, during the development of the larp *To Die in Jerusalem* this classification turned out to be insufficient. Besides, a certain disarray in our work was caused by the fact that one and the same precedent could be classified into several different categories. For example, the moments of choice often happen to be very emotional and are accompanied by a new comprehension of the finally chosen value. Following the results of our work and the analysis and discussion of the report by A. Kulakov about *Larp Designers’ Camp 2012*, a new approach to precedents classification.

Axes of Precedents

Currently we think that every precedent can be laid out along four independent axes: the axis of cognition/self cognition, the axis of value, the axis of action, and the axis of beauty.

The axis of action. High value along the axis of action is featured by the precedents related to struggle, resolving a conflict by action, living through hard times, and getting over external and/or internal barriers. For instance:

- A victory or a defeat in battle or in some other struggle, competition, or conflict;
- Solving a complicated problem;
- Challenging an a priori stronger enemy;
- An action that required exertion of physical, emotional, or mental forces, a heroic deed.

The axis of cognition/self-cognition. Here, high value belongs to the precedents related to the appearance of new ideas, understanding something about the world around oneself, re-evaluation of phenomena or features of one's own character, or acquiring new knowledge. For example:

- Comprehension of the way this or that social mechanism operates, understanding the reasons for other characters' strange or/and wrong actions;
- Comprehension of the organizers' concept;
- Generation of a new creative idea, subjective discovery of some new scientific knowledge;
- Understanding of one's character feature that previously stayed in the background.

The axis of value. High on this axis, there are the precedents connected to evaluation of certain phenomena, situations, objective laws, and actions; the choice between several options important for a player (actions, ways, parties to a conflict); or the foregrounding of some ethical concept for a player. For instance:

- Choice between individually valuable and socially valuable: between being loyal to one's word and to one's in-game native country; between serving one's country and having domestic bliss;
- Watching the downfall of a society that is, from a player's point of view, almost ideal, because of its maladjustment to the conditions of the surrounding world;
- The ethical evaluation of some phenomenon that was not important in a player's personal value system before;
- Fear of losing something important for the player, of relationships getting ruined, and of in-game death;
- Contact with something ideal, for example, a social utopia, or a model of an ideal person or ideal relationship.

The axis of beauty. Here, high value belongs to the precedents related to strong emotional response to perception of the surrounding aesthetics, atmosphere, a beautiful concept, or a realistic situation. For example:

- Joy inspired by watching a beautiful in-game world;
- Player's participation in a realistically operating model;
- Watching how the archetypical plot from the original source book unfolds independently during the larp;
- Contact with a work of art or with a masterpiece.

For example, if during an educational larp, players solved some problem and, by the means of the solution, acquired a new area of knowledge, then, most likely, high value is featured by this precedent along the axis of cognition, and next-to-nothing values are featured along the other axes. However, if the problem was complicated, and solving it required overcoming certain difficulties, then a high value is featured by the same precedent along the axis of action as well. Additionally, if this solution led a player to re-evaluation, then high value would be featured by the precedent along the axis of value as well.

Take the case that a player has come to a larp based on his or her favourite book with a wish to become engrossed in the book's world and/or to put into action a plot common for this world. Then, the moment of

the plot implementation and/or understanding of the fact that the book's world becomes living and real will be the precedent with high value along the axis of beauty.

In the case of a player participating in a larp about struggle and this struggle was efficiently solved in his or her behalf (e.g., in a battle or at a court session), a high level will be featured by such precedent along the axis of action.

If characters' values (e.g., their faith or lifestyle) received abuse during a larp and they had to choose between these values and something else, then high value along the axis of value would be featured by the precedent of choice or by the emotional stress connected with abuse. If players decided to defend their value or prove their choice with an action (e.g., to protect a fortress, to risk their life etc.), then a high value would be featured by such precedent along the axis of action as well.

If at a larp based on some dystopian world a player understood how to change the society into an Utopian one and decided that such a way was unacceptable for them, then a high value would be featured by this precedent along the axes of cognition and value because the player received new knowledge and gave axiological characterization to this knowledge and in-game events. If a player struggled long against a social system, but their plans for how to change the world finally failed, then a high value would be featured by our precedent along the axis of action as well. Finally, if the dystopia looked exceptionally realistic and emotionally exciting and the game world responded to the player's actions in a way appropriate for a dystopia, then a high value might be featured by this precedent along the axis of beauty as well.

All other things being equal, it is clear that the strongest precedent – and, accordingly, most probably the one unfolding the larp idea – will be the one by which high value will be featured along all the four axes.

It is also clear that for the revelation of every particular larp idea, some axes may be more important than the others. In some cases, the larp idea may unfold through a succession of precedents. For example, the first of these precedents forms the comprehension of a certain phenomenon in the player's head, the second one gives an ethical evaluation to this phenomenon, and the third one demonstrates the successful experience of fighting with the phenomenon if it is evaluated negatively.

Management of Precedents

What tools can an game master use to establish the conditions for the necessary precedents to appear and to convey the larp idea via them? We singled out four such instruments: conflicts, mechanisms, context, and aesthetics.

Conflict is a collision of diverging interests, views, ambitions; a serious disagreement, a hot dispute, leading to struggle.³

It is important that a conflict must by all means lead to struggle. Take the case in which a royalist named John lives in the in-game town of N, and a republican named Harry lives in the town of M; in these towns, there is no public and political life, because all townsmen are busy with their own problems. In those circumstances, the conflict of John's and Harry's ideologies influences the larp in no way, and, thus, it is beyond the scope of this article. Struggles can have various forms, from an engagement of armies to a clash of ideas within a friendly party, but it must be there.

For this article, it is important to mention that there exist different types of conflicts:

- Conflicts between players or groups of players (PvP);
- Conflicts like “a player against the world/a game master”: for example, game masters create some catastrophe and then players escape successfully from it (PvE);
- Conflicts inside a player, who, for example, wants both to defend his or her motherland and to build his or her career as a governor of the territory of his or her motherland, which is occupied by the enemy.

Mechanism is a method of implementation of an existing or potential in-game conflict.

For example, in the city of Verona, the families of Montague and Capulet actively dislike each other, so the conflict is evident. How exactly can they solve it?

³From now on, we use our own definitions unless indicated otherwise.

- To slaughter one another with knives, swords, or to shoot one another dead from crossbows. The mechanism is the combat rules.
- To convict one another on some charge and drive one another away from the city. The mechanism is the court system. It is set, probably, not with some modelling rules, but with a descriptive text about justice in medieval Italy and by adding a court and a prison to the list of roles.
- To raise the armies of Guelphs and Ghibellines and meet in the battlefield. The mechanism is the armies combat rules.
- To excel the opposing family in wealth and power several times over, and, better yet, to put the rival out of business. The mechanism comprises economic relations and the economic rules.
- To set the Inquisition after the representatives of the enemy's family, in order for the enemies to be burnt at the stake.
- To hold a luxurious ball, a city carnival and a series of other significant events; to win the citizens' support by this and to make the enemy's family become outlaws in public conscience.
- And so on. . .

We can set mechanisms through the rules, character plots, atmospheric text, the texts describing the game world, and also through GM-controlled influence.

Mechanisms can appear independently during a larp. For example, at the beginning of a larp, all state decisions are made by the king, but then a revolution takes place and the parliament takes the helm. In other words, the conflict of the nation and the king gives birth to a new mechanism bound with making decisions by the state power.

Accordingly, mechanisms can give birth to conflicts the same way as conflicts can give birth to mechanisms. For example, if you have such a mechanism as combat rules and a lot of players have brought 30 kg of armour per person, then there is no doubt that some conflict will appear. Therefore, it is better for the game masters to embed a possibility for appearing of a conflict in advance and this conflict should correspond to the game world and the game masters' goals. Otherwise, it is better for the game master to recommend to the players not to bring their armour.

Game engine is a complex of existing and potential mechanisms and also of all the methods of triggering them (rules, GM-controlled techniques, information about the game world, starting conditions in characters' backgrounds, etc.).

Game context is a complex of circumstances, archetypes, symbols, and genre expectations forming a player's view of in-game events and allowing a player to treat them this or that way.

For example, when a person present at a larping area, but not integrated into the larping context, sees a piece of paper on the ground, he or she will most likely think that players are careless and have made a mess in the forest. A person taking part in a detective larp can perceive it as an important clue and a player who has come to a fantasy larp can perceive it as a key to an ancient cipher or a piece of an important prophecy. At an economic larp, a player may expect that this piece of paper may contain some helpful information that will help to adjust his or her behavior in trading.

A bird, having flown with a loud cry above the players having a talk, can be perceived by them as a sign from the gods, if a larp is about events in ancient Greece, or as a good possibility for additional argument in the debate about ecological taxes, if the larp is about a conflict between modern governments and corporations.

One and the same event will be differently interpreted by a player depending on the current in-game context. Also, there are some curious accidents when players misinterpret something. For example, at the larp *The Second Age*, based on J.R.R. Tolkien's works, players accidentally found at a larping area a description of a zombie-creating ritual that had been left there from the previous larp. The players interpreted it as a full-fledged in-game document and began to prepare a corresponding ritual; however, the extremely amazed game masters did not allow conducting it.

Game aesthetics is a complex of artistic forms that are used by an organizer and players when they develop and conduct a larp and take part in it. Development of game aesthetics consists of working on language norms,

speech patterns, costumes, props, visual images, and tools for affecting all the player's senses, e.g., smells, sounds, pictures, tactual sensations, etc.

Conflicts, mechanisms, context, and aesthetics are necessary for an organizer to create in-game situations where precedents revealing the game masters' message will appear.

Every precedent is implemented within the framework of some conflict. We point out once more that a conflict is not only a confrontation of some players. A conflict can happen even in a single player's head. A player can simply sit on a bench amidst a town, but if he or she empathizes to something that is going on there, mentally considers and chooses the rendering of events that is ethically more acceptable for him or her, etc., then the character is involved in some conflict. If there is no conflict, then there will be no precedent, and the larp idea will not unfold. Accordingly, a game master must create and maintain such conflicts within the framework of which the precedents conveying the larp idea are possible.

Any conflict is not essential for a larp if it cannot be fulfilled; and a conflict is fulfilled with mechanisms. Accordingly, a game master must create and maintain such mechanisms that will lead to development of the corresponding conflicts; in its turn, the development of conflicts will initiate the precedents that will send the game master's message.

In other words, a game master wants to unfold the larp idea and the precedents are the events that must happen to every single player for the fulfillment of the game master's goals. It is important for the game masters to understand exactly what kinds of precedents are necessary for them, to put into their larp these particular conflicts that will be able to give birth to these precedents, and to set in-game mechanisms describing the way these conflicts happen.

Responsiveness to these precedents depends on several issues: one should take into account if a player is in the necessary context and how deeply a precedent is perceived. Something can be a strong precedent for a player, who is inside the game context, and, at the same time, it may happen to be unnoticeable and unimportant for a player out of the context. For example, for a player who has not read Tolkien's books, the game event during which a funny hobbits throws a golden ring into some volcano, will be absolutely of no consequence. For a player who knows Roman history poorly, the murder of Julius Caesar will be just one more political "murder by stealth."⁴

Examples and Explanations

In some cases, the whole larp can be customized to one precedent happening with all the players synchronously changing their view on the previous events. As an example, we can name the larp *The Road* (2012) by the Good Gryffindors game masters team. It was a small larp for 36 people only, but by this example, we can see well how to work with a precedent. At the larp *The Road* a group of characters living in a primitive society were travelling, overcoming various obstacles, and building their complicated relationship with their god. The larp was finished when an NPC dressed as an elf stepped out to the characters in the end of their journey.

The whole larp was made for this precedent. The moment of meeting the elf was the successful ending of the task, which comprised passing through a number of obstacles along the way; so, a high value was featured by this precedent along the axis of action. At the same time, it was the moment of context change when an abstract primitive world changed into Tolkien's world and an abstract primitive god turned into Melkor (the larp was based on "*Tale of Adanel*," a text by J.R.R. Tolkien). Furthermore, this episode was the point where, at the same time, the characters' behaviour was re-evaluated and the essence of events the characters had faced along their way became clear. So, a high value was featured by this precedent along the axes of cognition and value. The meeting of the shabby travellers with an elf in shining garments took place in a dark forest at night and the players-characters were emotionally open, looking for explanations to the current events; therefore, it is rather possible that the high value for a player was featured by this precedent also along the axis of beauty.

Altogether, in this example, all the larp management was built in such a way that the precedent would work for all the players as strongly as possible and would send the game masters' message. The larp idea was the way from slavery to freedom, when around it there was uncertainty, and slavery was not yet recognized as such.

The main game conflict was the conflict between the travellers and the god. The game mechanisms were the mechanism of the way and the mechanism of the players' interaction with the god, implemented through

⁴Secretive murder (murder by stealth) is a quick and unexpected murder of a character performed by some other character.

an NPC playing the role of the god. They successfully modelled the escape of the first men into the West in Tolkien's world and the interaction of men and the god, when the god more often than not appeared helpful and saving, but often demanded instead something strange, cruel, and bad, whereas not naming things with their true names.

The precedent itself was aesthetically modelled and changed the game context entirely. Therefore, the game masters used all possible tools efficiently for conveying the larp idea through only one precedent and synchronously for all players.

However, in spite of all its beauty, in most cases, such an approach with one final precedent is faintly suitable, especially at large-scale larps. At a large-scale larp, a game master, due to control over conflicts, mechanisms, context, and aesthetics, creates the ground for various precedents to rise, expecting that every player will get some of them, and that they per totality will reveal the larp idea to him.

For example, at the larp *Cost of Living* (2011, 520 players), the idea of which had been discussed above, the game master team created a grotesque postmodern society to help the players in forming their own ethical position relative to this society, and trying to change it on the basis of this ethical position (Kolesnikov 2013).

First, we should mention about the game world of this larp. It is the year 2030. The city of New Venice has become the platform for the biggest and the most popular TV project in history, a reality-show called *Lifecost*. Parallel broadcasting of its various programs runs under license on hundreds of TV channels all over the world, and every day, billions of viewers watch the life of the show participants, that is, the citizens. According to the rules of the show, all the participants have a rating, which is allocated depending on their actions and how much the viewers all around the world like their actions. Thus the rating is the main value in New Venice.

Accordingly, game mechanisms, first of all connected with consumption and show, were adjusted in such a manner, that players who faced them became drawn deeper and deeper into playing consumption and show. Moreover, thanks to these mechanisms, even remonstrative actions became the elements of this grotesque in the end. Therefore, a person protesting against the show quickly, though unwillingly, became a participant of it: he or she was shown on all the channels, other players saw the broadcast, the rating was allocated, etc.

A player involved in different in-game conflicts was drawn further and further into playing show and consumption. Players were in the context of the show, but next to them, there was always some other context: for example, the context in which the grandfathers who won the Second World War lived; the context of the socialists of the sixties; the religious context; etc. A player facing the symbols typical for these contexts – e.g. , with the Unknown Soldier's Tomb – could begin to treat the events on the assumption of not the context of the show, but of some other, more profound context. An aesthetics of the grotesque also worked towards that. According to our concept, cutting people with motor saws in a live television broadcast, group sex in the crosshairs of telecameras, and other decisions shaping the game world should, at a certain moment of the larp or after it, make a player stop, look around, evaluate his or her own role and the roles of other people there, and give axiological evaluation to it.

Therefore, specially prepared rules of the show, models of consumption, the main context of a postmodern society, ever increasing aesthetics of dystopia, and additional contexts to which a player could turn his or her attention all created a field for the appearance of different precedents for the players. Every precedent could facilitate the larp message implementation.

Conclusion: Why We Like Large-Scaled Larps

In conclusion, we would like to say some words about the reasons why we appreciate large-scale larps and organize them.

Large-scale larps allow for a rather detailed simulation of a society and the processes going on in it. This kind of larp is suitable for raising such comprehensive issues as conflicts between large groups and even civilizations or a clash of different cultural values. By great detalization, a large-scale larp provides a possibility for deep immersion into the game reality.

Size does matter. One can feel themselves a part of the great Christian world even at a larp for 100 players where the numbers of the Crusaders and the Saracens are much the same; still, this feeling of belonging will shine in new splendour at a larp for a thousand players. Now, you are not just in the same group with 50 conventional characters, most of whom you know at least by sight, if not by name. You become a part of a

seamless entity, together with several hundreds of people who are united not with personal acquaintance and not with backgrounds from their character plots, but with common religion and culture.

In other words, a large-scale larp allows the adjusting of our perception in a different way, shifting from the level of the individual to the level of large social groups; thus, one becomes able to see the forest for the trees. Many events happening at a large-scale larp are perceived more keenly than those at a small-scale one. For instance, the larp *The Raven's Nest* by the JNM game masters group featured a scene where Dracula, the Prince of Walachia, was going to execute an innocent fellow. Several hundred people, most of them armed, were standing around. Dracula had only a few bodyguards with him, and in case of a military clash, his chances were thin on the ground. Everyone knew the current trial was unjust and Dracula was a vampire, but no one interfered. Only one girl was walking around and crying loudly that evil was being done, but nobody listened to her. At a small-scale larp this sensation of a crowd keeping humble silence is often broken into components: you are acquainted with many characters and know why this one is silent, and this one, and another one, and that one too. At a large-scale larp, all these parts comprise a whole and very impressive picture: "A piece of injustice is being done; the people are silent".

A large-scale larp can help us to reconstruct a whole historical period and, using the language of metaphors, to speak about the problems pending for this period and still being crucial nowadays. Thus, in 2015 we are implementing *1905*, a great cultural and historical project devoted to the First Russian Revolution. This project differs from the larp format familiar to us, as it includes not only a larp itself, but also a vast number of various events: lectures, exhibitions, dancing and poetry parties, interactive performances and competitions in city racing.

The key event of the project is a large-scale larp and a poem *1905* involving several hundreds of participants; it will take place at the end of July in 2015.

The beginning of the XX century is a crucial historical period: it is the time of cultural and scientific boom, the time of commotions, the time of an impending catastrophe and the rise of a new hope. The Russian society was at the crossroads: the old world was crumbling and a new order was taking shape; yet, it was not clear what it would be like. The problematics of *1905* has much in common with our modern one, when all the world, and Russia as well, comprehend their fate and their own way again.

The revolutionary events of that year involved not only Russia, but also Finland. In 1905 there was a commotion in the sea fortress of Sveaborg near Helsinki; less than a year later this commotion led to an armed riot. Nevertheless, this is just one of the many reasons why we will be glad to see guests from Finland and other Scandinavian countries at our larp.

Please, come to our larp, and let's try together to reconstruct, live through, and experience on our own the choice of a person loving their country and trying to understand what to do.

Summary

Now we summarize all said above. We think that a larp begins with the larp idea. It is important to define this message and state it in one or two sentences – in other words, to word the game focus.

The larp idea is implemented for the players through the moments leading to a strong emotional and/or intellectual response. These moments are precedents. Accordingly, game mast have to create conditions for the appearance of such precedents, thanks to which the players will be able to comprehend and feel the larp idea.

Organizers have the following tools for precedents control: conflicts, mechanisms, context and aesthetics.

It is of utmost importance always to remember that, while developing conflicts and mechanisms, setting context and aesthetics, we must keep in mind the larp idea. In other words, we must use these tools to create the precedents that will implement the larp idea.

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Commentary by Emma Wieslander

How to convey your vision when doing larp might be one of the most central questions to answer for anyone, like me, aspiring to create political larps. Certainly though, as this article argues, it's something everyone organizing larp ought to pay close attention to.

Molodykh and Rybalko actually makes three different claims, all interesting: Larps that are created with a clear idea, goal, or worked through theme makes a bigger impact on participants; focusing on creating certain types of catalysts— in this article, called “Precedents” — is a good way of achieving your ideas; and, finally, that more people should make bigger (500+ participant) larps.

Why do something at all if you're not going to do it well? The tools to do well that this article advocates have been created from need. In organizing bigger larps, the authors claim, you have to be organized on more levels and you can't rely as heavily on “just” creating characters. While the tools are specifically designed for the bigger context, many of the main thoughts might be applicable in other settings too. The first of their points I'd like to highlight, though, is that no matter how good your tool is, you still have to know what to use it for in order to achieve something.

The seemingly obvious point Molodykh and Rybalko makes here is, in my mind, less redundant than one could guess. To convey a message or idea, you need to know what you want to say. I would say that most drama larps in the Nordic context are very good at this. What this article proposes is something wider than that though: that any larps' idea should be possible to convey in one sentence, like a slogan. This doesn't mean that they say that every organiser has to be transparent about their idea, but rather that the organizers should be clear on their own goals, be synchronized as a group, and, even more importantly, be synchronized in their reasons for doing the larp at all. Of course there can be many, many reasons to do a larp and I think one of the appealing perspectives of the article is that it doesn't really make a value judgement as such on what would be a “better” idea. Only that all larps should have one central idea: a game focus.

From there, the article moves to elaborate on the theory of Precedents. As a concept, I think it can be very useful! However, I find the term itself problematic and unclear. The idea is that through focusing the design on creating pivotal moments — the deeply moving situations, catalysts if you may — the organizer can steer the game and reach their goals for making the game. Although no games are exactly the same and there are many different things that can trigger players, Molodykh and Rybalko have, through thorough work, mainly interviews, identified a pattern.

It first came together into five different categories. After working with these and trying them out practically, what they ended up with is four concepts that work as axes in a four dimensional graph. Action, cognition/understanding, value, and aesthetics/beauty are the four main Precedents. I find the reasoning very clear and I also find the suggestions in each axis of the graph engaging and helpful.

As appealing as they are though, I don't believe that the main takeaways from this article have to be exactly how the system works or is managed. I believe that theories like The Mixing Desk of Larp and this Theory of Precedents could fruitfully complement each other and there are probably more theories out there on exactly what narrative design choices to make that this could be relevant to as well. What I do find very refreshing, however, is the take on what part of the experience to design. The point isn't that we can “design for bleed” or “design for fun.” That all comes down to being clear enough on the reasons and game focus. What this article suggests is more detailed.

If we make people have epiphanies, feel real excitement, have overwhelming feelings of being part of a convincing illusion, or have to make gut-wrenching choices, we increase the chance that they will also have a bigger takeaway from the game. Choosing what sort of experience we design for will (hopefully) make a difference. All too often, organizers get lost in the spectacular: we want it all. Staying true to the game focus will impact how clear the message gets across. Moving that design to Precedents — what makes these scenes happen, what precedes them — rather than to the scene itself might be a brilliant move. Especially when managing groups rather than individuals, as in a bigger game.

There's really only one sentiment I disagree strongly with and that would be that conflict as such is essential in getting any form of idea realised. This is, however, something I've elaborated on in articles of my own and that would take up to much space here. It could also, interestingly, be an issue of language. As there's no requisite in the way it's used here for an actualised confrontation, it may very well be that conflict in this

sense could be seen as “drama,” “issue” or even “choice”.”This, in turn, would open the floor for a lot of further engaging discussion on what exactly drives a game and a story.

Finally, Molodykh and Rybalko argue that size matters! The article introduces us to several examples of big larps. These brief descriptions alone make the article a good read for a Nordic audience, where this scale is both exotic and rare. Although I wouldn’t agree that bigger is always better, I’m certainly excited by some of the arguments for making bigger larps. Especially the argument of exploring the sort of shifting of perception where you feel that you are truly part of something larger, the large scale form of peer pressure, and, of course, the possibility to reenact and create a greater understanding for some historical period. They indeed make it very appealing to accept the invitation and come and play with them!

The Modelling Rules in Russian Larps

By Olga Prudkovskaya, Moscow

The article by Olga Prudkovskaya presents a review of modelling rules, their characteristics and, typical features in Russian larps. Using the term ‘modelling rules’ to denote the in-game representation of game world phenomena that are too complicated or impossible to reproduce physically, the author considers the following aspects of such a representation: the purpose of using the modelling, criteria of the modelling effectiveness, and the classification of modelling rules according to the scopes of application (e.g. combat rules, magic, medicine and treatment, science, economics etc.) The review considers modelling in the context of the historical perspective of Russian larps. Part of the article is dedicated to the general ways of larp modelling development (the simulationist toolbox).

Introduction: What Models Are For

“Russian larps descend from Hobbits’ Games”, an all-Russian larp campaign. This rather true point of view is popular within the community (for more detail, see Semenov 2010).

Larps played in Russian existed even earlier than that, but now they are generally known only to experts: pedagogical games of the 1910-1920s (see the article by Yaroslav Kot, 2013), pioneer war games (“zarnitsa”) and the games played in Fantastic Fiction Fan Clubs.

However, *Hobbits’ Games* of the year 1990, where about 130 people came from all the USSR, at once set two very important features of larps played in Russian:

- At Russian larps, very global events happen. A larping area, being some kilometers in diameter, can easily accommodate the geography of a whole continent; one hundred people play whole nations; a week of larping can see generations passing by.
- Russian larpers are interested in events out of the everyday reality. The environment of the former Soviet Union of the 1990s was uncomfortable. Enormous crowds of adult people were nostalgic about the past, whether the USSR or Russian Empire. Very few people wanted to live in the present. Against this background, Tolkien’s legends, myths, tales, and fiction were perceived by young people as a comfortable place where they could escape and which was not related directly to the reality outdoors or to the nostalgia of the older generation. (The escapism of larpers and, afterwards, the attempt to overcome this escapism, constitute a topic for another research paper).

These two facts influenced the forming of the models of Russian larps. *From the very beginning, Russian larpers had to represent enormous crowds of people, long periods of time, long journeys and, of course, magic interactions and battles with the use of medieval weapons.*

At the same time, the material component of the first Russian larps was incredibly poor. Larpers, being students and pupils of some very poor countries, simply had no resources to sew luxurious costumes and make weapons similar to those we see now. Also, in the USSR, different kinds of backpacking trips were rather popular. Young person (and their parents) had the experience of living in the forest and could borrow from their friends or take from the high shelf a tent, a canvas cover or a canoe (to simulate travelling by water), and so on. In most cases, there was simply no place to organize a chamber larp, however forests were familiar,

and free to use. The first models were developed for “field larps,” played outdoors where a fighter could easily brandish a sword, not being afraid to brush against a ceiling lamp (so, it was rather silly to decide upon the result of a combat by throwing dice). A long journey could be initiated simply by setting different locations rather far from one another.

With the passing of the years, the topics of Russian larps became much more various. However, the community still gravitates towards historical and fantasy worlds. A larp about the conventional Middle Ages is seen as “a default larp”; a larper is perceived as a person who comes to the forest to do there something wearing a medieval costume and carrying a sword. Russian larpers know the European Middle Ages well and often can say “Pater Noster” in Latin, but do not remember it in Old Church Slavonic.

Stories about the distant future, as well as settings with “parallel worlds,” are also very popular. They are convenient for city games, when the familiar space of a megalopolis becomes populated with creatures having superhuman capabilities – for example, *The Watches*, *The Secret City* etc.. Besides, a larp about modern times with no magic component is a rare exception; as a rule, it is an interpretation of some confabulated microcosm, e.g. an American or a Japanese school, the island from *Lost*. Even the larps about the 20th century are rare; many larpers perceive the theme of 20th century history as painful and traumatic.

To summarize, the game reality (game world) of Russian larps radically differs from the physical world of daily life. It is this fact that required the development of models and rule-making.

Model is a way to implement a phenomenon of the game world (or a part of it) that cannot be reconstructed directly during the larp.

Models are a part of the meta-game reality; in other words, they are a mediator between the physical reality and the game world (for more detail, see the article by Olga Vorobyeva, 2014).

Models can be like reality – in-game fencing, generally speaking, is rather like the real one – but they do not have to copy it. “Larp models do not copy the reality and do not represent it. They work only for the larp itself and for its goals.” (Belokon 2013).

It is evident that the most important property of models – and the rules describing these models – is the fact that they are obligatory both for organizers and players. Characters cannot go under the ribbons that imitate mountains and it is impossible to inflict a wound with a sword without a certificate. If a food certificate appears on a farm field every hour, then an organizer must put it there. A vast number of quarrels and scandals in the Russian larp community are connected with the discussion of models and the fact that somebody has violated the game rules or has found a loophole in them.

The defect of a vast number of models is their resource-intensiveness. The organizer group is forced to find a large number of man hours to snip the slips of paper with “certificates” and deliver them to different corners of the playground, stick the certificates in place, and put ribbons on the weapons.

Additionally, together with very strict, formalized models, there can exist models that leave the lion’s share of decisions to players: “it happened if you believed,” “there is no need for a game master; any quarrel can be arbitrated by anyone,” and so on.

Certainly, at Russian larps, rules are inherited and borrowed (most of larp designers are content with spreading their ideas within the community, copyright conflicts are extremely rare), but for a vast number of games, they are written from scratch. It is impossible to cover them all; we will have to describe the main phenomena and tendencies very briefly.

What Kinds of Models Can Exist

The very first larps had rules on fighting, economics, medicine, and demography; some attempts to create a system of magic were undertaken. Themes, and, equally important, larp genres of games became more various with the passing of time. It is evident that a detective larp does not need rules on assaulting fortresses, while the rules on criminal investigation, the collection of clues, and crime solving are crucial for it. The scope of activities available at larps expanded greatly. We can discover a new medicine, explore alien planets, invent spells. The scope is limited only by the game world.

Now, in the 2010s, there are some important tendencies in the development of rules and models:

1. The organizer group tries to implement the idea of their larp via the rules. The issue of what a larp is made for and about is very important for modern Russian organizers. Clear understanding of the reason

for which a larp is made allows forming the system of models that will emphasize this idea in the best possible way. The larp *Cost of Living* (2011) is a paradigmatic case; there, the players had to comprehend the modern world, consumer society and the role of media technologies. Naturally, the larp rules were based upon traditional models (combat, murdering, and sex) to be filmed and put online. The prosperity of characters depended not so much on earnings and savings as on rating (for more detail, see the article by Molodykh and Rybalko in this book).

To copy the rules of another larp entirely is considered to bad manners. Not because of copyrights – the Russian larp community pays little attention to them anyway – but because the organizer who has copied the rules, evidently does not really understand the unique character of their game.

2. Organizers try to make their model maximally closed from players: few professionals or enthusiasts can understand “how it works”, and players, in their turn, deal only with its local manifestations.
3. Organizers try to make their model “the one without game masters.” If, at the larps of the past years, organizers personally gave earned resource certificates or assigned diseases for misdemeanors to players like toothache for swearing or plague for cheating, now a model must evoke from a player the sensation of “impersonality,” prescription, or “a universal law.” It is not the organizer who speaks about the progress of a disease; a player knows about the results of his actions from a program: a paper card or a flashlight that lights up or goes out.
4. Deep integration of models depend on the same stylistics. For example, at larps with a so-called “musical game engine,” emotions and actions of a character are set with the music that plays around them and in their headphones. Fights, drugs, sex, and death are also played with the help of audio files: special music or instructions are read by a speaker. For more details see (Shovman & Shovman 2015), (Vechorek & Zakharov 2015).
5. A good model should not require special knowledge, e.g. a model of science is made in such a way that a person who is far from a scientist can play it. At the same time, a model may require learning it before or at the larp. For example, at a larp about space, the flight control is imitated by playing at a simulator; the pilots must train a lot before the larp, while a new spell can be learned at the corresponding lesson at Hogwarts.
6. Usually models aim at beauty and efficiency; we will speak of this in detail later. We should note that many models are horribly conventional and need straining of the imagination; we will also describe them.

What Models Must Be Like

A good model must correspond to all of the following 6 features:

1. **Coherence:** the model must be included in the general context of the larp;
2. **Accuracy:** the model must not give results that are impossible in the game world;
3. **Stability:** the model must be resistant to stress factors, e.g. . to the lack of players or to cheating;
4. **Playability:** the model must be realizable at a larp in general; it must be easy to play; a player must not drop out of character for a long time in order to play the model, e.g. to talk to a game master;
5. **Ethicality:** a model must be ethically acceptable for the players, e.g. it must not require damage to out-of-game things);
6. **Efficiency:** the model must not claim vast expenses.

This set of features was proposed in 1999 by P. I. Delgado and G. Kantor.

After All, What Kinds of Rules Do Exist?

1. Space and Time

The implicit assumption is that a larp is going on non-stop within the whole playground; still, more complicated rules on space and time are often introduced.

A usual forest can simulate several different planets with flights between them according to special rules, or cities, where you can come only by the “roads” or through a special “post house”; a larp can accommodate locations having special rules (“dungeons,” “the underground labyrinth of the Shaolin monastery,” or a magic forest).

The walls of in-game houses can be imitated by the walls of cottages of a holiday camp, by strained cloth, by a wooden baffle, by a string – or by nothing, according to the principles of “poor” games. (Sharov & Lustberg 2013).

2. Combat Rules: One Does Not Simply Get Away From D&D

“Combat rules” often constitute the largest part of the thick folder of larp rules. They arouse the biggest number of debates and scandals and, in this area, larp thought develops most actively.

In Russia, a larp without combat rules or with relative rules is a rather rare case, e.g. “two gentlemen will always be able to arrange how their conflict ends.” A Russian larp assumes a drama based upon the background of war and death, and this issue is still seeking its researcher.

The background of the whole concept comprises a rather obvious idea: that a blow stricken with an ice hockey stick imitating a sword – the same as a blow stricken with a model of this sword made from aluminum or plastics and looking very similar to the real weapon – does some damage to a character. At the first *Hobbits’ Games*, every character had a “life” which was lost in case of receiving a blow to player’s body or to their shoulders; then, they had to go to “the Land of Death.”

Soon enough, the concept of a “hit point” came from D&D to larp combat rules. A character has some hit points; a weapon takes some hit points off. During the past 20 years, innumerable variations of this model appeared.

For safety’s sake, a blow to the head or a hand may not take hit points off. There can be “multi-hit” monsters and special weapons that take many hit points off. It is necessary to say that this variation is very complicated and needs the earnest effort of the brain.

The hit-pointed combat model is still perceived as the model by default. The harder models, originating from swordsmen who practice historical fencing did not take root, e.g. a person who falls on the ground is badly wounded or killed, which provokes a more dangerous style of fighting. In general, the issue of interaction between Russian larpers and historical reenactors is very interesting. Interaction with reenactors and historical swordsmen certainly made the visual side of Russian larps, previously very relative, more developed and good-looking; fencing became more spectacular.

The main problem of combat models at larp is as follows: either the result of a fight is determined a priori – e.g. one character fights at level 4, while the other character fights at the level 7, the second one inevitably wins – or it depends on the skills and physical conditions of a player, e.g. fencing, shooting, the skill of handling the flight simulator at a fantastic larp.

2a. Death and Afterlife At the first larps, spending 10 hours in “The Land of Death” was a kind of punishment for a failure: dying at the war or from a disease. After this 10 hour spell, the player returned as a rule – in his own team, but as a new character. This simple model gave rise to enormous variety of larping options for players whose characters are dead. See more details about current state of Land of Death in (Vitkevich 2012, Trubetskaya & Fedoseev 2013; Vorobyeva 2014).

2b. Birth after Death So-called “demography rules” appeared very early and were caused by the scale of larps; during a one-week larp, several generations could change on the whole continent. The return of the dead into their team became a reward for good role-playing; there are a lot of anecdotes about warriors who “came out from their mother’s belly in a chain-mail and holding a spear.”

A Small Digression: Sex models are invented and described with great love; there are a lot of them. Sex by mutual consent was played through massage and combing hair, joint eating of sweets, searching for pins on each other, sucking lollipops, listening to music, etc. Models of rape enjoyed great popularity, although at modern larps, rape may be not simulated at all in order not to negatively trigger female players. Therefore, models of sex can be found in combat rules (when speaking about rape), demography (when sex is considered necessary for childbirth), and on their own (when sex is considered, first of all, to be a part of people's relationships).

But let's return to fighting.

2c. Mass Fighting, Sieges, and Fortresses At Russian larps, especially large-scale ones, mass combats are very popular; there can be simulated long marches of armies, battles in the field, storms and sieges, for which there exists the profound experience of fortresses and siege engine construction. A small force – from 3 to 5 warriors – can represent the whole army.

As a rule, creation of an army needs a large investment of in-game economic resources; an army can be clumsy, moving only along the roads, but not through the forest and all the soldiers must keep together, not going far away from a special flag. These are the limitations imposed on an army.

These are possible bonuses:

- having met an army, a single warrior is inevitably killed;
- only an army can besiege and storm fortresses;
- being in an army provides a warrior with several lives.

For example, there is a rather successful model of “ribbon fighting,” when a commander buys with their economic resources a certain number of ribbons and fastens them to the flag. Instead of a certain warrior, some abstract character dies. “Killed” in battle once, the warrior returns to the flag, takes a ribbon off it, goes back to fight, and so on, until the victory or the situation with no more ribbons.

2d. Stunning, Binding, Torture, Brawls, and “Quiet” Murders by Stealth All of these can be simulated at a Russian larp – just as very conditionally, so very graphically. To lessen the mortality of characters at larps, some rules suppose complicated finishings off.

2e. Minimalistic Fighting Many modern game designers try to simplify combat rules and to reduce fighting to the background. For example, there is only one gun in the game, and shooting a person – even simply voiced like: “Bang-bang, John” – inevitably kills him.

2f. Modelling of Guns, Airsoft, and Artillery At first, firearms were modelled by percussion guns; by throwing a pellet made of tinfoil with one's left hand, with a toy gun in the right hand; by Chinese-made toy guns, and so on.

However, by the turn of this century, a rather large airsoft community had formed in Russia; this community intercrossed partially with the role-playing one. Airsoft guns became available, thus providing an opportunity to make larps about the 20th century and the future featuring a considerable share of battle interactions.

Airsoft has an important minus – all players must wear glasses; we cannot say that everyone is accustomed to this; besides, glasses spoil the photos.

NERF guns represent the latest trend. However, Russian larp players can boast their own know-how. It is the infrared gun technology, made by the game master Artem “Ksotar” Sergeev. Every player must wear a band with sensors on their head: they light up when a character is killed or wounded. The capabilities of infrared guns are vast: they can model submachine guns and shotguns, power armour, or anomalous zones. Unfortunately, “ksotar-guns” are custom-made products and limited in numbers.

We can say the same thing about artillery and models of weapons of the XV-XIX centuries that are being developed for larps. They are various – some shoot with tennis balls, others with toilet rolls. Production technologies here do not belong to larps directly.

2g. Larps on Paper. Headquarters Map A great war does not necessarily break out afield. Larpers can accompany live action role-playing with moving figures on a map according to the rules of D&D or others. Such models work well at chamber larps about politicians or generals.

3. Rules on Economy

In Tolkien's books, economic affairs are mentioned rarely, but as early as at *Hobbits' Games-91*, there were rules on economy. Characters had to work in the field, in the mines, or take prisoners and force them to work, receiving food and valuables for that, for example, pieces of lead from which they could smelt coins and buy imported weapons from the organizers.

The so-called "model approach," when a larp is based on some prescribed model (a pattern of forces interaction), appeared in the early '90s (about three main approaches in Russian larps see Semenov, 2010). It was important for organizers to give perceivable goals to players. One team has a resource, the other one does not, and both teams need it. For example, a team has some fields. One in-game year – an economic cycle – usually equaled 6 hours. Players had to show economic activity (e.g. "pasturing of forked sticks"); for that, they received a certain quantity of certificates and had to deliver them to an organizer. Failure to deliver the certificates threatened trouble for the character; if somebody had not delivered clothes certificates, they caught a cold and had to play a deceased person; if they had not delivered food certificates, they died of starvation; if they had not delivered metal certificates, their weapon broke).

In-game "fields" could be taken by force and certificates could be taken away. Certificates were usually represented by pieces of paper with inscriptions; these pieces of paper could be easily carried away in a pocket, thus causing rather funny situations. However, according to the rules, a single player could often keep on hand only two certificates; more of them had to be carried in hand-barrows. Certificates could be stuck on sacks of grass or other big things.

In the Urals and in Siberia, there was "natural" (or "hungry") economy, when a team delivered all the food they brought to an organizer and he or she issued it piece by piece on the basis of the economic game. Food could be taken by force. In the European part of Russia, this model did not take root, but sometimes can be used for representing an atmosphere of war, revolution or post-apocalypse.

3a. The Existence of an Object in the Diegesis One and the same tent can have a very different status at a larp. At a larp about hippies, it exists perfectly well and may be destroyed or confiscated by the police. At a larp about the Middle Ages, it may be considered nonexistent. Somewhere else, it may represent the private chambers of characters. Objects at a larp have either in-game or out-of-game status. e.g. a player may take 1 hit-point off an enemy with an in-game boffer ladle, but he or she had better not do it with a real one. To denote that an in-game object greatly differs from a real life object, there may be a certificate attached to it. A certificate denotes that a fiberglass model of a sword is a steel blade with corresponding characteristics, e.g. it can be used as a weapon, and, alternatively, not only takes hit points off, but also can be used for stunning. A certificate may indicate that a gate will not fall unless it receives 80 blows of a battering ram. A certificate with a picture may stand for a sack of wheat or a barrel of wine; according to the rules, in-game weapons and valuables are usually marked with a ribbon or a label.

3b. Macro- and Microeconomy To escape absurd situations, when a tavern keeper can easily buy a kingdom with their income, at many larps, the economy is divided into the one meant for "small people" and the one meant for states, corporations, and big banks.

3c. Billing for the larp The larp *Cost of Living* devoted to dystopian future, its own system of electronic payment was created. Its support required about thirty programmers (Molodykh 2013).

4. Medicine

Medicine and war go hand-in-hand. Actually, the first medicine models served as a tool to punish someone who had lost a battle or somehow offended an organizer.

Punishing diseases were popular, e.g. a toothache for bad language or dysentery for the mess at the camp. It is necessary to say that, nowadays, relations between organizers and players have changed, and organizers try not to place themselves in the position of severe mentors looking after silly children.

Early disease treatment models could look as follows: an game master came to a player and told them that their character turned sick with the following symptoms. Then, the game master had to accompany the player, explaining that symptoms got worse, watching how the player imitated these symptoms, seeing if the treatment, prescribed by a healer, was adequate; and then rendering the verdict: either the character recovered or died.

All of that needed lots of organizers to follow a player and to watch the process of treatment and the player's time, waiting for the organizer who was very busy with other affairs. Furthermore, when the decision depended upon the organizer, persuading and other methods of pressing were common.

This system was replaced a "soulless" card – one of the first versions of GM-free technology – developed by a Moscow larp designer Andrey "Askold" Sapozhnikov. The technology changed a lot at different larps, but the common principle is like this: there is laminated piece of paper (usually 1/4 or 1/6 of an A4 sheet) with some text. The text on it is covered with strips of black insulating tape. On top, the condition is written, according to which, a player must unglue the stripes of insulation tape. The text under the stripes describes the sensations of the character, which must be represented by the player. The character does not know what is happening to them. A medical character also may not understand at a glance what disease this patient has, but they may give to the patient a medicine, within which a similar card is enclosed.

Medicine cards give an opportunity to play engrossing medical detectives in the manner of *Doctor House*, but they better suit fantastic larps. For historical larps, bloody and naturalistic models are developed: a player is wrapped around with food wrap, pig organs are laid on them, and are covered with one more layer of wrap. Doctors can perform operations on these organs. A more simple method is applied when a scrap of cloth is stuck on a player's skin, and it is possible to suture the cloth with surgical instruments.

5. How to Play Culture

The mental outlook and attitudes of a player (a modern person) and their character (a cowboy, a hobbit, or an Egyptian slave) differ very much. Sometimes a player wants to behave as a player, not as a character, and the organizers face the problem of forcing this villain into the rigid framework.

Early culture rules tried to occupy players with something beside warfare and make them represent fine rituals, offering, in return, simple bonuses. For example, a beautifully played burial reduced the spell of being in the Land of Death.

Now, culture rules comprise a set of texts that should explain to players what the values of their characters are. For these very values, the characters will kill and die at a larp.

However, special models provoking a player to play especially brightly are elaborated for some larps. It can be a language model that makes the character's speech different from the usual Russian language of a player.

For the larp *To Die in Jerusalem* (2013), a model of pilgrimage was developed. It provoked a player to think about spiritual categories, to travel a lot across the game world, to meet other characters, and to converse with them about the meaning of life and the faith.

For the larp *¡No pasarán! ¡Hemos pasado!* (2012) about the Civil War in Spain, the organizers invented a model of "ideology-on-beans." It made modern larpers (who are very tolerant and not inclined to ideological disputes) defend their views passionately with lethal force. Every player was carrying along a pouch of beans. When somebody began to hold a meeting, to pray, to agitate for the Republic or for the traditional imperial Spain near the character, they had to object aloud or to give one bean in support of the declared ideology. Beans represented "popular support" of this or that ideology and allowed the front-benchers to win the game on the macrolevel.

6. Science and Magic: Intellectual Games

Simulation of magic was a huge problem for the earliest larps. The history of magic at larps worked up a long way from fireballs made of cones with red ribbons attached to them to magic speaking portraits on the walls of Hogwarts.

At early larps, simulation of magic needed the interference of an organizer. For example, fine rituals with a lot of participants were rather popular. Following the results of them, an organizer approved or did not approve this or that change of the game world with magic.

For *Hogwarts Seasons*, a larps campaign about Harry Potter's world (2005-2011), magic disciplines were developed. They were so difficult that it was necessary to study and practice them directly at a larps for years. "The Bantses' charms" (Bantses is a nickname of this system's inventor) were most unusual and comprised beautiful dance movements of various degrees of difficulty and with different effects. During a magic duel, one wizard could assault their opponent with an attacking spell or a series of spells and the opponent could beat every spell off with a special shield and, in their turn, attack.

6a. Magic and Visual Effects Made with Electronics For many years, Moscow game designer Gennadiy "Kreyll" Kruglov has created devices specially for larps. These are:

- things that allow players to feel the technologies of the past, e.g. a telephone station requiring the work of telephone operators;
- magic things, e.g. daggers glowing at the approach of orcs; the Rings of Power reacting to the approach of another Ring-bearer with a vibration similar to a heartbeat; portraits on the walls of Hogwarts that talk to characters; arches and paths in the forest that light up at the approach of a player;
- devices that influence the emotions, monitor the movements, and show the physical condition of a character;
- science fiction devices, e.g. collars for the Battle Royale monitoring the movement of pupils around the playground;
- ID card readers; combination locks that can be hacked.

As we can see, similar technologies are used both for the simulation of magic effects and for the imitation of technologies of the future. For more details, see Kruglov, 2013.

6b. Science A lot of models of scientific and technological inquiry were created for Russian larps. Sciences do not necessarily represent real science; in-game models may describe laws, according to which fictional or magic worlds function. We should mention that science and magic are close in the mind of a modern person; a scientist is perceived as an eccentric and mighty wizard.

Some models are aimed in the first place at creating a beautiful picture; some of them are brain twisters and comprise the solving of problems or combining of a puzzle, etc. At historical larps, some attempts can be made to reconstruct scientific methods of the past.

A lot of larps simulate technological development, e.g. development of military technologies.

Finally, it is possible to create a large-scale model using actual data and adding some objective laws important for a larps, to make a program, and to load it into the computer. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to create such a model and keep to scientific truth at the same time; besides, the maintenance of such a program requires enormous organizational resources.

At fantastic larps, one can construct entire biological systems where every animal acts and develops according to its own rules. Those who play scientists can be practitioners that go into dangerous jungles for specimens or be theorists that analyze the data received from the specimens.

Different theories of in-game science may describe one and the same process; thus, a scientific conflict appears.

Some humanities may be created specially for larps, e.g. a certain language of aliens where great importance is attached not so much to words as to gestures). For more detail see Fedoseev, 2013.

Conclusion

Quite every in-game action, from letter writing to childbirth, has already been transformed into Russian larp models. This article hardly touches 10% of modeling variety. There was a number of attempts to create a general database of larp models, but unfortunately all those attempts failed. Most part of larp skills is transmitted orally. Russian game designers consider models as a substantial part of pre-larp creation that are as important as plot-making, casting and logistics. Any organizer is always glad to share their results.

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Abandoning Unity of Time and Space: the Commentary by Mike Pohjola

It is easy to read one article about Russian larps and assume it describes all Russian larps. The same holds true for many “Nordic” articles in this book and their Russian commentary. Fatland, Koljonen, or Stenros describe their own understanding of Nordic larp, not a ubiquitous truth of it.

Reading only this article, one might think Russia only has gamist larps where players have to be forced to immerse in their characters through external models. And, similarly, that Russian larps are very abstract, having no unity of time or place, or attempt at 360 degree illusion.

In my understanding, like with Nordic larps, this is sometimes the case and sometimes not. With that in mind, I find the topic very interesting and believe it describes many techniques that could be applied outside of Russia as well.

In his commentary on Johanna Koljonen’s article, A. Sapozhnikov calls “360 Illusion” larps 1:1 scale modeling, and argues they are not superior to other forms of modeling. This line of thinking is marginal in the Nordic groups, mostly limited to small "black box" larps where time and space need no unity, and where the aesthetics are almost or completely abstract.

Unity of time and space is a concept Aristotle used when describing Greek tragedy 2500 years ago. Unity of time means that if the play lasts for two hours, then it logically can only portray two hours of the lives of the characters. (This leads into lots of “Hi! I’m just back from the Trojan War, let me tell you what happened over there..”) Unity of space means the whole play must happen in one location, such as the throne room where characters come and go. According to Aristotle, without these, there can be no theatre! Of course, it didn’t take long for theatres to create the idea of time jumps, flashbacks, dream sequences, multiple locations, and the like.

Larp is in a similar phase of development. The Norwegians have invented fateplay, meaning someone can pre-determine certain events in a larp! The Swedes have invented the monologue! The Danes have perfected black box larps with completely abstract scenography! We Finns talk about immersing in your character. And now the Russians claim you can have larp without unity of time and place!

In fifty years or so, all of these inventions will seem self-explanatory, but right now, they provide a breath of fresh air in the smug self-referentialism of Nordic larp discussion.

Models

The concept of “models” seems to contain both “rules mechanics” such as hitpoints, “meta techniques” such as ideology-on-beans, and “abstractions” such as natural economy.

In Nordic larp, rules mechanics are usually very lax or completely missing. Complex fighting rules with weapons that deal different kinds of damage are frowned upon. They are seen as coming in between the player and the experience. They are usually replaced with meta techniques such as “whoever draws their gun last, controls the situation,” or dramatic guidelines such as “in the first act, nobody dies.” The dramatic guideline is a type of model not included in the article. Is it left out, is it uncommon in Russia, or is it not considered a model? Typical dramatic guidelines might tell larpers to “Play to lose,” “Play in a way that enables others,” “Don’t kill anyone in the first hour,” “Don’t try to solve all your plots before the larp ends,” “There are three act breaks in the larp,” or “When you are ready to end the larp, move to the inn.” Advanced dramatic guidelines are very rare in my native Finland as well because of the heavy focus on character immersion.

In most larps, combat is inessential and is hardly dealt with at all. In such cases, the results of possible skirmishes are left for the players to deal with: “Do whatever would feel realistic.” The article seemed to differentiate rules mechanics from other models in terms of player attitudes. Models should not be copied from larp to larp, as that is lazy game design. But “all larps” must follow the hitpoint battle system. One would imagine it works well for one kind of game, but poorly for some other types.

Meta techniques are popular in Nordic larps and the article had several interesting observations on these. The ribbon mechanic (meta technique) used for armies (abstraction) seemed very interesting for combat heavy larps.

Ideology-on-beans seems like an interesting way to force a strongly gamist larping culture to recreate different cultures. How can you “win” the larp if your character has a worldview that gets in the way? Other larping cultures have developed immersive, dramatic, and simulationist playing styles to bypass gamism and the focus on winning, but this is an interesting, different approach.

Abstractions

Abstractions as described in the article are quite rare in Nordic larps and almost completely missing from bigger games. Some are seen in so called black box larps which live in the border between freeform tabletop role-playing and mini larp. Certainly, Nordic abstractions are not as advanced as these Russian ones.

Many of these have to do with either breaking unity of time, breaking unity of space, or breaking the “What You See Is What You Get” idea, also common in larps. If you break all of these all of the time, you are perhaps not larping anymore. But some of them can be broken some of the time in a way that actually enhances the larp.

I see enormous story potential in a Land of the Dead, but it is lacking in this article. The Land of the Dead is only described in the condition it was in early larps, not as what it has perhaps developed into. Nevertheless, the idea itself seems like a meaningful entry into the diction of large fantasy larps.

The rebirth of players of dead characters into new characters and, thus, creating new generations is a great idea. I can only imagine what effects this has for the sense of time in the larp. In the *Hobbit Games*, one in-game year is said to be six hours, so new generations must spring up quite fast in the Shire. Nevertheless, one larp having the scope of a family story with the flow of generations is appealing.

In most larps I am familiar with, time is usually 1-to-1, meaning one off-game day equals one in-game day. This is Aristotle’s unity of time. As a consequence, larps deal with extraordinarily important days where warrior queens are crowned amongst great turmoil and dragon gods die leaving whole cultures in chaos. Everyone has traveled from all over the world to be there and the everyday toil of their lives is inconsequential. Thus, economy and economic models rarely come to play, other than perhaps for bartering of goods.

The concept of a larp having several economic cycles of planting, crops, hunting, trade, and such, is virtually unknown to me. (For context, I have larped in Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Poland, Germany, and the United States, and ran larps also in Italy and the Czech Republic).

This idea deserves to be tried out in all fantasy and historical larps outside of Russia immediately.

Curiously, the Siberian/Uralian “natural economy” reminds me of stereotypical Stalinist economy, where the state takes your food and redistributes it according to perceived needs. Of course, Game Masters have a better understanding of players’ actual needs than far-off bureaucrats. I do applaud the Siberian organizers’ efforts in keeping their world realistic: Why would the poor farmer have the best food just because their player is rich?

The difference between micro and macro economy makes sense in keeping the larp world stable. (The innkeeper cannot buy every army in the world). However, if the scope of the larp can span decades, this can make the larp world even too stable: in the real world, powerful industrialists can and do buy governments and armies. And revolutions are caused by empty stomachs.

If the world of Nordic larp is ready to abandon unity of time and space, this article is a great place to start!

Larps Built on the Problem of Choice

By Alexey Semenov, St.-Peterburg

The article by Alexey Semenov considers the issues with creating a specific kind of Russian larp, which focuses on the history of an individual, a community, the human spirit, and consciousness during crisis. Defining the position of such games among other larps, the author reveals their main advantage as the impression received by the player during the game process. Based on this thesis, the author finds the common point of the game and real world in an existential choice situation that is significant for both the characters and their players. Then, developing this idea, the author extracts the common features of such situations and introduces the possible methods of creating them during the game through specific game world architecture (e.g. setting design) and game rules (e.g. multidimensionality, profundity, symbolization, topicality, temporality, etc). When examining these similarities, empathy is a common principle in larp and art.

The problem of classification

Currently, it is not possible to give any satisfactory classification of larps from the ontological (and, maybe, any other academic) point of view. For the sake of simplicity, from now on we'll use the term "role-playing games" or "larp" ("live action role-playing games"), considering that the question is just about larp.

We had better admit a classification that would be functional as a satisfactory one. Such a classification, in other words, wouldn't only break larps up into groups on the grounds of certain abstractive features (e.g. scale, method of organization, storyline particularities, creative agenda, structure of role-playing space, etc.). It would also allow us, according to these marked characteristics, to typify newly created larps and, following the typification, have an algorithm known in advance or, at least, the most general principles of creating and analyzing these larps.

In other words, whether we admit Linnaeus' theory or not, thanks to his classification of life forms, we can reconstruct the appearance of an extinct animal by the fragments of its bones. Thus, we can also understand the particularities of its behavior and establish many more new helpful facts, concerned, in turn, with the reverse influence of this animal on the environment.

We can say the same about chemistry and Mendeleev's periodic law. Unfortunately, currently there is no such systematic classification for larp. We have poorly formalized complexes of empirical experience and theoretical constructs; it would be too brave to call them systematic knowledge or, at least, a database. I mean the overall situation in larps in Russia, the Ukraine, and Belarus – we'll call them all Russian in general, because there is no great difference between them, – as I know for a fact only about them.

This excursus was necessary at the beginning in order to give the understanding that the positioning of the below-mentioned larps appears rather relative. Any enclosed characteristics can be understood and explained highly randomly depending upon the reference frame familiar to a reader.

To clarify the answer to the question regarding which games we are discussing, it will be necessary to provide an overall answer to this question – and here is, I dare say, a special feature of many Russian larps. No familiar scale of comparison, even very descriptive, will give any adequate notion of the game we describe.

Impression as a distinctive feature

However, in my opinion, this issue must be explored wider and deeper.

Suppose we have a full record of all in-game events along with a video log filmed with CCTV cameras, so that no game point escaped the objectives. Will we then achieve an adequate comprehension of the game? The answer will be negative. We will possess no knowledge of possibly the most important game aspect: the players' feelings and impressions. If an actor playing in a feature film or a theatre performance tries with his whole role to show their character, introduce them to a viewer, and maximally express the inner world of the character to make them understandable both inside and outside, a larp player, in turn, in most cases, has no such goal. A larp is not only a play for a viewer, but, in the first place, a play for someone being their own viewer, where much could and should be left hidden from the broad audience.

Here, an interesting dialectic contradiction is engaged. On one hand, a character must be bright and shown outwardly to present an image. On the other hand, a player is (appears) in the game world as a character and here, we don't see the player themselves as a personality; still, it is exactly their inner life that is important for us and this very life stays in the background. Theatre and cinema, in general, do not consider the inner world of an actor to be the key point, but care for the viewer's impressions. Accordingly, any parallels between larps and cinema or theatre (and, eventually, literature) must be constructed very carefully, considering this contradiction. The critical distinction between larps and psychodrama lies in the same area.

From a game designers' point of view, a larp looks rather like a directed documentary film: shot, in addition, in one take and without any editing. A director can place the cameras beforehand, set the route for the operators, and instruct the interviewers, but no one can foretell the reaction of the spontaneous participants in the film and is unable to affect the result by means of editing. Moreover, the result itself will never be known for sure.

Speaking about players' post-game reports, deconstruction cannot be total here as well. No report of a player will contain all impressions; besides, impressions of different players will be contradictory (this being common practice): people's opinions about the same facts of daily life and pieces of art are extremely different. Maybe only a hermeneutic explanation can provide the overall picture of the game, but the hermeneutics of larps is an issue never addressed before.

Meaning as the main impression that a larp must produce in a player, we'll accept as a classification feature the way an organizer's group positions their game. The game may develop differently from the original concept; still, some efforts of organizers and the emphasis on their work with players will reflect the game's special features better than other, more abstractive parameters such as the larp scale or plot. In the postmodern world, there are no principles assigned in advance by the frame of the story; besides, one and the same subject can have quite different content: a tragedy easily becomes a comedy, a comedy turns into a drama, a detective becomes an epos, etc. Contemporary art rejects classical criteria of genre and style.

What choice we are speaking about. Existential choice

I will speak about the games intended to put a character – and the player portraying this character – into the situation of choice. This choice should be insoluble from the point of view of both formal and dialectical logic: that is, the character faces an existential problem. According to Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, such situations have the following features:

1. the choice is made from the situation of feeling and understanding oneself in the condition of necessity to change something, owe to oneself, experiencing the lack of independence of one's own existence (§13, 16, 21, 26, 30, 40);
2. any solution seems non-optimal and even aggravating to the circumstances (§60, 62, 63);
3. this choice cannot be passed to anybody; neither authority, nor logic, nor experience, or other initial knowledge can help here. This choice is completely individual (in other words, it is the choice of conscience) and unreasonable, showing the horror of this principle unreasonableness (§40);
4. the choice is compulsory; it cannot be eluded and it inevitably affects both the person making the choice and the others who are already significant or become significant as the result of the choice (§29, 30, 62, 63).

It should be noted that the features listed above refer to both negative (grieve, loss, despair, frustration) and positive emotions (joy, delight, amazement etc.). In positive situations it is necessary to express the joy, but the means of expressing are insufficient and imperfect.

Why are we speaking about this very choice? The answer is that the meeting point of the player and the character is in the space of such problems and choices. Certainly, we can separate game world from the real world and consider it absolutely conventional and fictional, but we can not (and even would not) eliminate from larp the things that touch players' souls and make the imaginary world interesting and familiar. These situations provoke feeling of unity of player and character (or spectator and character in case of piece of art). Experiencing an existential situation in character's life causes importance of the larp in player's real biography. Character's diegetic feelings are not excluded from player's lifetime but are integrated into it through similar situations of meeting Self.

That is, here we deal with not only a situation of choice but with changing an attitude, with the most profound experience including both intellectual and emotional aspects.

Certainly, the tension of the situation is decreased with the game conventionality; nevertheless, the strength and depth of the impression received from such a simulated situation are comparable with impressions from pieces of art because of the same mechanism of empathy. Here, a player shares their character's feelings or empathizes with other characters in the same way as a viewer or a reader empathizes – feels “pathos,” as described by Aristotle – to an author's characters.

The narrative setting for such situations may be of any kind; however, no matter how complicated the background book or historical period is, it is much easier to show the complexity of the game world with a certain model than to add some unusual meaning to it from outside (although the latter is very peculiar to a postmodern situation).

In order to avoid voluminous arguments about immanent meanings I refer to the famous scholar Mikhail Bakhtin:

Any creation is bound with both its own rules and rules of its material. Any creation is defined by its subject and its structure, therefore it avoids random and does not generate anything itself but unfolds things hidden in the subject. You can arrive at a truthful thought, but this thought has its own logic, so you can not just invent it from the very beginning. There is the same process for an art image, whatever it is, it has its own art logic and law. Having chosen a certain task you should comply with its objective laws. (Bakhtin 1984).

For instance, a classical Latin-American novel featuring the “magic realism” style or films by Lars von Trier, have a more provocative context for the situations of existential choice than the films about the adventures of the four musketeers based on books by Dumas or cartoons about Mickey Mouse do.

Accordingly, the class of games we mostly speak about are larps based upon sources — literature, cinema, historical situations, or life collisions – that include an existential choice.

However, any data can be simplified or complicated with a special approach. The sources for larps is the topic for a big and special research.

The choice as the idea of larp. The four reasons inside the larp structure

The four reasons and the primacy of form

If, in view of the foregoing, we consider a larp as an idea sent to a player, then the idea has some material, driving, formal, and goal-based reasons (again, according to Aristotle's “*Metaphysics*”).

Thus, digressing a little from the material and having already said a few words about the driving reason of a larp – the existential choice – it is possible to declare some theses about the goal of game designers' actions and the formal steps to achieve that goal.

The actual goal is not even to change a player, although existential choice can lead to changes. Here the goal is the choice itself as an action, but this choice is done by the player themselves. By means of an uneasy choice at the game – by facing the tangibility of death, the realness of another person as a subject, the realness of a loss (a defeat), the realness of horror, the realness of power, the realness of the supernatural (divine), the

imminence of responsibility, the realness of beauty, the realness of hatred, distrust, refusal, shame, motivation, desire, etc. – a player, wishing to or not, opens before themselves new life horizons that show them the world in a new light. A player can comprehend the life framed within these horizons or refuse such comprehension. This answer about the goal is given from the point of view of philosophy of life and existential philosophy; there is no need to follow these ideas, but this approach, at least, limits the scope of conversation and prevents us from straying away from the subject and getting lost in insignificant details.

The most important issue here will be the formal steps, as larps are much like art (according to Aristotle's interpretation of art explained by H.-G. Gadamer), where the answer to the question "How is this done?" provides, in its turn, the answer to the question "What is this work's meaning?" A vividly perceived answer to the question "What is the larp about?" allows players to feel the game world and the role better. Firstly, art uncovers the truth; secondly, art does it in the playing form and through the form's play. The most important argument here is Gadamer's thesis about playing nature of art (*Truth and Method*).

We should note that all the techniques listed hereafter aren't independent from each other (aren't so-called orthogonal bases), but are connected with each other and this is not a fault. The case is that they all serve to uncover one and the same idea; therefore, being different by external expression, they are essentially the same.

Although techniques should be spoken about from the formal side, that is the structure should be discussed instead of certain realizations, it is necessary to demonstrate also the examples of their application.

I'll have to illustrate the techniques in question with the games that are developed by me and my colleagues, or those games by other larp designers, in which I took part and, thus, have the information about the organizers' concept and its implementation.

The Multilayerness of a Larp

A larp is not limited to the "direct" strategies. In-game realities with metaphysical dimension – for example, attitudes and stereotypes usual for the game world inhabitants, – *must have the real embodiment in some game model* and not in some recommendations about culture that are frequently ignored or forgotten when being not reflected in game mechanics, in life and action. Thereby, it is more useful not to separate intentionally the reality of a direct action from the place where the metaphysical laws of the game world work. These two realities must be bound together organically, even osmotically, but not mechanically. As in the case of our real world, tradition and attitudes must turn into live action naturally, and, vice versa, live action must become a tradition.

Action's mechanism is uncovered through a folded metaphor, in other words, a rather simple model explains allegorically complicated relations included into both tradition and normativity. Such mechanism can be illustrated with Snorry Sturluson's "Language of Poetry": he uncovers the meaning of scaldic poetry through explaining kennings in mythological stories. In-game relations with a model behind them do the same thing hiding simultaneously historical precedent, tradition and normativity. A precedent can often be a myth or a religious attitude. But the aim of larp designer is not to replicate some real traditions without thinking but to find the attitudes important for in-game reality and to include them into game mechanics.

For example, at the larp *Balkan Dream Book* (based on the novels and stories by Milorad Pavić, 2003) motives for the creation of existential choice situations such as love, dream, and death, dominant for Pavić's works, were simulated accordingly, with a picture, a fragment of some text, and an object, on which there was a quote from one of the sacred books (the Bible, Koran, or Torah). All these items had been distributed at random. A meeting with a character having these meaningful symbols provoked interaction with the players and the choice of the interaction method: for example, one's love could be bought out, taken away, exchanged, spoken about, etc. The choice of interaction mode itself defined the status of love for a character – this status was to be chosen.

At the game *To Die in Jerusalem* (Crusades, 2013), the pending situation of struggle against a sin and of understanding of the essence of a sin in general was depicted by "spiritual warfare." In other words, everyone had a set of maxims; derogation from those was an indulgence for a sin, a climb down to it; if someone did not fight their sin with discipline and confession, then the sin overcame them and they could commit much more horrible derogations from the maxim. On the contrary, if someone resisted their sin, the temptation became stronger, so the discipline had to become more severe and confession had to become deeper. This spiritual fight

was additionally monitored by a confessor, who also gave some advice.

Symbolization

We must use the bifacial nature of a symbol to bind the reality of cause-and-effect relations of “direct action” and of “unseen” cultural ones. Only then, the diegetic traditions will be included into the larp. None of the diegetic laws, except for the facts presented somewhere in historical and cultural background information, prevent community leaders from making alliances or starting conflicts where they can’t exist (these are the most rough and indicial examples), because they simply can’t do it in this world, not to mention more delicate interpersonal relations, violation of estates borders, or other patterns of behavior. The introduction of symbols to a simple cause-and-effect relationship complicates it and makes it multilevel. Symbols are extensively used by the daily reality: a military man with torn-off stripes has a different status; a church without a cross is not a church at all; a girl with a bouquet of flowers is perceived as if she has received a courtesy from somebody. Thus, the situation becomes more complicated. Diegesis claims the same.

The clue is in the objectivation of human relationships through conventionality of some certain things. A thing refers to some certain connections within society without naming them directly.

However, as the power of habit is such that it is difficult for us to consider as a symbol some attributes of distant countries, foregone, or fictional worlds (they remain just wordless wonders); it is easier and more efficient to mark some cultural realities as significant for the game world and to label them anew with something familiar, yet referring to them in the context.

Here we deal with a kind of translation from one language to another. Such translation is often extremely difficult and requires special qualification. For example, a similar situation there was when Europeans tried to translate sacred Indian texts from Sanskrit. Before appearing Bergson’s conceptual framework of his philosophy of life, Kant’s framework could not provide an appropriate translation. Not only religious or philosophical texts, but also national epic, fairy tales, historical documents could not be understood – in sum, the whole culture required translation. This example demonstrates that in such cases we face not only re-coding but also transposing the whole conceptual framework, ethical and aesthetic system.

For example, at the larp *Ultima Esperanza* (known better as *Latimeria*, Latin-American magic realism, 2005), such a significant realia for the life of Latin America as political orientation – which is both expressed, designated, and understood differently in Latin-American life than in European and American tradition, – was symbolized with a bow, coloured in accordance with one’s affiliation to a party. A bow was to be worn openly according to the larp rules. The bow denoted your vis-à-vis’s predetermined position, and, accordingly, provoked your certain prejudice against them defined by the colour of your bow. You were allowed to wear no bow, but this would mean your immaturity and non-membership to the society and would a *priori* place you in the state of a person with no position and no opinions, a person even worse than an outcast from a Greek *polis* or an outsider.

The Time Factor

Time must contribute the larp actively and have an impact on the events. This calls for making time nonlinear and non-uniform. The habitual, invisible passing of time, or even the introduction of cycles or scales, is allowed as a technique; still, it must not be taken for granted. The neglect of time as a place for an action, for a possibility of an action, leads to the depreciation of this possibility and the depreciation of the story in general. Here, it is appropriate to remember the psychological representation of time by Augustine, where the present comprises our actions and decisions, the future consists of our hopes and expectancies, and the past is made of our memories. (It is clear that within this comprehension that all the three components affect each other mutually and actively, as both the past and the future are seen differently in the light of hopes). Alternately, we can turn to an even more difficult existential rendering of time.

According to the existential interpretation, time is not a fact of external objective reality for a human being. Any understanding of some general, common time is based upon the individual time with roots in self-understanding. Diegetic self-understanding requires playing with time, when deeply individual nature of time is represented instead of external determination.

“Drops” into the past, into the future, and into other time levels, the quickening and slowing of time flow – all these can be easily implemented without complicated simulation. One can use signals / symbolic triggers – e.g. certain music, posters showing the current date, clocks, uttered code words, and other obvious signs – or more subtle and smooth transitions. It is important for changes of the forward flow of time to affect diegetic reality not only as a change of background scenery, but also to create tension by mutual influence or by the fact that, at a certain level, a character may be successful, yet at another one, the outcome may be sad; alternately, what is even more interesting, a player may play different characters at different time levels.

At the game *Emigre’s Trip Journal* (emigration in the XXth century as self-identity, 2009), the time flow in Paris was assigned by the newspapers and posters being posted during the larp, and also by the radio – time flowed fluently from the end of the 1920s to the year 1968; in Buenos Aires, the time was set by presidential elections: you could elect Peron, Yrigoyen, or montañeros and general Velado. The time background itself was set by changing the social statuses of the players’ roles. As time went by, the emigrants did not change their age, while the local people, accordingly, did.

At the game *Ireland 1901* (based on the works by Seumas O’Kelly, 2006), the inhabitants of the town of Kilbeg could introduce a certain code phrase into the conversation by saying “and it was so. . .” Afterwards, the narrator became the director of a story from the past and all the listeners became its active participants; the action migrated into another time level and everyone could add his or her own view of the story seen from the perspective of the characters they played. In such a way, the past of the town, its local legends, and connection with the past came to life and became significant here and now.

I know that in Nordic larps such techniques are rather common (e.g. blackbox). Russian larps, unfortunately, do not work with time deeply. Creating alternative time streams is popular, but in fact they are spatial, not temporal elements without touching the problem of historic time in the Augustine’s psychological representation renovated by Heidegger.

The Connection with Present Days

A game world may be arbitrarily far from ours in space and time and, howsoever, fictional. Nevertheless, we can’t help indicating its realities differently than with the help of comparison to our world and allusions to it (J.R.R. Tolkien says so about Middle-Earth in his letters). If these allusions and associations look like a circumspect system, diegesis will be filled with realism. The harmony of connection is crucial here. A direct calque or an evident allegory flatten and impoverish the larp too much, depriving it of its charm of believability, while implementation of undetected allusions and unexpectedly revealed motives varies the game world and adds some depth to it. Therefore, a player can compare themselves in our world with their character and the diegesis in general.

Opening up the world is an important process for personal development: game world can facilitate player’s personal development, especially if they are bound with the real world by understanding of the essence of an event with the help of allusions and not by simple copying of externals. Existential situations are common for all times and, through their very similarity, one can show some existentials of our present via certain existentials of other epochs.

The larp *Tambourine for the Middle World* (based on books by Victor Pelevin, 2004), showed the realities of the Moscow of the ‘90s and the Civil War of 1920s; the interconnection between them was carried out through an asylum, in the same way as in the novel *Chapayev and Void*. There, the real farceness and contrivedness of the “problems” imposed by the ideological machine and mass culture of the Russian present time were depicted with the farceness of revolutionary Smolny and the front in the ‘20s. Two historical epochs reflected each other as two mirrors.

At the larp *The Games of Patriots* (the events of the war between Athens and Sparta in the V century BC, 2007), the issues of true patriotism, power (e.g. autocracy, monarchy, democracy, etc. and their nature), war and peace, topical for modern people, were depicted through life and relations of Greek city states.

The Depth of the Game World. Abundant Possibilities for Action

A choice must be a choice, not a declaration of the possibility of a choice. In other words, game models and entities embedded into a larp by the designers must have some redundancy. In case we have such thing as

redundancy embedded there, then, even if some possibilities for implementation and display of the game world did not come to life, they, in fact, did it anyway, as there was a choice. When there is no choice and the model is non-redundant, latency of some realia is caused rather by the breaking of some cause-and-effect relationships, or by the fact that the players refused or found it hard to fulfill one possibility and had nothing instead.

The afterlife (Land of Death) for the larp *Ultima Esperanza* was designed the following way: a late character made a fictional or documentary video about themselves and about the brightest moment of their life (following the pattern of the film *After Life* by Hirokazu Kore-Eda, a Japanese film director). By virtue of the fact that in-game death befell only one character not long before the end of the game, this possibility remained unimplemented. However, everyone knew that life did not cease after death and there were players who portrayed a film crew. They had enough on their plate even without making such a video; yet, the general idea of cinema being important in the life of the Latin America of the '50s together with the concept that cinema could keep the brightness of life, even of a passed-away one, and transform the reality, did survive. Due to this depth, death did not turn into despair. The last hope (“ultima esperanza”) showed itself this way as well – the reality did not remain stiflingly mechanistic and one-dimensional.

Game Engine

In this case, the game engine belongs not to the driving reasons of a game, but to the formal ones, as a player moves (ascends, if you will) to empathy for characters and opens for themselves new life horizons – that is, to the situation of existential choice that connects the player and the character.

Therefore, the game engine must be brought, as closely as possible, to some real-life problem: safety, life necessities, and economy (in fact, all these are various types of survival); career, reputation, power, and knowledge (career, knowledge and reputation are also forms of domination). In other words, the game engine is often connected with competition. Freedom is a form of game engine contrary to competition, but it means moving from someone’s power (even from the power of the desire to dominate) to autocracy (not in the sense of self-discipline, but in the sense of understanding of ontological, existential abilities).

A really alternative game engine is faith, or, in other words, the vertical of spirit and ascension to the divine. A character ascends to acceptance of the worldly by detachment from it, and by departure from the secular, he or she ascends to understanding of its deep sacral nature.

At the game *Conquest of Paradise* (1997), the true game engine was exactly faith, but not the fight for power and resources and not quests, as non-radical actions (and maxims of faith move us only to radical ones) simply would not lead to unraveling of the plot – such was the system of characters. A radical action – in other words, an action involving the issues of faith – caused some resonance, while a different one, though justified by the circumstances, died out with no aftermath.

At the game *Spain-1937* (civil war in Spain in 1936-1939, 2007), the role of the game engine was performed by hatred (class hatred, hatred based on attitudes, caused by the facts of the war, enkindled by propaganda). The dilemma between hatred and decency (and evidently the poor existential position of “decency” itself as a moral stance in the face of ethical and existential reality of hatred) and the search for the antithesis for hatred pushed the game events forward in the same way as the flywheel of civil wars swings and pushes on the history.

It is possible to provide many more examples.

Conclusions

Does the implementation of the above-mentioned formal steps fulfill the goal of the game with the motives of a situation of existential choice? I dare say it does. At least, while inventing and formalizing the above-described steps, either intuitively or on the basis of logical constructs, the author of the article and his colleagues tried to reflect upon all of the criteria of a situation of existential choice (a dramatic situation) as they are described by the founders of phenomenology and existential philosophy, together with some provisions of philosophical hermeneutics.

Is the given list full? Does it exhaust all formal possibilities? I am sure it does not.

Above, we described a certain practice of designers’ approach to larps. I hope that such systematization of this approach to larp creation will facilitate a general systematization of knowledge about games or, when being

discussed, will reveal new important issues to be resolved and formalized.

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Commentary by Sarah Lynne Bowman

This fascinating article posits a type of Russian larp design based on creating moments of existential dilemma for characters in which they must make some sort of difficult choice. The author outlines the theory of design employed by him and his colleagues, then provides several helpful examples of what existential choice in larp looks like. Unlike games with clear “win” conditions such as quest style larps, Semenov describes experiences in which characters must make non-optimal decisions with no clear answers and little ability to escape these choices. The author further proposes formal techniques that can achieve such effects, such as the use of symbols, manipulation of time, and a structured game engine.

In the case of the “game engine,” I assume Semenov means the mechanics of the game where cause and effect can occur, which he insists should center upon these difficult choices. In other words, agency outside of the choice will not result in an effect in the game world nor will inaction. Therefore, the game engine forces players to experience the existential dilemma intended by the design. Regardless of the level of fantasy of the larp, Semenov insists that these engines should resemble real life problems as much as possible by including issues pertaining to status, survival, and other forms of societal competition. Interestingly, the article also describes faith as a potential game engine. For example, in the larp *To Die in Jerusalem* (2013), each player experienced a form of “spiritual warfare” in which their religious maxims were tested by their desire to sin, a conflict that was moderated by a confessor, who assumedly was played by an organizer or NPC. In another example, *Conquests of Paradise* (1997), only radical actions motivated by faith caused resonance in the game world, whereas non-radical or irrelevant actions had little effect. Semenov explains that while these larps are based more upon works of literature and film, and thus probably belong more in the “arthaus larp” tradition, such existential moments can occur in any game regardless of the level of fantasy with adequate design.

I find this latter comment the most telling with regard to the current debates around the concepts of “playing to lose” versus “playing to win.” Larp mechanics that encourage players to “win” through quests, leveling, social position, or other motivations are often placed in contrast to larps such as many in the Nordic larp scene that emphasize playing for the intensity of experience, including situations in which the character experiences a deep loss of some sort, e.g., social humiliation, loss of life, loss of a loved one, loss of freedom, etc. However, in my experience, some players “play to lose” even in fantasy games that incentivize win conditions; alternately, players can avoid intense consequences in social realism games designed to reliably provide them. Also, many larps are designed to provide both experiences; for example, leveling is possible in the American boffer larp *Dystopia Rising*, but ultimately, all characters will die and eventually become horrific zombies, mockeries of their former selves that haunt their loved ones. Players often recount their death sequences as the most powerful moments for them and some even rush headlong into these moments.

What is particularly fascinating about the approach of Semenov and his colleagues is the lack of emphasis on “winning” or “losing” as the important component. Instead, the goal is to encourage characters to confront difficult choices that have no clear answer and, thus, bring players closer to the existential reality of their own lives. One could interpret these existential moments as “losing,” though the choice might not produce a negative consequence for the character per se other than the frustration of the difficulty of the choice itself. Instead, the emphasis here is on the psychological impact of having agency in a world where choices are not simple. Semenov explains that this process leads to a greater sense of empathy for players, both for their characters and for others in the scenario who are in similar dilemmas or affected by these problematic choices.

Overall, this form of larp design takes a rather profound, intellectual approach to conflict rather than a purely emotional, visceral one or a puzzle-solving, intellectualized form. The idea is to problematize the very nature of agency and being in the world. While I think we have room in larp for all forms of design and different players will naturally be drawn to specific approaches, I find the idea of exploring the social and philosophical dimensions of a given scenario through the problem of choice highly fruitful and intriguing.

Commentary by Elge Larsson

As Semenov outlines in the beginning, we must keep in mind a certain paradox of larps: the character must be visible and active, but it is the player's experiences that are important. The tension between these poles is what makes the game designers' work interesting: how can designers make sure that the actions in the larp are based not only on what the characters might do, but also on what the player will get out of them?

To that end, the author introduces the concept of choice – specifically existential choices. They can be defined as including the necessity of change; being non-optimal and unavoidable; as well as having consequences for the character and others.

This brings to mind an old, but still valid paper, Greg Costikyan's rather well-known "I Have No Words & I Must Design" (1994), where he tries to define games and lay the ground for a critical language to analyze games. In the end, he says that all games "involve decision making, managing resources in pursuit of a goal," which come close to the concept of choice. Here, Semenov goes one step further: we need not only a critical language; we must also think philosophically on larps.

Larps with this idea of choice as the driving reason must then regard the form of larp from a somewhat different viewpoint than those we traditionally use to classify larps. The important demands for designers, Semenov says, is to formally incorporate multilayeredness, symbolization, time considerations (flow of time, breaks etc.), and connections to the present world. By implementing these demands we will be able to create games motivated by existential choice.

An interesting point here is that not all choices need to be enacted; to give a larp the kind of depth the paper proposes, it is sufficient that the possibility exists as a reality, not just a "declaration of the possibility of choice."

The game engine, that is the actualization of the above-mentioned formal demands, should thus be close to real-world problems such as safety, economy, power, freedom and even faith.

As the paper is intended to make it possible to classify larps ontologically, rather than on things as size, organization, story etc., we could ask if this lofty goal is achieved. I would say it really is an important step in the right direction. In the conclusion, Semenov clearly states that his results are to be regarded as tentative, hoping that they "will reveal new important issues to be resolved and formalized."

Still, the concept of designed choice also brings into focus such things as the player's relationship to the character; the possibility of real-life changes (in attitudes or actual behaviour) for the players; and the designers' intentions and responsibilities. As such, it should be seen as a needed broadening of our understanding of what larps actually are.

Larp as a Story: Told to Little-Known People Who Interrupt You All the Time and Do Not Laugh at Your Jokes

By Daria Kurguzova and Vladimir Servetnik, Moscow

The article by Daria Kirillova and Vladimir Servetnik considers larp as the same story told by the participants and larp designers to each other, when each composes their version of the story using available tools and means. The story itself as the larp idea develops over a period of time appears out of this storytelling. The authors introduce the necessary terminology, such as discourse, space, context, plot and character, defining it through the prism of common Russian larp terms and the structural laws of literary – and specifically dramatic – texts. A thrilling story that also has some artistic merit becomes the main goal of a larp. All of the storytelling tools described by the authors should be directed toward creating the beauty and thrill. The interaction between the storyteller and the audience is considered a specific issue that takes the internal approach to larp and its evaluation to the external level.

Necessary Foreword: All organizers make their larps according to their own tastes. Here, we'll speak only about those larps that are made on the principles of a story and will not touch upon all other possible kinds of larps¹. Examples resembling larps not made as a story should be perceived as the examples from these larps, as if the latter were made on the principles of a story.

Introduction

Larp as a story means that during a game we do the same things by means of larp that we can do after the game without these means. We tell a story about past events (e.g. “I walk along the street. Four bullies come to me. I box one of them, strike another one with a dagger, and then they all escape”), but at larp we do it not after, but during these events. We imagine a larp as a sequence of declarative statements, which resemble literature more than not literature, but, in fact, hails from oral art.

A story, in our view, forms approximately this way: some message discursively sets the space of the story and the flow of the storyline to the storytellers, who embody it according to their abilities and feelings. Let's speak of this principle in more detail.

Discourse

We do many things, not thinking properly, only because this is the way things are done. When we make a larp — and by “making,” we imply equal contribution from the organizers and the players, — we do not formulate our wishes. In other words, we do not set before us any explicit goals for why something is being done. The structure of a larp inevitably consists of some parts, which we may think about and shape the way we wish. Or we may not think and these parts will assume their shape at random. These parts comprise everything that

¹Meaning the larps made by people, who are unpleasant to us, in order to diminish them afterwards with this article.

comes into our minds when we imagine the entire process of larp making: from the creation of the original concept to the final garbage raking.

The larp discourse is the way the game message influences the space. Discourse sets the terms we use for storytelling and what exactly we tell about. Discourse depends on the storyteller; in other words, storytelling comes from the speaker and touches only those things that the storyteller wants to tell. Thus, discourse determines what the storytellers see when they look at the in-game space and it does not touch those things that the storytellers do not see or do not want to see.

In our terminology, any participant appears a storyteller. The participant is the one who takes an active part in the process and is emotionally involved in it. Every person is a hero, the centre of the story, her co-creation is her contribution. She complies only with the preset discourse and not with facts or other people's wishes. Facts do not exist in the space of a story, but interpretations do. In other words, facts need not happen for the sake of a story to come to life.

If the game message is not defined, any activity at a larp is meaningless. Here we judge from the simple assumption that we cannot deal with anything amorphous and all nameless things do not exist.

For the sake of a story to happen, we must observe the following conditions: a social agreement (everyone agrees that we create a story on meta-game level); playing to lose (that is, the process of role-playing brings us joy and we are grieved by the absence of role-playing, not with in-game failures), and the existence of reflexive space (we understand what is happening and what we want from the world).

Under such conditions, the larping process is, in fact, an exchange of information among people where everyone is ready to suppose that the others tell them the truth. A larp appears when this information exchange becomes interesting and meaningful. Deep down, the goal of all preparations of a larp is to ensure that both a player and an organizer speak the same language; in other words, they should use similar words to describe one and the same picture.

Sometimes, a larp is made not as a story, but as a glossolalia. This means that people utter some words and phrases into the air. Having a certain gift, you can bind these words and sentences with some artificial sense, but they still remain, in fact, just incoherent shouts.

The story itself must be told by a person with fine taste, a wide area of thought, and a gift of storytelling. This refers to all of the creators of the project, both organizers and players.

A story exists not when it is being told, but when it is interpreted. A story is not objective; it is a subjective narrative about events where many things simply will be dropped. These events may be of objective importance, but of little emotional value, trifling to the story, etc.

A story is being told by two people: an organizer and a player. An organizer knows what will happen and players know what they are doing. Both of them must know why the whole story flows in this particular way. It is necessary to work with players in order to make a player and an organizer tell the same story. The main character of *"Theatrical Novel"* by M. Bulgakov is writing a book, imagining a lighted room where the characters of his book come one after another and tell about themselves. An organizer and a player interact in a similar manner. One of them determines the space; the other one changes it.

The interaction of a player and an organizer happens on the principle similar to a hermeneutic circle: permanent specifications of the world happen all the time via interaction, through player's and character's eyes, and through the prism of the world. Comprehending larger things, we understand smaller ones better and vice versa. These two things are bound inseparably. Every single part of a larp must be adequate to all the others and specify the general concept, as the general specifies the particulars.

Players must be incorporated in some way into the culture (set by an organizer) and bound with the world. Between a player and the story, there must be feedback and support of each other's adequate statements; players must be full-fledged bearers of sense and be coauthors.

We build communication with coauthors as a sentence with a subject (who?), a predicate (what does she do?) and adverbials (how? e.g. these are game rules and so on).

Understanding of game content begins with the definition of a subject and a predicate, because a player focuses on what she sees first. If, in the first turn, she sees the rules, then it will look as follows: an unknown person does something unknown according to the rules of three hit points. Players can fill in all deficient elements by themselves, but after that you should not wonder why your larp about brotherly love and high duty becomes a larp about elves and orcs killing each other.

Players have a memory slot for your larp: an empty structure that needs to be filled. Things that are told to them in the first turn fill the most important place in this structure. Many larps went wrong because they were not begun from the right point.

The essence of a story is in amazement: we want to play as children; experience adventures of the body and mind; fear and enjoy fearing; feel love and be glad of heroic deeds. The main enemy of a story is boredom.

Game Space

Game space is a hyperbolized reality. In it, everyone acts on the edge between normalcy and madness, where normalcy is the absence of a story: in other words, everyday life. Madness is a story that has found exit out of the world.

Not only events at the larping area are included in the game space. A larp begins with announcements on the website and conversations with players. Game space is the language in which the story is told. In practice, preparation for a larp comprises studying the language, or, if the language is learned, enriching its expressiveness.

Language is a form of thought, just like a vase is a form of clay. It is impossible to think outside of your native language; therefore, there is no larp built on the inventions of one person or a small group. The picture existing in their minds cannot be adequately transferred with the help of language means. Therefore, it is necessary to fill the space with exterior sources, but we must interpret them so that they will correlate to the game discourse. When we simply say that we make a larp based on George R. R. Martin's works, each of us has her own Martin in her head.

(A practical example: let's suppose that we want to make a larp based on Martin's works. As far as we have not formed the game message properly, then speaking of "a larp on Martin," we mean at the same time everything that we can understand as Martin's world: wars, betrayals, love, death, proud Lannisters, noble Starks, cartoon-cute Jaime, funny fur capes of the North men, etc. As a result, it can turn out that a larp "on Martin" is made as a larp about something of the above-mentioned.)

Game space is set contextually and intertextually; sometimes it is one and the same thing.

Context is a sign field of our larp consisting of objects that can be interpreted in discursive conditions. Context is determined by the game message and sets the direction moving. Therefore, if our larp is about hope, then our context must set the feeling of hope, etc.

We set the context through three outer laws and three inner ones. The outer laws are: time, space and action, e.g. let's imagine that society interacts with physical laws inside the narrative in such a way. Inner laws are: lore, tradition and world view e.g. what the views of oneself and society are based upon; what forms continuance of these views; what these views result in).

Within the framework of context, there are binary oppositions limiting the space, such as normalcy and madness; time and eternity; and the others which the author will decide to set.

Context can be wide and deep. A deep context means that there are such connections between the objects in space that one thing follows from some other one. A wide context means that there are objects in the world that are irrelevant to each other. A wide context implies that these connections can be figured out and amplified and, sometimes, this process goes beyond the bounds of decency (in such a way madmen within the Knights Templar appear). Larps having too wide of a context turn into the Internet. In other words, a player can exist near one of the objects not touching the others only because it is funny. Let's imagine, that two people are in the Internet at the same time: one of them is at "Facebook", and another one at "Google+". Can we consider them members of the same space?

A larp is not an engineering construct, but a verbal one and, for the most part, it requires wide strokes, not stability.

A story is set intertextually by exterior sources. In other words, our space includes some interpreted part of other spaces (e.g. books, films, or dreams), that are interpreted in such a way as to become adequate to the space in question, but bring new connotations to it (e.g. the things that are implied).

Plot

When the game discourse is defined, we create a plot. Plot is not what happens to the characters; it is the way they change and the decisions they render. The plot does not describe their actions, but makes them act.

It is most convenient to build a plot according to a classic pattern: introduction, when the characters are aware of who they are in the given conditions; the climax, when the circumstances change and make the characters change too; and the resolution, when the characters respond to the change of circumstances and somehow transform the game reality themselves.

In parallel to culmination points, there are points of space tension that do not necessarily correspond to the action tension points.

It does not matter what exactly happens. It is important only who, how, and why does the things that are happening. Let's take the story from *The Lord of the Rings*: a halfling with his friends goes to a volcano and throws a ring into it. It is not yet a plot. A story receives the meaning when we tell why he goes there and why it's him who must throw the ring into the volcano.

The general plot of a larp consists of numerous single players' plots and is set by them as by phenomena, but, in its turn, sets them discursively: we can say that the general plot consists of some points of emotional tension that are assumed and located in advance, and of an emotional question, to which the local plots will be the answers.

The thrill of the action is defined by its significance within the framework of the discourse. As a rule, a complicated structure cannot be built on the fact that a thousand of minstrels walk around the larping area and sing songs (unless it is a larp about songs), or on the fact that the team of Starks razes three fortresses to the ground one by one.

In-game action is a complex of meaningful statements adequate to the predestined context. An organizer and a player use different tools for these statements, but have the same rights in the framework of the context.

A larp is not one-act; it does not obey the rule of trinity and is built as a sequence of statements, answers to answers. As a dialog, that begins before the larp and ends after it: everyone is a narrator and a listener at the same time. Additionally, a certain story of a person in the game world ends, but the person (the character) themselves does not.

Character

Characters do not exist; they are only some words in your mind. At larps, we separate ourselves from our characters in order not to offend anybody. For example, if I kill somebody at a larp with a plastic knife: remember, that it's not me but my character that has done it, nothing personal. The character is not the person who tells a story, it is the person who is told about: the tool with the help of which you speak the language of a larp. A poorly played character is the sign of an insufficient language level. Characters are formed on the grounds of immediate experience and assumptions about the way they could act. A character is an intention: in other words, a representation aimed at negotiation. A character is outlined by reaction. All the words describing a character will be verbs and deverbative words. Out of action, a character is not interesting.

Characters speak the larp language. In other words, they are adequate to the space. They should be interested in the events happening in the world. Additionally, there should be other people with similar interests and some ways for moving on.

If a character has a goal, then let this goal be adequate to the space. In other words, the goal must not close on itself. If a character wants to get rich, then he or she should invent a new profitable business, or find a way to steal the treasury of the Masonic Lodge, or do something else. It is important for the character's goal to be followed nonstop by the next one. In general, a plot is good when it balances between efficiency and inferiority. In other words, the characters may get their goals, but not in the way they wanted. This fact makes reaching the goal not the end of the story, but a significant point of it.

At a larp, a character always acts in the space of choice. There are three types of this choice: simple, simplified, and complicated. A simple choice is associated with character's earnest desires: they act rationally in the given situation. A player makes a complicated choice when he or she thinks that the character should act not the right way, but the way the character would have to act in the player's opinion. It means that a player

does not understand the character he or she plays. Players make a simplified choice when they are being lazy or do not want to larp: they prefer to snap their fingers and refuse to solve the problem. Making such a choice, the player, generally, drops out of the game space; he or she does not understand what story is being told, and does not want to tell it. (It is this very case when people come to a larp not to play the game, but “to play economy” or “to fight”).

Everything Else

Game rules are the last thing we should develop when creating a story. They are just a model of characters’ interactions. Rules are designed on the ground of the game message and lead the players to discuss it.

The significance of a larp is designated for us by three things:

- visual appeal, literariness of action, and its pathos;
- creation of reflexive space;
- accordance of the narrated to the stated goals.

These three things can always be found in a larp: every action may be more or less showy; the players always analyze their experience to various extents (for example, “I will never go to these goofs’ larp again”); the space somehow corresponds to the game message, from “not at all” to “entirely.” We can pay attention to these things beforehand and try to control them, or not try and not control.

A quest is a crutch for a player who does not know what to do in the game space. A quest is a story without adverbials: it’s just a list of nouns. Indiana Jones went to find the Grail, met a mummy, crept up a rope, overstepped snakes and scorpions. The quest loses nothing if we take some nouns or all the verbs from it. Indiana Jones, a mummy, a rope, snakes, scorpions, the Grail. We understand, as before, what it is about, though there is no story. Indiana Jones, the Grail. It’s all the same.

In a larp built on the basis of a quest, the significance of a character disappears: it is of no importance who exactly fulfills the quest. Such a character is not needed both by the larp and by the player. Naturally, it turns a sensuous experience based on internal necessity into “well, we and the lads simply go for the Grail.”

Such a story is boring, reproducible, and interesting only by the fact of its existence.

To Whom We Tell a Story

Larpers come to a larp to implement their creative intentions. It means that they like speaking and dislike listening. They evaluate a larp not as a whole creative work, but only in terms of if they managed to tell about themselves or not and how exactly they did it.

A story differs from marketing because a story has no target audience. It is told to everyone who listens to it, even if they are strangers. When we think that we make a larp for a definite group of Tolkienists (e.g. for the players of our larp), it can be said that we force our product on them. In doing so, we depart from the rule of players’ equality and destroy the story.

Under this approach, the players will not be comprehensive storytellers working together with the organizers; they will be walking participation fees. These are just people that have come to pay me for my fairy tale.

When players try to press their story onto others, it is even funnier, as, to a large extent, they presses it onto themselves.

To maintain the quality of the work at an adequate level, it seems necessary to be fully aware that a larp becomes interesting and thrilling – made so both by an organizer and a player – not on its own accord and not for some of the storytellers, but for some stranger, who will be able to look at this larp from outside. That stranger may be an archaeologist living a thousand years later or some angel. And they may say, “Oh my god, that’s fucking great!”

Commentary by Eirik Fatland

In the epic Greek poem *Argonautica*, the legendary hero Jason sets sail on a quest to retrieve the Golden Fleece together with a band of adventurers, the Argonauts. For centuries, scholars have been puzzled by the presence of a far more popular hero, Heracles, amongst the Argonauts, and by how Heracles is left behind on the flimsiest of pretexts after the first quarter of the journey. Of the many theories that have been proposed, this is my favourite one: Imagine an archaic Greek storyteller who proposes to tell the tale of the Golden Fleece, a lesser-known tale of a lesser-known hero. “Is Heracles in the story?” the audience asks. “Nah,” says the storyteller. “Well, then we don’t care,” respond the audience, “we love Heracles! We only want to hear about Heracles!” “Ok! Ok!” the storyteller backtracks, “Heracles is in the story!” “Yay!” goes the audience. “Tell us of Heracles and the Argonauts!” And then, as soon as the audience is sufficiently engrossed, the storyteller gets rid of the annoying superhero to focus on his main protagonist, Jason. After this happens a few times, a version of the story with Heracles in it is committed to writing. The rest is, you know, history.

There are many texts that liken role-playing to some other form of human culture: Ritual, the Theatre, Games, Therapy. Such theoretical projects are alluring: if we can say with certainty that roleplaying is a form of “ritual,” or that role-playing is subset of “game,” we simultaneously assert that everything we already knew about rituals or games are now things we know about role-playing, vastly increasing our store of relevant knowledge. When we begin seeing role-play in a particular way, though, we also will tend to strengthen that aspect of role-play in our own play and design. And so such assertions can serve a normative cause: to make role-playing more ritualistic, more theatrical, competitive, or introspective.

Kurguzova & Servetnik assert – descriptively and normatively – that larp is a form of story, a statement that is far from uncontroversial. Everywhere where there is theory about larp we find debates about “story.” Can larps tell them? Should they? How would they? And, a bit further down the road, what do we mean by “tell” and “story” anyway? In the Nordic and Anglo-American contexts, these debates have – at times – been fairly contentious. That may be the case in the Russian context as well, as the presence of a “necessary foreword” (or disclaimer) to this article shows.

In the Nordic context, the greatest controversies have to do with the idea of narration through authorial control, of the larpwright pushing unwilling players around to realize the Story of his or her dreams. But this is not what Kurguzova and Servetnik are arguing for. They are not claiming that the larpwright should tell a Story, but that role-playing is Storytelling. And that is a quite different assertion, one which (to the best of my knowledge) has never been made properly in the Nordic conversation.

People who believe that for storytelling to occur, the Story must have been determined in advance, don’t seem to realize the degree to which verbal storytellers modify and make shit up as they go along, and how much of storytelling actually occurs in the meeting between teller and audience – as illustrated by the case of Heracles and the Argonauts. The story, in this sense, is the telling. Not some underlying or predetermined structure to be enacted. And role-playing, then, would be a particular mode of telling, characterized by having the storyteller constantly doing the stuff that the people in the story are doing, as they are doing it, in a continuous and attentive dialogue with the other storytellers.

What does it mean for role-play to be storytelling? Who is the storyteller? Who is the audience? What does the designer add to the telling? How do they relate? Most of this article discusses just those questions, with wit and wisdom and with unexpected consequences for design, play, experience, and our understanding of things such as “character” and “plot.” And while no one article can hope to bring an end to the scholarly debates or online flame-wars about larp and story, I’d challenge anyone to give this article a fair reading and then go on to deny that the comparison is, at the very least, a useful one.

Commentary by Gabriel Widing

I think I am within the target group of this article because I am little-known; when reading, I repetitively get the impulse to interrupt the authors; and, no, I don't laugh at the jokes. It is always fascinating to see how larpers struggle to make sense out of such a complex phenomenon as larp. This text proposes a narrativist point of view, which is not foreign to me. I think it's relevant to make the story and storytelling the focal point of larp because it helps us understand how improvisation can happen and how larp creates meaning. Thinking larp through language, signs, symbols, narratives, plot, discourse, and characters all makes sense; it's a piece of the puzzle.

Personally, I find it a bit lacking, because it omits so much of the experience and design, i. e. the social, bodily, and playful parts. The authors want to save the story from the threat of glossolalia, but, who knows? Maybe, we sometimes need some ramblings in an unknown language to summon and potentially incorporate the "angels" that experience larp with proper distance.

Talismans: The Birth of Siberian Existential Larps

By Fyodor Slyusarchuk, Krasnoyarsk-Yekaterinburg

The author illustrates the history of Siberian (and Russian) larps using a particular example. The larp traditions were changed dramatically in the region in ten years: from effective (gamism) style to the unique creative agenda of existentialism larps. The larp series example will show how the larping culture was changed.

Culture is a conventionality. Having appeared in the absolute world of animal instincts and physical laws, culture provided a space for the dawning human spirit and mind. Having comprehended this conventionality, we gained a new degree of freedom – freedom from our biological nature. While combining within herself these two macroworlds, the natural and the cultural one, clashing them and trying to use one of them to control the other, the human found some space for herself, for freedom of will, for her individual Self.

It seems to me that a larp is a riot against culture, a new round in the struggle for metaphysical freedom, a new measure of possibility. Larping is art and art makes you free.

Certainly, a player does not generally comprehend these philosophical schemata and they are of a rather low value for them. When starting to play, a person really appreciates the fact that a larp expands their opportunities, provides feelings, reflection, and resources not available in their daily life; a player steps over the borders of their life patterns and gets a completely unfamiliar experience that is impossible within the track of their usual social life.

This is actually what a riot is: a riot against everydayness, arranged once and for all; against culture, where evil is distinguished from good once and forever; against the historical epoch that imposes the rules of life and death; against the language that holds thought in its chains; against your gender, your sex, the physiological processes that define the life of your body; and even against time, which facilitates your inevitable end. In any culture and in any past historical epoch, an attempt to cross the borders of these “determinations” led the braveheart to the status of a “madman” who was cast out of the society. Only nowadays, during a larp, can we find such a form that allows us to live in the society and, at the same time, to trespass – deliberately and repeatedly – against its major laws and principles. A larp is a compromise: a concession of culture to the rebellious human spirit.

Larp and Borders

Larping helps a person to find new possibilities, to extend their borders, and conquer the right to get a existential experience previously unavailable. The borders expand along three directions, three vectors:

1. External vector: beyond the borders of everyday world.
2. Internal vector: beyond the borders of everyday Self.
3. Existential vector: beyond the borders of everydayness as such.

The first direction is the most clear and most frequently used in Russian larps. Our world – common and boring, too complicated in its entirety, and too predictable within the framework of a certain person’s life – can

be so tiresome that we feel a need to escape from it. Exploring different circumstances – a different social role, a different company, a different activity – comprises an obvious way to get a new experience. Either it is a larp about medieval Spain, *The Lord of the Rings*, or a universe created by the larp organizers, it only matters from the point of view of certain players' tastes. Irrespective of the game world, the players' experience is based on one and the same impression: "I was in completely different circumstances and did things that are not available to me in my daily life: I killed enemies, commanded armies, I saved the economy of a vast Empire. I was beyond the borders of the usual world, and this way I was able to fulfill Myself."

The second direction where a larp attacks the rigid frame of our reality is inside a person. No matter how free a person is, she is extremely limited by her Self anyway, with the form of her own individuality – character, style of behaviour, temperament, interests, self-identification, culture, and values, which she associates herself with. However, a person has much more potencies than she can implement without endangering the integrity of her personality. Playing another person represents the same compromise as the one that a larp reaches with the society: "You can be different; you can deny your beliefs; you can feel and think in a different way; you may cross your own borders, but only within the space of a larp. Get to know your possible self in a different reality, learn what you might be like if you were not yourself."

Finally, the third direction where a larp tries to step over the borders of reality are the laws of our everyday life as such. A usual human life has its own logic: its tragedies, as a rule, are not epic trials, but horrible banalities; conflicts last for months and years and are rarely resolved unambiguously; turning points and real dangers are quite infrequent. Instead, a different threat is typical here, which is the humdrum of our everyday work. As a rule, living in a time of no great commotions means swimming in the pool of regular days, steady norms, familiar passions, and everyday dramas. Common life does not guarantee any purpose or meaning and creating and maintaining such a meaning requires incredible strength of spirit. A larp, however, is naturally born by meaning. The pace of life, dramatic concentration of the events, intensity, strain, and challenge – all these are the features with which a larp tries to "excel" reality. A larp tries to expand the limits of human life intensity, to speed up the internal life so that we could run safely on the surface of that pool of everyday routine..

In fact, all larps try to expand the borders of the familiar environment by suggesting different circumstances, different personal features, and different dynamics of existence. The wider the borders are expanded, the greater the emotional effect, the feeling of "open space," of the absence of limits. The further we explore "the space," the more significant our discoveries, the more important the experience we gain.

Larping becomes an integral part of our lives. It goes beyond the limits of an episode and, for many of us, it turns into a real life environment, into a lifestyle. We have learned to interlace our own fate with the fates of our characters, to unite the stories of various worlds and characters in our one soul. We plan our lives, careers, and fates, taking into account that the game world is always nearby, and from time to time we will "step over the borders." Having invited larping that far into our lives, we found ourselves in a slightly different universe – at least, in a universe where the laws of our personal life are different.

Trying to understand the variety of larps, we very often tend to suggest a certain typology that will enable us describe a certain larp, classifying it this or that way, and, thereby, point out its specific features. With such a tool, we can define a larp by the number of players, theme, genre, predominant diegetic interaction – e.g. combat, verbal, economic, etc. – and about a dozen of formal features of the same nature. However, classification of larps will tell us neither about the larp content, nor about the organizing method that made all this content happen. Still, these are the most essential issues.

Everyone who has been designing larps long enough develops her unique style, her own pattern and method. This method does not boil down to a conformity of themes or plots preferred by the designer and repeated in each succeeding larp, or any standard models and technologies applied again and again. All this can be changed depending on the organizer's artistic and pragmatic goals. The permanence of the method is in the similarity of the experience offered to a player by different larps made by the same designer. A unique designing method is a special and stable goal together with a special and stable way of how the organizer leads a player "beyond the borders." Here, in this very aspect, we may hope to find the universals (universal principles?) of the game world.

In order to take a look at larps at large, we had better study the variety of designing methods than larps themselves. When speaking of a larp, we should remember that a method answers not only the question "how,"

but also the question “what?” “What” awaits us at the end of the road if we follow the larp designer?

Larp and Method

My hypothesis states that no matter how different designing methods are, they still can be compared on the basis of the experience of crossing everyday life borders that a larp gives to a player. In all other respects, approaches to larp creation can differ, but every organizer team has to solve the problem of sending a player beyond the “borders of everydayness” and decide what reality the player will find there. It is also a stable feature of larps organized by the same organizer team; thanks to it, we can single out a series of larps as a tradition, as a method: regardless of the theme, genre, pace, larp props, etc., a player is immersed into a typologically similar state, faces typologically identical issues and challenges.

It seems to me that if we stay at the same level of abstraction, then the experience of crossing the borders and immersion into the diegetic world consists of two key universal notions: focus and challenge.

Focus is the point on which a designer centres the attention, suggesting that a player accepts the larping conventionality as a reality. Creating a larp space, we cannot make it as complicated and multidimensional as the natural universe and the social world. Creating a larp, we always simplify, highlight the major points, and leave out secondary issues; thus, we create not a reality, but a symbol of it. Here, a larp becomes aligned with art, as a player’s experience and feelings are born not from the direct, signed meaning of the game world – e.g. texts, character plots, models, etc. – but from the interpretation performed by a player, who is able to reconstruct the integrity of diegesis and her own diegetic existence from the fragments of reality put together to form a symbol.

Focus is a special configuration of the vectors of the breakthrough beyond the borders of everydayness; thanks to this configuration, a player is able to “unpack” or to reconstruct the feeling of being inside the diegesis. It is a symbol: a drop of water that can help us to reconstruct the existence of oceans.

Roughly speaking, no designer develops her larp to the same degree of specification as the one featured by the natural world. Moreover, an designer does not try to drop a player as far beyond her everyday life as possible along all the three “vectors of breakthrough” – into an absolutely strange world and into an absolutely different personality featuring completely different rules of existence. Most frequently, such an experiment leads to the tearing of the integral larp web, as the player cannot accept all the conventionalities and the changes to existence that are suggested by the organizer. I think that the task of a designer is to find a harmonious combination of these vectors, due to which, a player would be immersed into a different existence, and would start perceiving the larp conventionality as a space for real thinking, feeling, and action. To me, this configuration of the vectors seems to be the particular constant that unites different larps of the same organizer team, the same tradition, and the same method. Game focus comprises a stable configuration of otherness – e.g. the composition of the other world, of a different self, or of different existential principles – where a player finds herself at the larps created within the framework of the same designing method.

The other crucial universal feature of a Method is a challenge.

The specific nature of larping – and, maybe, of all the art in general – states that “magic” and “a journey beyond the borders” may happen only if a player pays a certain spiritual effort to it, breaks through the limit of the real life, and enters the diegetic reality. This effort is a kind of a ritual, a sacrifice where the player ensures the reality of the larp with her energy, her attention, and her own act of will: “I spend my efforts on the larp and I spend myself at the larp. That means, the diegesis where I live and act is real. Its reality is ensured with the reality of my contribution into it.” Challenge is a kind of active communion, an oath of loyalty to the game world.

I suppose that one more constant – due to which we can define a designer’s work as a method, as a tradition – is the form of this communion, of this ritual challenge that a player must rise to accept: “What must I do, what key diegetic conventionality must I accept in order to get into the diegetic space?” If the game focus is a grain of otherness, a symbol from where the reality unfolds, then a challenge is the work that should be done in order to separate the wheat from the tares and to add value and meaning to the wheat.

Within the framework of the method, a challenge represents a permanent requirement to the player; having met this requirement, the player joins the larp and enters the diegesis. This is the minimal necessary effort that provides the very possibility to play, to unfold the diegetic reality.

It is obvious that the description of any particular way of designing a larp goes beyond these two features. Suggesting them, I tried to find the universal features that, on the one hand, would be common to any larping method and, on the other hand, would answer both essential questions of larp knowledge: “What, in the name of heaven, are larps capable of doing?” (e.g. “What special existential experience does a player live through in the case of this game focus?”); and “How on earth did they manage this at their larp?” (e.g. “What effort should a player undertake in order to get this particular existential experience?”).

Focus and challenge do not describe the method to the full extent; yet, they are the characteristics due to which a method can be identified and distinguished in the chaos of how larp works. They represent universal features of larp culture that show the very essence of our passing “beyond the borders” and help us start to explore a new world and a new space of our existence.

Tradition of Talismans: From the Functional School to the Existential Method

I think it logical to test any theory myself. Therefore, it seems quite reasonable to look for a method in my own works created in the the last 16 years, when my friends and I were carrying out our larp experiments within the framework of the *Talisman* larp campaign. Contradicting myself to a certain degree, I am going to tell not only about the method, but also about the larps we were creating; I hope that this will give the reader a better understanding of the idea of our method and how it was born.

At the end of the ‘90s and in the beginning of the 2000s, interaction among Russian cities and regions was not as active as now. The total internetization was yet to come; a large regional project accounted for a few dozen non-resident players at best. Moscow, the Urals, Siberia, and the Far East represented separate larp communities that had almost no influence on each other and created their own specific larp cultures. As a rule, these cultures were generated by conventions, larp clubs, stable organizer teams who went on working after their first game, and larp campaigns.

Larp campaigns have a special significance, as they facilitated the establishment of a certain custom of larping: a certain style, manner, and way of “being” at a larp that I call a method. The organizers’ views on larping were transmitted via such projects; a player decided where to go based not only on external factors, e.g. in-game problems, plot, or good company, but also on whether she found it interesting to play “this way,” “about this,” according to these particular principles. Thus, revoicing Toynbee, local civilizations were formed from Russian larp communities and the larp methods that ensured certain specific larp features.

Let’s have a look into one of these larp traditions and learn what influenced its development, to what challenges it responded by its formation, and what values and principles it manifested. In actuality, it is a story about the maturation of a Method within the framework of a single local larp civilization.

Krasnoyarsk Functional School

The *Talisman* campaign appeared in Krasnoyarsk as early as the beginning of the ‘90s at the dawn of the larping in Russia. However, we will not speak about the first four larps of this campaign here – not because they deserve no attention, but I just do not have enough information on them for a meaningful discussion. I can only note that, although created by different organizers, these larps were part of the same important larp tradition that went beyond the borders of Krasnoyarsk – the so-called “Krasnoyarsk Functional School.” However, by the end of the ‘90s, this tradition had mostly exhausted itself, reached its peak, and stopped creating new thoughts, emotions, and experiences. It had turned into the “larp routine”; nevertheless, it demanded keeping to certain norms and “decorum,” as any culture does. Applying simplification – and any description is a simplification – we can describe the canon of this tradition in the following way:

1. The larp is a kind of “field chess.” The organizer’s goal is to create interesting models and write interesting rules, according to which players will be able to compete with one another by solving riddles, defeating monsters, interpreting the rules, and using, cleverly and efficiently, everything that is not directly forbidden (loopholing).
2. The plot, the game world, and the role are conventionalities that must not distract anyone from the main goal, which is victory.

3. If you cannot win fair and square, just win anyway.

In other words, describing the Krasnoyarsk Functional School as a method, we should say the following: the focus was based on the feeling of a hot, uncompromising competition happening according to strict rules and giving approximately equal chances to everyone. Both rules and equal chances are what Russian social reality of the '90s greatly lacked. The challenge was in learning rather complicated rules and, mainly, in the readiness to fight any rivals in any circumstances.

I think that the series of “new “ *Talismans* (5 – 9.5), was born, to a large extent, out of the opposition to this orientation on absolute and unconditional victory.

The World Having its Own History

Talisman-5 was made in 1998 by a team of organizers who most likely belonged to the “old school,” but worked mostly “in a new fashion.” First of all, this larp had its own game world with a history, religion, legal system, bureaucracy and so on. It was very important that this world did not stay locked in the organizers’ minds, and was not just described by the organizers to the players; it was represented and enshrined in dozens of documents: historical works, sacred texts, diaries, and notes. Thus, the world became “tangible,” stable, and “objective”; it could be discussed with the involvement of actual data. It could be argued about and for the sake of itself, not for the sake of searching the information that helps to win.

Secondly, this larp had a plot. This plot was not just scenery for a fight for power and grandeur; it was a story with an inherent value, where it made sense to choose personal defeat for the sake of the triumph of some idea, principle, or value. It moved the players from the level of meta-game competition within the framework of diegetic conventionalities to the level of the struggle for diegetic values and into a space filled with the beauty of the unfolding story.

Thirdly, though it was a team larp, it had many individual roles. This made the project unusually profound and complicated for that time. There were dozens of interlaced personal stories, which supported global storylines, collided with them, and made characters doubt and choose. Storyline mechanisms provoked conflicts inside in-game locations, thus causing an unprecedented rise of larp density and intensity. While previously most of the larping started when a team met a “stranger,” a representative of some other team, at *Talisman-5* the existing controversies were constantly provoking processes within the team, encouraging the players to play with or even against their own team members.

Thus, even the first larp of the new *Talismans* series transformed the method greatly. The focus started moving gradually from the desire for complete and unconditional victory to sensing the diegesis and living through the storyline. “Going beyond the borders” was no longer limited to introducing rules in a hot contest for success. Still, the challenge stayed mostly the same: if you study the rules, learn something about the game world and are ready to fight for power and grandeur, you could easily step into the diegetic space, join the larp, and be in its mainstream.

In general, it was “a new spin”, something that did not yet defy “official ideology,” but already excelled it. Yet *Talisman-5* remained, to a large extent, a traditional larp with prevalence of team play, striving for victory, playing with models. Within this tradition, the organizer group merely created some options of “narrative larping” that required doing something completely new from the players. It was the next larp of the campaign, *Talisman-6*, where the changes became more obvious.

From Empire to City, From Model to Narrative

Having borrowed the best from its predecessor by keeping the same game world, history, and many of the characters, *Talisman-6* made the next ‘quantum leap’ and transferred to a new format: the “one-city larp” that became the campaign’s hallmark to a large extent. We should not underestimate that change, as it instilled the larp with new quality. As a rule, modelling large social formations – nations, states, and civilizations – at a larp lacks adequate models and people, as well as the appropriate level of organization. That’s why, in reality, great “empires” are represented as primitive, superficial social entities, claiming the complexity they do not actually have. A city – especially a conventionally medieval one – is a different thing. It is a local social formation, all the functions of which can be modelled rather adequately, thus creating the controversies and dynamics commonly

found in a city. With the new format introduced, *Talismans* gained a social dimension: the conflicts related to estate stratification, property, confrontation of the local government and the global state, etc.

In addition, the new format provided one more apparent advantage: the concentration of action in one spot. While previously the diegetic locations were placed in different corners of the playground with most players sitting in their locations without knowing about global diegetic events or events in nearby locations, in *Talisman-6* on the contrary all the larping was going on in a small, “closed” space. Thus, every diegetic event became available for all the players, so they could respond to it; the larp pace, together with the strain, escalated many times; the larp intensity increased as good players could support each other’s play more easily, thus creating reliable pools of continuous larping.

Talisman-6, organized in 1999, became a landmark larp for Krasnoyarsk. Players who were sick of the ruthless playing to win, tired of playing against a game master to solve equations in order to get a new level of magic, seeing the pointlessness of certificate gathering, got a new experience that an interesting storyline can be more important for a larp than a defeated enemy. Also, full-fledged role-play demanded more than the knowledge of how to overcome an enemy and what the rules are. The challenge faced by a player implied accepting the values of her character and living the character’s life in such a way that, later on, the player would not regret bitterly the larping moments she had wasted, but would be able to understand a thrilling story and bring it to life.

So, What is the Larp About? The next larp of the series was organized in 2003 by a new organizer team. The older team was represented only by Danil Kogan, the creator of the game world and the head organizer of the previous larps, and Ela Kareva, the author of the texts. Besides me, the team was joined by a couple more organizers. Naturally, we also kept the game world, the history, and the characters of the two previous larps.

By 2003, most of the above written about *Talismans 5-6* had not been really reflected on. It was the larp of 2003 that helped to turn the intuitive way of design into a position, an ideology, a method. Individual designers’ decisions and techniques created a new culture.

Talisman-7, which received its own name, The Renaissance – was significant in three aspects. First and foremost, for the first time we asked ourselves the question, “What is the larp about?” What is the main subject of the diegetic interaction? What should we think about when playing this larp? Having answered it, we started organizing the larp, trying to get rid of everything unnecessary and leave just the elements that focused the players’ attention on the subject in which we were interested.

Secondly, our larp was about the historical process, about how social changes depend on culture, religion, and the established way of life. The plot involved a threshold period, the beginning of a revolution that ruined the stable social hierarchy. We needed to aggravate social inequality and conflicts between social classes to the greatest possible extent, so we created situations of blatant legal, social, and financial injustice for the people living in our city. However, at that moment, many people perceived it as a disparity not of the characters, but of the players, as a sorting of players into the first and the second class, into “the organizers’ friends” and “all the rest.” To a large extent, this situation was caused by the tradition of the Functional School, which suggested a certain equity of possibilities at the start of a larp and demanded providing anyone with a chance to win. However, by that time we already had a vision of a larp as a plot implementation, the unfolding of an interesting controversy during the role-play; we saw fairness as giving all the players equal access to the storyline, not to rich clothes and other elements of wealth and power. Thus, it was the first larp that denied the Krasnoyarsk Functional School so openly.

Thirdly, this larp worded out a kind of a “creed,” a set of basic organizing principles we applied in all other larps of the campaign. Generally speaking, these principles practically established the focus of our method:

1. The main thing in a larp is the plot. The larp plot can be only based on a conflict, on a significant and complex controversy of the characters’ worldviews and values.
2. Each player must have their own character created by the larp designer. No more teams and team backgrounds. No self-created character backgrounds. Only with a designer’s background will the players be involved in the plot to the right degree.
3. During a larp, “player vs. player” interactions are important, while “player vs. game master” ones are detrimental. That’s why a larp must include as few models requiring the participation of an organizer as

possible; whenever possible, all the organizers should work as moderators playing supporting cast.

4. Larp action localization. The plot unfolds at a country estate, a manor, a city neighbourhood, at the most – at a small town.
5. A larp only needs what is really necessary to unfold the plot. If economy is irrelevant, get rid of it; if violence is irrelevant, there will be no combat rules.

The Space of Freedom within a Rigid Framework

In 2005, *Talisman-8*, the next larp of the campaign, was to take place. However, its concept was so complicated even for us organizers that we had to be honest and tell ourselves: the time for it had not come yet. So, we decided to organize a micro-project, *Talisman 7.5: Prologue*, which, however, it gradually became a full-fledged, independent larp. The major organizing principles had been established at the previous larps; it would take too long to immerse the readers into the larp plot, so I will just tell you about some bright characteristics of the project:

1. Localization took one more step forward; now, the larp events took place at the country estate where the Emperor was staying with his court. The concentration of role-play per time unit reached its peak.
2. We organized a larp where the tragic finale had been known to the players in advance. We offered to play in order not to change it, but to understand it and to comprehend its background. To find the possibilities for important actions and decisions even in the situation of the global predeterminacy. To feel helpless, but to find where to show one's strength; to say a short, yet important word.
3. We organized a larp having an extremely rigid timetable. All the important "official" events were scheduled in advance in the corresponding procedure, and the larp action flowed from one milestone to the next: dinner, court session, state counsel, execution of the foreign ambassadors. We suggested that the players look for their freedom space within this predeterminacy.

I dare say that, at this larp, we took an important step in comprehending the challenge we offer to a player. In order to larp, to find the meaning in the diegetic events, it was necessary to immerse into the feeling of tragic and unchangeable reality, of the predetermined end, and then to find the value of confrontation between a person and the predeterminacy. Only if a player took this first step did she start to understand the meaning of the events and saw the space for actions where there had been a wall before. No sooner than a player accepted, as a prescription, the impossibility to change the outcome, to change the world around, she discovered the possibility to change herself in this world. The character – her fate, her story, her personal rise or fall – became the subject of the larp.

A Role as Pain

After all, we managed to organize *Talisman 8: The New Testament* in August, 2007. This was our most complicated larp in terms of the topics and the plot. It was about the cultural nature of the reality, about the correlation of reality and will, and about the things that happen if people lose all their spiritual cares or let "professionals" manage them. It was about the idea that a soul is more important than salvation (in a metaphorical, not religious sense). The storyline unfolded in a small provincial town, where the judicious townspeople assigned all the spiritual issues to those who were best at it – to clergymen who led their flock right to a dreadful and horrible "salvation."

Without going deeply into the plot, I am going to tell about the essential discovery which formed in our minds during the preparation of this larp and, I dare say, became the natural final point in the development of our larping ideology, our method. We called it the "Role as Pain" concept. This concept implies that in the core of a character there must be pain, some obvious and persistent discontent about something in the diegesis. A character must feel the problem most acutely, but know no solution for it at the beginning of the larp. The challenge that the organizer puts before a player is to experience the character's pain to the full extent. In this

case, the subject of the larp is to investigate, specify, and word out the “desired” state that can eliminate the pain. Thus, the main content of the larp is transferred from reaching the goal to comprehending it, to finding the way things should be. Only when it’s done does a character try to reach her goal by applying the tools, resources, and the situation existing at the larp and solve particular problems: to persuade, to bribe, to steal, to kill, to win, and to apply other similar means from the toolkit of traditional diegetic actions. The pain is necessary as the kickoff point of such a larp; as pain, and pain alone, makes a person act and search for the image of the desired future.

I dare say that this concept has finally established our designing method, which I personally call “existential.” Its essence, its ambition is to “reveal the existence” of a character in the diegesis, to discover its meaning. Via her character and the character’s pain, a player should also feel and comprehend her own existence, her own way of “being” in this world. At all our larps, we tried to reach this particular strain, this dramatic feeling of a “different being”.

Talisman-8 was our most ambitious larp, yet not the best one. The larp showed us many faults of our method. We tackled a very complicated and fascinating theme, but the social and cultural game world within which we wanted to unfold it, turned out to be too fragile. This world was quickly broken by the actions of the players who were not immersed into the cultural context deeply enough and were provoked to radical actions by the pain we had embedded into their characters, or they simply did not respond to our Challenge. During this larp, we showed experimentally that if the players’ “information background” is not good enough compared to the larp theme’s complexity, it does not mean that the larp will surely fail, but it will surely be simplified. *Talisman-8* did not fail, but was simplified to the level of its predecessor; surely, we can hardly call this the organizers’ triumph.

The Night Changes the Day

The next to last larp of the campaign was *Talisman-9: The Imperial Theatre* in 2011. This larp did not bring anything ideologically new, but it allowed us to implement some of our earlier ideas. The larp was devoted to “the link of times” and showed how the events of the long-gone epochs influence modern times and our current reality. In terms of composition, we divided our larp into two parts: the day belonged to the modern time; the night belonged to a distant, but crucial moment of history. Depending on the night events, the day circumstances also changed; the larp was going on in a completely different historical context, making the players reconsider the diegetic reality and understand how events that had happened long ago defined a certain modern phenomenon, and what the world would have been like if some historical event had not happened. It was a larp about history, historical forks and alternatives.

For a long time, I supposed that *Talisman-9* would remain the last larp of the campaign. I felt that, as any other “local” civilization, it had seen its dawn, reached its pinnacle and, having exhausted its internal capabilities, started to decline, sinking into self-repetition and dogmatism. Some parts of this culture were adopted by other “civilizations,” other organizer teams, and still live on in larps and players – and this alone can be considered as a successful life of the method.

Nevertheless, it seems that we had not said all that we wanted to say, so three fruitless years later, we organized the last larp of the campaign – *The Requiem* – in the summer of 2014.

The End of the World

In terms of the storyline, our last larp was a sequel of all the previous parts and completed the 16-year-long campaign. In some sense, it was a farewell to the game world, to the story, and to our friends, with whom we had spent years united by this larp. This time, it was important for us to make the players meet an ultimate challenge: face death and non-existence.

It was the story of the last city of the Universe being destroyed by the God, and its inhabitants facing the divine embodiment of this world’s cruel culture, who was fighting not only its children, but even itself, and devouring itself.

It was a larp devoted to the end of the world, the end of the Universe. It spoke of death – on the one hand, of the death of culture and civilization, and, on the other hand, of the personal, private death of an individual.

This larp showed how people were swallowed by the Leviathan of culture and told about their capability to transform this Leviathan, to transcend of their civilization's cultural core and create a new world, with different laws and different norms of relationships between people and between people and their God.

Before the larp, we tried to create the feeling of everyone's inevitable death; it was the pinnacle of the challenge as we understand it within the framework of our method: to accept and comprehend the inevitability of death and, at the same time, to find meaning in one's own existence, in every single moment of being. Only by immersing into this state could one larp to the full extent, feeling the pain of this world, but recognizing its essence, its soul, and trying to find some ways to overcome the laws of the world (if was possible) and to fulfill one's potential (which was surely possible).

As organizers, we knew no answers to the questions we raised. We did not know – and we still do not know – how to accept death and regenerate culture, how to find the meaning in the inevitable ruin of one's own civilization, how to live through one's last days, and how art can create worlds. We just established a situation where these answers were vital and could potentially be born during a clash of different values, positions, views, and beliefs. They could also be found in discussions, actions, and in mere human dignity that people found in themselves.

Nevertheless, death was the finale for everything.

I would like to finish this article with a quotation from our Manifesto. Perhaps, this will make it more clear who we were and what we tried to do:

We suppose that a larp does not need to solve people's problems. A larp is not a workshop, not psychotherapy, or a way to the God. We are not here to decide what a person should be like and in what direction to develop. Our personal views, judgements, notions of good and evil are irrelevant to the larp, we do not try to teach anyone anything. Through our larp, we try to create a problem, or, more accurately, a system of problems, an intricate network of ideologies, positions, and values. If, during the larp, a player accepts something existing within the diegetic reality as a Challenge, feels her character's pain as her own, and realizes the impossibility of standing apart – then, the organizers have succeeded in the essential part of their work.

Ludography

- **Talisman-5** (1998), Krasnoyarsk region, "Talisman".
- **Talisman-6** (1999), Krasnoyarsk region, "Talisman".
- **Talisman-7** (2003), Krasnoyarsk region, "Talisman".
- **Talisman-7.5** (2005), Krasnoyarsk region, "Talisman".
- **Talisman-8: The New Testament** (2007), Krasnoyarsk region, "Talisman".
- **Talisman-9: The Imperial Theatre** (2011), Krasnoyarsk region, "Talisman".
- **Talisman-9.5: The Requiem** (2014), Krasnoyarsk region, "Talisman".

Commentary by Niina Niskanen

In his article, Fyodor Slyusarchuk presents a Siberian viewpoint to larp design and concretizes it by introducing the arch of development of one larp series called *Talisman*. The viewpoint is existential: what kind of experience of existence is created for the players and where does the game take them?

The basis for Slyusarchuk's design is breaking the borders of everyday being externally, internally, or existentially. Here I strongly agree. One of the main reasons for larping, according to several unofficial questionnaires or discussions, is the possibility to experience something new, to step into someone else's life. Especially the existential vector of border expanding is interesting, since it can be seen as one of the basic design elements of a larp. I would call it temporal and spatial concentration. Suddenly, everything happens at the same time in the same place, old friends and old enemies, big decisions are bound to be made and conflicts rise, now or never. "[T]he humdrum of our everyday work," as Slyusarchuk describes it, does not create meaningful game (excluding historical re-enactment, which, on the other hand, operates on the other vectors of border breaking). Thus, to gain the suitable platform for a game, we must get over everyday logic. This demand works closely together with focus and challenge introduced in the article.

Slyusarchuk sees these concepts as defining features of each game designer's style. Focus is closely related to the three vectors of border breaking: as game designers we have to find our game's position on the map. These questions should be answered right in the beginning of design. What is the game about? What is relevant? What means and tools are used to enable the players' journey towards the goal? Knowing this requires a vision. Slyusarchuk believes in the importance of the designer's vision, and so do I. Whether it is a feeling, or a scene, or an important pair of words, it must exist and be shared with the players.

This brings us to challenge. According to Slyusarchuk, "a player pays a certain spiritual effort to it [the game], breaks through the limit of the real life, and enters the diegetic reality." I'd like to expand this view of the challenge to apply to everything from loyalty to the diegesis to being in time at the game scene. In our own recent projects, the meaning of cooperation has proven, at its best, to be effective and affect hugely the quality of the game. Eloquently put, the seed is the vision, and from the seed we, designers and players, together grow a plant. As designers, we, too, face a challenge. How can we create a world and practices that welcome the players in them, to co-create and contribute?

From Slyusarchuk's experience of creating and developing an existential larp series arises a third concept: pain. He writes, "The essence of this concept implies that the core of a character must consist of some pain, some obvious and persistent discontent about something existing in the diegetic universe." The concept can be interpreted more or less concretely. As a designer, I recognize the need for pain. It can be scrutinized in different scales and aspects. It can be a need to correct injustice, or a personal character's tragedies that drive them to desperate action. As pain is, in essence, dissatisfaction; it is often sad, traumatic, or dark in nature. Here, I see a question rising. As a game organizer (and also a player) I have noticed that, when given the chance, the players tend to create characters with tragedies or painful situations. Also, the strongest and most memorable experiences often consist of dark ingredients: catastrophes, danger, violence, loss, tears. I find myself a bit confused by this. Where is the border between enough pain and too much pain? What is left if the border is crossed? Can a game be meaningful or enjoyable without pain? Should it be? And whatever the character's pain is, how do we give it a concrete meaning in the game, enabling the player to affect the game reality?

My knowledge of Russian larp culture is relatively narrow. Reading of a campaign of over 15 years' span and thus seeing the process of development from the functional school towards the existential method is extremely interesting, and also somewhat familiar. Winning, fighting, solving puzzles, and applying detailed rules resembles the *D&D* kind of tabletop games. Slyusarchuk describes it aptly as "field chess." To excel in these games requires playing to win. The instruction that is more heard nowadays, at least in the Finnish game culture, is playing to lose (and here we catch a glimpse of the pain, again). How universal is this evolution? Can it be that larp groups all around the world find the same path as the form of culture evolves? Can it be a matter of the players' age and thus change of viewpoint? Whatever it is, through the pain and search for one's meaning of existence, we can create a multifaceted and truly significant culture of play.

Designing and creating the *Talisman* has brought Slyusarchuk to analyse larp in a rather philosophical mode in the beginning of the article. His thoughts about the human spirit and of larp as both rioting and compromising a form of culture are impressive. Yet, I come to think of practicality and a certain reality check.

As Slyusarchuk notes, the ambitious existential world of *Talisman* did not fully bloom because of problems in communicating the vision, or the players' reluctance or inability to immerse into it.

As a fellow game designer, I recognize the need to create, and I fully support the larp's intrinsic value as art. Nevertheless, the challenge carefully planned by the designer may have to give way to more entertaining and disposable features of play. This we must accept, and even better, merge together the art and the entertainment. They must not exclude one another. As presented in the Manifesto of the existential larp, "[A] larp isn't a tutorial, psychological therapy, or a way to the God. [-] Through our larp, we try to create a problem." This I underwrite. Larp is a unique form of art and culture for discussing the questions of being and creating.

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The Nordic Way

Incentives as Tools of Larp Dramaturgy

By Eirik Fatland, Norway

This article concerns itself with dramaturgy, the authoring and structuring of live role-playing works. It provides an overview and analysis of “incentives”, methods employed by larpwrights to encourage specific player interactions during the larp – conflict, puzzles, fates, etc. and how they can be structured into connected “webs”.

Introduction

Dramaturgy is in the strange situation of being the aspect of larp theory that is the most popular (“how do I write larps?”) , but also the least covered. This article is an attempt to remedy some of that imbalance by presenting an overview and analysis of What We Already Know. As such, it may serve as a “crash course” for the beginning larpwright, giving her an introduction to some of the methods available. Though not, it should be noted, much advice for how to use them properly. I should also hope there is something in here for theorists and even the most experienced of larpwrights, since the methods common in one tradition of live role-playing may be entirely unknown to another and vice-versa.

These methods are for the most part time-honored and tested, used by larpwrights on all five continents for several years. Still, they have rarely been described in much detail. A number of “how-to” articles and columns in larp-related magazines offer the best documentation available, but unfortunately these are often brief, written in a local larp jargon, and take much for granted on the part of the readers familiarity with the tradition wherein the author is writing. This very local style makes international discussion of dramaturgy rather difficult. My goal in this article is to describe, analyze and organize these dramaturgical methods into a coherent system that enables further discussion.

I have relied on several sources in writing this article – personal larp experience, discussions in person or on the Internet, previous articles on websites and in fanzines – most of which are not easy to reference. Erlend Eidsem’s classical article “Plotteori”, published in Guru in 1994, was the starting point of the discussions that have led to this article, but since then precious little has been put into writing. The first section of this article provides an overview of larp dramaturgy and its problems, explaining dramaturgy through concepts from recent Nordic larp theory. The second, and largest, section deals with one group of dramaturgical methods: incentives.

Notes on live role-playing dramaturgy

A larpwright friend of mine described her recurring nightmare before a major larp: “the players are all there, all enthusiastic, having made wonderful costumes and prepared for months. But they have no idea how to interact, they try gesturing and smiling and connecting to each other but cannot find any words to speak, any meaningful opening to a conversation. They don’t blame us, but it is our fault, they don’t have characters, they don’t have plots, they can’t interact”.

This dream illustrates a dogma of Nordic live role-playing: it is the larpwright’s responsibility to give the players “something to do” during the larp, and without the larpwright’s input a larp risks becoming unplayable, overly predictable and/or dull. We can imagine a larp where the larpwright has not done this task: the characters are interesting, but have no established relations between each other, no reason to stay put at the given place, and no reasons to contact each other. The larp begins with all the players in the same room, but

players immediately confront the question: “Why do I stay here, with these strangers? Doesn’t my character have anywhere else she wants or needs to be?” If characters leave, the larp disintegrates, and if they stay, the interaction feels forced, artificial, unnatural. No-one has, to the best of my knowledge, authored such a larp.¹

At the bare minimum, live role-playing scripts establish relationships and an initial situation that brings characters together. So a purpose of the larpwright is to provide characters with reasons to interact, and reasons to continue interacting. Once the larpwright fulfills this purpose, the larpwright will do so in accordance with her own creative vision. Simply providing excuses to interact are usually not enough, the reasons to interact will form a whole, a creative work, a foundation not just for improvisation but also for artistic meaning.

I use the term “dramaturgy”², defined as “the inner and outer structure of a larp as it is authored by a larpwright”³, to describe this aspect of larp authoring. Dramaturgy has several aspects:

- Establishing an Initial situation, the starting point of the larp and what came before it, bringing or binding characters together – such as a society, a past common history, a set of social rituals. (more on this in Wingård 2001, Fatland 2005, Hansen 2003)
- Establishing Relationships between characters – by organizing them into families, factions, friends, hierarchies, networks, by defining relationships between individual characters and by suggesting how characters are to relate to other characters they meet. (see Gade 2003, Gräslund 2001)
- Real-time directing the progress of role-playing, for example by using “contact points” and “control knobs”, adopting ad-hoc characters, staging theatrical segments, and controlling the flow of information. (see Freitag, 2002, Young 2004)

And finally, the focus of this article:

- Providing Incentives that encourage players to follow specific paths in their improvisation, to play specific scenes, to confront specific questions, etc.

A “textbase” is the larp equivalent of a theatrical “script”: the sum of all information provided to players before the larp, including character descriptions, group descriptions, world descriptions, etc. (Fatland, 2000) Even verbal briefings and drama exercises form part of the “textbase”. With the exception of real-time directing, the dramaturgical tools mentioned above are normally authored in the textbase.

The Fog of Larp

Unlike texts in linear media (the theater, the novel, the film) a larp is typically unpredictable. Some larps are planned “open-ended” or “player-driven”, purposefully unpredictable, others risk seeing the carefully crafted plans of the larpwright failing utterly when played. Bøckman’s maxim states that

“is impossible to control the direction of a game as long as the plot-structure is hidden from the players, and that an action appearing the only logical step to an organizer don’t necessarily do so for the players. (...) For any given problem, there are an infinite number of solutions, and as an organizer, you may take for granted that the players will think of those you did not.” (Bøckman, 2003) .

I call the unpredictability implied by this maxim for “the fog of larp”, and the fact of it’s existence can be attested to by any number of larpwrights and players.

¹It would have great value as an experiment if someone actually did organize such larps to test this hypothesis.

²My use of “dramaturgy” in English is a translation of the Norwegian term “dramaturgi”. According to Gronemeyer, 1996 – “dramaturgi” is the “inner and outer structure of a play”. See Hetland, 1997 for an example of “dramaturgi” in relation to larp. The English term “dramaturgy” may be used in this sense, and may have a meaning as wide as the “art of authoring theatrical drama” but more often refers specifically to the process of adapting a text for the stage.

³By “the larpwright” in this text I mean “the institution which holds defining power over the pre-diegesis and the fabula of a larp.” It is not necessarily a single person. In fact, it is more often a team of people. The institution can even be a method whereby players democratically agree on these things. But for simplicity’s sake, we’ll pretend it’s a single person, and in situations where I refer to actual people, such as in “experienced larpwrights”: I mean a person performing the duties of the larpwright institution.

Markus Montola’s application of a chaotic behavior metaphor to larp (see Montola, 2004) sheds further light on the fog-of-larp. Chaotic systems are not random, i.e. not “pure chaos”, but become unpredictable due to their qualities of non-linearity, recursivity and dynamism. Montola makes the convincing case that role-playing can be described as a chaotic system, and recommends that larpwrights view their activity not as authoring scripts but as establishing attractors. An attractor is “a dynamic pattern of behavior the chaotic system tries to follow”. We can think of attractors as paths or roads leading through the fog of larp, which players may try to follow but from which they may also deviate or be forced to deviate. Montola’s example is that of the race-car which attempts to stay on the racing track until it strays too far off-course and picks a new track leading into the forest. A web of incentives involving the election of the next Pope may be the focus – the attractor being followed – for the Cardinal characters of a larp, until suddenly the Visigoth characters decide to attack Rome and the cardinals jump onto the attractor called “defend the Vatican”.⁴

Integrative techniques make attractors stronger, bringing the larp closer to order and hence predictability, while dissipative techniques nudge the larp towards chaos and unpredictability. Integrative and dissipative techniques can be used by larpwrights and players both. For the larpwright to issue clear instructions as to the purpose of the role-playing (“Elect a new pope!”) is an integrative technique, for the player to ignore them (“fellow cardinals, enough in-fighting – let’s get drunk instead!”) is a dissipative one. The fog of larp gets thinner when integrative techniques are used, thicker with dissipative ones.

The chaos model is a useful tool for analysing larp dramaturgy, not just on a theoretical level but also in the practice of authoring larp. It forces us to think about which parts of the larp we can predict and which we can’t, and on how the dramaturgy will actually affect the larp – as opposed to how good it looks on paper. Comparing the concept of “attractor” to the concept of a “plot” or “incentive web” helps us to see the difference between the structures visible to the larpwright and the structures that are followed by players.

While Bøckman, Montola and other authors (including Hansen, 2003 and Henriksen 2004) argue that live role-playing is for the most part unpredictable, I do not believe this to be absolutely and universally the case. Bøckman’s maxim applies only to larps where the “plot-structure is hidden from the players” which is not usually the case with Dogma larps, fate-plays or suggestion-plays. Implicit in the chaos model is that if attractors are made strong enough, the larp becomes predictable. Montola also mentions “over-integrative” techniques, such as fate-play, which remove some of the characteristics of chaotic systems from a larp, leading to the question of whether they are role-playing at all.⁵ Whether that is a good or a bad thing and whether the boundaries can be pushed to include them remains to be discussed.

Predictions, Intentional Possibilities and Fabula

Apart from the use of strongly integrative techniques, a second factor is the ability of experienced larpwrights to predict player behaviour at otherwise chaotic larps. It is easy to offer anecdotal evidence for this statement, hard to offer empirical evidence. But consider, in general, all the predictions made that do not go wrong: if a murder occurs and a detective character is present, that character can be relied on to investigate the murder.

At the beginning of a larp, anything may seem possible – the characters may elevate themselves to godhood, or commit mass suicide, or sit meditating for the entire duration of the larp. Some things are however more likely to occur than others since the players improvise according to their characters, based on their understanding of the world in which these characters exist, and according to the rules and conventions of the larp. A normal family at a social realist larp are pretty unlikely to elevate themselves to godhood, a group of businessmen are probably not about to sit meditating for hours during an important trade meeting.

Specific predictions, such as “Mr. Moo will go to the toilet at 14:00” usually fail, but general predictions, such as “Mr. Moo will visit the toilet at some point during the larp, and will see the painting on the wall of the toilet” are usually accurate. Making precise predictions about the development of the larp is probably a matter of experience in larps and in understanding which developments are safe to predict and which are not.

⁴I am aware of the fact that the Visigoths pre-date the cardinal system by a few centuries. The fictive larpwrights of this imaginary larp, however, are not.

⁵On the scale from dissipative to integrative, taboo breaking techniques (overruling player actions, fate-play, rewriting diegetic history) can be considered over-integrative. They integrate the game, but as they remove interaction, dynamism or recursivity, they also change the core of role-playing essentially.” (Montola, 2004) My emphasis.

An experienced larpwright may easily foresee that allowing 40% of the players to play Visigoths hungry for plunder is bound to interfere with the activities of the 60% who play cardinals meeting in the Vatican.

Different players will usually interpret and play the same character in entirely different ways, but the character's social role tends to stay the same with different players – the character of a judge can be relied on to give judgment, but may do so in many different ways. For the larpwright it is a fairly safe prediction that the combination of discovered crimes and the characters of a judge, a prosecutor and a defense lawyer will lead to a trial, but a shaky prediction how the trial will conclude. The experienced larpwright will avoid predicting the outcome of the trial, and instead focus on the possibilities it opens – by planning an in-game prison, and by contemplating how an “innocent” verdict will affect the larp.

In other words, a central part of the larpwright's craft is predicting the outcome of the larpwright's decisions. This leads to “intentional possibilities”, possibilities and probabilities planned by the larpwright in order to establish specific attractors and events during the larp. Since they are planned and intended, these intentional possibilities exist prior to the larp being played. Unforeseen events may be improvised by the players, some intentional possibilities may be realized, others not. The intentional possibilities may include choices to be made by characters, conflicts with no clear outcomes, puzzles that may or may not be solved, courses of action that may seem obvious to the larpwright but not to the player. It is the summary of larpwright-held intentional possibilities I call “the fabula”.

The term “fabula” helps clarify what exactly it is that larpwrights do. They certainly do not author the thoughts or actions of characters, the way a movie director or writer would – while the larp is played, the characters are the domain of the player. What larpwrights author is not the actual larp, but the fabula. The dramatics of the larp situation are partly the result of players' improvisations and interactions with this fabula.

The term “fabula” is derived from theater theory, where it describes the underlying story of a play – the actual acting is called the “suzjett”. It is a concept pair similar to that of “story” and “discourse” in narratology. “Fabula” changes meaning when applied to larp because, as discussed in the next section, a larp cannot be said to have a single “underlying story”.⁶

The lack of an objective perspective

A larp cannot be observed, it can only be played. Passive observation is non-participation, and non-participation is not role-playing. Anyone who merely watches a larp, will see amateur ham actors engaged (for most of the time) in boring, humdrum activities. In an age saturated with media, where films with production values above the GNP of an average third-world country are instantly available in your living room, it is obvious that people do not larp to watch amateur actors perform humdrum activities. The experience of live role-playing lays only in the act of participation.

Analysing a larp as the summary of events externally observable thus makes little sense. A larp is experienced from the perspective of the single player, not even of “the players” (plural) but of a mass of single players, each with a set of unique experiences derived from the same larp. Markus Montola argues, and I agree, that even the “diegesis” – the world which is true to the characters of a larp – does not exist in an objective sense but that each player interprets the events of the larp as a subjective diegesis. (Montola, 2003) Subjective diegeses differ from each other, but players strive to maintain the illusion that their characters are interacting in the same world. I use the term “pre-diegesis” for that single consistent diegesis that larpwrights author before a larp begins (typically evident in the textbase), and the term diegetic situation for the diegetic truths that players believe their role-playing signifies to each other during the role-playing of a larp. In the larp situation (the real world “visible interaction or non-interaction of players”, Jonsson, 2001), one player touches another with a grey rubber stick, while in the diegetic situation one character kills another with a sword. Being entirely the subject of individual interpretation, the diegetic situation is a convenient illusion, not an “objective” truth.

What all of this means is that the theories of narratology, of dramatology, of cinema studies are hard to apply to the study of the dramaturgy of live role-playing. Even basic terminology, like “story” and “discourse” change meaning when the “story” could not exist before the discourse, and the discourse is only observable to those who take part in it, while they take part in it.

⁶Coincidentally, “the Fabula” is also the name of a book that creates the world out of itself in Tomas Mørkrids role-playing game of the same name (Mørkrid, 1999), an excellent metaphor for the nature of a larp's fabula.

“Story” remains a problematic term in discussions of live role-playing theory. There are both fierce critics (see Pohjola, 2000 and Pettersson, 2004) and fierce proponents (See Westlund, 2004 and Rognli, 2004) of the idea that larps can and should “tell stories”. Part of this disagreement stems from what, for the proponents and opponents, a “story” is and how, exactly, they can be told through live role-playing.

I use the word here in the meaning of “a chain of events where the whole chain in sequence yields a greater meaning than it’s individual components”. Murder, discovery and punishment yield a greater meaning if all three occur, and occur in that sequence. Under this definition, stories can be “told” through larps by larpwrights authoring the events and their sequence using incentives such as fates, suggestions or simple linear puzzle webs. They can be “told” through larps by players desiring to follow a path of improvisation that is story-like. They are always told after the larp, as the narrative created by the player to interpret the role-playing (Stenros & Hakkarainen, 2003, mention the “narrative of self” in relation to role-playing roles). This is a broader definition of “story” than the one used by Edwards, 2003, and role-playing stories in my sense does not by definition imply narrativism or even dramatism.

Since talking about a played larp as an objective set of events makes little sense, it is equally nonsensical to talk of “the story of a larp”, singular. What we have is a number of players, who improvise according to their understanding of the textbase, who interact with each other and the diegesis following attractors – some established by the fabula, others improvised on the spot – and who ultimately interpret and narrate what happened as a story of what their character saw, felt and did. It is against this background that we need to see the use of incentives and other dramaturgical tools in larp – not as tools turning the role-playing into a grand story, but as tools providing reasons and methods to interact, an interaction which may or may not form stories.

Types of Incentives

Now, the beef.

An incentive is any method used by the larpwright before the larp has begun, in order to encourage specific events to occur during the larp. We can identify a number of different types of incentives: Writing two groups of characters that are at war with each other is an incentive (conflict), encouraging battles between these during the larp. Writing a time-table of daily tasks during the larp is an incentive (scheduling), encouraging these tasks to occur and to occur with a specific rhythm. Burying the five fragments of the One True Ring needed to save the world at different locations is an incentive (puzzle), encouraging a complicated treasure hunt under threat of oblivion. Ordering a character to fall in love with the woman who calls him “little man”, is another incentive (fate), initiating a story over which the character has no control. Incentives are usually combined into inter-dependent structures, what I call incentive “webs”, but previously called “plots”, “plot-lines”, “story-lines”, “fate-webs”, “intrigues” etc. depending on jargon and context. Combining incentives into webs is sometimes done by design, but may also be a necessity as far from all incentives are self-contained.

One of the most easily misunderstandable words in discussions of larp is the term “plot”. “Plot” means different things in different larp jargons, and something else entirely in common English and in narratology.⁷ Whether “incentive” means the same as “plot” depends on which definition of “plot” you are talking about.

In terms of the threefold models (Kim, 1998 and Edwards, 2001), all incentives are neutral. They can be used to facilitate any creative agenda, although some incentives are biased in that they more easily facilitate a specific agenda. Fates were invented to facilitate dramatism, (Fatland, 1998), while puzzles and conflict may nudge players towards gamism. But one can easily imagine a game-oriented larp where fates are used to initiate challenge, or a simulation-oriented larp where competition in solving the existing puzzles is important only to the characters, not the players.

Conflict

Nearly all larp dramaturgies establish some form of conflict between characters in order to encourage specific attractors in the diegetic situation. One of the simplest larp dramaturgies available is to divide the characters

⁷See the definitions in the “dictionary of larp terminology” at laiv.org, <http://forum.laiv.org/showthread.php?t=265>, for examples of conflicting definitions of plot.

into two mutually hostile factions, and let the larp be about them fighting it out: Orcs hate humans, and humans hate orcs. Or Iran hates America and America hates Iran, and the larp is set in the UN security council.

An axiom of theater theory is that every play has one or more conflicts at its core, which is resolved during the progress of the play; an axiom unchallenged even in the face of “absurd theater” where a conflict is found between the actors and the audience. In this fairly abstract sense, we can identify conflicts on many different levels of a larp, but when talking of the use of conflicts as an incentive, I will use the word to refer to any obvious conflict of interest or intent placed in the textbase by the larpwright.

While live role-playing traditionally, especially in the Anglo-American world, has focused on violent conflict, occasionally to the point where “LARP” has become a martial art in fantasy costume, a conflict incentive is more often resolved in non-violent ways, adding to the depth and complexity of the larp. Diplomatic conflicts may be resolved through negotiations, both in public and in the back room, unless “extending policy by other means” becomes necessary. Internal conflicts, inside a group such as a family or a political faction, can be resolved through emotional appeals, ideological discussion, and arbitration. Characters can be written with inner conflicts in mind, tearing the character between different courses of actions – enhancing the character interpretation, and perhaps involving other characters in what was initially a personal dilemma.

Likewise, conflicts need not be large battles between hostile factions – they can also be applied on a small scale. A violent conflict may be a war of civilizations, or a wife beating her husband. A diplomatic conflict may be about succession to the throne, or about what to eat for dinner. An inner conflict may be about murdering the heir to the throne or accepting defeat, about whether to speak out one's love for a particular person, or whether to wear the brown or the red coat. Conflicts may invoke huge, complex questions of morality, philosophy and human nature or be fairly straight-forward.

While some form of conflict incentive seems almost indispensable to larp dramaturgy, American author Ursula LeGuin has a different take on the issue:

“Modernist manuals of writing often conflate story with conflict. This reductionism reflects a culture that inflates aggression and competition while cultivating Incentives as tools of larp dramaturgy 157 ignorance of other behavioral options. No narrative of any complexity can be built on or reduced to a single element. Conflict is one kind of behavior. There are others, equally important in any human life, such as relating, finding, losing, bearing, discovering, parting, changing.” (LeGuin, 1998)

In my experience, which can be corroborated by taking a glance at web fora where players describe and discuss the larps they have been playing⁸, non-competitive behavior often forms key elements of players experience: the death and mourning of an old friend, the birth of a child, the sharing of stories, falling in love, the sight of forest spirits dancing in the morning mist.

I can think of no examples of larps that have been authored and played entirely in this way, though “Mellan Himmel och Hav” (Wieslander et al, 2003) allegedly came close, but it is not hard to imagine a larp where characters are involved not in conflict but in relating, finding, losing, bearing, discovering, parting, changing.

A common dramaturgical tool is for larpwrights to instruct players on the relationships between their characters, both according to affiliation (membership in groups, families etc.) and to emotional bonds or antipathies – the sum of these forming the “relationship map”. (Freitag, 2002). On the surface, this method could be seen as supporting a “LeGuinian” dramaturgy. However, relationships, when used to encourage events, often imply conflict. A relationship of mutual love is not always an incentive, it may encourage some role-playing between the two lovers but no specific courses of action. Love becomes an incentive when the parents of the young lovers refuse to acknowledge their relationship, and we once again speak of conflict.

Establishing conflict

Since incentives by definition are established in the textbase, it follows that conflicts are created by authoring the larp's characters, published materials, and other information given to the players before the larp begins. Aside from the obvious “You don't like Jim”, the textbase can be manipulated in many different ways to encourage conflict. A common and clear-cut method, objectives, give players clear goals in their character descriptions, as

⁸For example “Terningkast” at “forum.laiv.org”.

in: “your over-riding goal is to kill the king” or “your goal is to gain the acceptance of Maria’s parents to marry her”.

A danger of objectives is that they usually are fairly integrative, leaving the players in an either/or situation when the attractor established by the objective fails to seem plausible, achievable or desirable. If the king turns out to be a good and capable ruler, the player may question why her character would wish to kill him, what the purpose of the objective was and whether regicide will contribute to her desired larp experience. Motivations, on the other hand, give players more depth and more alternatives than objectives, as they state the reasons a character might have to achieve any specific objective, for example “you are deeply unhappy with having others in control of your destiny. If you could somehow take the place of your despotic older brother, the King, you believe that happiness would be within reach.”

One of the more subtle methods of authoring conflict is the creation of natural conflict by introducing two entities (characters or groups of characters) who are bound to come at odds with each other even though there is no explicit statement that they shall. The natural conflict may simply be an issue of setting up mutually exclusive objectives, such as with a larp where the pioneers who are out to settle new land meet the American Indians who already live there. Or it may be constructed by supplying factions with different world-views and ideologies, as with a larp featuring missionaries from two different imaginary religions: one seeking salvation in the afterlife and rejecting all worldly concerns, and the other teaching that the afterlife is of no concern and the gods are here to help us while we live.

In larps where characters are written as narratives of their past life (back story), conflicts may be initiated by authoring events in that story which are left unresolved at the beginning of the larp, as in the following cliché: “The Abasians murdered your entire village and you fled, but you remember the face of their leader, you know he will be at the market, and you’re hungry for revenge.” Alternately, conflicts may be established in the back stories of groups (“Your pal Frodo has this magic ring, but there are some nasty folks who want to take it”) or the entire larp; “Three thousand years ago, Sauron was defeated, but unfortunately his defeat was not final and these days he is again gathering vile creatures to his fortress”.

By using other incentives, a conflict may be concealed in the textbase only to appear during actual play. Triggered conflicts do not provide initial reason for the hostility, but enter play when a trigger occurs. Triggering can for example be done through a fate – “on the second day, you shall declare war against the Abasians” – or a puzzle: “if Bob manages to combine the clues leading to his fathers Last Will, it will be clear that his fathers murderer was in fact his loving mother”.

Inner, internal and external conflicts

Conflicts need not be between different characters or factions, but may as well be inside these or against foes that are not present in the larp situation. The inner conflict, a common device of storytelling, is one where a character faces a choice but does not know how to resolve this choice. Asking advice, thinking it through and rethinking it as events unfold will be a way to resolve the question.

Inner conflicts may be fairly straightforward, pitting two options against each other, as with “Your parents want you to marry Peter, a decent chap, but you love Andrew. You can’t make up your mind on whether to follow your parents or your heart.” Or they may also involve larger questions of morality and ethics: “You believe in doing what is necessary and good. But on the other hand, you hope most problems can be solved with diplomacy and understood over time. You don’t want to be a hero, but face a moral obligation to act as one.”

Internal conflicts can be seen as inner conflicts on a group level, where various factions of a group will disagree, and there will be no obvious way to resolve that disagreement. A larp where the characters are divided into conflicting factions can become even more complex when members of these factions disagree on how to confront the other factions. For example: “The Knights have begun persecuting the witches, but the witches’ council is divided. Of nine members, four say we should flee, four say we should abandon our pacifism and fight and one says we should do neither but stand our ground and be martyred.”

Conflicts may also be set against a foe that is not present at the larp – as in a larp set amongst European diplomats discussing how to confront the American drive towards war in Iraq. Even though the foe is not present, the pressure of preparing for confrontation may lead to role-playing as if it was.

“Lids” – prolonging conflict

The usefulness of conflicts as incentives is tied to how much actual roleplaying they generate. A conflict involving two dueling cowboys is not particularly interesting if they kill each other off at the beginning of the larp. Especially if a narrativist creative agenda is pursued, where it may be desirable to gradually build tension and provide an illusion of a “story arc”, conflicts work the best if they can be made to last for a while. Similarly, diplomatic conflicts usually require a reason to remain diplomatic and for the tension of unresolved differences to be preserved.

“Lids” are methods used to prevent premature resolutions of conflicts, or to prevent unsatisfactory resolutions. A number of different methods may be used to put lids on conflict, including:

- Ruling out some possible resolutions: if a member of Council kills another member, the murderer will be executed by the magistrates guard.
- Direct instructions: “In no circumstance will any of the characters consider going for a peaceful solution”
- Scheduling: The negotiations are set to last for four days. On the last day, not before, will be discussed the one topic the factions cannot possibly agree upon.
- Setting a deadline: The wedding will be held on Saturday, the decision must be reached by then and can be changed at any time before the wedding.
- Limiting the area: As magic is forbidden, and the Magistrates spies are everywhere, the ritual to silence the magistrate can only be held somewhere it is neither seen, nor heard and therefore can’t be interrupted.

Several of these examples rely on the use of other incentives to construct the lid, forming webs of incentives. More on those later.

Triggers

Conflicts are often fairly simple incentives to deal with – they establish an interesting situation, usually with the onset of the larp, and occasionally put a lid on it to keep it interesting. Players are left with a large degree of freedom to follow and switch between the attractors established by conflicts – the fog of larp is thick, but unproblematic. The fabula becomes more complex if the larpwright intends to reveal new attractors at later points of the larp, as is the case with most of the incentives discussed below.

When dealing with predictions and developments over time, the question of causality becomes an important one: which effects will be caused by the events established in the fabula? How can it be ensured that a certain event will produce the desired effect? One way to control causality is by using triggers, “if-then” situations embedded in the fabula: if a certain thing happens, then another thing will also happen. The concept of “triggers” may seem both a bit abstract and painfully obvious, but since they are integral to several other incentives (puzzles, fates and suggestions especially) , they are worth a closer scrutiny.

Triggers can be discerned and established in many different ways. One is by direct instruction: If Event X occurs, then character Y must do Z. (“If your wife divorces you, you will kidnap the children.”) Another is by planning outside intervention in the event of a condition being fulfilled: If character X achieves objective Y, then the organisers will stage event Z. (If Arthur pulls the sword out of the stone, Merlin will appear to proclaim him King). Triggers may be features of the underlying logic of a fabula : if the King dies, the struggle of succession will naturally begin, and so we may view the event of the King’s death as a trigger for the struggle of succession.

All triggers can be broken down into conditions, effectors and connectors. The event that sets the trigger in motion is the “condition”, the outcome is called an “effector” and the way the trigger activates the effector is called a “connector”.⁹

To illustrate, we’ll break down the previous example:

⁹I originally stumbled upon the concept of trigger/connector/effector when reading an American “how-to” for new larpwrights on the web. Unfortunately, I have been unable to find that article again, and so cannot provide a reference for this Very Useful Concept.

Condition: Character X achieves objective Y

Connector: The larpwright reacts

Effector: Event Z occurs

Condition: Arthur pulls the sword out of the stone.

Connector: An organiser observes the sword-pulling feat and orders Merlin to enter the game.

Effector: Merlin proclaims Arthur to be king.

Studying triggers in terms of their conditions, connectors and effectors are a useful way to “debug” an incentive web. Triggers can be analysed by looking at how likely their conditions are to be reached, which demands the connectors put on organisers, the likelihood of a connector actually producing the desired effector, and how an effector will further influence the larp.

Connectors can be “direct”, i.e. they require no outside intervention to work, or “invoking”, calling the attention to an outside influence (typically an organiser) to cause the effector.

A direct connector: “If Agrod has the three keys, he may enter the treasure chamber” – Three keys are needed to open the door to the treasure chamber. The chamber has actual locks, and the keys actually fit in these.

An invoking connector: “If the five elfstones are gathered at the holy place, the Green God will appear”. The organisers need to know this is being done, and send in the green god NPC.

Especially connectors can be the troublesome links in an incentive web. In the case of direct connectors, the larpwright will need to examine whether they actually will causally produce the desired effector or not. In the case of invoking connectors, it is necessary to examine which organizational burdens they imply: having lots of invoking connectors at a larger larp is usually an excellent way to produce overworked organizers and a dysfunctional dramaturgy.

Dramatic, temporal and spatial triggers

Triggers may be broadly divided into categories according to the nature of their condition; “dramatic triggers”, “temporal triggers” and “spatial triggers”. These terms were originally invented as part of the terminology of fate-play (Wingård, 1998), but are easily applicable to other incentives as well.

“Dramatic triggers” have conditions that are events played out. Dramatic triggers are by far the most common form of triggers.

Examples: If the pope dies, the cardinals must convene to elect a new pope.

If the five elf-stones are gathered on the sacred hill, the Dark One will be defeated.

Temporal triggers have a specific time as their condition.

At 11 PM John will turn into a werewolf. At 6 AM he will resume his human form.

On the morning of the third day, the Shiites will rebel against the Sunnis.

Spatial triggers have some event occurring at a specific location as their condition.

If someone enters the graveyard, the ghosts will appear.

If someone enters the underworld, they cannot return to the world of the living.

These different types of triggers affect role-playing in different ways. Temporal triggers may act integrative, perhaps even over-integrative, by establishing new situations no matter which situation preceded it. Spatial triggers may add an element of discovery to the larp experience. Dramatic triggers can be used to establish story, by ensuring that events occur in the desired sequence.

Puzzles

When the conditions of triggers become sufficiently complex, they represent a distinct source of challenge to the players/characters, and it makes sense to talk of them as “puzzles”, a separate type of incentive. In addition to having complex conditions, puzzles differ from fates and suggestions in that puzzles require investigative effort on the part of the characters to solve, and in that they may be left unsolved.

Examples: If all the clues surrounding the death of Sir Edward are put together, it will be apparent that the Butler was the murderer.

If the three fragments of the Necronomicon are assembled, the spell for dispelling Cthulhu may be read.

Larp puzzles are similar to the puzzles of adventure computer games: they both require investigative effort, problem-solving, and the gathering of objects (items or clues) for resolution. Where this similarity comes from is a bit of a chicken and egg problem: both larps and adventure games trace their genealogy back to “Dungeons & Dragons” and it is hard to say whether D&D first inspired computer adventures or computer adventures was a significant source of influence on the evolution of D&D. Both may be true.

We can discern at least two major types of puzzles used in larp – those that concern items, and those that concern information. The classic murder mystery is an information puzzle, the Lord of the Rings has an item puzzle at its core.

Item puzzles require a certain combination of physical objects for it’s conditions to be fulfilled, for example the One Ring, Mount Doom and the person Gollum in order to destroy Sauron or the three keys in order to open the safe of Madame deRiche. Solving item puzzles (called “Widget Hunts” in the U.S., see Young, 2004) is thus mostly about gathering stuff and taking it to places.

Information puzzles require the understanding of a certain combination of facts in order to gain an over-riding insight. For example, if the detective finds out that the butler was underpaid by Madame deRiche, that he was the sole heir in her secret testament, that he did not have an alibi and that he spent his childhood as a throat-slitting hit-man in the slums of Calcutta it will be pretty obvious that the Butler was the Murderer.

Puzzles can be analysed and constructed in terms of the triggers they’re composed of. For example, the “Lord of the Rings” puzzle contains a spatial trigger (mount doom), a temporal trigger (during the final battle, when Sauron is occupied elsewhere) and a dramatic trigger (Gollum grabbing the ring and falling off the cliff).

Instructions

Conflicts, triggered events and puzzles all give larpwrights some measure of control over the larp. They are also prone to the abilities and free will of the players, making their outcome rather difficult to predict. If there is a conflict – who will win it? If there is a puzzle, will it be solved, and will the players even care? Instructions are a group of incentives (meta-instructions, fates and suggestions) that give larpwrights a greater deal of control over the larp, especially it’s chronology. This group can be sub-divided according to how voluntary or interpretable the instructions are – with fates at the absolute end of the scale, suggestions at the voluntary end, and a fuzzy are in between.

Meta-instructions are a form of instruction that borders on what can be considered an “incentive”, since the place responsibilities for the overall larp that go beyond what a normal player has. Unlike fates and suggestions, meta-instructions clearly have a non-diegetic purpose.

Example: The player of Judge Whitey is instructed not to allow the case of Josef K to be brought before the court until the second day of the larp. There is no diegetic reason for this delay, and the player will be forced to invent in-game excuses, but the larpwright has deemed that bringing the case up earlier will take focus away from the larp’s opening scene.

Just as with puzzles, instructions rely on triggers to gain their effect. The difference is that instructions – in theory – should not pose any challenge for their conditions to be reached. While a puzzle might require forcing the truth out of the butler for the detective to solve the murder, an instruction could tell the butler to confess his sins.

Instructions are often associated with dramatist play. A dramatist player may be happy to carry out parts of the story, even or especially if it comes as an order, while a simulationist player may see the instruction as a violation of her character interpretation and a player pursuing a gamist creative agenda may see it as a hindrance to achieving the objective.

There are exceptions. For example, an instruction may create part of the challenge to achieve the objective, satisfying gamist priorities. Instructions may also be used to force natural events that do not occur naturally in the unnatural circumstances of a larp. For example, the King's player may be instructed that the King will die of a stroke on the larp's second day, triggering the contest for succession.

Fates

Fates are absolute instructions given as part of the character text. They are, by definition, unavoidable although human error or the fog of larp might make it impossible to carry them out. (see Fatland & Wingård, 1998)

Fates differ from meta-instructions in two important aspects. First of all, they may allow for surprise – the exact design of the fabula will only be revealed when the fate is acted out, it need not be discernible from the written instruction. Secondly, fates may be dealt with as diegetic truths – as the threads woven by the Moirai or Nornir, as the will of God or as the unavoidable determinism of nature.

Example: Orfeus' fate is to marry his true love Eurydice, to travel to Hades on the second day of the larp and beg for the return of someone who died recently, and to look back right before leaving Hades. Eurydice's fate is to die on the marriage night. Hades' fate is to let Orfeus have Eurydice only on the condition that he leave the land of the dead and not look back until he is outside.

A “fate” was originally the list of instructions given to the player. The term has drifted so that a “fate” today refers a single instruction. See Fatland, 2000 and Wingård, 1998 for more on fate-play.

Suggestions

The Oslo-based troupe Amaranth pioneered with “Dance Macabre” (Solberg and Bardal, 2000) their own version of instructions, under the name of “hendelsesforløp” (roughly: “sequence of events”), an incentive which I here will refer to as “suggestions”.

Suggestions are a less rigid version of the fateplay technique. A fate is something you (the player) have to do, or something you (the character) inevitably will end up doing no matter how much you resist. Suggestions are often written like fates, and may be combined by triggers into webs, but encourages a player to follow a specific suggestion only if it suits the player at the given time. A larp using suggestions may deviate quite a lot from the fabula, while the suggestions serve as an inspiration to players and as a “safety net” for players to follow if the larp situation does not develop interesting dramatics by itself.

Suggestions are usually more dissipative than fates, they allow the larp's development to be recursive, and as such encourage a more chaotic larp with a greater freedom for players to improvise and choose attractors. On the other hand, suggestions can be harder for players to handle since it is not always known how central a suggestion is to the fabula, and whether other players are expecting you to carry out the suggestion since it forms as a dramatic trigger for their own suggestions.

Fate-Suggestion combinations

While fates often mix badly with puzzles and conflicts, they mix quite easily with suggestions. In a fate-suggestion combination, the most important events of a story may be secured by fates whereas lesser stories and noncritical details may be written as instructions.

William Anderson is a wealthy businessman, married to the neurotic Barbara, and father to Carl, an unruly anarchist of 19. It is fated that William will expel his son from the family towards the end of the larp. Before this, it is suggested that Carl smokes pot in his father's presence, that William tries to pressure Carl to attend business school, that Barbara reveals her plans for divorce to Carl – telling him about the many sins of William. The father-son conflict is the central theme of the

story, and the breach is inevitable. The apple has simply fallen too far from the trunk. Suggestions provide several possible extra reasons for the breach, but these are not necessary and the players may choose other quarrels to build for the break. Suggestions also may bring the mother into the conflict, add a divorce to the story, and explore an unusual mother-son alliance.

In a story with a “Romeo and Juliet” theme; the Mavrocordato and the Sokollu families are fierce competitors for the attention, positions and gifts of the Ottoman Sultan. One family being Greek and orthodox, the other being originally Serb now Muslim, they have no love for each other. A Mavrocordato son is fated to fall in love with a Sokollu daughter at the beginning of the larp. Their parents are fated to despise any affair between the children, and certainly marriage. The rest of the story is described in suggestions, no matter if and how the children declare their love – the central theme remains intact.

Tasks and Scheduling

Tasks and scheduling are two kinds of incentives, reminiscent of instructions, but that double as being purely diegetic information. A task is the job of a character or group, as defined from the onset of the larp: “The bakers produce bread”, “The watchmen defend the village”, “The Circassian army is under orders to pacify the village and root out resistance fighters hiding in it”. The concept of a task may overlap with objectives (see “conflict”, above).

Schedules set up daily rhythms and/or schedules for specific events during the larp. Two examples of schedules:

Farmers always get up at sunrise, and go to bed at sunset. After awakening, a family breakfast is enjoyed. The elderly, the young and women with child-raising responsibilities stay at the farm and care for the children, while other healthy adults go out to work the rice fields. When the sun is at its highest point, the farmers return and a communal lunch is enjoyed. The afternoon may be used for work, or for trade and visiting neighbours. Dinner, eaten when sunset approaches, is communal and often enjoyed with visitors from a neighbouring farm.

The Synode will begin with a meeting between clergy on the night of the first day. Drink is enjoyed, and theological points not discussed, but it is expected that factions begin organizing themselves during the night. The first debate is held on day 2, on the topic of whether Christ was of a human or a divine nature, and shall last 4 hours, chaired by the Patriarch of Constantinople. The second debate is held on day 3, chaired by the Patriarch of Jerusalem, on the topic of how many angels may fit on the head of a pin. This, too, shall last four hours. The third day is reserved for meditation, and at the fourth day the grand assembly, chaired by the Patriarch of Rome, shall reach consensus on the theological questions. Meals (at sunrise and sundown) are communal, involve much drinking of wine and no discussing of theology. The rest of the time, reserved for “meditation” will probably be used to socialize and attempt to convert fellow priests and bishops to ones own.

Incentive webs

As may be discerned from the examples earlier in this article, incentives are rarely used alone. They may often require other incentives to yield meaning, and one incentive may trigger another. The term “incentive web” is borrowed from “fate-web” in the terminology of fate-play (see Wingård, 1998), and denotes any such inter-connected group of incentives.

If all incentives are connected, then the larp has a single incentive web, but it is more common for larps to have several unrelated webs – say a web of internal issues for each group, a “master web” involving all factions, minor webs involving characters from different groups etc. The bigger and more all-encompassing a web gets, the harder it is to predict and huge, inter-connected webs are notoriously difficult to manage – two good reasons why larprawrights often divide a larp into smaller, self-contained webs. On the other hand, separate webs that develop independently may establish attractors that conflict with each other and the overall dramaturgy of the larp.

If a master web establishes a situation of warfare during the larp, the minor webs dealing with the grudges of family members may lose a lot of meaning.

Open, Closed and Wild incentives

Central to how incentive webs function is the degree of openness in their component incentives. Any incentive can be designed as an “open”, “closed” or “wild” incentive, depending on how much it allows for players’ interpretation and how many options it provides for different outcomes.

Closed incentives allow only for a single, or a finite set, of improvisation options. A fate is typically a closed incentive, but so is a puzzle which allows for only one outcome when being solved (the finite options are “solve it” or “not solve it”) and an objective (“you are consumed by a raging, all-pervading passion to murder John F. Kennedy”) that can only be achieved or not, never re-interpreted.

Open incentives, on the other hand, allow for a high degree of interpretation and variety in their accomplishment or non-accomplishment. A task such as “pacify the village” may be solved in multiple ways and lead to many different outcomes for all parties. A task such as “kill the villagers” allows only one solution and two possibilities : victory and defeat. It can be turned into a web of open incentives by including traitors in the village, and moral doubts as inner and internal conflicts amongst the soldiers.

A third class, wild incentives, allow for an even greater degree of freedom than open incentives. Wild incentives encourage players to re-interpret and re-define the frame of meaning wherein the incentive is used. That includes making alterations to the interpretation of normally “rock solid” premises of improvisation such as past diegetic events, the nature of a character, and the interaction code. A fate that when played unexpectedly turns a tragedy into a comedy (“an hour after your death, you shall arise from the dead and declare ‘it was only a flesh wound!’”) is an example of a “wild” incentive.

The incentive web of the bohemians at Norwegian larp “Baghdad Express” forms a good illustration of wild incentives: a close friend of the bohemians had died, and each single bohemian was convinced that he or she was in fact the murderer. There was no “true explanation” available in the larp. As the incentive entered play, this left characters free to decide whether they were deluded and the first one to confess was the actual murderer, whether there had been an outside conspiracy to make them each feel guilt, or whether there had actually been a murder at all etc. While most incentives gravitate towards one degree of openness, there are exceptions to nearly every rule. A suggestion that “on day two, you shall propose a toast to the health of your father” is closed. A suggestion that “on day two, you shall propose a toast” is more open. A suggestion that “on day two, you shall fall in love with one whom you hate” borders on wild.

In terms of the chaos model, closed incentives generally act integrative while open and wild incentives generally are different degrees of dissipative. I write “generally”, because there are exceptions when you look at how incentives behave in context. For example Susanne Gräslund notes how fates may, from the players point of view, act dissipative:

“Many players tend to get stuck in a certain kind of character and in a common pattern of action. Fateplay is a way for the organiser to direct the players and thus both break their habits and make the game more unpredictable. A cautious player can get a little bit braver and an often too dominant player could be made to act more low-key. “ (Gräslund, 2001)

Web Structures

In his classic essay “plotteori” (Eidsem, 1994), Erlend Eidsem proposes a view of three kinds of incentive webs (“plot structures”) – linear, branching and non-linear. This distinction remains useful, as it shows how incentive webs may (and often are) organized. It also helps us analyze an incentive web in terms of the chaos model.

Linear web structures (see fig. 1) require conditions to be reached in sequence, only when one condition is fulfilled may the next one be attempted. Thus, the players may only explore this track of the fabula to the extent that the required incentives are carried out. This is the typical structure of typical fate-webs, but also describes one kind of puzzle-based web.

Example: To get the Porpentine Amulet that will save the world, our heroes must first obtain the Five Keys of Krzatlökrothl, then use these to open the Gate of Gates, then find the path through the Labyrinth, and finally defeat the Guardian of the Chamber of the Porpentine.

Branching web structures (see fig. 2) are similar to linear web structures, except that they allow for different lines to branch out depending on whether a condition was reached or not, or on whether a specific choice was made.

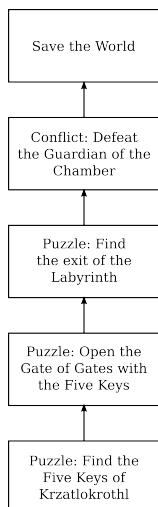


Figure 1: Linear Incentive Web

“marble structure” (proposed by Eidsem, 1992) that requires a certain amount of items or clues to be collected to trigger an event, but not necessarily in any specific order and not necessarily all available clues. Thus, if 4 out of the 10 clues left in the larp regarding the murder of Lady Poshbridge are collected, the murder will be solved, but which four and in what order they are collected is irrelevant. Wild incentives could be added to a non-linear web – for example by setting it up so that who is revealed as the murderer will depend on which 4 out of the ten clues that are collected. Different combinations of clues will yield different murderers. If incentives are not connected to each other thematically or by using triggers, we may speak of a “non-connected” web (actually, not a web at all). Establishing some conflicts, and only conflicts, would be an example of a non-connected web, as would a web where the solving of puzzles do not lead to any other puzzles.

Using incentive webs

Incentive webs are easiest to organise, in theory, when they use closed incentives only. But in actual play, closed webs can be the most problematic structure, where the non-achievement of a single incentive may halt the progress of the drama or put players in a conflict between following the logic of the fabula or the logic of their character and the diegetic situation. Closed incentive webs, when they fail, can greatly thicken the fog of unpredictability, not always in a positive way. That is not to say that closed incentive webs are by definition dysfunctional or “bad”, only that they require a great deal of care to function.

Pure fate-plays commonly use closed incentives in linear webs. Of the many larps using this structure that have been attempted, only some (“Moirais Vev”, “Knappnålshuvudet”) have been successful. Others (“Much Ado About Nothing” and “Afasia Barn”, to mention a couple) have failed according to their larpwrights and players both. (see Pohjola, 2005 and Wingård, 1998) The successful examples, on the other hand, have become larp legends.

Larps using open incentives, especially if they are structured as branching or non-linear webs, are far easier to deal with. If the larpwright has failed in predicting a specific development or the failure of players to solve

Branching structures may also mean that there are several paths leading to a single goal.

Examples: The players may obtain the Porpentine Amulet. If they do so, they may go to the Holy Place to save the world, or they may go to the Castle to become emperors. If they choose instead to obtain the Really Bad Sword, they may conquer the Castle or go to Mount Destiny and lob the sword in, thereby destroying the world. Or, if they don’t have the Five Keys, but they have the Really Bad Sword, they use the Sword to cut open the Gate of Gates and grab the Porpentine Amulet.

“Non-linear” see fig.3 is a catch-all phrase for puzzle structures that are, well, non-linear – where one may jump from incentive to incentive in no particular order. A web of purely open or wild incentives would often be a non-linear web. Another example is the

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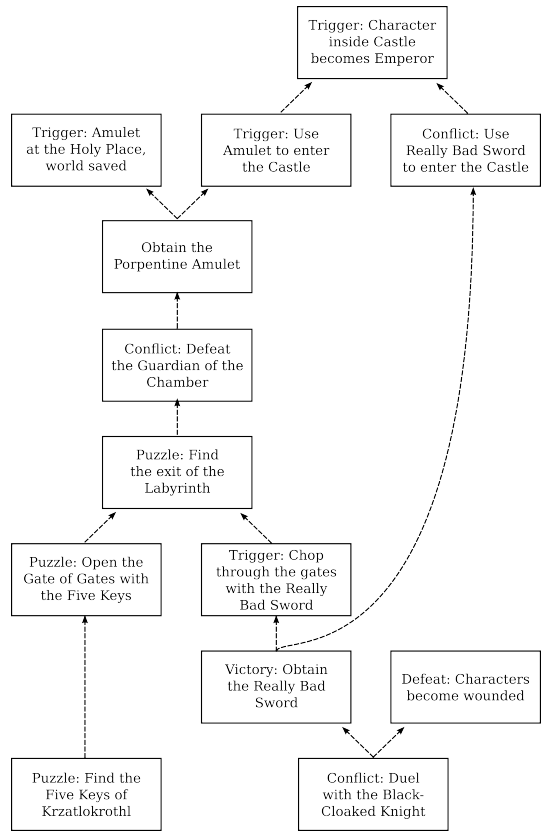


Figure 2: Branching Incentive Web

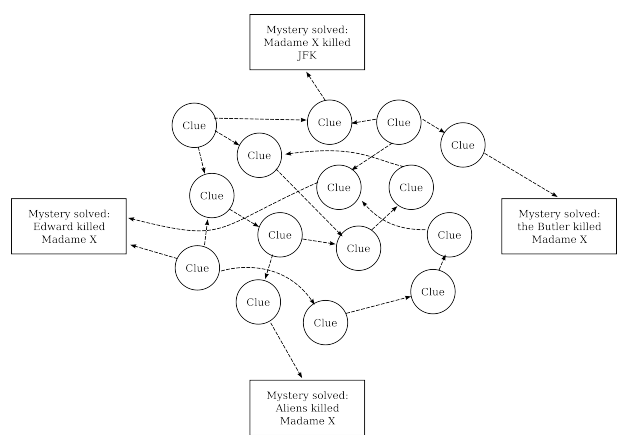


Figure 3: Non-Linear Incentive Web

a puzzle, player improvisation will easily enter to fill the gaps. The non-connected web is perhaps the easiest structure to deal with, but also the one that provides the fewest opportunities for larpwright influence on the larp situation. With a non-connected web, chronology becomes impossible, and establishing story-like attractors using incentives equally impossible.

The use of wild incentives, on the other hand, may thicken the fog of larp so much that the role-playing loses all coherence. Players will have all the freedom in the world to fill in the gaps in the fabula, but when doing so they risk making even bigger holes in the consistency of the diegesis – the gulf between their subjective diegeses becomes so wide that the illusion of a single diegesis is lost.

Not many larps have used wild incentives, however, and some experimentation may well end up proving the previous paragraph wrong.

In closing

External influences

A number of factors which are not, technically, incentives have a strong impact on how incentives are played out. The limited scope of this article does not allow the discussion these deserve, but it should be clear that incentives are not autonomous structures, and that how they affect actual play depends greatly on the following external factors:

- The character spread. Which characters are present, and which players play them. There is a large difference between the larp with 100 starving, angry, peasants and 5 oppressive nobles and the one with 40 starving, angry peasants, 5 nobles, and their 30-strong oppressive guards. Or maybe not, if the guards of the latter larp are played by 12 year old kids and the peasants are adults in their thirties and forties.
- Relationship maps – what are the initial relationships between characters? A number of larps rely on relationship maps and only relationship maps in building their dramaturgy.
- The nature and values of characters. Different people handle the same situations differently.
- The players (obviously). Different people interpret the same characters differently.
- Interaction Codes – genre conventions, cultural conventions and thematic implications. Which course of action seems the most appropriate according to the interaction code?
- Space. A player will walk five minutes, but not five hours, to follow a promising lead. Which conversations are overheard? Which opportunities do the scenography offer for interaction?
- Ability. Which character has the greater chance of exerting her will in a given situation? Who will win a fight, be able to command the loyalty of others, win a debate? This is a question determined by players, their characters, their interpretation of characters and/or game mechanics – depending on the larp and the style of live role-playing.
- Creative agenda (GDS or GNS). Which non-character criteria are players pursuing during play? (see Edwards, 2001)
- A butterfly flapping its wings in Inner Mongolia.

Alternatives to the incentive-based fabula

Not all larps use incentives to construct the fabula. There are at least two notable alternatives to the use of incentives – one is to simply avoid incentives, relying on fundamentals like the society and relationships between the characters to provide a fabula. Pre-diegesis, characters and relationships remain the most powerful tools of larpwriting, adding incentives to the mix may bring in more complexity but also (which too often is the case) destroy the excellent possibilities that players improvise themselves.

The other alternative is what O.P. Giæver (Giæver, 2003) calls “Event-machines” (“handlingsmakin”), a structure embedded in the larp or larp society that generates possibilities of interaction without tying them to characters or groups. An example of an event machine is the dramaturgy of PanoptiCorp (Tanke et al, 2003): the constant appearance of customers (short time characters), or messages (by mail) from customers, kept the employees of the corrupt ad agency PanoptiCorp busy working. Added to the structure of the company, which determined leadership and distributed jobs and money through formal popularity contests, the characters were kept quite busy interacting, working and partying.

An event machine usually forms a very strong attractor, or a number of very strong attractors, without removing the chaotic nature of a larp. Players are in theory free to pick a different attractor, but the event machine tends to call attention back towards itself and may contain corrective measures for characters that stray off the path, as a PanoptiCorp character who didn’t bother to attend business meetings would quickly discover.

Acknowledgements

This text has evolved over a period of five years, from an initial draft for a “larp organizing how-to” into a 100-page book covering every aspect of larp and dramaturgy, which was then cut up and pasted back into smaller articles, of which this article is one.

Larp dramaturgy is not an easy thing to capture in an article, as every part is connected to every other part of the larp medium and a full understanding of larp dramaturgy would require us to have a full understanding of every possible aspect and variety of live role-playing. It was this realization that prompted the original article to grow into a book, and it was the realization that one man cannot cover all aspects of larp alone – proven by the 2003 and 2004 Knutepunkt anthologies – that reduced it back into article format.

- Fate-play is not, as I claimed in 1997, a radically new approach to larping but a tweak, a minor innovation that is reliant on the same structures as traditional larp dramaturgy: triggers and webs.
- “Plot” in most Nordic jargons is the same as what I call “puzzle”. They are structurally so similar to their brethren in computer games.

During this process of expanding and contracting, writing and re-writing, some things became painfully obvious:

- They provide easy proof for the “Larps are games!” camp, with whom I otherwise strongly disagree.
- Some of the most interesting larp experiments these days do not use any of the incentives mentioned.

There is still a lot left unwritten. The list of incentives presented here is by no means exhaustive, a couple of the methods mentioned have been invented within the past five years. This article answers a lot of “whats” but few “hows” and almost no “whys”. With a growing arsenal of tools available, why should larpwrights use a particular tool, and how is it used most effectively? And perhaps more importantly, how can we understand and encourage larp experiences in terms of drama, narrative and meaning? Some of these questions are in essence questions not of craft but of art, inspiration, expression.

I would like to express my gratitude to Lars Wingård, Mike Pohjola, J. Tuomas Harviainen and especially Markus Montola – who read through and commented on this work at different stages of it’s (de-)composition. Without their constructive criticism and encouragement, this work would have spent the rest of it’s life with spam e-mails and old to-do lists, gathering digital dust on an obscure hard disk sector.

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Commentary by Maria Grubaya

I have read this article with great pleasure. Many things described in it are more or less successfully applied in our larping practice; still, I have never seen before such a systematized presentation of a storyline development methodology available for game designers.

I recommend this article particularly to those designers who develop their storyline “out from a picture,” i.e. first of all, embedding an emotional message into their larps. Such organizers often lack consciousness in applying other organizing methods; this article could help them – surely, only in case that they think they need help.

The article offers a lot of terms. Each of them has its own meaning and is introduced for some justified reason. Frankly speaking, I am not sure that most of these terms will take root in our community. I would actively recommend comprehension and introduction of the notions of integrative and dissipative techniques. Organizers apply them all the time, but the lack of appropriate awareness often leads to a result that is different from the desired one.

It is interesting that the author of the article does not break game participants into “players” and “NPCs,” as we are accustomed to doing, but suggests various degrees of loading a player with metagame tasks. I think that it is a very progressive trend.

I suppose that the weakest point of the article is in considering a player as an object that, when subjected to certain incentives, provides a certain reaction.

As much as I understand, this article is a part of a series; the other articles study other aspects, including the issues of working with players. Nevertheless, this article may encourage some designers to make a rather common mistake of thinking that a player may be directly or indirectly programmed. In truth, a player will play the way he wants to do so anyway; an organizer’s task is to channel the player’s desires into the course necessary for the larp, to offer a method of desires implementation that will be of use for the larp. Yet, if a player’s initial requests are not taken into consideration, this way leads nowhere.

On the other hand, I think the article comprises an attempt to develop a methodology suitable for any larp type. The examples feature both highly dramatic storylines and “quest larps” about “saving the world.” (In Russia, the latter larp type stopped being interesting both for most designers and players long ago, although, maybe we just cannot brew it properly). In my opinion, creating larps of different types requires essentially different approaches. However, this fact does not expel the possibility of using universal methods, but you should realize very clearly for what result they are applied in this case.

The article fascinates me with the method of a “wild incentive”; being developed and applied properly, it can raise a larp to the level of an artwork fairly well.

Still, I would like to draw the attention of those who intend to apply this method to the fact that players should be very thoroughly prepared for such a larp. Judging by my experience, when a player has to rethink his diegetic worldview urgently and the events leave the framework of the everyday logic far behind, this often leads by no means to a character feeling deep emotions and taking unconventional actions, as the organizers would like him to do, but to a character feeling helpless and dropping out of the game.

I sometimes also dream that players have come to me and I cannot create any common ground for them to interact; this nightmare has happily been banished from my dreams by a more traditional plot about an exam where I come wearing no skirt. Nevertheless, such situations are not infrequent at our larps (I mean interaction gaps, not the absence of a skirt during an exam). All that is left to do is to envy our Scandinavian colleagues, who have only a hypothetical image of such a situation, and to start adopting their valuable experience.

Commentary by Andrey Salik

Fatland's article represents a rather well-structured and quite comprehensive research project on the methods of larp dramaturgy sequencing. You can safely recommend this article not only to all aspiring organizers, but also to fairly experienced ones who would like to act more consciously. Despite certain style ponderosity and positioning the article as a part of some magnum opus, the article features internal integrity and inherent value. Fatland demonstrates a list of organizer's tools intended for storyline building and gives some appropriate advice on the application of this list.

I am impressed with the set of terms, the efficiency of which is inferior only to their unpronounceability. I am not sure that someone would use words like "dissipative," "effector," "diegesis," etc. in real life. Usability is obviously impaired by academicism here. The evident merits of the present article include references to other works, other authors, and actual evidence from larps. Unfortunately, all these names and references are almost unknown to us. I really like Markus Montola's suggestion, quoted by the author: to consider a larp as a chaotic system and the work on storyline development as "attractors establishing." As I regard a larp in the same way, I was rather interested in reading about the techniques increasing the degree of chaos in a larp or, alternately, bringing a larp closer to order and organizing its space.

The key notions of "incentives" and "incentive webs," in the article comprise an intuitive view of things. Nevertheless, I have more than one confirmation of the fact that many organizers do not realize the right degree of mutual correlation existing among various incentives. For instance, when embedding conflicts, they do not bother to think about when these conflicts will most probably pass into an active phase. What if they become active simultaneously? Won't a larger conflict cover and bury a smaller one? The example with the cardinals and the Visigoths can easily happen at a good larp because the organizers plainly don't relate the timing of two crucial events. Conscious management of such events and prediction of a larp's dynamics during the pre-game preparation fails to appear a strong point. It seems to me that the article can be rather successfully applied as a kind of an organizer's checklist; according to it, one can check the way various decisions made by organizers will influence the storyline structure during its dynamical development.

The author's assumptions based on experimental larps and his "marginal notes" are very interesting. In particular, I was captured by the thought that non-competitive behaviour is often perceived by the players as the key event and the key feeling. Probably, for me, this was the most valuable point in the article, as it will obviously influence the storylines I'm going to write from now on.

Speaking about the weak points of the article, I should notice that the author is evidently over-impressed by the tool named "fates." Though interesting, they are obviously over-estimated. However, their popularity in Scandinavian larping culture may actually be great, as much attention is paid to them here.

Also, I would like to share an abstract thought with you: the more articles by Nordic authors I read, the more I feel a certain essential difference in "our" and "their" approaches to larping.

Making no claims of an overall study of this complicated issue, I will highlight only one important feature forming this difference. In the West, a player is ready to take – quickly and easily (that is, without serious emotional frustration) – any position needed by an organizer. When doing so, the player enjoys the quality of his play, the emotions he gets along the way, and the success of the resulting work, which is similar to the relationship between an actor and a director. This way of larp perception has much in common with the skills taught to future actors.

For instance, during a scene study, students are asked on the spot to play an old person, or something more abstract, like say, a lamp. This creates a special theatrical attitude to the process, encouraging a player to work for the public, to treat a character as an expression medium having no value as such, and so on.

In our community, characters are taken much more personally. Rapprochement between a player and a character is much closer. For us, the phenomenon that was named in the West the particular word "immersionism" is included into a certain default basis. A character's inner world has an independent and, sometimes, major value for a player. I think that the active force is presented here by our historical background and cultural pattern with no relation to any conscious decision made by our larp movement.

I understand that so vivid a distinction does not really exist, but the tendency is evident, especially at the level of subconscious expectations and declarations and also in writings. If we analyze all this, it becomes clear why, in our heritage, all the tools used by organizers for direct control over a larp are received with hostility

by common larpers, though these tools still find earnest interest with single enthusiasts. What Western larpers consider a fascinating director's discovery in dramaturgy management during a larp (like "fates"), we see as an organizer-controlled storyline track that is laid right through players' hearts. Our ethics imply that an organizer either interferes with nothing after the beginning of his larp limiting himself to the monitoring of models operation, or manages the events by correcting obvious faults with an organizer's action, an action that can have various degrees of success). The cases when the conditions of a larp were deliberately changed and the larp was directed on the spot – either by direct control or via imperative instructions made for the players in advance – are rather unique and mainly remain the destiny of small-scale chamber larps.

I am interested in exploring this strange Nordic approach, and the present article is a fairly good contribution to my database devoted to "their larp movement."

The Character, the Player and Their Shared Body

By Tova Gerge and Gabriel Widing, Sweden

What happens to our bodies when we give them to characters and place them in new environments and situations? Where do these memories go? The aim of this essay is to write a genealogy of muscles and organs; to try out visions and conflicting thoughts concerning the body in play.

Introduction

Live role-players put their bodies at the disposal of the destinies of the characters. Thereby, their bodies are also at the disposal of the aims of the organisers. New experiences are imprinted onto the organism of the participant, and new desires and aversions are born out of these experiences: the brain is pulling in one direction, the stomach just wants to quit, the heart is rushing. As the motivation for playing lies in the body, so do reactions in the game.

Our starting point is that each player has interests in his or her character – sexual desires, social awards, psychological challenges, need for confirmation, etc. Yet the choice of character is often disguised by false neutrality. A character's choice directed by personal interest, seems somehow dirty and suspicious. “I can play anything” is a common expression when it comes to picking a character. It is shameful to want, shameful to choose.

Within each player culture, there is a norm for what thoughts and variations are acceptable. This norm might be good in terms of controlling and moderating our behaviour. The tradition of some interests, for example “psychological challenges”, being more legitimate than others means that, in practise, a controversial choice of character will only be welcome if the player has a billion brilliant intellectual reasons to explain it with. The success rate in passing this social test is entirely individual, which is why we wish to describe these interests on a structural level rather than an individual.

If we can identify which desires one might be gratifying by entering a live roleplay, we can also produce scenarios that are fulfilling specific needs or interests. In other words: scenarios and characters that make the greatest possible impact on their participants, and vice versa.

Stories of Bodies

Live role-playing has for some years explored the physical limitations of the participant. Fatland's and Tanke's *Europa* and *Panopticon* as well as Wieslander's and Björk's *Mellan himmel och hav* [Between heaven and sea] are examples of scenarios that transgressed physical borders, hence reorganising the body of the participant. Through these examples, we want to show how game mechanics with a real physical effect on the participants can be used to manipulate/change standpoints and living patterns in a very concrete way. Live role-playing is a powerful tool, but despite some radical pretensions, the questions of how and why we use it are still surrounded by silence – especially in the case of so-called apolitical events. Yet, even the sweetest weekend entertainment in the local fantasy world operates on the same physical level as the following examples.

Physical Politics of Europa

Many of the European wars have been preceded and rendered possible by strong nationalistic movements. *Europa* focused on what would have happened if the Nordic countries and their ethnic groups would have ended up in a conflict similar to the one which occurred on the Balkan countries in the 90's. During the preparation and pregames of the scenario, national identities were heavily emphasised. The players were encouraged to feel strongly for their homelands. They sang national hymns and made up positively charged memories connected to places and their native language. At the same time prejudice about the characteristics of the other nationalities was enhanced.

Europa began with the escape from the characters' homelands to a peaceful fictive Balkan where they spent four days at a refugee centre. These were days of numb chill, humiliating health examinations and meticulously observed meal times, that could, ultimately be more than two hours postponed. Here, Swedes, Norwegians and Finns were forced together into small spaces. All constructed prejudice in the became real as the majority chose to trust only their own countrymen, pushing the others away.

The half week at the centre was just a representation of the months and years reallife that refugees spend waiting for an answer from the migration board. But four days was enough to connect language, politics and bodily memories to each other. The players are remembered of their experiences in the fictive refugee centre every single time a press item about increasing waiting times or upcoming deportations appears in the news paper.

The purpose of the game – to direct attention to a Europe where even “legal” refugees are sometimes treated like animals, and where the alternative (escape from the bureaucracy live sans-papier) hardly offers any stability or liberty of movement – found its way in through the very skins of the participants. Exposing themselves to a violence that was consented on beforehand, a direct identification was created between the players and their characters, an affinity rather than feeling of compassion. This affinity was enforced with the tools of fiction.

Europa also worked to create an aversion towards the organisation of societies as nations. It demonstrated with all possible clarity that everyone that does not fit into the picture of “the people” is in a tricky situation where conflict becomes ethnicised. This aversion was coded into the body through experience – an anxiety rising in the stomach when national flags are hoisted or when acquaintances start to talk of feeling pride for their nationality. The politics ended up in the players back-bones.

Erogenity Dislocated

Mellan himmel och hav [Between heaven and sea] deconstructed sexuality and gender during several preparatory workshops. Individual expression was consciously disguised behind turbans and wide clothing. Hands and arms were recoded into erogenous zones; sexually neutral parts of the body became the only allowed tools for intimate interaction. The players were trained to look at what all people had in common and to find a beauty in every single person through concentrating on bodily aspects less occupied by media images than tits and ass. When a hand touches another hand it does not matter how it looks; when gazes meet, faces blur.

The participants were suddenly thrown into situations where they had physical contact with people they would normally, for one reason or another, never touch. As a consequence, very many of the participants were smitten with a poly-sexual analysis of human relations – and they took it into practise, because they had experienced that these ideas functioned. A big number of break-ups, amorous adventures, and attempts to establish new norms followed among the players. Heterosexuality and monogamy were undermined among the participants to the benefit of polygamy and a general questioning of gender.

The common experience contradicting many of the unspoken “truths” of this society, created a strong feeling of connection, belonging and insight between the participants – probably something quite like what is felt by people with a new found identity within a cult. A part of this phenomenon was that the ex-participants identified themselves as a homogeneous group; an “ensemble”. Individuals outside the group were sometimes considered as social threats that needed to be checked or approved. The identity trips were many and wobbly, and three years later the consequences of this scenario are as obvious as ever, even if the sectarianism is fading.

Surveillance and Precarity

Panopticornp was a scenario taking place in the glamorised advertising business. The players took on roles that had reached the top in public relations, design, copy-writing and lobby-ism. They were all hired by a company – *Panopticornp* – which had taken the toyotic production model to its extreme.

As the globalisation of economy progresses, toyotism is to an even greater extent replacing the classic fordistic production model. Toyotism is distinguished by new forms of internal organisation and teams of multi-functional workers with a relatively high level of local influence. Management by objectives replaces strictly hierarchic directives. Repression is disguised behind internal competition between work-teams and individual workers, relating to each other in a shifting system of clients and providers. Permanent employment and fixed wages are replaced by a situation where the payment is related to the profit of the company and the threat of being fired is constantly present. Rankings and transparent structures lure workers to top performance, ideally to the degree where performance and identity merge.

The *Panopticornp* narrative hit right at the core of the restless identities of the 00's, and created a social structure that forced the participants into hectic competition. This included the value of being an effective worker as well as being an object of sexual attraction. To optimise the possibilities of topping the rankings of the day, everyone did everything within the walls of the office; ate, slept, fucked, entertained themselves and worked out. Everything became a part of the job. In a few hours, the participants were transformed from lazy slacker youngsters to super sharp workaholics. Constant sexual confirmation and shots of adrenalin from heavy deadline surfing kept them awake through the nights. They were working like dogs—but for what?

The name Panopticornp refers to Jeremy Bentham's idea about creating humanistic prisons in accordance to a "panoptic" model. Michel Foucault have written philosophical theories concerning the concept. The architecture of the prisons made it potentially possible for the supervisors to look into any given cell at any given time. Since the prisoners are aware that they might be watched, they internalise the gaze of the supervisor. In the ideal case, the supervisor is no longer needed; the prisoner does the supervising himself. At *Panopticornp* the panopticon model was decentralised; the players were surveying each other to the point that they were surveying themselves.

The constantly watching gazes forced a cynicism into the fictive company's fictive marketing campaigns, a cynicism that few players thought themselves capable of—no strategy too extreme, no cows too holy. As a consequence, the motives behind "real" advertising became highly suspicious to the participants. When the players, unlike the ordinary advertiser, could move outside the mechanics of the office after a couple of days, they experience frustration about how much creative energy had disappeared for no good. It was obvious that anyone who wished could be a young, hot body in the service of new capitalism. Left in the muscles was a feeling that this hot body had been submitted to the production of value, and the understanding that the real world lacks loopholes out of similar structures.

Sacrifice to the Unknown

Maybe the examples above could be viewed as a sign of a growing solemnity in our movement when it comes to the physical. Or, it could be viewed as an expression of an increasing contempt of the body; a feeling that the body belongs atop some kind of sacrificial altar, political or private. With terms such as "hard-core" a kind of competitive mentality concerning physical limitations has been established in the larp scene. Starvation and cold are talked about with a twinkle in the eye; an almost military attitude.

This element of self-induced punishment is of course not unique to the role-playing world. To begin with, there is the picture of the suffering artist or Christ figure that has been transmitted into our subculture, where it works as a measurement of dedication and performance. Another aspect is the sado-masochism (in a wider sense than just as a sexual practice) that permeates great parts of interaction in our time, both human versus human and human versus society. The context of role-playing employs positions of submission and superiority, but it is hardly a case of a consensual act between lovers. since the play is never allowed to give any impact on reality through making the powers of nature and unknowing co-players our executioners, we remove from our own lives the interaction with, and escape from, the complications of sexuality and the analysis of power structures. The playing demands secrets as well as energy and keeps them within its frames. The role becomes

a hole for the body to disappear into.

In the same spirit we choose characters that in a (sexual) fantasy can seem glamorous, but that in our social reality, historical as well as contemporary, are more problematic. Prostitution and slavery are among the themes that – often under the presumption of seriously examining the conditions under which individuals in these domains are living – become a projection surface for the players more or less explicit wishes for an unlimited sexuality, free from responsibility. Questions that could be relevant to reflect upon include: What consequences do these fantasies have for our understanding of physical practises such as trafficking? How is our understanding of the events that have led to today's interaction between poor and rich parts of the world influenced? What follows from the commodification of human relationships? What do these recurrent themes tell us about how gender is perceived?

The given reaction to looking at larp this way, is that always politicise experiences is a fucking killjoy – and furthermore a way to create a distance between mind and body. The consequences of a scenario that changes the position of the body obviously has different long-term effects depending on the values held by the participants. We can, to a certain extent, choose how to deal with our physical experience. We can work on our memories and make them fit personal views and patterns.

Even so, we are playing with powerful tools, tools that reorganise our identities with an impact equal to that of real life. We have the power to change ourselves. Who do we wish to become?

It is easy to end up in the same character, again and again. There are plenty of explanations as to why this is so: wishes, re-enactment of psychological trauma, the self recreates itself, the players defining each others as subjects. This understanding rarely result in any lasting change, even if it can suggest possible measures. If one does not manage to change the position of one's body, one's possibilities will not change either. But if one does indeed succeed to make the body do something it has never done before, this will always bring on multitude effects, for better or for worse.

The Will to Words

In the field of live-action role-play, new books, net forums and articles such as this one, have an increasing tendency to attempt to verbalise the experiences of playing. We meet before the scenarios to develop our characters and afterwards to describe the events that took place. We cut in the middle of the story, step out of the character and the playing area to discuss what is going on. Considering that we generally have the intention to return to everyday life sooner or later, this is probably necessary; to keep our ordinary identities and protect ourselves from dissolving.

But constantly describing brings on other consequences as well. The dominant interpretations are always that of the the individuals with the strongest social position. The values of our age seep in with the talking, and override physical experiences. As deviation is mapped out verbally, it is rendered harmless. Norms and relationships are re-confirmed, wounds are healed, but not always cleaned. The mouth says hallelujah to describe the experience while the foot sweeps it under the carpet, to make life proceed as if nothing has changed. Even if one aims to make the norm visible, and demands a self-conscious verbalisation of why players wish to enter certain relationships, it is hard or maybe impossible not to exchange old norms for new or invisible replacements.

Role-players have often been categorised in accordance with their style of playing; gamist, immersionist, dramatist. These categories most likely correspond to our need to be seen and framed as individuals with a certain belonging to a group – but do they correspond to our desires?

Shut Up and Play

Role-playing has, despite its potential as a tool for building new, alternative realities, a tendency to primarily, in a more or less conscious way, reflect and comment on the contemporary. We would like to finish this associative text about the role of the body in role-playing by formulating some post-utopian lines of flight and loopholes; an attempt to engage the body in the building of a counter-experience, or an experience that is allowed to leak.

Our best proposition at the moment is the silent game, which we develop below in some different versions. Our hope is of course that you will make these sketches your own.

In the silence there is room for a multitude which speech lacks. The physical movements that speech reduces and frames, become audible in the silent body. The individual gets a chance to handle his or her inner processes without having them reviewed by a collective that, no matter whether it wishes to or not, assesses validity according to a very arbitrary scale. In silence, the story of the collective, the common body that the players have created, is left a little more in peace from the social positioning that breaks up and ranks the narratives.

Play 1 – Hunters, hiders Similar to following the fox; one group of people, or one person, leaves a place, and the others are to follow a few hours later and try to find the traces. This is probably easiest to play in a forest, since the chance to feel a smell, read a footprint or hear a small sound is bigger in a calmer environment, but it could probably be done in urban areas too.

Play 2 – Contact improvisation A form of dance—spontaneous movement with a group or another person. The people move together while maintaining a connection through exploration of weight, touch and timing. Through contact improvisation our bodies find new approaches to each other.

Play 3 – Mask The covered face has an anonymising effect and changes how we relate to the body. The head becomes heavier, the breathing is different, and no previous identity can be recognised. The mask strikes a non-human and mythic nerve; it has a trance to it, and it mutilates the face, which is usually the place where we read and project feelings. Masks make other kinds of stories happen.

Play 4 – Nakedness The stripped body is not neutral; we can never undress culture, but some symbols will fall, traces of class and social positions fade. Normally, we only look at naked bodies in the shower or in bed; to put them in a novel context creates an alien surface. The skin without its extensions becomes a new skin.

Play 5 – Reduction How dependent are we on our senses? Can we develop new skills by temporarily taking one away? If we blind ourselves, what do we hear? If we mute ourselves, what do we see? If we walk backwards, what happens to our conception of speed?

If we just shut up and play, our bodies will still betray us. Role-playing consists of the torrents of feelings and impulses that pass through our muscles in the situations where we put ourselves. The silent game and the silent parts of scenarios can not so easily be described in terms of politics etc, but it is what we have experienced with our bodies, that is following us out into the ordinary world. It is these physical memories that have the potential to influence and change how we act as continuous identities.

Body at Risk

A world of desires is a difficult world; a world where one risks losing, colliding and changing in an extent that is not only frightening but also dangerous. With the body as a destination, we are torn out of context. Reality blows the frames of the subculture. If we search for silences, if we search for desires, we risk our lives; and not just our pretended lives. Things are turned upside down for ever more.

Acknowledgements The authors wish to thank Kristi Schmidt, Malin Neuman and “The 33”.

Ludography

- **Europa** (2001), Norway, Fatland, Eirik & Tanke, Irene et al.
- **Panopticon** (2003), Norway, Fatland, Eirik & Tanke, Irene et al.
- **Mellan himmel och hav** (2003), Sweden, Wieslander, Emma & Björk, Katarina et al.

Commentary by Alyona Muravlyanskaya

The context of the larps offered by Gerge and Widing as the examples of work with players' bodies is extremely interesting especially because it comprises "person vs. society" problematics, including corporation, politics, etc. Thus, the game designers get whole concepts across to players via bodily sensations and personal experience: a war feels like this, and business culture feels like that; feel it all with your own skin.

Body application looks a bit different in Russian larps.

Body Out of the Brackets

In Russia, the level of awareness about the bodily aspect is much lower. Also, the bodily aspect is approached very rarely and deliberately; people perform bodywork for a particular purpose. Most often, the bodily aspect is taken out of the brackets of a larp; moreover, it is frequently reduced with models – models of sex, pain and food being most indicative – to something abstract, bringing no personal sensations.

What about sex? In the general background, the popular model with searching safety pins on each other clothes where tactile contact is necessary, looks really revolutionary: massage lost its value as a sensual process long ago (especially in the conditions of a field larping area), let alone the notorious models engaging drinking wine together, removing garters as sign of characters' lost virginity, and so on.

Hunger? Our hunger is not a physical phenomenon, but a stock of cards you need to replenish. With a rare exception that will be described below, players don't want to play real hunger or to play with real unsavoury food eaten not for the pleasure of it, but for keeping fit.

Pain? There are models of torture that would suit any taste. They are beautiful, yet, completely painless. The most popular types of larp tortures are: sport exercises (push-ups, long standing); a short card game; theatrical action and makeup without any physical impacts at all.

A model moves our flesh from our souls; I suffer, starve, or feel pleasure, but I do all this in a safe space where experience can be produced by anything – e.g. a work of imagination, my own associations and memories – but, by no means, sensual experience. We can't call these sensations false – we do feel them; still, at the same time, they have little in common with real hunger, pain, or sex. They have almost nothing in common.

The Three Pillars of Corporal Denial

Why so? I think we should take into account the following three points.

Mentality. We do have a habit of keeping a distance, and by no means a small one, from others. On one hand, it is a safety issue. On the other hand, it is the heritage of the USSR – we were raised by people with a certain Soviet discourse, which dealt with bodily issues in a specific way – and of the chaotic 1990s, when the issue of awareness of one's own body was stuffed into the back row. In Russia, people have relatively recently started learning to feel their bodies, to be aware of them, and to work with them. These people are mostly represented by exceptionally adequate teachers, a few psychologists, and sufficiently advanced parents. Body and its reactions are still a taboo in many aspects. Getting naked during a larp? It's shameful! Playing a different gender identity? Perhaps, just for luzl.

The fear of leaving your comfort zone. I want to play the Great Depression, but I don't want to starve. I want to play a prostitute, but not to experience rape. Remembering Huizinga's words, a game is a safe process by default; during a game, one can do things that are difficult and frightening to implement in real life. Yet, is it possible to play hunger, pain, or sex with no bodily sensations? I am convinced that such larp is a dissimulation having little concern with the modelled reality; it is a play of the mind.

The fear of self-study. Our body is terra incognita. We do not know how it works! We are afraid of learning about it because of the above-stated reasons. We are afraid of learning something that would ruin our identity: for instance, that the romanticized feeling of love is just a game of complicated biochemical

processes happening within a completely non-romantic evolutionary context. This can be a rather unpleasant comprehension, especially if someone's personal identity is based on her feelings of romanticization.

Russian larpers en masse do not play with the body consciously, although, they start "flirting" with it.

How to Play with the Body in Practice

My personal experience of larping "with the body," both as an organizer and as a player, shows that the demand for such larp does exist. I will repeat myself: this demand depends on the level of a player's awareness and on her desire to study herself and to leave her familiar comfort zone. I will offer examples of bodily sensations application that I have seen. Certainly, the range of examples is limited to my experience.

Speaking of obvious examples of larps where the tactile aspect was a mandatory element of larping:

- expression of power and passion via physical tactile interactions (embraces and kisses) in the society of libertine vampires (larp *The Breast*, 2012);
- transformation of a human into a different Lovecraftian creature (tight bandaging, limb binding, tactile deprivation) (larp *Dagon*, 2012);
- transformation of people into wolves (communication via touching, no coherent speech, interaction of the body and nature as a mandatory element of larping) (larp *Wolf Path*, 2013);

Personally, I faced an amusing situation in which people wanted and were able to play with the body. At our rather simple larp on pioneer horror stories, an NPC offered for players to sign a contract with their blood and get their wishes granted for this. One could literally stab her finger with an aseptic needle and shed a drop of her blood onto the sheet of paper. This option was introduced as an experiment; the organizers didn't think that anybody would use it, which is why there was an alternative option embedded into the larp. Nothing of the kind! People really did this, joyful about a new sensation that was out of the familiar context. So, it was decided to continue this bodywork at other projects. Let me list some successful techniques:

Working with scents. They are frequently forgotten about, but scents are an extremely bodily sensation. They immediately recreate in our memory such sensations that are hard to achieve even by complicated scenery and props. For instance, it can be the smell of a hospital. Does everyone remember how it smells at a hospital? In the general larp practice, scents are applied very narrowly; you can find aromatic oils as a maximum. In the meanwhile, first, an aromatic essence interacts directly with our body and only then with our mind.

Working with hunger. In words, everyone agrees that it is ill speaking between a full man and a fasting one; in the meanwhile, it is difficult to play class disparity when both a proletarian and a plant owner are similarly full. At the larp *The Pit* (2012-2013), which was devoted to revolutionary events, the players were asked not to eat before the larp. During the larp, the food, which was tasty and fragrant, was not available to everyone. The same technique was applied at the larp *Aliens* (2012), where one group of players was hungry while the other had plenty of food.

I would like to observe that real hunger is practiced at larps in different formats. For instance, there can be cheap and unsavoury food available for all the characters and tasty, yet expensive food available for a limited selection of them. Alternately, there can be field rations for post apocalyptic survivors, when you just have no alternative supplies and have to eat bare army biscuits. However, it is almost unreal to control this process at large-scale larps; players sabotage "playing hunger" and prefer to have a bite of their own supplies secretly than to settle for some unsavoury soup. That's why full-scale recreation of hunger is more possible in a small format.

Working with bodily discomfort. It can hardly be called pain. At the larp *TS* (2011), some real torture techniques were applied; they were safe enough not to harm the players, but they were actually practiced during the epoch of Stalin repression, to which the larp was actually devoted: water torture; enchaining in an uncomfortable place and in an uncomfortable position; blows. Certainly, this is possible when all the participants

agree to such physical interactions, there are no counter indications, and the NPCs performing the torture have appropriate qualification.

At the larp *Therapy* (2013) devoted to a psychiatric hospital, electric current was used as an amusing alternative; they applied a medical device intended for domestic use. Still, it provided the necessary sensations. It was not actually an electric shock, but not a model of current; it gave real tactile sensations.

By the way, a separate marker is presented by slaps in the face. The attitude towards this uncomfortable, yet rather safe interaction differs in various circles of larpers: from modelled slaps to rather realistic blows. As a rule, people supporting different approaches accept no alternative at all.

I daresay that now Russian larping is in the very beginning of getting familiar with bodily sensations integrated into a larp. In some circles, it has become normal already; there are places where it will never become normal. Still, the community is very heterogeneous because of geographic reasons, let alone the reasons of a different nature.

Ludography

- **Aliens** (2012), Ural region: Ekaterinburg, Fyodor Slyusarchuk.
- **The Beast** (2012), Siberia: Tomsk, Sergey Aksenov
- **Dagon** (2012), Siberia: Tomsk, Yuri Nekrasov.
- **The Pit** (2012-2013), Novosibirsk-Ekaterinburg, Alena Muravlyanskya and Andrey Serebrennikov.
- **Therapy** (2013), Siberia: Novosibirsk, Omsk, Novokuznetsk, Alena Muravlyanskya and Andrey Serebrennikov.
- **Wolf Path** (2013), Siberia, Dmitriy Ivanov

What shall I do with this body they gave me? The Commentary by Maria Raczynska

0. A character and a player share one and the same body; yet, how and what for do we use this common body? What limits are set to us by our life and what borders do we set for ourselves? This short essay will provide some examples showing the way corporeality perception works in Russian larps.
1. The Post-Christian European culture in general (and especially ours) has almost no forms of non-sexual corporeality. Encounters with “southern” cultures, featuring a great amount of contact, perplexes us at best or, at worst, it arouses our indignation. We touch each other very little – and hardly ever exceed the bounds of pre-defined social touching. To make a long story short, we are afraid of stepping over these borders and pass this fear to our characters, even if, unlike us, they have no reasons at all to be afraid.
2. Russian tradition comprises several competing concepts of a good larp. Still, it is fair to say that an ideal mainstream larp consists entirely of non-predefined interactions of characters. Narrativity, storyline rigidity (i.e. the events known to players in advance), and meta-techniques are out of fashion and exist somewhere on the fringe, limited to narrow genre frameworks. We want something to happen to us at a larp spontaneously and beyond our will, and for non-diegetic feelings and interaction to be absolutely minimized; we want the players to be free from solving any problems among them while being out-of-character, even if it would benefit the larp in question; we strive for maximal storyline coherence, interrupted with no meta-larping concerns. We perceive the issues related to our bodies within the framework of the same paradigm; thus, we work for maximal realism of bodily interactions.
3. The space of chamber experiments still exists and everything is possible there. Small-scale genres can afford being experimental more easily; organizer risk is lower and the degree of larp controllability is higher. On the contrary, large-scale larps comprise the space where new concepts can’t take root easily and the floor belongs to vague common views; unspoken laws and regulations; and compromises. These are the issues we are interested in discussing here.
4. Realism is not same as reality itself; it implies vividness and likeness to life. But when we speak about likeness, we can never reflect the whole object as is; we choose some of its features that are interesting to us. For us, a larp is a way to acquire experience beyond the available area of our everyday life; still, what kind of experience is it?

The approach to this issue can differ greatly. We try to experience, truly and entirely, some things that do not exist in our familiar reality, e.g., to master certain forms of social behaviour or cultural patterns that are new to us. However, there are larps that have a completely different focus; according to the type of the acquired experience, we can more likely compare such larps to extreme sports. I mean large-scale fighting larps featuring excessive “hyper-realism”: assaulting a fortress, we “non-diegetically” break it with our hands; we use unsafe weapons; we are not ashamed of being rude, etc.

This type of diegetic interaction is focused on the pseudo-naturalistic, lower aspect of reality. Conditional diegetic relationships are much less important than the pure adrenaline acquired from combat interactions, as these interactions are not actually real, but include the rather real risk of injury.

It is interesting to note how natural it seems to us that the internal group relationships at the larps of this format are usually simply copied from real ones: nobody will try to appoint an outside commander to a fighting team. As a rule, organizers just take it into account as a prescription; we have a certain team led by a certain captain, let’s invite them all together and offer the role of the lord to the captain. The issue of introducing any diegetic plots to a fighting team is the field of the eternal battle between organizers and players; this is shown by the abundance of discussions devoted to the ethical aspect of playing a traitor in the team of your “friends,” let alone a traitor. As a rule, even interpersonal diegetic conflicts inside a team will seem unnecessary and excessive

One more aspect arising from “hyper-realism” implies that such larps are “men’s space” to the highest degree, where no one would bother to think about women larping. Since immersion into this “reality,” in opposition to conditionality, is the supreme value of such larps, a woman naturally stays beyond the borders of this world and, if she wants so, she has to prove her essentiality somehow. The point is that the “value” of a player is not in her acting talent or her skill to support a dramatic line, but in her fighting and physical qualities.

5. The tendency toward realism created a popular genre of survival larps. Let cold be cold and hunger be hunger. Let’s prevent players from sleeping and let them keep a six-hour night watch; no matter that nothing happens in our PvE world. Let’s drive them to deserted stone mines in order to aggravate deprivation and to make them lose their sense of time. At the extreme – it seems that this extreme has never been reached, though discussed – other effects on a character’s and a player’s common body are implemented in the same way: have you taken a breath of some poisonous gas? Now, eat this bag of hot peppers. On the one hand, at the larps of this style, it is difficult to answer all the expectations: for some people, it was a piece of cake and they had no feeling of overcoming; others were starving the whole larp, suffering from stomach ulcers and gastritis, but they felt too shy to tell the organizers about this. (Does everyone remember the convention of continuity)? On the other hand, these larps also create their own special sportsmen and addicts, who will survive – successively and efficiently – in any role and in any space, from *Lost* to *Zombie Apocalypse*. This leads to paradoxical consequences, when organizers of such larps ask the fans of this genre not to apply to their larps. Finally, according to V. Zakharov’s paradoxical observation, if we cause trouble to a player, will he actually play better?
6. Now let us forget hyper-realism and turn to more classic larps, the space of equal opportunities. It would seem that a larp provides us with an opportunity to become anyone; still, are those who share the same larping space ready to perceive us as we would like them to? At small-scale larps, all of this can be a subject of discussion and individual agreement. Yet, don’t may Galadriels wear spectacles at a larp for 500 players? Are not these elves too fat? From how many metres away should my outfit look like a historical one? And – oh, my God! – may a woman play a man?

The larp culture, which requests for events happening to us as if all by themselves and the world reacting to our actions, needs extreme clearness of markers, so that we will be able to understand what has happened to us: a king wearing a crown; the beginning and the end of a wall; fighting and non-fighting-time. Any borderline cases potentially cause a conflict. Therefore, the images, symbolically signed for a large number of people, should be vivid. That’s why almost every larp based on a famous setting is marked with a scandal about casting and frequently these scandals turn out to get more attention than the larp itself.

In no small measure, the essence of larping lies in feeling oneself inside one’s favourite movie or favourite book – and what can be better than – on top of all this – becoming its main character? For an organizer, successful casting is an additional tool of advertising and immersing players into the diegetic universe. We are larping about *BSG*, and our Starbuck looks exactly like the Starbuck from the movie series! It looks vivid and saves a lot of effort.

7. We will devote a separate section to the issue of cross-gender larping. It would seem that if we dare to play people who are different from us in terms of age, culture, religious confession, nation, or race, why would there be so much trouble with cross-gender characters? With rare exceptions, in our larp culture, cross-gender goes only in the FtM direction (vice versa transition takes place only at comic larps): the degrees of affordance given by a male role, for instance, at a historical larp, are obvious, but what can a female role give to a man? In other words, representatives of the less privileged social group encroach upon the roles of the “elite.” No wonder that cross-gender is opposed mostly by men and they also try to protect their dominance. Their reasoning is of great variety: they say they can’t speak both to a man and to a woman playing a man with the same sternness (yet, it is considered the woman’s problem, and not

the problem of this particular player); playing a conflict with a woman does not bring the same emotions; a woman playing a man will put more effort into it and will be less natural (than she would be while playing an old woman? An animal? An extraterrestrial intelligence? – but these are not a problem); finally, “a moustached female is simply odious!” Generally speaking, one will never see a woman playing a male role, “behave like a real man,” although, what such behaviour really is can only be told by the authors writing for women’s magazines!

There exists the following practice, both interesting and horrible: to allow cross-gender at historical larps only for the roles like priests and castrates. On the one hand, it is done in order to make playing the other gender less attractive, thus regulating the number of cross-gender characters at a larp. On the other hand, this situation, though seemingly offering a solution, actually provides women only with the roles that are low-activity and marginal in the larp social layer; that is, the dominating strata is still unavailable for them. Women get the roles where they have to gain power and influence only with devious methods, which are traditionally considered to be part of women’s world.

8. Touching a person means crossing her personal border and that is dangerous as such. We can shield ourselves with models from everything that seems to us to be especially dangerous forms of bodily interaction. Two classical examples are fighting and sex. At the same time, modelling usually covers only the narrow area of the achieved results and leaves out everything that accompanies them. At a larp, we understand how to kill a person, but how can we slap her in the face in order to do this both offensively for the character and safely for the player? How should we play being wounded; should we do this at all? How many times have we all faced this off-pitch “aargh, it hurts horribly?” Or let’s remember the situation when soldiers, having their wounds dressed at last in order to restore their hit points, instantly forget about their fresh casualties?

Transitioning to diegetic sex can also be extremely clumsy. In real life, people who know each other only a little rarely pass to this form of intimacy all of a sudden. Actual sex is preceded by gradual rapprochement, such as holding hands and first tentative kissing – all the things that, as a rule, find no time and no form at a larp. That’s why flirting during a larp is “illegitimate” and flavoured with horror: is she doing this diegetically or out-of-the-game? Do we understand each other correctly? Haven’t we crossed any borders? (Now, let us remember our unspoken ethical code that forbids us to drop out of the role-play in order to discuss embarrassing issues).

Eye-witness to the Illusion: an Essay on the Impossibility of 360° Role-playing

By Johanna Koljonen, Finland

In this article Johanna Koljonen takes us on a guided tour of the Nordic larp history. She investigates whether 360° larp is an illusion or a way of life. Appropriately, she starts off at a debate at Knutpunkt '98 and ends her tale at Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum.

Since the mid-nineties, a new larp aesthetic has developed in the Nordic countries, especially Sweden and Norway. I call it the 360° illusion, and attempt in the following a description of its special circumstances. Its most obvious characteristic is the ambition to place the players in a physically total, real and present environment, while refusing to limit itself to realism in genre or subject matter.

Its most surprising effect is its incompatibility with roleplaying as it has previously been understood within this gaming culture. The 360° *illusion* at best can create intense experiences, but it does so through replacing *internal visualisation of the room and psychological immersion into character*¹ with *physical presence in the room and visualisations, both internal and external, of character psychology*.

Readers who dislike theoretical terminology will benefit from skipping the middle section: some practical discussion of actual games is included toward the end. Speaking of the experience of larping inevitably puts one in an anecdotal and subjective position, which is why I have chosen the essay form. A full disclosure of my position relative to the larps and larpmakers mentioned would run as long as the text itself. In short, I have played all the games used as examples unless otherwise indicated. Inevitably, most of these larpmakers are acquaintances or friends. Out of the games mentioned, I was a character coach for *Europa* and peripherally involved in character writing for *Hamlet* and *OB7*.

The full 360°

At Knutpunkt in Stockholm in 1998, Samir Belarbi gave a presentation of *Föreningen Visionära Vetenskapsmäns Årliga Kongress* (“The Annual Congress of the Society of Visionary Scientists”, *FVV*), a larp he had staged on the Stockholm-Turku ferry². Whether by coincidence or through prescience, *FVV* exemplified everything that a then emerging Swedish gaming style would strive for: a complete universe available to interact with, a situational, emotional and physical realism in character immersion, and a what-you-see-is-what-you-get attitude to the physical environment of the game. I call this style the 360° illusion, in reference to the totality of both the physical game environment and the space for immersion it strives to create.

An onboard conference centre was rented for the titular meeting. The players stayed in character for the exact duration of the cruise, bringing only character belongings with them (although, presumably, off-game IDs). The setting automatically solved some of the central challenges later identified with the style and especially

¹English lacks an exact match for *inlevelse/eläytyminen*. “Immersing” is actually closer to *fördjupelse/syventyminen*, but in this text the word, especially in conjunction with “psychological”, is intended to retain the nuance of “placing oneself in the position of another through empathy” that “*inlevelse*” carries with it.

²The description is based on Belarbi's presentation and participant recollections.

with larping in “the real world”: providing borders to the game that are solid but feel permeable, managing character movement and communication, and dealing with non-player interaction.

In contrast to a situation in which a person larps in public in his home town, here the player’s private life could intrude on the character’s experience only in the unlikely event that another passenger happened to be an off-game acquaintance. And as for interaction with non-players, the choice of location made sure that they would in some sense be “in character” as well.

To Finns and Swedes alike, these cruise ships function as transitional or indeed ritual spaces. It is an unvoiced cultural given that what happens on a cruise does not “count” as part of every-day life. Nearly all groups of passengers define for themselves a new set of behavioural rules for the duration of the cruise, whether the trip to them is labelled “family vacation”, “romantic getaway”, or “graduation blowout” – or larp. Thus the *FVV* players could assume with some safety that non-intrusive weirdness would be dismissed by the other passengers as some variant of cruise behaviour, rather than mental illness or offensive provocations.

FVV became significant both because of its artistic merits and the way it was discussed on the local and Scandinavian level³. The players’ appreciation of the every-day tragedy of their superficially comical characters opened new avenues of subject matter and tone. The game fed a debate on the ethics of real-world larping that continues to this day. And at an especially fruitful moment it helped raise the bar on illusions of reality. Belarbi was at the end of an influential larp career and never made another game. But in the year he gave his presentation, preparations for Daniel Krauklis’s hugely influential *Knappnålshuvudet* were already under way⁴.

Apart from Swedish influences, it seems almost certain that Krauklis’s team was influenced by the experiences of Eirik Fatland, who had previously organised the similarly pioneering *Kybergensis* in Norway. Some of Fatland’s methodology was adopted for *Knappnålshuvudet*, which also had a Norwegian player presence.

Tracing influences is very hard, but regardless of causality I would argue that *Knappnålshuvudet* and its direct Swedish descendants, like *Carolus Rex*, *Hamlet* and *Ringblomman* (all with participating players from at least one other Nordic country), share their aesthetic with contemporary Norwegian games like *1942*, *Europa* and apparently *Panopticon*⁵.

All these larps received thorough post-game analyses at Knudepunkt conventions, feeding experiences and ideals of game aesthetics back into the scene, and less directly spawning projects with similar ambitions. These include otherwise fruitful games, like *Moir* and *Dragonbane*, that aimed for but did not successfully achieve the 360° illusion, and several games like *OB7* and *Prosopopeia Bardo*, in which I did not participate and therefore cannot adequately judge.

In the following I will focus on differences in the Swedish and Finnish traditions, as these are the gaming cultures with which I am most familiar.

Great Pretenders

In tabletop and freeform role-playing games, it is possible for players to explore dreams, memories and the borders of the map, to acquire and use items that are not represented by props or by stats, or to call a character’s previously unknown aunt on a moment’s notice. While none of these things are impossible to do in larps, making the option available is usually too impractical to bother, curtailing both the plot content of Scandinavian larps and the in-game actions of players in them⁶.

In many other countries, the entire toolkit of tabletop is available to larpers too, making any action possible as long as one has access to a game master and a willingness to abstractly simulate physical action. Scandinavian larpers generally have neither. They would rather drive game events in a less plausible direction than play

³A similar perfect storm of coincidental brilliance provided Finland with its ground-breaking 360° larp, Mike Pohjola’s school room dystopia *.laitos* (1997).

⁴Another strong influence on the naturalism of that game, which I unfortunately know very little about it, was a series of occult larps set in the 1920s, informally known as the Gyllenstierna campaign, that started in the early nineties and reached its finale with *Sista Kapitlet* in 1998.

⁵For a description of the Norwegian “Hardcore-laiv” aesthetic, see Fatland (2001).

⁶Scandinavian Style larping is a collective term for the kinds of larps that are indigenous to Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland. Players generally stay in character for all of the game and are attired in appropriate costumes from head to toe. During the game, playing is usually not suspended for sleeping, to simulate fights, or for any other purpose except for safety reasons or to indicate the passing of time within the narrative. Within each of the Nordic countries, however, many different gaming cultures have developed, some of them from international, commercial rules systems, all of them with differing assumptions and ideals.

changes that require off-game logistics, like a note on a building informing players it is in fact now representing a smouldering ruin.

Yet most Scandinavian larp traditions have in fact made do with more than one kind of representation⁷. A sheet for a cape, a boffer for a sword, cardboard for a gun, a hand-written note for a lock on a door, a classroom for royal chambers, a game of chance for physical conflict. We imagine our co-players as taller, as not having a ponytail hidden in their collar, as elves, as charismatic beauties. The imagination is a strong muscle, and as long as that muscle is willing to work, a total and present 360° environment is not strictly necessary.

Transforming input into powerful images, holding them in one’s mind and manipulating them is the most basic role-playing tool. We employ it to place ourselves within a narrative, but across society it is used for many other purposes. Athletes and dieters call it “visualisation”, others prefer “meditation” or “hypnosis” – pagans, doing it in a group not entirely unlike tabletop roleplayers, refer to it as “magic”. In tabletop, the information is mostly aural and gradually added, which initially requires a high level of concentration, but allows for a strong, real-feeling image and consequently a strong gaming experience. Contrary to the common-sense assumption, the game environment is easiest to believe in when it is entirely restricted to the imagination.

In Swedish freeform (close to some American variants of larp), the imaginary world is partially mapped out on the physical room. And in Scandinavian style larp, time and space are generally represented on a scale of 1:1, even when items, costume and the physical environment are not indexical.

The way we use our mind-muscle while larping is by accepting input for the visualisation from our whole perception – by systematically manipulating and filtering our reading of the surrounding reality. As a process this is much more complex than collective visualisation in a mood-lit room, especially since one needs to be very attentive to the ways a greater number of co-players have interpreted the available information.

On the other hand, the sheer concentration can actually be helpful in suspending disbelief. In my experience, the process gets less demanding over time, which could help explain the special intensity of first larp experiences – the initially required discipline keeps the mind from bothering us with off-game thoughts and non-game associations.

Larping in representational games is a process of continuous translation. Back in the days when players commonly wore nametags, we made them invisible by convincing our brains that the tags were an externalised image of our character’s memory processes. We turned whole characters invisible by systematically ignoring anyone with a fist above their head until our brains, too, pretended that they were not there. Our brains retroactively corrected ugly sets and bad props to fill our in-game memories with beautiful rooms and period clothes.

Settling the art debate

Metaphorically speaking, this kind of larping is almost like coping with autism. In our daily lives, we can assume that reality is what it is: a chair will carry our weight, a cloak will warm us, food is edible, and alcohol is intoxicating. But to function in a representational larp, we must constantly question even perceptions that in our daily lives are completely automatic.

From the player’s vantage point, natural laws and causality are out of sync, memories are unreliable, making assumptions about the world is a struggle, and even human contact can be incomprehensible. Is the opposing character lying – or is the co-player just really, really unconvincing? Editing this barrage of information into a coherent whole is challenging and exhausting. But when it works, it is exhilarating, because the whole we construct is not “reality”, it is “art” – and let us just sidestep the elitist baggage of that word for now by defining it in a formalist way.

If “reality” is the amalgam of our understanding and experience of nature, society and culture, then “art” constructs subsets of reality that are independent from some of its rules. All of art is based on treating

⁷I use the word “representation” or “representational” in reference to things that represent things that they are not. This includes both *symbolic* representation, which is dissimilar (like a word for an action or a piece of paper for an object), and *iconic* representation, which is similar (like a gesture for an action or a boffer sword for a real sword). This distinction is mostly overlooked in the article since I suspect that the effort of imagination involved in reading symbolic and iconic input is broadly the same, while reading *indexical* input (regardless of degree – a house representing either that same house or an identical house) requires almost no effort at all. On representation, see Loponen and Montola 2004, and on indexical propping, see Montola and Jonsson 2006.

information differently than we normally would – this, briefly, is the meaning of “estrangement”⁸, which is the Russian formalist name for what art does. A traffic light turning red does not stop us walking if it is in a gallery, and we do not run screaming out of the movie theatre when King Kong attacks (although we do jump in our seats if he does it suddenly, since many of our responses are faster than our powers of contextualising analysis).

Estrangement from ordinary codes of communication through flexing our powers of perception is the source of the pleasure of art. And according to thinkers ranging from Victor Schklovsky to Jean Baudrillard, the purpose of fiction and artifice is in fact to invigorate our relationship to the reality around it⁹.

In a 360° game, when what you see is what you get, the role-player’s whole struggle of continuous visualisation goes out the window. If the game-makers succeed in presenting the player with a reality they can find plausible, then the world is the world is the world, enabling an experience that does not perceptually come across as fictional. There the estrangement arises not from the language of the situation, but from the role we present in it and the difference to our everyday lives.

Depending on the setting, content and success of the game, this sense of estrangement can become very strong, but not necessarily very different to any situation in our private lives that we would describe as feeling “unreal”.

To a player from a strongly representational game culture, the 360° environment can be startlingly disappointing. If no effort of self-estrangement goes into putting you in that fictional space, then it is indeed often *you*, not the carefully constructed character with its carefully filtered thoughts, that stands awed in the medieval village.

As long as immersion into the game world requires continuously transforming your understanding of reality into the significantly different perception of your character, even brooding in relative isolation (“Turku style”) is an interaction with the game itself. If, on the other hand, the environment requires no transforming visualisation, the experience of being in character must be supported by something else entirely. But before I get into what that can be, we must make a small digression to consider what believing in a character entails.

Portraying “self”

Aesthetically speaking, realism is only an -ism among others¹⁰. It is prevalent enough in Western culture to sometimes get confused with reality itself: many of the symbols and agreements of its constructed representations are common enough not to create an obvious sense of estrangement in the audience any more.

But we certainly have the choice of telling stories about reality differently. When I speak of the 360° illusion, it is not because “360° realism” sounded less cool: it is because this aesthetic – not unexpectedly in a cultural form sprung from the fantastic – does not seem to accept the adequacy of the realist narrative as a description of reality. Nor does the ambition to create a tangible world limit the larp-makers to realism in genre or subject matter.

Represented “reality” must always be pruned for length, plausibility, dramatic purposes and on ideological grounds. This is demonstrated by the vast chasm between fictional representations of identity (causal, coherent, with specific properties) and our first-hand experiences of being “ourselves” (random, biological, in a variety of social roles). We turn ourselves into fictions too. We say: “I am like this” to explain our actions coherently, even though we know that is not what we are like at every moment of every day.

It is not impossible for art to convey subjective identity. Modernist novelists like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf had some considerable success at this. Unfortunately, the better the artist mimics stream of consciousness, the less we understand of, or care about, the plot. Even Woolf’s accessible *Mrs Dalloway*, while leaving us with a detailed snapshot of its main character, suffers from this problem: it is difficult to remember what actually happens in it.

⁸Also translated as being defamiliarized – either way it refers to making things feel unfamiliar.

⁹In “Art as Technique” and “Simulacra and Simulations”, respectively. Baudrillard, with his postmodern doubts about reality, naturally paints this process in a quite more sinister light.

¹⁰More properly, a number of related -isms in the arts. Realism was a reaction to romanticism and is the opposite of idealism. Realists attempt to describe things accurately and objectively, aesthetically seeming to reject symbolism and politically often rejecting idealized and beautiful subject matters. The logical problem of realism is, that even naturalistic representation involves interpretation, what is shown is inevitably symbolic of something the artist wishes to convey.

Being fiction and belonging to our culture, it makes practical sense for larps to operate with characters that are realistic – in accordance with our cultural traditions if not our personal experience. But since in larps we observe the fictional character from inside an actual head, this is the one art form where this tension between realism and reality is difficult to ignore.

In a representational game, with all the translation going on, “being in character” is like reading a novel – or rather improvising one in one’s head. Reading icons like “room” and “gun” creates one’s own character too, because text always implies an author, and interpretation always implies an interpreter. The process of visualisation is perhaps not unlike the language we interpret to harvest the experiences and emotions of Mrs Dalloway – except that in this case, we also participate in writing the book.

In an indexical environment, on the other hand, since everything around us is “real”, the estranging fiction emerges from the characters we play. In comparison with what it feels like to be me in a room, being my character in that same room does not feel real at all.

Even if we manage not to think of our off-game lives – which is not all that difficult, once the mid-term memory gets filled with game events – we are left with immense mental resources used, typically, to think as little as possible. In the vast expanse of identity, the character information we had going in (name, number of siblings, location of secret map) only amounts to some insignificant rubbish in the corner of a vast, echoing emptiness. In reality, our thoughts and memories are manifold. In the game, our characters become single-minded in the extreme.

You could argue that this creates estrangement. At its best it can certainly convey the experience of leading a passionate, unmediated, non-reflexive life. At its worst, it makes belief in the character impossible. Perhaps this is why Swedish fantasy larpers in the mid-nineties said that they sometimes did not even feel in character until the third day of the game.

In medieval underwear

One reason for the 360° illusion to emerge so strongly in Sweden in the late 90s was that the fantasy genre already had a head start¹¹. For years, Swedish fantasy gaming had increasingly focused on period outfits and gear. Many Swedish larpers very seriously believe that even period underwear is necessary as not to disturb oneself or the co-players with reminders of the outside world. (Requiring a substantial investment of time and/or money has the additional affect of guaranteeing that the players show up on the day).

This sense of responsibility for the closest co-players is fuelled by the tradition of plotting the games on the level of (sometimes quite large) character groups. As for individual character personalities, in this type of game the players or player groups pretty much developed those themselves.

The appeal of this style of gaming – of being in, experiencing and sharing a fantasy world together – is obvious. Yet at its most extreme, this tradition is said to have resulted in larps focused entirely on hanging out: off-game buddy groups on feel-good fantasy tourist trips to campfire country. There may have been some truth in this, but on the other hand the same games also catered for player groups interested in interaction, especially political or armed conflict (“adventure”, broadly speaking).

Still, if one considers larp an opportunity for in-character socialising in a visually realistic fairytale environment (last-day orc attack optional), there is really no need and scant opportunity for character immersion in the sense of translation and visualisation.

On the other hand, since the activities one’s character engages in – walking on uneven paths, cooking on open fires, digging, drawing carts, swinging swords, crapping in a hole and generally roughing it – are mostly outside the scope of one’s private life, they are enough to conjure up a sense of estrangement akin to that of an exotic vacation.

This method of physical immersion has the added benefits of continuously reminding the player of the tangible reality of the game world, of encouraging the players to action, and of bringing a vivid sense of immediacy to the proceedings. The head may be resting, so the speak, but the body is alive.

I do want to emphasise the continuing validity of this aesthetic even as I presume to call it anti-intellectual. If one’s goal is to give the players new ideas and insights, achieving it through a larp of this kind would be quite

¹¹Other reasons probably include the high level of organisation and positive media image, which enabled financial grants for these often quite costly productions, and participant overlap with the Society of Creative Anachronism.

challenging (although historically not impossible). Similarly, achieving sense of wonder will get progressively more difficult as players get used to the environment.

By the late nineties, many larp-makers were looking for new options. Some took the complete environment to other worlds and genres (the Star Wars-game *Röd Måne* set on a forest planet especially springs to mind), others went looking for ways to insert ideas and advanced storytelling in it, and out of these quests the 360° illusion emerged.

When the 360° illusionists looked for ways to fill the mental space left by receding imagination, they turned to two important facets of the tradition of Swedish indexical fantasy. The emphasis on physical immersion – later leading to an almost comical proliferation of pre-game physical improv sessions – was carried over as an ideal of good gaming. And so was the inherent assumption that larping is a group activity. This has resulted in the ensemble playing method.

The ensemble player employs aspects of his role to support the initiatives of his co-players with the express purpose of creating satisfyingly dramatic situations for the group to experience. The ensemble is collectively responsible for the dramatic arc in the whole game as well as each scene, and may choose to do something implausible or illogical to achieve the most moving narrative. An influence from the Swedish free-form scene, which has viewed playing in a similar way since the early 90s, is not unlikely.

Personality Striptease

In Finnish larps, by contrast, the characters have usually been written by the game-master, who communicates the plot to each player in the shape of a more or less detailed description of the character's situation and psychology.¹² Since reacting to new in-game information in plausible accordance with this description is ideally necessary for further information to be revealed and the plot to unfold¹³, Finnish larp culture places great weight on psychological immersion into the role.

The task of the player could be summarised as mastering his character before the game, and explore the truth of this character through action and interaction during it. Performing this task correctly or even enjoying it does not in itself require immersion on the level of actually feeling the character's emotions – they only have to be taken into account. I suspect psychological immersion became the Finnish ideal because the fog of emotions helps to obscure the (sometimes clunky and obvious) mechanism of the gradual reveal of the story arc.

From deep inside the fiction, the fiction is always logical, and for a character, the unfolding action is always new, whether or not the player has seen stories take similar turns before. Thus immersion strengthens the player's experience of the narrative. The downside is that a highly immersive player playing a passive, grieving or shocked character will sometimes block the action unnecessarily. Very roughly put, the Swedish tradition tends to lean on action, sometimes created through emotion, and the Finnish on emotion, sometimes expressed through action.

At *Knappnålshuvudet*, the characters were treated as storytelling functions in the Finnish manner. But in harmony with Swedish larp culture, Krauklis and his team placed equal emphasis on physical improvisation as on the written materials. Just as the psychological institute in the game was indexical and present, just as the whole world was available to the players on a 1:1 scale, so the entire body was co-opted for a playing field. That the characters were all in therapy, much of it tactile and bodily, was in retrospect even more important than the pre-game improv in keeping the body involved. The player-characters were encouraged to experience grief, anger, frustration, and joy all through: involving lungs, muscles, tear ducts, and brain chemistry.

A hen on the open sea

Only a decade ago, the idea of going to a larp to suffer was considered new and fairly foolish. To some, *Knappnålshuvudet* may still sound like a pretty terrifying experience. As for suffering, that really does not need to deter from art – if people avoid reading *Crime and Punishment*, it is not on account of the titular criminal getting such a bum deal. It is because involvement with any story of that ambition and magnitude seems like

¹²Players can express preferences as to character type, but are centrally cast and not expected to prefer playing with their friends.

¹³While in practice many characters were filler, there was broad agreement within the gaming culture that a good larp made every character feel like the main character – i.e. provided each with ample, personally relevant “plot”.

a commitment. Ah, you say, but then the pain stays in the novel? The reason *Knappnålshuvudet* was not terrifying is the same: its borders were clearly defined.

Borders that limit the game are useful for the dual purposes of framing the fiction and for creating an atmosphere of safety and trust. Knowing that something has a beginning and an end not only makes turning it into a narrative possible – it also makes almost anything tolerable in the middle. Marking this beginning and this end with a ritual action, however minor, is especially helpful if the intervening period is to be spent away from one’s everyday self.

Let us imagine for a moment that I am getting married, and my friends, in a profoundly disappointing misjudgement of my taste, organise my hen party on the Stockholm-Turku ferry. They bring me to the harbour blindfolded, revealing where we are only as we show our passports to the customs official.

The boat is reached through a series of gates, one of them the entirely fictional gate with the ship’s name painted on it, by which the ship photographer takes a humiliating group picture. This is the first activity of the party and the cruise: I do not usually allow strange men to take my picture, but I am already bound by the implicit rules of the party. I do not usually drink alcohol on a Tuesday afternoon or a Wednesday morning, dance sexily in a Spider-Man costume while singing karaoke, or travel without a cell phone and computer, but on this cruise, I probably would. In real terms, these things should be as embarrassing to me on the sea as they are on land. Yet I am prepared to accept them in this context.

If you argue that these are all minor things that I would be shallow to care about anyway, consider for a moment that a significant number of polled Finns were of the opinion that casual sex while intoxicated on a cruise does not count as infidelity. Would I crown my hen party by sleeping with the cruise host? No, as “I am not like that.” But neither am I the person who appears in public in a Spider-Man costume and a beer-stained tutu. The Meilahti model postulates that the fictionality of our larp roles in comparison with our other social roles is irrelevant, since the experiences are real (Hakkarainen and Stenros, 2003).

That does not render the limits between these roles irrelevant, on the contrary we rely on borders in real life as well to enable a hierarchy between our experiences, allowing some of them to “count” more than others towards the construction we consider our “identity”. A series of gates helps me encircle my cruise experiences with a border marked “exceptional, true”, just as standing in a circle in a darkened room listening to a certain song can help me mark an overdose at a larp as “exceptional, fiction”.

Highly representational larps automatically include all kinds of borders and differences in comparison with real life. Restriction to a specific area, violence without physical consequences, the memory of “my husband” devoid of corresponding emotions, and of course the limited range of thoughts and actions that were available to the role in the fictional situation – all of these are estranging, which helps us organise the information as “art” rather than “life”. (A ritual ending – an applause, a debrief, a silence, a gate – is often helpfully tacked on anyway).

In a 360° illusion, where many borders are obscured on purpose, others may need to be erected. *Knappnålshuvudet* had an agreed-upon time frame, but no physical borders. However, the unravelling of the plot was directed in some detail through the use of fates (*skjebne*)¹⁴, constructed to ensure an intense catharsis experience for each player. Limited to one a day, the skjebnes were only minimally intrusive to player freedom, but they served as a reminder that the action was not arbitrary, giving the players a tool to bounce improvisations off – or to support themselves on if they felt like the story was pulling them under.

A similar marker of the fiction’s borders is the safety word, borrowed into intensive larping from S/M world and used to perforate the surface of the story when its reality becomes too uncomfortable.

Moira, which required the players to perform in (iconic) heavy make-up in the otherwise purportedly indexical environment, successfully mapped out the borders of its fiction on the building in which it was played. The top floor was the in-character game area, on the middle floor a player would still be in character but perform actions not normally expected of fairies, such as brushing teeth, and the lowest floor was entirely off-game and used as a dressing room for touch-ups. Converted into a physical act, passing in and out of character became as simple as the verbal markers used to do the same in a tabletop game.

¹⁴A storytelling device. A non-diegetic instruction ensuring that the player has his character perform a certain often seemingly unimportant action, or appear in a certain place, at an agreed upon time.

Reliable but permeable borders

Time, space and story borders are helpful, but also a nuisance. They impose on all larpers a filter of self-censorship, which in all too many games is in conflict with both the ambition to create cool situations and the ambition always to act in accordance with character logic. The player is forced to censor all off-game thoughts, which is inevitable to some degree, and all character impulses that are impractical to realise in a game situation, which can actually be avoided.

Creating a real 360° illusion requires solving this problem, which *FVV* can elegantly illustrate. Since the game was set in our reality, it automatically provided a complete world of experiences to reference during the game – removing the problem of players having to edit their associative processes or to make up fictional but “commonly known” cultural phenomena. The practical constraints of being at sea solved the problem of unrestricted physical movement diluting the interaction.

The common problem of characters needing to contact other fictional characters, forcing the players to make up plausible reasons not to, was automatically solved by real-world technical limitations: at the time, the ferries were equipped with impractical and unreliable satellite phones, and had no cell coverage for most of the cruise.

The space ship of *Carolus Rex*, the asylum centre at *Europa*, and the bomb shelter at *Hamlet* all functioned similarly – adding one crucial aspect, the permeability of the border. Even when a physical border is logical to the game world – a border the characters *do not want to* cross – the players veer toward treating it as an absolute that their characters would not conceive of violating – a border the characters *cannot* cross.

To liberate players from this self-censorship, the totality of the surrounding world needs to be demonstrated. *Hamlet* had three phone lines out of the bunker that the players could use to call anyone they pleased in all of fictional Denmark – and reach them or not, depending on the roster of experienced table top game masters at the other end managing the simulation of the surrounding world.

A few hours into *Carolus Rex*, a retro-futuristic pulp adventure set during a war between the space empires of Sweden and Denmark, the ship made contact with an escape pod from another ship. The players struggled for some time to find a way around this dilemma – they could not explore it, since they “knew” that their space ship was really a museum submarine, and that only the game masters and the off-game world remained on deck.

As the ship’s AI, played by a GM on the outside, steadfastly refused to accept any of their many excuses, the docking was finally performed. Down the opened hatch came a large group of uniformed enemy combatants, portrayed by Danish larpers secretly smuggled to the game area and kept hidden until the Swedish players were all in the game.

A plausible universe can deliver surprises. To make the player accept the border of the game as something else than the border of the fiction, it is the duty of the truly illusionist game master to demonstrate that characters, plots and information could, and sometimes will, cross them.

360° Surreality

In games concerned with people not in continuous action – prisoners, asylum seekers, philosophers, the grieving, the waiting – physical immersion is a less helpful practice. To simulate a freewheeling, unpredictable inner universe other methods have proved necessary. This was the break-through innovation of *Knappnålshuvudet*: the emphasis on creating character memories not only before the game (through agreement, improv, literature and private preparation) but during it.

Into the otherwise indexic milieu, three symbolic elements were introduced to reflect and affect the inner landscape of the characters: sound, emotions externalised as invisible non-player characters or “angels”, and an abstract room in which dreams, memories or emotions could be acted out with the aid of these angels.

Before *Knappnålshuvudet* sound design, efficient because sound so easily slips past our analytical faculties, had long been neglected in the larp world. At the larp, meta-diegetic music played at low volumes within the building created moods or associations for the players to engage with. In the abstract game space or “womb” (see below), a soundscape composed for the purpose represented the voice of God (the same composer, Henrik Summanen, would go on to create the 72-hour meta-diegetic soundtrack for *Mellan Himmel och Hav*).

Meta-diegetic sound was apparently also employed at *Europa* to simulate post-traumatic stress in the asylum

seekers – although curiously, my brain has filtered out this information from the in-game memories themselves¹⁵. Both *Hamlet* and *Carolus Rex* used diegetic sound (bombing, crowds, engine sounds, torpedoes sent and received) to create a three-dimensional world around the game area.

In *Knappnålshuvudet*, dumbfounded players were awoken in the middle of the night and led to the womb to “dream” – to act out primal memories or work through the events of the day. In *Europa*, some of the refugees were granted a meta-diegetic meeting with “the bureaucrats”. Although played during the game in a building in the asylum centre complex, these scenes were not to be considered literally true. The players were free to use them as fodder for memories or treat them as daydreams, nightmares or potential futures.

In *Hamlet*, the game action was intermittently suspended for all the characters to gather and hear a performed soliloquy from Shakespeare’s play. The players were instructed to treat the soliloquy as an external manifestation of the psychological struggles of their own character.

In parallel with the 360° illusion – or perhaps as a subcategory of it, if abstraction can be said to indexically represent abstraction – another experimental aesthetic has developed in the Scandinavian countries. These game-spaces are difficult to rate on the symbolic-iconic-indexical scale. What does a symbol represent if it can represent everything? What do your dreams “really” look like from within? Was the trash heap setting of *Amerika* literal? Were the white canvas labyrinths in which *inside:outside*, *Hamlet inifrån* and *Mellan himmel och hav* took place symbolic or iconic?

In *Luminescence*, possibly the most symbolic larp of all time, the terminal patients were placed in an abstractly lit room on a tonne of white flour – and the players instructed to treat this fact as both literal and entirely expected. The way this distances the player from the fiction is positively Brechtian: I suspect the result of this kind of estrangement is the opposite of psychological immersion, but then again, there is something both powerful and appealing about using fiction as a petri dish for ideological reflection. I guess we could call it intellectual immersion.

Not walk alone

The angels of *Knappnålshuvudet* remain the most beautiful illustration of the way the 360° illusion can express inner reality through external action. Each tiny player group was written to the theme of an emotion, given physical form by their guardian angel. The angels were clad and painted all in grey for easy identification, and when there were two or more of them in the room, they moved softly and in seemingly telepathic synchronisation.

The angels were diegetically present, and although the characters could not understand seeing them nor interact with them directly, the players were intended to do both. The angels were even scented to make it possible to sense their presence before they stepped into view.

The angel players (practically bordering on game masters) could punctuate character actions through physical movement, make suggestions through nudging them in the correct direction, enact inner conflict through whispering in their ears, comfort them through touch or protect them by blocking their way. Since the angels had studied both the character descriptions and the *skjebnes*, they came across as all-knowing.

If interpretation implies an interpreter, so does interaction, and ultimately this is the form of being and doing that saves the 360° illusion from its own efficiency. A grief-stricken character in a representational game can be immersed in by a player through continuous visualisation even though he is sitting alone in the bathroom. In a 360° illusion, especially in the early parts of the game, balancing the fictional inner life with the actual surroundings is harder. It helps to cry quite loudly, to know that someone might hear – this turns the solitude into interaction, but it is perhaps not what the character would really do with his secret sorrow. At *Knappnålshuvudet*, the character crying silently was at this moment of the story represented by two players: himself grieving, and his angel, that other part of himself, either comforting, or weeping with him, or egging him on.

¹⁵As in film theory, diegetic sound is audible to the characters, meta-diegetic sound is representative of or directly affecting (the inner worlds of) the characters, and non-diegetic sound is a communication between the author and the audience. An example of non-diegetic larp music is the melody played at the beginning and end of each act of *Hamlet* while the players were going into and out of character.

A feature, not a bug

Even in the best of 360° illusions, some elements that disturb the fiction will remain. If nothing else, having previously seen the players as them selves can provide a blip in the fiction's internal logic – a potentially significant blip, since representational elements in indexical surroundings easily sabotage the whole venture. Given that the illusion is unstable even over the course of the same game, I have seen more failed illusions than I have seen successes. The experiences have been rewarding all the same. The ambition at totality is enticing in itself, and besides, the players can often turn a collapsed illusion into a good (albeit often unnecessarily expensive) representational larp.

Perhaps role-playing games should be divided into three categories: those that are created all through visualisation (tabletop), those that require continuous translation (free-form and larp) and those in which the environment can be accepted at face value (larping in the 360° environment). In the last category, the process of role-playing is the least cerebral. It becomes immediate, physical, and social. It may not even be role-playing in the sense of constructing a shared fiction. As a mental process, it lies closer to the sense in which we role-play in our everyday lives – except that in this role, we actively censor recollections of our other roles and environments.

This necessary refusal of complete personality within the complete environment can make the most perfect 360° illusion feel pointless and hollow. With the aid of physical immersion, immediate action and social interaction, and occasional bursts of stubborn self-suggestion, this emptiness can be kept at bay and the off-game blips to a minimum.

That said, the next logical step for the 360° illusionists is to start treating this weakness not as a problem but as an integral part of the aesthetic. At the *Prosopopeia Bardo* games *Där vi föll* and *Momentum* the players were apparently instructed to fill the emptiness with their own lives, memories and experiences. I guess this works, but it does limit the range of possible characters more than a little.

Most larp-makers must find another way to balance the internal illusion with the external, to make the limited personality of the characters generate wondrous estrangement rather than startling disappointment. Only then can the 360° illusion be lived like a life, experienced and remembered with an extra-ordinary vividness, and allowed to affect us profoundly.

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The 360° Immersion. The Commentary by Anton Zaitsev

Johanna Koljonen writes about the 360° larps. On the one hand, she describes advantages and disadvantages of the approach and, on the other hand, she declares the impossibility of such an approach already in the title of her essay.

The 360° larps (unlike Koljonen, I will not write “the 360° illusion” or “the 360° realism,” leaving to a reader the possibility of forming his own attitude to the approach) are a Scandinavian school of larping characterized by minimal virtuality. Modelling is expelled everywhere it is possible. Everything is represented on a 1:1 scale. There are no strings or denoting walls, and there is minimum of symbols (e.g. fighting modelled with a “rock-paper-scissors” game) and figural models (e.g. a rubber sword denotes a metal sword. You see what you see. From there comes the title; 360° is the full view, there are no blind areas and nothing that you need to expel intentionally from your perception, e.g. white “hair bands” denoting dead characters and so on. We should notethat it follows from the title that the vividness of events is examined first of all with sight, meaning that “blind areas” can simply move into other modalities.

My first impression about the 360° larps is based on stories told by my friends who had heard or read about them, or had taken part in them. It is the same challenge for larps as “Dogme 95”¹⁶ is for cinema. It is something intentionally provocative and its value is a “true sincerity” that must be reached through some “austere” methods. It is clear from where such a desire arises – it does so from satiety. In order to discover the main thing, Lars von Trier had to deprive himself of all facilities. However, we can not take Dogme 95 seriously. Von Trier himself began to betray it almost immediately after he had declared it. This conscious self-restraint is immediately removed as soon as true creative motives are defined. Is it possible that these motives are in the process of forming for Nordic larps? Or have these motives, actually, been formed already and is the term of a 360° larp out-of-date?

Larp’s Basic Value

Koljonen opposes physical presence to internalization¹⁷ of the world and a character. It can be difficult for a Russian-speaking or an English-speaking reader to understand. We became accustomed to speaking about immersion. It means that we value the process in the first place. In other words, we can immerse as a player anywhere and anyhow.

Johanna writes: “Its most surprising effect is its incompatibility with role-playing as it has previously been understood within this gaming culture. The 360° illusion at best can create intense experiences, but it does so through replacing internal visualisation of the room and psychological immersion into character with physical presence in the room and visualisations, both internal and external, of character psychology.”

At that, the word “immersion” in this quote actually means not the process of immersion into a character as into some layer of reality. The Swedish word “inlevelse” (Finnish “eläytyminen”) is translated into English as “empathy,” “involvement,” or “compassion.” So, we speak of an internal process: of placing oneself in somebody else’s position through the help of empathy. Empathy, in its turn, is conscious compassion for the current emotional state of some other person with no loss of feeling that this emotion has an external source.

Therefore, the Swedish tradition always underlines the separation of the internal from the external and the internal is preferred.

This internalization – the internal creation of a world based on external inputs – is the basic value for Swedish larp players. In Russia, both immersion into a character and the continuity of the game environment are declared to be basic values (Vorobyeva 2014). We focus on the process that can be organized both from

¹⁶Dogme 95 is an avant-garde cinema movement. Its ideologists are Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg.

¹⁷In psychology, internalization or interiorization (Latin “interior” – “internal”; French “intériorisation” – “passing from outside into something”; Eng. “interiorization” or “internalization”; German “Interiorisation”) is the process of transformation of external real actions, properties of objects, and social forms of communication into persistent moral virtues of a personality via digesting of the norms, values, faiths, affirmations, ideas, and so on by an individual. In the psychoanalytic tradition, internalization is understood as a mechanism “through the help of which objects of the external world receive permanent mental representation. In other words, through the help of it perceptions turn into images that form a part of our mental content and a structure.” – Russian Wikipedia

inside and from outside, as long as there are no fallouts. Within this framework, the 360° larps certainly appeal to us.

Player's Process

Let's look at the issue from the other side. We can speak about the process reflexively: it is estimated *post factum* if there was any fallout or not. However, what does the process comprise in the sense of a player's activity? What does a player do when he plays?

Koljonen writes about the internal visualisation of the room and character empathy. If we make a comparison with the art of acting, it is the method by Stanislavsky (1989). Physical presence in space and the visualisation, both internal and external, of character psychology, resemble Meyerhold's biomechanics (Meyerhold 1968).

How do these two methods actually differ from larp's point of view? At the theatre, a viewer may not suspect what method an actor uses. He doesn't know how an actor does it; he sees the result. An actor is crying, but we don't know if he has felt his character's emotion and it has caused tears or he has strained his tear gland and used his internal "muscle."

An actor can cease distinguishing between true emotions and acting because of his professional training. Largely because all people are actors in some way, emotions have ceased to be a direct response to something long ago. Some of our emotions cause others: we blame ourselves for the absence of grief; we are jealous and proud. So-called secondary emotions (Plutchik 1966), appearing as a result of the transfusion or combination of the basic ones, are much more flexible. We can bring up our pride or guilt. While doing so, do we use the same mechanisms that actors do when acting according to Meyerhold?

Is there any difference for a larp player between how he has caused tears if his character is crying at the moment? He may explain this to himself in any possible way: that he is a good actor; that he has experienced the same issues as his character; that the character's life story has involuntary resonated with a story from the player's life; that he has remembered something from his life on purpose. However, both for him and for the people around, there is only the fact that he is crying.

Finally, we must remember that not long ago, the theory of emotions itself supposed that tears cause emotions and not conversely. Mechanical imitation is one of the tools used by a child, a teenager, and then an adult to adopt new forms of behaviour.

So, can we say that physical presence and mechanical reproduction of the world and the character performed by a player impoverishes a larp as a process?

The Full 360°

Let's absolutize the principle "what-you-see-is-what-you-get" and see if it causes damage to larp's basic values.

Let's tread upon the holy and get rid of the last outpost of internalization: the role. Certainly, there will be no more larp. Will internalization, immersion, and its continuity be possible at that point? Research by Montola, Stenros, and Waern (2009) show, that yes, they will.

A 360° larp without roles is an ARG: an alternative reality game. This genre has developed in the USA. Its reference is the plot of the film *The Game* by David Fincher. Ideally, you not only play yourself, but you don't even suppose that it is a larp. In actually-conducted ARGs, the TINAG ("this is not a game") principle is used rather to blur the border between the real life and a larp, but not to erase it entirely. A player must be haunted by the feeling, "that is too much for a larp" or "what if it is all real?" That particular feeling must encourage the player and arouse his interest.

Of course, the genre has significant constraints. There are no elves and aliens, and a fantastic settlement in the midst of a forest hardly exists, unless the setting implies travelling between the worlds or it is *The Village* by M. Night Shyamalan. However, it turns out that many things don't need to be fully depicted in the game universe. It is not necessary to create a full-size dragon to show the effect of its presence. It is enough to show fire and eyes in the darkness with the condition that a player will not be able to see through the trick. Alien invasions may and must be invisible for the majority of people. It becomes evident that an ideal setting for an ARG is our world with paranormal touches, whether they are aliens, mutants, or something else. The genre is thriller, detective, or suspense. There should be no epic fights with destruction of New York.

Another genre characteristic is active application of modern communication means as themselves. SMS' from an unknown number, telephone calls, strange Internet sites, etc. – all this adds vividness to the game universe.

We can see that we can create a realistic world even without any roles. However, what about internalization? It is evident that all internal work connected with the role is gone. Or isn't it?

Koljonen writes: "The Meilahti model postulates that the fictionality of our larp roles in comparison with our other social roles is irrelevant, since the experiences are real."

A player will continue to play in the sense that we have described above. He will respond emotionally to the events. The more dramatic and fantastic the plot is, the more internal work is required from the player.

In other words, when blurring the border between a larp and reality, we are doing the same to the border between a character and a player. We choose only those game and players' process elements that work both here and there. Isn't the real intention of the 360° larps to fill a larp with maximally lively content suitable for real life?

Therefore, we internalize the roles of ourselves exploring paranormal events, or ourselves hunting vampires in our native town. In the same way, we internalize this complemented reality, existence of vampires, and paranormal events.

Does immersion (in the Russian rendering of this word) take place and is it continuous? Certainly. We immerse into the plot and into the game universe. We respond emotionally to the events there. (These responses are the product of internalization of "me in this plot.") The more incorporated a larp is into reality, the more continuous the process is.

We continue to admit an assumption that it is all real, though ARG minimizes the effort necessary for that.

Imagination as a Goal in Itself

Let's look at another extremity: at absolute imagination. If the basic values of Scandinavian larps are internalization of the world and a character and imagination filled with emotions, then the tool comprises transformation of the input information into vivid images – into imagination as a skill. Koljonen compares it with hypnosis, meditation, and pagan shamanism, sacralizing it by that. It is the very same argument in favour of books and against cinema.

But according to history, with the appearance of cinema, theatre and literature didn't disappear. Ceasing to be a popular art, theatre got an elite status.

If we return to Russia, then, does game continuity as the basic value depend on the way a player uses his imagination and creates a fantasy?

I have noticed that Russian players play within two paradigms: psychodynamic and behavioral. The first one postulates immersion as a value and puts emphasis on intrapsychical processes; it is focused, to a greater degree, on the process. The second one implies distinct goals and emphasis on social interaction, focusing on the result. At that, in the latter case, the question is not about munchkinism: playing the game to win. A player's goals can change depending on the events happening to his character. Also, there is often no "winning" result of actions for a player. What is more important is that these two extremities coexist easily within the framework of one and the same larp.

Continuity is a basic value in both cases. What about imagination? It matters for the psychodynamic paradigm, but is largely irrelevant for the behavioral one.

Alternately, let's take, for example, the GSN(I) theory (Pohjola 2000; Edwards 2001; Bøckman 2003). Victory is valuable for gamism; internal logic is valuable for simulationism; a good story is valuable for narrativism; and immersion into a character is valuable for immersionism. Imagination is irrelevant, at least for gamism. Simulationism combines imagination and realism within the meaning of the 360° larps.

Therefore, neither imagination nor realism is an absolute value for larps en masse.

Realism as a Goal in Itself

Freedom from virtual interaction and the minimizing of models are specific for Scandinavian larps. For some plots, it means that players "would rather drive game events in a less plausible direction than play changes that

require off-game logistics.”

Therefore, storyline realism is sacrificed to photographic realism. However, later, we'll also see other examples when the principle “what-you-see-is-what-you-get” works not for realism, but for surrealism.

Further on, Koljonen notices that realism is not the only art style; it “was a reaction to romanticism and is the opposite of idealism. Realists attempt to describe things accurately and objectively, aesthetically seeming to reject symbolism and politically often rejecting idealized and beautiful subject matters.” The 360° larps aesthetically reject symbolism, but do they reject idealized and beautiful subject matters?

Koljonen is right in noticing that “The logical problem of realism is, that even naturalistic representation involves interpretation, what is shown is inevitably symbolic of something the artist wishes to convey.” It seems that organizers of the 360° larps understand this. For them, realism is a tool and not a genre limitation. (There is such a concept in Russian larps as a “hungry game engine,” when real hunger makes players take game actions.) A larp may be built on the principles of romanticism or a fairy tale, and this will state different requirements to the plot and the players.

Is realism a true value for the 360° larps?

Imagination against Eventfulness

Speaking about a larp as one would about reading a complicated book, Koljonen points that it is necessary to make a lot of effort to decode input information. The more relative the environment is, the less energy we have for the internal development of a character, so the character becomes cardboard. Therefore, Johanna writes, “Perhaps this is why Swedish fantasy larpers in the mid-nineties said that they sometimes did not even feel in character until the third day of the game.”

Though I haven't attended any larps in Sweden, I have read about larps outside of Russia. I can suppose that a great amount of scenery, props, and “story constructing” hides a low density of significant game events, the events that influence “immersion” by not engaging a character nominally, but touching a player emotionally. These are the very events that leave multilayered recollections. Of course, immersion speed also depends upon it. The tradition of the character's low mortality at West European larps is one of the indirect indices. As far as I can see, high psychological density is important in the tradition of Scandinavian larps. Let's make a mental note of that.

Speaking about Swedish fantasy larps that aim at hyper-realism, Koljonen marks an important tendency. Players are often motivated to show off their costumes and their props, but not to play. This effect is facilitated by players' extensive investments into these costumes and props, and also by writing character plots at the level of teams, not single players.

In Russia, the situation is approximately the same for large-scale larps (300+ players). In this case, it is of no importance if we speak about a historical larp (true-to-fact historical costumes) or about a more free setting (beautiful and showy costumes). Writing plots at a group level becomes necessary when the question is about a larp for several hundred players. The experience of the Stepladder to Heaven organizer group proves that not only “adventures” can provide players interested in interaction with mental food. It can be also done by more complicated types of interaction (e.g. the pilgrimage at the larp *To Die in Jerusalem*, 2013) and by a common message for the whole larp (e.g. the fight of religions, patriotism, etc.).

Larp as Art

Koljonen determines art as the entity that is built as a result of input information systematization done by a player. However, this rendering implies that every player forms in his head his own story, freestanding from the others. If a Russian organizer takes larp as art, his super-task is to create an entire story. This story comprises the sum of all the players' experience. In a good larp, all stories correspond to the game message.

What about a player's work on information systematization? We must keep in mind that the question often is about selective perception and the conforming of the input information to the imagination. Is it the very escapism that causes larps to be considered something marginal in Russia and in some other countries?

Connecting imagination with art, Koljonen seems to deny that the 360° larps can be pieces of art. However, can a documentary film be a piece of art? I know some examples that can. A viewer as a co-creator makes

efforts for estrangement (Schklovsky) from the documented events, interpreting them unusually by dramatizing.

Or is dramatization a usual mode? And is actuality a new alternative? Have you noticed how much attention is paid in modern arthouse cinema to documenting the routine?

Koljonen herself writes that realism is one of the art styles. So, why imagination is more art than something else?

What actually matters is plot. We can see a plot in a documentary film if the director chooses and sequences the shots properly. In fact, artistic fiction is not an event, either fictional or not, but an attitude towards it. Attitude may be also dramatic, realistic, romantic, etc.

Koljonen contradicts herself when she says “the world is the world, enabling an experience that does not perceptually come across as fictional.” We have already found out that a demonstrated thing inevitably symbolizes something that an artist – a larp designer in this context – would like to convey and this is artistic fiction.

If we speak about the voiced task of the art – that is, to surround fiction with reality, interaction with which fills a person with vitality – then an actual experience can nourish vitality much more than a modelled one.

However, Koljonen does not contradict that the sense of estrangement at a 360° larp “can become very strong, but not necessarily very different to any situation in our private lives that we would describe as feeling ‘unreal’.” We can hardly debate with this point, as well as with the fact that we can say the same about the sense of estrangement at a larp with a strong model component.

Often, a model larp has nothing in common with the internalization of the world and a character, with immersion, and with other things of this nature. It turns into absolutely a gamistic competition. The sense of estrangement is present there, but it is equivalent to strong fascination during table football playing.

Unlike in Europe and the USA, in Russia, there is no distinct conviction that your character is not you. In our opinion, there is no point to deny the transfusion of a character and a player if the question is not about controlled dissociation of personality. However, the effects of “bleed-in” and “bleed-out” are true for Russia too; we don’t encourage “sticking” to a role and having players’ out-ofgame relationships influence their larping.

When Koljonen writes that “if no effort of self-estrangement goes into putting you in that fictional space, then it is indeed often you, not the carefully constructed character with its carefully filtered thoughts, that stands awed in the medieval village,” we perceive it as prescription.

At one larp, I played myself in strange circumstances and, at another larp, I acted how I would never act myself, but how my character would act. Yet, it is often difficult to distinguish these moments and playing a character turns into an answer for the question, “What would I do, if I became a maniac murderer?”

Raising the issue this way, we also raise certain ethical problems. Some Russian designers are convinced that, at a larp, there should be no initially evil characters who would make players do evil (Sharov & Lustberg 2013).

However, we will not study this issue in detail. We can once more refer to the methods of acting: a player can use the systems of Stanislavsky or Meyerhold. Regardless, at the output, the player receives impressions, emotions, a story, and experience.

Furthermore, let’s once more refer to the postulate that the fabulousness of roles is of no importance compared to our social roles. My experience is real, no matter if it is me or my character who is standing in a medieval village.

What the 360° Larps Actually Do

Two features are specific for the 360° larps: emphasis on physical immersion and ensemble playing.¹⁸ We have spoken about physical immersion mainly in terms of realistic scenery and pit-digging, but the concept is much wider. Actually, mentioning Meyerhold was not out of place. The 360° larps encourage physical therapy and the training of physical acting skills (the very same “muscles” of laughter and tears).

We have said enough about the main features of the 360° larps. Now we understand that physical immersion may be a perfect tool for the creation of a dramatic plot, sending messages, and calling for a player’s emotional response. In this sense, realism is not a goal in itself for the majority of larps.

Let’s look at the examples from Koljonen’s essay that confirm this fact.

The rule of “fates” that channel the plot in the right way for a given character is, in fact, a storyline model. It is the same model as a piece of paper denoting that this building is blown up. The difference is in modelling of unobservable things. That’s why it seems that the model doesn’t contradict the principle “what-you-see-is-what-you-get.” We must only end the phrase: “what-you-see-is-what-you-get-but-you-do-not-see-all-that-you-will-get.”

As I understand it, a “fate” is a concept contradictory to the aesthetics of realism. Therefore, we are right that romanticism, idealism, and other art styles can state their requirements to a plot expressed in the game rules.

In the same way, a safety word, being “a marker of the fiction’s borders,” is actually a marker of the borders of realism. Certainly, it is not a storyline model, but a technical one, introduced for the reasons of players’ safety. However, it shows that we can limit players’ actions by creating linguistic rules.

Ultimately, the rules of surrealist larps are the most evident violation of the principle of realism postulated by Koljonen.

At the larp *Knappnålshvudet*, the inner world of a character is modelled (!) with the help of “invisible non-player characters,’ or ‘angels.’” In Russia, similar things were used from 2000 on, when at the larp *Hobbits’ Games*, a single player played the One Ring. *Knappnålshvudet* also featured “an abstract room in which dreams, memories or emotions could be acted out with the aid of these angels.” What is this, if not the violation of the principle “what-you-see-is-what-you-get?” What physical immersion and realism can we speak about here?

Real Experience against Imagination

Koljonen writes, “Contrary to the common-sense assumption, the game environment is easiest to believe in when it is entirely restricted to the imagination.” We wish to agree with the statement, especially when tabletop role-playing games are taken as an example. However, we do not speak about them, but about larps.

Physical activity, such as digging a pit, can conjure up, in Koljonen’s opinion, a sense of estrangement “akin to that of an exotic vacation.” At that, she writes, “I do want to emphasise the continuing validity of this aesthetic even as I presume to call it anti-intellectual. If one’s goal is to give the players new ideas and insights, achieving it through a larp of this kind would be quite challenging (although historically not impossible). Similarly, achieving a sense of wonder will get progressively more difficult as players get used to the environment.”

Yes, players get used to the environment, but why can’t we use it?

I’ll bring up as an example a larp where I was a designer. It is the larp *LOST*, which was to a large extent a 360° larp. Players came to an island in the middle of a lake under the pretense of an excursion. They sleep on the ground. They cover themselves with what they have found on the island. They eat what they have

¹⁸From time to time, a series of workshops called “Player School” is conducted in Russia and in St. Petersburg. The workshop form differs depending on the coach, but, as a rule, it serves as practice in dramatic skills and in acting at larp situations. It would be wonderful to apply body therapy in Russia, except for the connotation with psychological aid. (In Russia, an average citizen still considers such aid to be the lot of psychotics – of insane people). Unfortunately, our average larper considers himself to be an outcast and a dropout, and speaks ironically of his psychiatric deviations. Certainly, there are a lot of counter-examples; the community makes conscious attempts to position larps as a hobby of successful people. Still, the public image of larps can now be described “as is,” and a larper will possibly react with hostility to a suggestion to take part in any therapy, for doing so he will confess his deficiency. What about ensemble role-playing, where everyone is responsible for the game and its plot? In Russia, this practice is encouraged irrespective of aesthetics. We discuss this practice in terms of “a player in the position of an organizer.” On the contrary, we criticize “conflict wasting,” when a player nullifies the conflict that should have been escalated according to the character’s temper, the circumstances, and the laws of the world.

found on the island. However, a larp based on the *Lost* TV series implies events that are far from realism. Such a compound produces a curious effect when a player immerses into the physics of the real world, becomes an integral part of the reality, and then, having taken deep root in this small, but utterly realistic world on a sliver of firm ground, he perceives fantastic events. There were some models at this larp; the discord with symbol models was deeper than that with graphic ones, but there was no global mistrust of events and objects. Extreme reality of the island became a default layer. Fantastic events are realistic in realistic circumstances. These are the limitations and possibilities of the ARG genre I have mentioned above.

What about sending messages? Well, yes, digging a pit does not send any message on its own. However, what if this pit is your future tomb?

The 360° experience can be much more significant than experience with models. There is a simple example: when at the larp *Saint Summer* (2014), I entered the army and crawled upon my stomach, listening to a sergeant's swearing. It left a lasting impression and provided the necessary contrast with the hippie camp. It allowed me to re-evaluate my character's life and the world around me once again; later on, I managed to spiel off an address from the stage. I wanted to cry from my own address, not because I had been broken down in Vietnam, but because I understood the value of peace and the importance of love. Hippies talked about love for the most part abstractedly, but I had seen cruelty, so I understood the value of love. It influenced my character's story. Besides, "the army" gave me some practical experience of fast switching (rise! lie down! rise!) at kinesthetic and physiological levels. Interaction with a model would give me no such experience.

Therefore, physical immersion is valuable not on its own, but as a tool of artistic expression. Therefore, it is not important how extreme physical immersion is.

Physical interaction may be much stronger than a model one. In the same way, a physiological model is stronger than an abstract one. For example, let's consider a model of sex made in such a way that a man searches for safety pins hidden by his partner in his or her clothes. By hiding pins, one of the partners regulates the level of the model intimacy (Perepelkin 2013).

In the same way, a social experiment was actually carried out during the *LOST* larp. It showed how human behaviour changes in extreme conditions, e.g. if people share warm clothes when they have to sleep on the ground, or, on the contrary, if they take away a travelling rug left by somebody for a minute. It is not so difficult, as it seems, to create new ideas and inspirations here.

It is enough to use physical actions dramatically and not only as scenery, as in the example about a fantasy camp. Provide the people with twice less tents than they need. Encourage class struggle through dragging carts and digging pits. These are simple and stern, but efficient methods of natural dynamics creation. Certainly, it doesn't cancel out the necessity of counterbalances. Provide the people with values and ideas as the reasons for sacrificing and sharing; give them something to lose and to fight for.

Summary

Turning back to the analogy with Lars von Trier, I think that the real motive of the 360° larps organizers is to bring human emotions to light. Lars von Trier used Dogme 95 to clear the table: to take all irrelevant things away and look at living actors in the living world. When he saw what he wanted to see, he started using it in his next films, departing from his own rules.

In the same way, the 360° larps used physical immersion and a realistic environment to watch players' immediate reactions.

Ultimately, as shown by the examples of surrealist larps and the larps where genre contradicts stern realism, organizers began to depart from their own rules as soon as they learned to work with emotions.

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Commentary by Alexey Sapozhnikov

The author reviews the style of larp creation when the organizers aim at reconstruction of the modelled reality on a 1:1 scale with physical territory and the objects with which a player interacts. Paying no attention to the issue of price and the essential limitations of this approach, the author sets out to demonstrate its negative side-effect on the larping process as such on a player's immersion into a character and on a player getting a profound emotional experience from a larp.

The observations stated in the article are interesting, but they do not provide any reliable proofs of the presence of this deteriorating effect. In other words, we consider questionable the very thesis that a full-fledged larp must obligatorily occupy all the "computing resources" of a player's brain in order to reach proper degree of immersion and pleasure from the process.

A player's imagination that he uses at freeform larps and larps featuring vast amounts of model conventions is, no doubt, necessary for better immersion into a larp and for getting a proper experience like "I am a knight fighting a dragon." However, it is not obvious that the work of imagination on decoration and visualization of space stops under the conditions of a "360° illusion larp".

Likewise, I see no reasonable grounds to suppose that larps with 1:1 scale modelling provoke the feeling of "I am playing myself among some scenery," while larps requiring significant imagination efforts for visualization and development of in-game space within a player's mind somehow decrease the effect in question and facilitate immersion. There is a strong feeling that inclination to show both effects ("I am playing a character, but, in fact, I am playing myself surrounded with in-game props and scenery" and "I am a real noble knight") is a personal feature of each particular player. Frankly speaking, if we raise the issue of 360° illusion's influence on the degree of immersion, then we should carry out a profound statistical study, not limiting ourselves to sporadic observations and theoretical conclusions.

On the other hand, if we speak of the existing limitations of 1:1 scale larps, then the influences of these limitations on the game storyline and the range of possible interactions are really evident and obvious. Still, once again, the article does not feature any profound analysis of this influence. For instance, we have no possibility to evaluate how much and in what way the set of available plot twists change in accordance with the chosen simulation style (1:1 scale, symbolic, indexical, and so on).

In my personal opinion, under otherwise equal conditions, the increase of quality of visuals and any other environment in the direction of 1:1 scale modelling always raises the general "quality rating" of a larp. In other words, organizers have no reason to abandon this style because of some mystical fear of "a player's poor immersion" into the game; they just have to take into account the issue of price for such modelling and also the limitations that inevitably arise from it.

What seems interesting here is, firstly, the correctness of the assumption about the increment of the quality of larp in the perceptions of a player in the case of an increase of the degree of the 1:1 scale modelling and, secondly, this relationship having special points. For instance, what is the role of various simulation factors – like small, but functional objects, scenery, small details, and daily life elements – in creating the 360° illusion? The same question is fair for the elements that destroy this 360° illusion.

In other words, there appear a number of interesting practical issues that are better illustrated with a couple of examples:

1. Does it make any sense to aim at high quality, 1:1 scale modelling of only some elements surrounding a player or it is no good under certain conditions. For instance, should we not make realistic guns along with unrealistic larp weapons?
2. What elements of the environment should be modelled first in order to achieve the best possible effect of 360° illusion, if it is impossible to simulate the whole larpspace on a 1:1 scale?

Nordic Larp: Theatre, Art and Game

By Jaakko Stenros, Finland

Nordic larp is designed social experience. It is about visiting different worlds and slipping under foreign skins. It is about discovering what it is like to be someone else, a refugee, a Mafioso, a space pirate – in a coherent, thought-out setting with others who share and strengthen the experience. But is Nordic larp art, theatre or game?

Larps are temporary worlds superimposed on the everyday world. They are framed by their fictionality and the participant is present in the moment of playing as both a player and a character. Though deep character immersion has sometimes been hailed as the ideal way of playing (Pohjola 2000), to many players, games and gaming cultures performance or success in reaching one's goals is more valuable than the subjective experience of feeling your character's feelings.¹ Not even the most dedicated immersionist experiences exactly what her character might arguably feel in the fictive frame of the game. In fact the friction between the game world and the real world is often a central source of the meaning in a gaming experience (as argued by Pettersson 2006). The experience of playing in a larp contains both the diegetic experience, as mediated through the conduit of the character, and the direct experience of playing. Larp simultaneously simulates and produces experiences.

Though the goal in Nordic larps is often a complete illusion, and losing oneself in a character is often seen as desirable, in practice this only happens momentarily. (After all, complete character immersion would be more akin to psychosis than play). Finnish larp designer Ranja Koverola (1998) has described larp like a pearl necklace. The pearls are perfect moments in the game, when the illusion of the world is complete. Instead of thinking about playing a character, you are the character. Some necklaces have more pearls, some have less. The continuous pearl necklace is unattainable, but striving towards it is part of the aesthetic of Nordic larps.

The very impossibility of this goal provides much of the power of role-playing games, as creating it causes friction between the everyday and the diegetic, the player and the character. This flickering between modes, which attempting to stay in character entails, provides an automatic distancing, a built-in alienation effect like Brecht's *Verfremdung*. The participant will be able to view the events both inside the game and outside it, slipping between the different social frames (see Goffman 1974, Fine 1983, also Pettersson 2006) of the game and of playing. This means that even though a character may be overjoyed, hungry, or bored, the player will not necessarily feel that way. This distance is what makes it possible to use the form to explore experiences beyond enjoyment and fun. Nordic larps need not be immediately satisfying. Indeed, instead of offering instant gratification they can be boring, infuriating or even painful for stretches of time. Yet the playing is meaningful for the participant, which can ultimately make even an uncomfortable experience a pleasure (Hopeametsä 2008, Montola 2010).

Theatre and Audience

In larps participants play character roles; they improvise freely within parameters established by the game design and the goals, background and personality of the character. Playing styles vary wildly from tradition to tradition and time to time: Sometimes the aim is to feel like the character – to become the character in an

¹Probably the most widely used typology of role-players divides players into three groups: dramatists, simulationists and gamists (Kim 2003). At times simulationism is replaced by immersionism (Bøckman 2003).

emotional sense. But the aim may just as well be to portray the character believably, with an outward emphasis like that of actors in the theatre. At times the players may strive to simulate a world and one person's place in it – at others to simply win a fair game challenge. Regardless of the style, larping is often performative.

Improvisation and performance are so central to larp expression that at first it may seem difficult to distinguish the form from theatre. A larp might look suspiciously like boring Commedia dell'Arte (usually without obvious masks), a particularly obscure Theatre Game, untherapeutic psychodrama, a sort of Invisible Theatre, or amateur improvisational theatre. Indeed, from a spectator's point of view the closest relative to larp might very well be a long, uninterrupted impro rehearsal. But this is the key distinction: Larp is not designed to have an audience. Though larps can be witnessed by non-participants and judged as performances, that is not their primary nature.²

Larp is created by the players for the players. This should be taken very literally: Larp is not only performed, but created and experienced first hand. The participation is not limited to the way any performance needs to adjust to its audience, nor to participants making a few controlled or curated contributions as is often the case in theatre. Instead in larp each participant, each player, has control over his own narrative and a tangible possibility to influence not just her little corner of the story, but often the general direction of the whole piece.³

To truly appreciate a larp without taking part in it is impossible. Aesthetics of action and participation are completely different from the aesthetics of spectating and distance. In the context of larp the whole concept of audience needs to be rethought. According to Daniel Mackay (2001) in larp the audience and performer positions are internalized in the same person: "The participant playing a character is the performer, while the player after the fact, or even during the event within a down-keyed frame, is his spectator."

Christopher Sandberg (2004) calls this subjective audience the *first person audience*: "The piece is not merely 'finished' in the spectators' mind, it is created by the participants that can only fully meet the piece they help create, by becoming an intricate part of it." Like games, rituals and even everyday life, larps need to be entered, surrendered to and inhabited in order to be fully experienced. Though the game organizers often provide the setting, the initial set-up and the themes, players bring the larp to life through their own choices and action. The participants are players in two senses of the word, as players of a game and as players on stage, yet they also form the audience. The internal world and emotional turmoil of the character, perhaps hidden from the other players behind a poker face or a bourgeois façade, can become much more interesting than anything that is visible on the surface. The first-person audience requirement makes criticism of role-playing games thorny, since the critic must participate in the imagining and co-creation of the experience and is in that sense himself the artist (Mackay 2001, Ahlroth 2008).

Larps are, by nature, communal experiences. Each participant's experience is shaped by the actions of their fellow players. Kings need subordinates, prisoners need jailors and rock stars need fans. At the core of these games is *inter-immersion* (Pohjola 2004). It is the positive feedback loop of inhabiting the game world and the character, pretending to believe in the diegetic world of the game and everyone else in it, temporarily accepting it as real – and thus supporting the experience of every other participant. The king becomes a king not simply by acting like one; he is only truly crowned by his subjects who elevate him by responding to his social status.

Viola Spolin (1999) has written that without an audience there is no theatre, and that the actor should no more forget the audience than forget her lines. The fourth wall between the performers and their audience can be shattered: the architectural division between the performers and spectators is broken down, the audience distanced with *Verfremdungseffekt*, subjected to desensitizing sounds, lightning and gestures in Theatre of Cruelty, invited to perform in Forum Theatre or provoked into being unwittingly participating *spect-actors* in an Invisible Theatre. Yet there is still, at the core of theatre, a performance by certain people for some others who do not really participate as equals.

In theatre, the performance happens for an external reason, it happens for *someone* (Kirby 1987), and there is a separation between the spectator and the performance (Schechner 1988). In larps, as in games in general, play is *paratelic* (Apter 1991): it is a goal in itself. Larps can certainly be viewed, but that is not really what they are for, nor can they fully be appreciated that way. This difference is so fundamental that from the point

²Harviainen (2008) even questions whether performance is that central to larp. Some participants do not so much perform for an external audience, but simply do. At least parts of larps are no more (or less) performative than everyday life. Larp has also been called "interactive drama" (Phillips 2006) and "indrama" (Pohjola 2005).

³Haggren, Larsson, Nordwall and Widing (2008) discuss larp as part of a wider participation culture.

of view of larp most performance art and theatre look like the exact same thing. Both typically stage something in front of a live audience that has only limited input on the resulting performance. But there are strands in the tradition of performance art which do not necessitate the presence of an audience at all:

Allan Kaprow and others, however, do performances without any intention of showing them to an audience. They may be done alone, privately. Other performers may see certain portions. Sometimes there may be accidental spectators. But the performances are intended to be done – to affect the performer – not to be observed. These performances, which may be called “Activities,” are not theatre because they do not have the intent to affect an audience. It is not the mere act of performance that makes something theatre; all theatre is performance, but all performance is not theatre. (Kirby 1987)

Performance art stems from the tradition of visual arts. Some individual game designers excepted, role-playing games, though they have numerous roots, cannot claim to be descended from that tradition. Even so, larp and performance art often take very similar forms.

Audience Participation and Performance Art

There is a tendency in contemporary art towards participation and collaboration. This tendency stretches back to at least Richard Wagner (1849), who wanted to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that would be a synthesis of artistic genres and a reflection of not just an artist, but the people (*das Volk*) – a goal he himself arguably failed to reach (Groys 2009). During the 1920s the Futurists and Dadaists staged provocative spectacles that offered roles for spectators and questioned artistic individuality, and even earlier Marcel Duchamp had reduced his art to an instruction of how to create the work – including his signature. Even so, it was not until the late 1950s and 1960s with Situationist International, Happenings and Andy Warhol’s Factory that audience participation, as it is understood in the arts today, really emerged. Yet according to Boris Groys (2009) “[b]e it Wagnerian opera, a futurist scandal, a Fluxus happening, or a Situationist event what unites all of these events, each has the same goal: to unite the artist and the audience at a particular location.”⁴

It is possible to understand larp in terms of constructed situation specific works. Situations and Happenings are perhaps the closest relative of larp in the arts.⁵ Allan Kaprow wrote in 1961 that Happenings are “essentially theatre” and at that time the blurring of the line between audience and performers was limited to the architectural, to inhabiting the same space. Five years later he called for the elimination of the audience: events where everyone would be following the same scenario or score (Kaprow 1966). During the previous decade Guy Debord (1958) had already outlined the goal of breaking down the line between audience and actors:

The situation is thus designed to be lived by its constructors. The role played by a passive or merely bit-part playing ‘public’ must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors, but rather, in a new sense of the term, ‘livers’, must steadily increase.

The spectators were to be moved to action and the idea was to create ephemeral and unique perishable instants, “inseparable from its immediate consumption” (Situationist International 1960). These Situations lacked the anthropomorphic character constructs or *roles* of role-playing games (see Montola 2008). Their purpose as critical wake-up calls and artistic creations also limited their scope in comparison to larp.

The most common motivations for including audience participation in art, according to Claire Bishop (2006), are *activation* and *empowerment* of spectators, ceding some of the *authorship* in order to be more democratic or egalitarian, and restoration of social bonds and forming of *community*. Though larps certainly can have such motivation behind them, the form was not built on such lofty ideals. Emerging as they did from tabletop role-playing games larps were always communal and participatory but historically they have more often been branded pastimes and hobbies than art.

The structure of many of the works in the tradition of participatory art is game-like. The artist creates an activity by providing a set of rules that produce an activity when they are adhered to. The experience and

⁴For a more in depth look, see Groys (2009), Bishop (2006) and Frieling (2009).

⁵Both Kaprow (1966) and Debord (1957) explicitly reference games and play in their key texts.

the art are in the enacting of the structure. Game events are both *consciously structured* by the game designer and *enacted experiences* that can only be accessed by participating in and contributing to them (Stenros & Waern 2010). Similarly, the psychogeographers' *drift* (strolling around the city in a particular way), or the more formal *Abstract Tours* (Ruggeri 2001), are formalized play, like games are formalized play (Montola et al. 2009). Such participatory works of art are especially close to larps as there are no clear winning conditions and the experiences are often *internally validated* (Dansey et al. 2009), meaning that it is the participant herself who decides when the goals of the activity have been met. The central difference to larp is that there is no story world, no narrative and the participants are present as themselves instead of playing fictitious roles.

Participation challenges the cult of the artist. If the line between on the one hand the creator, the artists, and the auteur and on the other hand the audience, the spectator, and the masses in the other is blurred, then the special cultural position of art is jeopardized. Anthony Howell (2000) has warned against the shattering of the *homeostasis* of an artwork. "To acknowledge the audience destroys the performer, since it dissolves the difference between them." This statement is based on fear, a fear that such an acknowledgement would demystify the performance. "One of the signs of weak theatre is that it is too willing to accommodate its audience – to acknowledge it – and thus for its performers to become 'just like their audience'."

But even works that require participation or co-creation are initiated by someone, who may also curate the piece or design the activity. In larps the game masters, the organizers, the designer and the initiators of the game are at times treated as auteurs and creators in a manner analogous to artists, directors and authors; and naturally there are movements to storm even that castle, as the collective larp design method used for example in *Enhetsfront* showcases. Different larps have different levels of co-creation and participation and these can be compared to the different levels of organizing structure in participatory pieces such as John Cage's *4'33"*, the nude crowd photographs of Spencer Tunick, *The AIDS Memorial Quilt* and zombie walks. In *Open Work* (1962), Umberto Eco wrote:

the author offers the interpreter, the performer, the addressee, a work to be completed. He does not know the exact fashion in which his work will be concluded, but he is aware that once completed the work in question will still be his own. It will not be a different work, and, at the end of the interpretive dialogue, a form which is his form will have been organized, even though it may have been assembled by an outside party in a particular way that he could not have foreseen.

Eco was writing on modern music, but his description also happens to capture the way game designers see their work today. They create the rules, goals, setting and story-worlds, and though each play session is different, it is still the same game – created by the designer:

As a game designer, you are tackling a second-order design problem. The goal of successful game design is meaningful play, but play is something that emerges from the functioning of the rules. As a game designer, you can never directly design play. You can only design the rules that give rise to it. Game designers create experience, but only indirectly. (Salen & Zimmerman 2004)

Game design is always second-order design, as any truly participatory art or activity design must be. The designer does not create an activity, but the rules and structures that foster it. The participants always bring in their contributions. Indeed, the challenge of co-creation is the very starting point for game design. Unfortunately there has so far been very little dialogue between games and art in this area.

Games, Art and Tradition

Historically games have not been considered worthy of the status of art, yet canonized art has mined games for inspiration for centuries. Though games are generally not seen as a form of art, it seems that it is possible for art to adapt the form of a game (Montola et al 2009). The move from being a subject of arts to being art perhaps started when Duchamp abandoned art to pursue playing chess.

As art evolved towards being more conceptual, games became a handy reference and a building block. Many of the well-known works created in connection to Fluxus are both playful and interactive. *Fluxboxes*

contained instructions for the spectator-player to follow and directly referenced games – yet they were often left purposefully open-ended allowing for different sorts of enactments (Frieling 2009).

There is a tradition of games presented as art in the context of museums and galleries. But these *art gallery games*, a genre of their own, are a narrow tradition. They tend to be objects, artefacts to look at and to ponder, rather than platforms for actual play. When these games are described, the description will list what the piece looks like and what the rules are – not how it is played or what kind of activity it creates. Art gallery games are rarely designed to be good *as games*, as the very point of these pieces is often in their lousy functionality. They are subversive in the way they alter the implicit rules of all games. This is interesting, but often renders the games themselves unplayable.

Yoko Ono's *Play it by Trust*, aka *White Chess Set* (1966), is a prime example of an art gallery game. The work is a completely white chess set with the instruction: "Play it for as long as you can remember who is your opponent and who is your own self." Though the game can be played, at least for some time, it is not necessary for the viewer to play it in order to understand what the artist might be trying to say with it.⁶ The fact that many games staged in an art gallery have been unplayable or relatively amateurish from a game design point-of-view has probably contributed towards giving art a bad name in the context of games.

There are also games presented as art that are about playing, experiencing, and the activity they produce instead of simply being objects one contemplates. These kinds of works seem to be rarer, and they often pervade the city and only use the gallery as a point of entry. The British art collective Blast Theory has staged numerous game-like interactive installations in and around galleries around the world (see Adams 2009). The closest one to larp is probably *Kidnap*, a transmedia spectacle where two people won the prize of being kidnapped and held hostage for 48 hours by the artists. Perhaps participant activities, as they are designed indirectly through the medium of the game, are less likely to be recognized as being created by an artist.

Recently, Nordic larps have also been invited to galleries. For example *inside:outside* was commissioned by Kunstneres Hus in Oslo, and *LevelFive* (2010) was played at both Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and at the Zero1 Biennial in San Jose. Larps are sporadically invited to join art festivals, but it is rare that larps not created with an institutionalized art world in mind would make their way to galleries and museums. Whether these tailored larps will develop into a subgenre of art gallery larps remains to be seen.

Just like most situation specific participatory events, larps resist easy commercialization. Nothing lasting is created; there is only the ephemeral event and the experience. Residual works based on larps are seldom produced. But more importantly, larps require a strong commitment from the participants in order to be appreciated. Whereas contemporary art has become "yet another form of mass culture" (Manovich 2009), larp has thus far resisted being streamlined and packaged in this manner.

Nordic Larp as Art

Game designers and academics specializing in larps agree that live action role-playing can be art, but it is not always clear what they mean by that. Larp has been called among other things a medium, an art form, a social art form, a new performance art that creates a social body, and a subjective form of art.⁷ The uniqueness of the role-playing expression is concisely captured by Juhana Pettersson, who writes about larp as experiential art:

It is an experience consisting of active participation and creation, of being a subjective spectator, of engaging with both the in-game and the off-game levels of the game. It is an experience of negotiating a large amount of communication and complex, artificial social systems, out of which the game itself emerges. (Pettersson 2006)⁸

⁶In some critical games the act of not playing is the only way to win. These games tend to criticise either violence and war or representations of violence and war in games. For example in *September 12th* (2003) every time the player bombs a terrorist, it creates new terrorists. *lose/lose* (2009) goes even further. It is a digital game that deletes a file from the user's computer every time she destroys another spaceship.

⁷For different takes, see Harviainen (2010), Fatland & Wingård (1999), Vanek (2009), Bowman (2010), Flood (2006), Mackay (2001) and Pohjola (2003). Note that On the other side of the fence there is silence: no researcher of art has written on the subject.

⁸Pettersson's essay is titled *The Art of Experience*. Art in this context refers to art as in artistic, not craft (see also Pettersson 2005).

While books tell and theatre shows – the experience is conveyed through sympathy and empathy – larps make you enact and experience first hand. This takes place in a setting and a structure which is consciously designed, played with dual awareness of the game and ordinary life, and co-creative power in inter-immersion with fellow players who share and strengthen the experience. Role-playing is designed social experience as an art form.

The *cluster theory of art*⁹ provides a hazy set of criteria that any potential work of art is compared to and must meet in some way (Tavinor 2009). Obviously this is a fuzzy, debatable way of drawing the line between art and not-art, but the criteria art scholars have compiled are very revealing of the way “art” is constructed in our society. Berys Gaut (2000) lists ten properties that usually count towards something being considered a work of art – and the absence of which is seen as an indication of it not being art:¹⁰

(1) possessing positive aesthetic properties, such as being beautiful, graceful, or elegant (properties which ground a capacity to give sensuous pleasure); (2) being expressive of emotion; (3) being intellectually challenging (i.e., questioning received views and modes of thought); (4) being formally complex and coherent; (5) having a capacity to convey complex meanings; (6) exhibiting an individual point of view; (7) being an exercise of creative imagination (being original); (8) being artefact or performance which is the product of a high degree of skill; (9) belonging to an established artistic form (music, painting, film, etc.); and (10) being the product of an intention to make a work of art. (Gaut 2000)

With this kind of a list and the works presented in this book, it is relatively easy to argue that at least certain larps are art. Yet ultimately, even if a few singular larps or a tradition of larps fill enough of the above criteria – or are similar enough to canonized pieces of participatory art – that still does not make larp part of the art world, art in the *institutional* sense of the term.

It is one thing for the game designers and larp researchers to say that larp is art – meaning probably that it carries cultural significance, has social value, can generate strong emotions, and is a source of aesthetic experiences – and quite another for larp to become part of the established world of fine art. The traditions and canons of art change and develop over time as a result of the field of power relations where the meaning of art is constantly negotiated. The central question is the *power and legitimacy* to define what art is. In order for larp to become a part of the tradition of art, someone in the art field needs to attain the power and the will to make larp art.

Tradition is an important consideration in defining art. In order to present a worthwhile piece, the artist is expected to know the relevant tradition and to position her work in relation to it – or at least seem to do so. In many role-playing cultures formal renewal is not necessarily considered a virtue. It is possible in many places to offer a larp constructed out of very similar building-blocks year after year – not unlike the market for popular genre movies.

Howard S. Becker (1982) has discussed art as a social, collective activity created not just by singular creators, but by larger *art worlds*. He has identified four different ways to stand in relation to these art worlds: integrated professionals, mavericks, folk artists and naïve artists. The first two refer to people who work or have worked directly in art worlds. The latter two are of interest in relation to larp. First of all, larp can certainly be characterized as *folk art*, as like quilting it is

done totally outside professional art worlds, work done by ordinary people in the course of their ordinary lives, work seldom thought of by those who make or use it as art at all, even though, as often happens, others from outside the community it is produced in find artistic value in it.

Many larp traditions deny that role-playing could ever be art and instead call it entertainment. However, the Nordic larp tradition has been self-identifying as art for some time. Becker’s category of naïve artists, or perhaps *naïve art*, is a slightly better fit:

Its makers work in isolation, free from the constraints of cooperation which inhibit art world participants, free to ignore the conventional categories of art works. To make things which do not fit

⁹There are too many definitions of art to get into in the context of this essay. Cluster theory is chosen based on its practicality, approachability and the fact that it incorporates most angles on art in its criteria.

¹⁰Gaut does not consider his list a definition, but many others, such as Tavinor (2009) and Dutton (2006) do. For a comparable list, see Dutton (2006).

any standard genre and cannot be described as examples of any class. Their works just are, and can be described only by enumerating their features. Once described, they cannot then be assigned to a class: each is its own class, because it was made without reference to anything else, and nothing else has been made in reference to it. (Becker 1982)

Though this description may work from the point of view of professional art worlds, it seems ill-fitting when viewed from the angle of Nordic larp. Nordic larp as a whole may seem like a text book example of naïve art, but individual larpwrights are certainly aware of each other's works. Also, the ideology of building on previous work, of some sort of progress, has crept into the Nordic larps and established a tradition. Perhaps the best way, in Becker's terms, is to characterize Nordic larp as an art world of its own.

Play and Games

In this book it has also been taken for granted that Nordic larps are games. Yet this stance can be problematized quite easily. It is obvious that Nordic larps are *play*. But are they really *games*?

One oft-cited definition of a game is provided by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004), defining game as “a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome.” Role-playing games in general seem to fit this quite well: there are players who often have goals that are non-trivial or in conflict with each other, there are rule structures even if they are at times implicit¹¹, there is an outcome, even if it can be difficult to quantify that outcome. Yet the fit is not perfect. The authors of this definition have called role-playing games a “limit case” of games because they lack a quantifiable outcome (Salen & Zimmerman 2003).¹²

In essence, what Salen & Zimmerman are saying is that role-playing games do not necessarily have a clear winner. Each character may have her personal goal and purpose, and they need not be in conflict with the goals of others. Every character might succeed in reaching her goal – or it could be that no-one succeeds. Even more problematic is that the players' goals may be in conflict with those of the characters'; a player may push her character to fail on purpose.¹³ Creating and embodying a tragedy, like in *Hamlet*, is as valid a goal as winning in the game. This is almost unheard of in games; games are almost always played to win, not to lose. Finally, the goal of the player can be just to simulate everyday life in a fictional setting, to inhabit and be someone else regardless of grand schemes, facetious goals and irrelevant plots.

If games are conceived of as systems, as artefacts, as objects, then finding the game in role-playing games can be difficult. The rules can change during play, the game master has considerable leeway, specific goals may be missing, the outcome of a session can be quite muddled, it can be impossible to say who won or lost. Indeed, it is also worth noting that Salen & Zimmerman were mostly discussing traditional tabletop role-playing games, not larp. The issues that are slightly problematic in tabletop role-playing game are magnified in larps; in tabletop games all the players and the game master usually inhabit the same room, but in larps the participants can be dispersed around a house or a city – and no-one has an overview of the game until it ends, if ever.

Even so, larps have traditionally been considered games – at least by larpers. Most consider them to be an offshoot of role-playing games – the kind of role-playing games that emerged in the early 1970s and which generally are said to be invented by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson. This is curious as history is rife with cultural practices that feature role taking: rituals staged by ancient pharaohs, the thematic naval and gladiatorial spectacles of the Roman Empire, Commedia dell'Arte, mask play and religious liturgy around the world, etc. Even during the 20th century there are numerous non-ludic uses of role-playing in at least the fields of psychology, social psychology, education, training and theatre.¹⁴ The list is long and varied, but it does show that the tendency to pretend to be someone else in the land of make-believe is something that not only children

¹¹Or they can be “invisible” (Montola 2008).

¹²According to Juul's (2005) influential definition, classic games have six features: rules, quantifiable outcome, valorization of that outcome, player attachment to the outcome, player effort and negotiable consequences for ordinary life. He considers tabletop role-playing games a “borderline case” because the human game masters compromise fixed rules.

¹³See Montola 2008 on exogenous, endogenous and diegetic goals.

¹⁴For an overview of larp-like practices throughout the ages, see Morton (2007). However, the cultural contexts before industrialization were so different that not all activities having the formal traits of larp should be labeled as such (Montola et al., 2009). For an overview of role-play in the context of social psychology, see Yardley-Matwiejczuk (1997) and Henriksen (2007).

have done throughout history, but something adults have engaged in as well (Walton 1990). Role-playing is a fundamentally human activity.

What Gygas and Arneson did in 1974 with *Dungeons & Dragons* was to productize one form of role-playing, just as Jacob Moreno had productized another form into psychodrama almost a half a century earlier (Montola 2009). The form of role-playing that emerged in the 1970s was heavily tied into a tradition of gaming. *Dungeons & Dragons* was based on *Chainmail*, a miniature war game, which was based on the first modern war game outlined by H. G. Wells in *Little Wars* (1913). Wells was influenced by the German *Kriegsspiel* tradition of miniature war games that were used to teach military strategy. Following this thread leads to *chess*, the forefather of European war games – and thus one of the forefathers of role-playing games (Parlett 1999, Lancaster 1999).

If larp is an offshoot of role-playing games, then at least historically they are games, emerging from the tradition of games.¹⁵ However, in many larp cultures theatre, the Scout Movement and historical re-enactment have been at least as influential as games. Most larpers do see larps as part of a larger field of role-playing games and thus as part of games. Yet this affinity is at times and in some larp cultures more a function of history than a reflection of current practices (Mäyrä 2001). It seems that Nordic larps, though certainly related to games, are drifting ever further away from the core of game play as they absorb in influences from elsewhere. But it remains to be seen whether this means that they are becoming less like games, or if the whole realm of games is expanding.

The Borderlands

Though the core of larping can be clearly separated from ideal forms of theatre, performance art and games, it does not mean that there is no common ground or overlap between these fields. As influences travel, boundaries have become blurred.

There have been attempts to bring larp closer to theatre and to make it more spectator-friendly: for example *System Danmark*, *Amerika* (Fatland 2009) and *Kalevala: Vainovalkeat* (Kalevala: Warning Beacons, 1999; see Leppälähti 2009) were all staged in a way that made them visible to the public and some of them even offered tours of the gaming area for outsider spectators. Viewing is not the same as participating, but that does not mean that the spectators could not get something meaningful and worthwhile out of these games:

Amerika was walled off, but from the terrace on the north end of Youngstorget any pedestrian could have an excellent view of the larp. Some stood there for almost the whole duration of *Amerika*, following the movements of a hundred characters – reality theatre before the break-through of reality TV. [...] late at night, a stranger walked up to the organisers by the gates of the larp, and exclaims: “I’m so exhausted... I’ve stood up there and watched for fifteen hours... now I have to get some sleep. But I’ll be back first thing in the morning!” (Fatland 2009)

Though larps are sporadically staged and played in view of the public, this has not become common. Being looked at changed the larps. It emphasises the performative side of the playing and violates the privacy of these events. It is one thing to play a role in the safety of a group where everyone participates and quite another to subject oneself to the judgement of an audience.

The experience of watching and playing remain very different. Indeed, so far there has not been a successful way to fully bridge this gap. It is telling that neither *En stilla middag med familjen* nor *Walkabout* (2009), both marketed as hybrids between theatre and larp, tried to bring in an audience that was not playing.

Similarly, *Luminescence* could well be discussed as performance art. It was conceived of and designed firmly within the realm and tradition of visual and performance art, and it certainly has a suitable appearance. But even if the game world was represented in a very symbolic manner, there was little or no narrative drive and numerous methods of alienation were used to distance the players, the participants still enacted character roles in a fictive setting for themselves, not for an audience. Also, *Luminescence* was played in the context of the

¹⁵It is also interesting that most names that are today given to larp omit the word “game”. Live action role-play, live role-play, theatre style are all labels that have severed the etymological connection to games. Yet the instances of play are still referred to as “games”.

Solmukohta 2004 larp convention, not an established context of performance art. Of course, it has been argued that role-playing games are a new performing art (Mackay 2001) and even that larpers are Kaprow's scions and that larps are "Happenings of the Future" (Harviainen 2008).

Consider *The Baudouin/Boudewijn Experiment: A Deliberate Non-Fatalistic Large Scale Group Experiment in Deviation*, inspired by the late monarch of Belgium, who absconded for one day to avoid having to sign a bill that allowed abortion while letting the bill pass into law. In this art experiment

a space is provided to accommodate 200 people, willing to step out of their 'usual life' for 24 hours [...] The space will be closed from the outside world and mobile phones, radios and TVs will not be allowed. This is to emphasise the group aspect of the experiment and to create a structure in which the 'step-out' can be done commonly. [...] basically the experiment will be to see what happens under these conditions; people are freed from their usual constraints, and yet confined in space and time. (Höller 2000)

The event was not recorded in any way. This set-up is quite similar to larps, especially to *Hamlet*, with the exception that in larps there is also a story-world and characters for the participants to play. Yet one might argue that the shared inspiration for the event created, if not a coherent world, a frame for the social context. And when a situation is so extraordinary, the social roles that people play can be hard to distinguish from characters. Martin Ericsson (2009), one of the designers of *Hamlet*, calls larps structured as separate spaces *ecstatic furnaces*:

These games used an isolated place and time, where extreme dramatic situations and hardcore attitudes were combined in order to make consensus reality vanish completely from the mind of the participants. To achieve this, I used the whole liminal-ritual-cultic bag of tricks including isolation, archetypal characters, elaborate costuming, life-and-death narratives, secrecy, intoxication, and militaristic discipline juxtaposed with wild abandon.

Another interesting case is Brody Condon's *Twentyfivefold Manifestation*. This work has three aspects: At the core there is the experience of playing the game staged in a public park in the Netherlands in the summer of 2008 as part of the Sonsbeek sculpture exhibition. In the game, designed by Bjarke Pedersen and drawing directly from the Nordic tradition, the players form tribes that worship in various ways the sculptures created by the other artists featured at the exhibition. The second level is created for the spectators at the park; though they do not understand the game and have no access to that experience, the game is designed in such a way that it is interesting to look at – and the players have a way of relating to the spectators within their diegetic frame. Condon (2010) used the gameplay as a "generating engine" that produced a striking visual surface for the spectators. Finally, the project was documented as a film that shows the play as well as some of the interactions between the spectators and the players. Though the play experience of larp is not accessible to a spectator, some residue of the play, if the design takes that into consideration, can be presented.

Historically, the connection between larps and games is fairly strong and it is relatively easy to find larps with strong ludic elements. Yet whereas certain staginess and a tendency towards performance are inherent in most larps, the spectrum from clearly game-like larps to simulations with no victory conditions to more experimental, symbolic or hermeneutic "being-theres" marks a much wider territory. In Nordic larp, where immersion is a common ideal, the character failing to reach his goals is not undesirable but rather a platform for successful tragedy. Even talking about "winning" is frowned upon in many larp cultures, resulting in "games" that are not very ludic.

That said there are Nordic larps that embrace their game-ness. Heavily influenced by game theory, *inside:outside* is larp that could easily be not only viewed, but played with emphasis on the gamist elements. It also underlines how important the players' contribution is; different instances of the game can have not only completely different endings, but the overall feeling and style of playing may vary greatly.¹⁶ Even so, *simulation* may be a more fitting term. Indeed, it has been argued that all role-playing is simulation and that the term *operating realities* might be a better fit for the more ludic simulations (Crookall, Oxford & Saunders 1987).

¹⁶For example, *Prayers on the Porcelain Altar* (2007) by J. Tuomas Harviainen is designed in a way that it can be played as a murder mystery puzzle or an immersionist catfight, or as anything in between.

Erving Goffman (1961) has noted that games “are world-building activities”. Games contain roles, meanings, events and relations that make sense only in their own terms. Role-playing games and larps are a particularly illustrative example of this world-building. The characters that players play inhabit worlds custom-built for this very activity. The actions players take in these worlds need not be sensible or even comprehensible in any other context. Moreover, these games are not just worlds, they are populated by human-like characters who have personal histories, wants and needs, goals and hopes, and who are connected to each other. Larps are *constructed communities*, and they always create some kind of *social* reality.

It would not be too much of a stretch to approach larps as *social art*. The alternative social worlds that they build are not too far from the explicit agenda proposed by Nicolas Bourriaud (1998) in his discussion of relational aesthetics:

[T]he artist must assume the symbolic models he shows. All representation (though contemporary art models more than it represents, and fits into the social fabric more than it draws inspiration therefrom) refers to values that can be transposed into society. [...] Art is a state of encounter.

Larp, co-created by the game masters and the players, simulate, model and inhabit alternative worlds. Even at their least reflective there is a dialogue with society through the players – and sometimes even through direct confrontation (as discussed in the opening essay of this book).

Grant Tavinor (2009) has discussed contemporary videogames as art and done so in the context of philosophy of art. He has noted that the fictional worlds videogames offer for the player to explore and interact with give us something new: “This seems to be something new in art: the representation of the player, their agency, and their aesthetic experiences, *within* a fictional world – videogames seem to provide an active exploratory aesthetics.” Larps offer comparable fictional *physical* worlds, where these new aesthetics of action are employed. If larps are positioned as art, they bring something new to the table and do expand the form art takes.

Similarly, if they are to be considered games, then the idea of a “game” needs to expand to accommodate them. Indeed, larps do seem to be part of a larger trend connected to the expansion of the fields of games and play. The core of games, the so-called classic *games* (Juul 2005), have been surrounded by an increasing number of cultural artefacts, practises and activities that are called “games” but which do not fit the tight systemic definitions. Just in the realm of digital games there are numerous party games with mimetic interfaces where performance almost completely overshadows scoring points (e.g. *SingStar*, *Rock Band*), massively multiplayer online worlds that are more like social places than games (e.g. *Second Life*, *World of Warcraft*) and toy-like never ending digital life simulators lacking clear victory conditions or even specific goals (e.g. *The Sims*, *FarmVille*).

Finally, there is the question of why. By looking at larps *as* theatre, *as* art and *as* a game, pondering the similarities and differences, we can learn new things about larp as well as about these three other fields. But why would one claim that larp *is* theatre, art or a game? Perhaps these labels can be used to bring in new players; maybe they lend status, legitimacy or societal acceptance to the activity. And they may, perhaps, bring respect and economic compensation for the people working in the field.

Coda

Larps are like improvisational theatre without an audience that is (not) performed for its own sake, rather than performed for an audience. Larps are Situations and Happenings that have been largely disconnected from the canons and traditions of art, set in internally relatively consistent story worlds that feature characters enacted by the participants. Larps are games set in simulated social worlds that do not necessarily have a winner – and even if they do, the players may still prefer to lose.

It is possible to situate larp in the fields of theatre, performance art and games, and to create larps that also fit under those labels, but larp in general cannot be reduced to any of those three categories. Illuminating though these approaches can be they all reduce larps to a framework that is ultimately ill-fitting.

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Commentary by Andrey Andryushkov

Jaakko Stenros' article is, surely, the best currently existing review of possible approaches to defining larps as a cultural form equal to all others. All further research on this issue should be grounded on the provisions worded in this article. At the same time, Stenros provides a minimal share of his own unique views and understanding of larp's phenomenon. During the whole article, it looks as if the author is sizing up modern forms of cultural activities to larps, discovering the areas that fit into an existing form and highlighting the areas that can be clearly recognized in the other forms. It is no wonder that when the author applies such a method, apparently in order to perform a kind of social and cultural legitimation of larps, it leads, in the long run, to defining larps through a listing of the characteristics that make larps kin to the three modern forms of art: improvisational theatre, performance, and game. This conclusion, being essentially eclectic, is also comprehended in full by the author himself, who states that these forms "all reduce larps to a framework that is ultimately ill-fitting." Therefore, in this way, we can outline only certain external manifestations, but not the essence of larps.

In order for the question of "What a larp actually is?" not to become a sophistic exercise in definition making, it should be stated at the level preceding the already distinguished and established kinds and forms of art. That is, the issue of presentation itself should include the problematization of this distinguishing; otherwise, the reduction of larps and distribution of their parts among the already recognized areas will be inevitable. Actually, this process is already going on, when the existing cultural institutions – theatres, entertainment, television, modern art, and museums – as if acquire their second breath, apply the accumulated potential of larps. This way of larp's socialization has numerous advantages of a social nature for larpers themselves; together with acknowledgement, they receive funding and a certain status/profession in the society). However, as a result, a larp itself turns into a technique of interactive performance that can be applied in various spheres from psychotherapy to political consulting. Having turned into a technique, larping cannot become an independent form of cultural activity any more.

Taking into account all the academicism of Stenros' article, I should note that it shows us the danger of this method. The author tries rather attentively to distinguish that very vigour of a larp: still having no name, not yet identified by the existing institutions, but able to change the modern cultural landscape. Most clearly, one can hear this unknown something existing within a larp, when the author actually speaks about larp as playing (*ludum*). Discretization, non-pragmatism, contextuality, and the experimental nature of a larp as such find their best implementation exactly in a larp. For sure, every performance – itself a form of playing – of Mozart's 40th symphony in the last two hundred years was every time unique and, in its own way, special. Yet, music sheets, standardization of musical instruments and, finally, sound recording devices are continuously narrowing the area where we see the playing of music as such, although, it will never narrow down to an empty set. Still, in larps, we deal with the apex of art as a moment: something that will never be repeated, but leaves an indelible imprint in our souls.

However, Stenros refuses to narrow down larps to just a game, as this name too is nowadays taken to a great degree by the industry of gamification, which penetrates both family private life and the worlds of whole communities. Certainly, here we need a clear distinction between a game that is like a "game" and a game in the sense of "play." Getting into the space of an algorithmically organized game is fraught with losing the freedom of finding a new experience and new ideas – the freedom that always accompanies play. A game played between a Muse and a poet or a game of syllogisms creates new forms of self-cognition and life. In this regard, larps should, certainly, be associated with that strange creative process, which had never been institutionalized before, and which is actually a game: a play. While finding its fixation in the existing forms, play created improvisational theatre, performance, futuristic experiments with poetry, and many other things that surround us nowadays. Yet, play acquired special implementation language – life activities of a community of people – in larps. This language was found not in colours or music, not in onstage performance – or, similarly, not in the destruction of onstage performances by the methods of modern theatre – but in life activities per se: in freely deemed feelings and actions of people who gathered also freely. Moving along this way, we could distinguish various strategies of play, methods of in-game space arrangement, and the meanings arising for certain people during a larp. We could do all this by decomposing and studying play as a unique creative process.

Acknowledgement of this fact, being a key one, even if phenomenologically evident, states the first problematizing question about the mission of art. We can't help admitting that nowadays larps and the larping

community implement the old Kantian interpretation of art as a free and altruistic activity. We should say that the absence of pragmatism (gain) featured by larps comprises an incredible potential for social protest; however, this, it seems, we tend to apply to Pohjola's early texts.

Going back to Stenros' wonderful and meticulous article, I would note that the work performed by the author relieves us from going further along the way of searching for appropriate comparisons among modern art forms. Our future way leads to the radical fixation of larp as a comprehensive and authentic form, having its own name and its own purpose in the history of art.

Commentary by Anna Volodina

In his article, Jaakko Stenros raises the question about the nature of larps. What are they? Are they theatre, modern art, or a game? He comes to the conclusion that larps are close to each of these categories, but cannot be narrowed down to any of them alone. I like this. Establishment of essentially new areas does not happen frequently enough in our world for us to waste an opportunity to acknowledge our favourite activity as one of them.

First, I would like to give a short commentary on Jaakko's line of reasoning. The list of "what larps look like, but don't completely represent" is clearly not full yet and can be supplemented. For instance, a larp has many characteristics of an educational project. During a larp, a participant learns something new about himself and the world and acquires new experience and skills which can be applied later on in the course of his life. Probably, there are some other areas to which larps can be related.

Okay, larps are an independent category of cultural phenomena. Why should I, a common larp designer, care if my larps resemble theatre or not?

There are three situations when we may be interested to know the answer to this question. First, it is the situation of reflection. Who are we, what are we, and where are we going? Here we enter the field of philosophy, so let's leave this issue to theorists. Secondly, and on the contrary, there are some absolutely practical situations: it is useful to study theatre, modern art, and traditional games in order to find something that can be applied in larping. We implement the mechanics of usual games widely; still, we could obtain much from theatre stage design and concepts of performances and installations. The third situation seems much more complex and interesting to me. Discussion of what our larps actually are becomes unavoidable when we "come out" and represent our larps to external people who are not larppers.

One does not simply come to a person who has never heard anything about larps before, and say, "Here is a completely new area. You have never met with it, but it is certainly noteworthy for you." Well, actually, one can do this, but hardly anyone will be interested in such an offer. So, in order to explain this absolutely new notion, we may use the established categories – games, theatre, art, literature – specifying which particular features, among those listed above, are characteristics of larps and which of them are not.

Besides, the choice of these or those combinations for the description depends on the public we would like to attract and the expectations we are trying to form. For instance, in case of positioning larps like "something that is close to modern art," "an experimental form of theatre," or "an essentially new type of entertainment," we will get as our participants various people with different expectations. Certainly, if we take the popularization of larps in the society seriously, the final goal should comprise establishment of larps as an independent cultural phenomenon. However, to achieve this goal we should work long and hard.

We may ask ourselves if we really need all these difficulties. Larps live and improve within their present niche. Why should we "come out" to non-larppers?

First, larps are an interesting phenomenon deserving to leave the narrow niche of a strange hobby. Secondly, as most authors, we would like to have a possibility to show our work to more people and to be acknowledged professionals in our sphere. Certainly, I do not mean that any larp organizer is eager to make a larp for any Tom, Dick or Harry. Yet, there is a tendency toward rapprochement of an organizer's work in larps and his professional occupation area.

I daresay that those who deal with educational larps, and those who provide services in organizing larps as entertainment activities have advanced most along this way. As with many other larp organizers, I am more interested in presenting larps from the position of art. The work in this area started later than in education, but it is already happening. . So, analysing our experience together with the experience of the educational games on which our colleagues work, we can't help noticing that rapprochement with any established cultural categories, be it education, theatre, or traditional games, inevitably modifies larps, not only enriching them with something new, but also impoverishing them.

Jaakko Stenros is right: it is impossible to use the framework of the traditional categories for a full-fledged definition of larps. Still, in order to challenge theatre, games, and modern art in mass consciousness, we will have to rely on them first.

The Psychology of Immersion: Individual Differences and Psychosocial Phenomena Relating to Immersion

By Lauri Lukka, Finland

In role-playing games, a player may achieve a subjective, immersive state where they feel in a more or less pronounced way that they are the character in the game world. Certain personality traits may mediate how intensively and how often one experiences such a state. These traits, especially openness to experience and empathy, are also prerequisites for immersion and may be more emphasized in live action role-players. Immersive state can be activated by self suggestion, acting, or situational factors, and it leads to dissociation between the character and the player. This dissociation upholds itself by cognitive biases but becoming conscious of it weakens it. Further, immersion protects the player psychologically and has a social, communicative functions.

Immersion, n.

1. The action of immersing someone or something in a liquid
2. Deep mental involvement – Oxford dictionary of English (2003)

The researchers of live action role-playing have put a lot of effort into describing the differences between games and playing styles. In the beginning of the century, there was a normative tone to this discussion, perhaps a most prominent example being the polemic Turku manifesto (Pohjola 2003) arguing for the “right” immersionist role-playing. A particular boundary has been drawn between immersionism and dramatism (Broden 2006; Kim 2004), and it has been suggested they lead to different game styles (Bøckman 2003). Archetypal immersionist player strives to immerse themselves completely into the inner world of the character and the game world, the diegesis, whereas a dramatist aims to tell a shared, interesting story, and immersion is secondary to this goal.

Yet, what is this immersion precisely? It is one of the constituents of player experience and appeal in (video) games (Christou 2014) and an important part of role-playing vocabulary. However, its definition remains unclear (Jennett 2008), the term is used inconsistently (Hook 2012), and it has aroused criticism due to its ambiguous nature (Holter 2007). This article explores the psychology of immersion in live action role-playing games: what elements does it include, which personal factors affect it, and what social phenomena are related to it. First, the most important concepts are defined.

In this article, immersion has two meanings. Immersion is both (1) the inner, psychological state: a result of a process where the player empathises with the inner experience of the character and the diegetic framework; and (2) the process by which this is achieved. The process of immersion is partly automatic and guided by individual predispositions to it. In immersed state the player feels in a pronounced way that he is the character in the game world (Lappi 2007). The result of immersion is a subjective experience where the sense of self and interpretative framework changes (Harding 2007).

The definition made here stresses the changes in the individual experience. Ermi and Mäyrä (2005) propose there are three different forms of immersion in video games: sensory, challenge-based and imaginative. Sensory

immersion relates to the audiovisual execution of the game; challenge-based immersion describes the balance between player skills and the difficulty of the game; and imaginative immersion depicts how player identifies with the character and the game world. The definition used in this article refers mainly to imaginative immersion, and views sensory and challenge-based immersion as factors arousing and supporting and the former.

Even if closely knit, immersion should be clearly separated from empathising with the character and the game world, and acting. Empathising refers to the mental activity in which we take the perspective of another person. This does not mean, however, that every time we take another person's perspective we would be immersed into their experience; rather, a sense of separateness remains. Acting, in this article, describes only the external behavior, portraying a person – whereas immersion is a state pursued via multitude of methods such as acting and taking another person's viewpoint. This simplification is made in order to clarify the difference between behavior and mental processes.

Immersion and Behavior

It would be tempting to evaluate immersion by the behavioral changes: the more the demeanor of the player, not only his attire, has changed in comparison to that of their typical behavior, the more immersed a player would be. Yet, there are many errors in this line of thought. First, the behavioral changes are not necessarily the result of immersion but many other factors such as anxiety or a restless night. Second, the behavioral changes are rather the manifestation of immersion, not indication of it. Still, acting may increase the likelihood of immersion because there is a reciprocal relationship between our behavior and our mind: our behavior affects our sense of self and our character, and vice versa (Säilä 2005).

Third, behavioral changes are related to the skill of the player to modify their behavior – their skill as an actor. The skill of acting, however, may correlate only moderately with the experienced immersion, even if good acting skills may strengthen it. It is possible to act with a more or less external orientation, only portraying the character without the aim to be them. Then, even if the acting is exquisite, the character is subjectively experienced as distant. This goes the other way around too. The player can experience high amounts of immersion without acting, which is sometimes described as “playing inside one's head”.

Due to the internal nature of immersion, the player experiencing it and others observing him are susceptible to several social biases, such as the actor-observer bias (see Pronin 2009). When making assessments about ourselves, there is a tendency to overestimate the introspective information we receive from ourselves, and dismiss our behavior as secondary to that. The observers, on the other hand, underestimate the significance of inner processes, and stress the significance of behavior. For instance, if we steal something we could justify it to ourselves by “knowing” that we are generally fair while others are more likely to deem us criminal by nature. We also know that people tend to overestimate the effect of situational factors over personality traits when assessing themselves. When they assess others, the contrary happens: then the behavior is rather attributed to personality than the situation. For example, if you forget your keys you may explain it to yourself as a regrettable result of being very busy that day, others may consider us careless by character.

These biases explain why acting, the external behavior, is the most important way of communicating to others about the personality of the character. The player's skill as an actor affects how other players view the personality of the character, because we tend to make constant, automatic attributions and inferences about the personality and the inner state of others. Further, whether immersed or not, acting serves as a signal about the inner state of the player and guides other players to react to themselves as a character, which reinforces immersion. Acting also strengthens other players' immersion by keeping up the diegesis. In conclusion: while the experience of immersion is fundamentally internal, in the game it is an inseparable part of social interaction.

Immersion, Personality and Individual Differences

The personality – the individual cognitive, affective and motivational processes – guides how one perceives the world and acts in it. Individual patterns in these processes are called traits. There are several models describing numerous traits, the most researched being the five factor model, Big Five (Table 1). Traits can predict the behavior and thinking of a person, to a certain extent. For example, extrovert people are more active and more

Trait	Description of a person with high trait
Openness to experience	artistic interest, creativity, unusual ideas, curiosity, need for variety
Conscientiousness	self-discipline, organization, dependability, planning of actions
Extraversion	energy, assertiveness, sociability, talkativeness
Agreeableness	compassion, cooperation, helpfulness, friendliness
Neuroticism	tendency to anxiety and depression, emotional instability, reactivity

Table 1: The five factor model of personality traits

Role	Behavior
Participant	Takes part in the game, interprets the character, acts, possibly immerses
Game master	Organizes and coordinates the event, guides the players
Game designer	Comes up with the idea for the game, writes the materials

Table 2: The roles within live action role-playing games

likely to direct their energy to group activities than introverted people. In this section, the personality traits of live action role-players are explored: they lay a foundation for the process and then the state of immersion, and explain some of the individual differences behind experienced immersion.

Starting a certain hobby depends partly on environmental factors one can not control, such as place of birth, and the selection of activities within the culture and community, but the process is not completely random. People with more similar personality traits tend to choose similar hobbies rather than the hobby would make them similar (see for instance Bakker 1991; Nettle 2006a). The interest in a certain hobby is not necessarily related to ability in the chosen field. Furnham and Chamorro-Premuzic (2004) studied the relationships between personality, intelligence, art interest and art judgment. They found that the personality trait of openness to experience was linked to tendency of being interested in art but not artistic abilities.

Intelligence had inverse relationship with the trait: higher intelligence was related to visual giftedness but not interest. It is very likely that the motivation to engage in live action role-playing originates primarily from personality rather than skills such as acting.

Often, our personality traits guide us – motivate us – to environments and roles in which we can use our abilities to the benefit of ourselves and others. Some hobbies, such as larp, have additional roles to specialize in. They affect the behavior and the status of the person in the event (Table 2). These roles may or may not overlap: the game designer can run the game themselves or even participate in it. Some roles are somewhat culture and game style specific. For instance, the role of game master may mean anything between organiser and director. These roles also affect immersion. Only participants may achieve a state of immersion into character, while game master and game designer may be immersed into the diegesis.

Next we will explore the specific traits associated with live action role-players. To my knowledge, there is no empirical research done on the personality traits of larpers. Perhaps the closest group studied are actors. Comparison seems justified, because acting is a key part of role-playing (Jarl 2009) especially for the participants. Nettle (2006a) compared the five factor personality traits of professional actors to the general population sample. He found actors being more extrovert, open to new experiences, agreeable and slightly more neurotic than the comparison group. This supports the findings of Marchant-Haycox and Wilson (1992) who describe actors as

extrovert and expressive. It may well be that these traits are pronounced in game participants, too.

Nettle (2006b) compared the schizotypy of poets, visual artists and mathematicians. Schizotypy describes tendency to have psychotic experiences (Tabak & de Mamani 2013) and it can be divided into four factors: unusual experiences, cognitive disorganisation, introverted anhedonia and impulsive nonconformity. He found that poets and visual artists have as high tendency to unusual experiences as those suffering from schizophrenia. He linked this trait to divergent creativity, where one constantly creates new ideas, thoughts and content. Mathematicians were low on schizotypy and their thinking was rather characterized by convergence, striving for one solution, and autism. As larping involves varying amounts of improvisation, it may more often require divergent than convergent thinking, which may be reflected on the participants' style of thinking. This trait may also partly explain the capability to pretend, imagine and perceive things as something they are not (see also Henriksen 2005).

The pathological personality traits, such as paranoid, narcissistic, attention-seeking or emotional instability, may affect immersion. The more pronounced the trait is in the player, the harder it is to separate, dissociate, from oneself and prevent its transference to the character. Usually, most of these traits are unconscious to the degree that they most likely do not affect the experienced immersion, but limit how versatile characters the player can identify with and harm the social interaction in the game group. For instance, a player high in narcissism may have a hard time putting himself to a subjugated or a humble status, and to follow shared rules, or an introvert may have difficulties leading a group. Still, immersion and personality pathology may be distinct phenomena.

There are differences in people between their tendencies to empathise with the inner life of others. Empathy and the ability to identify with another person's perspective is a key to acting (Hannah et al. 1994) and role-playing (Lieberoth 2006). Empathy is partly based on automatic neural processes (Rizzolatti, Fogassi & Gallese 2006). Nettle (2006a) found that actors are significantly more empathic than the comparison group; they were more socially intelligent and identified more emotionally with others. This trait of empathy correlated positively with other big five personality traits but neuroticism.

Empathy can further be divided into affective and cognitive empathy (Rogers, Dziobek, Hassenstab, Wolf & Convit 2007). The first includes empathic concern, which refers to sympathy and compassion towards the suffering of others, and personal distress describing the self-centered feelings of discomfort and anxiety in response to the suffering of others. Cognitive empathy includes the skill of taking the perspective of another person and also the skill to identify with a fictional character. Taking a role could be linked especially to cognitive empathy. Lieberoth (2006) has previously suggested using the term theory of mind that is sometimes used as a synonym for mentalization or metacognitive skills. These skills are a prerequisite for immersion and without them it is impossible to know whether one is immersed at all. Further, without the skill to observe one's thoughts one is unable to modify them, which is a requirement to changing one's perspective.

In short, the average larpers who are mostly in the hobby for the acting and immersion may very well be characterised by extroversion, openness to experiences, agreeableness and neuroticism. Their thinking is rather divergent than convergent, and they have a tendency in being creative and having unusual experiences. They are rather high in empathy which enables them to understand and describe their own and others inner states. These traits may both directly and indirectly affect immersion experienced during a game.

Immersion as a Dissociative State

Immersion as an experience does not arise from personality traits alone: the situation must support it. In role-playing games, the first contact to immersion often comes from reading the game materials or the character. The player creates an internal model of the character, the goal to be pursued. Then, the player imagines the diegesis through the eyes of the character. Using the theory of mind, the player pictures the reactions of the character to fictional events: how do they feel and think about the state of the world, and how do they relate to others. This self-suggestive interplay, interaction, between the player, character and the diegesis sets the stage for immersion. The player guides their attention to the internal and external elements reinforcing the changed perspective such as the game environment, other players pursuing immersion, and alternative patterns of thinking. The less external factors there are reinforcing immersion, the more important are the inner factors.

As immersion grows deeper, the player is required to use less and less effort and energy trying to consciously guide their attention: when immersion is sufficient it will uphold itself and the player is only required to correct this process when they become aware that immersion has decreased.

When the player is immersed, they lock their perspective to that of the character and attempt to uphold the diegetic reality. Then, unlike otherwise, they do not flexibly change their viewpoint. Immersion creates a noticeable, lasting, but reversible, bias in our attention that can be described using the perceptual cycle (Neisser 1976): once the player has immersed into the character, the worldview of the character guides their attention primarily to the factors reinforcing this view strengthening it and guiding their attention further. This is a self reinforcing confirmation bias – a perspective, once achieved, upholds and strengthens itself.

Additionally, the player is constantly ignoring elements that could break the immersion. This phenomenon is bidirectional: immersion requires the player to disregard information not reinforcing it but also enables this. Individual executive functions, current attentional processes and the situational factors affect the extent players can ignore such elements. Some players argue strongly for the 360 degree immersion while in jeepform games there is but a minimal importance to props and attire. Could it be that personal differences in the ability to disregard immersion-breaking elements may guide the player’s preference of games?

When immersing the player pays less and less attention to their actual self. While immersed, the player is somewhat separated, dissociated, from their everyday personality that is replaced by another perspective. This dissociation generates an experience that the character and diegesis are real – the structures questioning them are inactive. Cognitive science could describe this as decoupling (Lieberoth 2006), but I will use the term dissociation because it is more established in psychology, and increasingly researched (see van der Hart, Nijenhuis & Steele 2006). Besides acting in accordance with the inner model, controlling one’s behavior is at times achieved by inhibition, the ability to not act out on inner urges, thoughts and emotions. Having achieved a certain level of immersion there is no longer as much need to consciously inhibit urges, as there is less to inhibit. Our everyday personality has momentarily been dissociated from the personality of the character.

During the game, the players have a dual awareness of the character and their everyday self (Andreasen 2003). But rather than experiencing them both at once, usually only one of them can be active at a time, and our consciousness of the immersive state varies. Actually, once we become conscious of it we have already partly lost it. We can only hold one perspective active at any given moment due to the natural limits of our attention. For example, look for a moment at the Figure 1. Notice how its shape constantly changes according to how you look at it, and how it is impossible to see the two contradictory viewpoints simultaneously. Similarly the extent and depth of immersion can vary during and between games. The extent represents the frequency of perspective changes between the players’ everyday self and the perspective of the character, and how long these periods are. The depth describes the subjective strength of the experienced immersion.

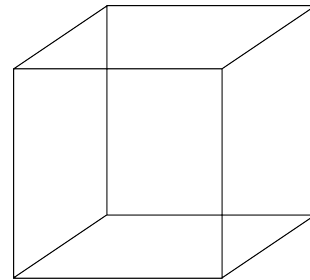


Figure 1: A cube with two perspectives

There is evidence that there are personal differences between the strength of immersion, and thus dissociation, the players achieve during the game (Hook 2012). This strength is partly mediated by the situational factors and varies throughout the game: at moments the player may be completely immersed in the story, then become more conscious of their actual self. Brown and Cairns (2004) have suggested using three tiers to describe player immersion: engagement, engrossment and total immersion. The state of being immersed could be rather described as a continuum than a binary state.

Immersion and dissociation it produces act as a psychological defenses: the crisis, challenges and insults during the game are directed to the character, not the player. In the recent years, there has been increasing attention to the psychological safety in live action role-playing games: safety words, traffic lights, “cut” and “break“ are in the repertoire of more and more games. During the warm up exercises, the players prepare for the game psychologically, tune to the character and prepare for immersion. The exercises support the dissociation between the perspectives of the player and the character ensuring both good game experience and psychological

	More external factors dissolving immersion	Less external factors dissolving immersion
More external factors supporting immersion	The environment supports immersion but dissolving elements are present. Present in Nordic larps or computer games.	The game world nearly completely upholds immersion. Present in 360 degree larps, simulations and historical reenactment.
Less external factors supporting immersion	Immersion is mainly the result of self suggestion, not external elements. Present in pervasive games or reading a book.	Immersion is the result of self suggestion in a structured environment. Present in black box scenarios or guided meditation.

Table 3: The external factors strengthening and dissolving immersion

safety. Learning is strongly state and context bound. Dissociation hinders learning unless the experiences of the character are turned to learning experiences of the player. The debriefing after the game breaks the achieved dissociation, helps the player return to their own personality, reinforces learning and generates distance to the character by strengthening the player’s real personality.

Immersion in Different Environments

The three way model differentiates players according to their primary motivation to the game: the gamists strive for competition and problem solving; the dramatists aim to tell a story; and simulationists pursue immersion (Bøckman 2003). Personality traits guide the players to find groups and games that suit their traits: the players look for an environment that fits their personality. Perhaps there are differences in the quality and quantity of immersion into character and diegesis between these groups, and the players may look to different game elements to achieve immersion.

Immersion can have many targets in the game: the personality of the character; the game reality; or the narrative, which results in feeling the story is real (Harviainen 2003). These three are emphasized to a different extent in games. It would be incorrect to presume the games that strive primarily to character immersion would result in stronger immersion than other games. The target of immersion is merely different and an explicit goal of the game. At the same time, jeepform games can produce strong immersion by shared and dramatic narrative.

When immersion is a key aspect pursued by the players, the games are often designed to promote this goal: the characters and the game world are focused on while the shared narrative has less of an importance. There is a focus on elements that support immersion and also aim to reduce factors that could break it (see Holter 2007). Immersion is increased belief in the viewpoint of the character and the world – and forgetting to disbelief them. This is also reflected to the game design (Table 3). Thus, the playing style, target of immersion, and game design are closely tied together.

This far, we have focused on conscious, deliberate immersion, but one can also experience immersion without aspiring it. This automatic immersion is rather a by-product than primary objective of activity, and it is a part of the gameplay experience (Ermi & Mäyrä 2005). This spontaneous immersion is closely related to cognitive empathy discussed earlier. It is a product of many factors and can be found in several contexts: in digital games it originates from effortless interface, prolonged concentration and imagination; in historical reenactment it is

the activation of rich historical knowledge and immersion into authentic environment; in a simulator the player perceives an alternative reality with many of their senses; in meditation there is focus on mindfulness skills, the body consciousness and breathing; in reading a novel the rich narrative and identifiable characters strengthen it; while listening to music it is forgetting one's self. People high in cognitive empathy may have a tendency to experience such identification with the characters and the imagined worlds, forgetting themselves. Conscious immersion may be the strive to this automatic immersion that is familiar to a person from other fields of life.

Conclusion and Discussion

In summary:

- Immersion as a *state* means the subjective experience of being someone else in an alternative, diegetic reality.
- Immersion as a *process* is automatic, unconscious reaction to and interaction with the environment mediated by personality trait resulting in immersive state. This process can also be consciously and deliberately activated.
- Conscious immersion is first upheld by the attentive processes controlled by the player. Once immersion is deeper, it is upheld by automatic attentive processes and biases.
- Immersion requires cognitive empathy, the theory of mind: the ability to take the perspective of another person.
- The strength of immersion is a continuum that correlates with dissociation from our everyday personality.
- Acting reinforces both the player's own and others' immersion and also has a communicative function in the game.
- Internal (self suggestion) and external factors (clothing, environmental changes) affect immersion.
- Subjective immersive state cannot be completely derived from behavioral changes.
- Becoming conscious of immersion weakens it making it harder to assess.

Jennett et al. (2008) have made advances in the subjective and objective measurement of immersion in video games – yet, there are methodological difficulties to it. When the players are asked about their immersion, the consciousness of their own personality is activated and their state changes affecting immersion. Also, assessing immersion from the outside is challenging: we cannot decide whether a person is immersed merely by the way they act, because our behavior is the result of many personal and situational factors. Even the players themselves become conscious of their immersion only after the fact: “at that moment I was really in character”.

According to Stenros and Hakkarainen (2003) a role-playing game requires a player, game master, interaction and diegetic framework. There is no mention of immersion. Immersion as psychological, dissociative state is not a requirement for a role-playing game, but a result of it. Yet, immersion, using metacognitive skills and empathy, is a process defining role-playing games. Some games may more explicitly strive to produce this state while other games have different goals. Regardless of the nature of the game, it may or may not lead to experienced immersion: at times immersion may creep up on the players without conscious effort as a result of situational factors such as other players' immersion, grasping storyline, strong metatechnique or authentic environment.

Many researchers have noticed that games sometimes produce an experience of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) involving an unceasing concentration on the situation; changed sense of time, self and the environment; and focus on the moment and activity at hand. Psychologically immersion and flow have many similar qualities (Jennett et al. 2008) and include a state change. Immersion and flow may often coexist in games (Christou 2014; Ermi & Mäyrä 2005). The two concepts overlap, but it is suggested immersion precedes flow (Jennett et al. 2008), and flow may increase immersion. Whereas flow can occur in many encapturing fields of life such as

hobbies or work, immersion appears in more limited environments and includes dissociation, an experience of being someone else, unlike flow.

What makes players strive for repeated experiences of immersion? There may be several explanations, the most important being that immersion is secondary to other factors, such as sense of belonging to a group, escapism or having fun. One can engage in the same activities with many motivations. For instance, games can have a therapeutic, entertaining or educative function (Henriksen 2005). One player may larp due to peer pressure, other because they want to explore new sides to themselves, third because they want to identify with their favorite characters, idols, and fourth because they want to escape their torturing self-awareness. The most important requirement for striving precisely to immersion is the capability to do so; second are personal motivational factors including a wish away from or toward something, such as an altered state of mind.

Suggestibility is one marker of hypnotic susceptibility. In role-playing games an immersed state may be achieved using self suggestion or the suggestion of the game master, such as in tabletop role-playing games. It would be intriguing to compare hypnosis and immersion – and the resulting states they produce. Perhaps dissociation is a common denominator between the two. To this date, many studies on immersion have focused on digital games. One has to be careful, though, when interpreting these results. Live action role-playing and digital games are fundamentally different environments in many aspects such as methods of communication, movement and player-game interaction. There is a clear need for interdisciplinary studies.

Does immersion arise only in people who have a certain personality favorable to acting and role-playing games; is it a skill that can be practiced; or is it a state brought on by the situation? If it was a skill, the players who have had more immersion experiences would achieve deeper immersion than beginners would. There are little such observations in the literature – and we know that already children spontaneously act and immerse. The childrens' tendency to engage in role-play reflects their developmental objectives. Some children may be more prone to automatic, spontaneous immersion, identification, empathy; to others is it a more distant phenomenon. These temperament tendencies develop into personality traits that may both directly and indirectly impact how, and how much immersion one experiences. There is some preliminary evidence that immersion is rather a player trait than a game trait (Christou 2014). The traits predisposing one to experience immersion are necessary but not sufficient requirements for it; rather they may mediate the strength of immersion the player can achieve. Immersive state is a personal response to the internal and external situational factors guided by personal traits.

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Commentary by Alexey Gorodnichev

The issue of game psychology is of special current interest for modern Russia. By the beginning of the 20th century, playing games had become an obligatory attribute of all the layers of our society. Everyone played everywhere, from peasant children at village streets to elderly academicians in capital city flats. The creative epoch of the Silver Age aligned with the rise of scientific and research interest into game psychology. Playing activity was still being researched as late as during the '20s. However, by the end of the '30s, the respectful attitude to game playing as a way of being had been lost due to notorious social and political processes.

At the moment in Russia, the larping community performs a most crucial task – it returns to people the phenomenon of game playing: its spontaneity and creativity. (It is important to underline that, unlike computer games, where the entire creative component is provided by a team of designers and script writers, larps implement a larper's creative potential, regardless of him being a head larp organizer or a player playing his second role). However, this return is greatly impeded by the stigmatization of the playing process in the Soviet Union, where playing games was considered to be something trifling, allowed only to children and distracting people from communism building. I think that most players face this attitude from their relatives and friends. Profound research of game playing process, like the one performed by the present article, may accelerate the acknowledgement in Russia of both the larping community and game playing itself as one of the brightest and the most resourceful activities of a human during his whole life.

The profound article by Lauri Lukka, commenting upon which is a great pleasure for me, studies the phenomenon of "immersion," which is one of the key factors of the playing activity.

It is obvious that if a child, as a rule, becomes immersed into the playing process completely and automatically, then "immersion" of an adult is a more complicated and, to a large degree, manageable process. That's why we assign high priority to scenery and props, try to avoid out-of-game behaviour, and switch off cell phones. Thus, "immersion" during a larp is a complicated phenomenon with a vast number of variables.

In my view, the author of the article is completely right in showing no desire to give a precise definition to the "immersion" phenomenon. As any other dextrocerebral manifestation of mental activity, "immersion" can hardly be defined with sinistrocerebral precision. At the same time, this imprecision complicates the analysis of the issues considered in the article.

Referring in his article to the Threefold model (gamism, simulationism and dramatism), the author assumes that depth and length of "immersion" are related to implementation of these three components during a larp. Though this issue is still to be researched, I suppose that models are models and immersion is immersion. In my opinion, different models of playing processes reflect the differences in the players' background, world view, and experience; still, when I speak to players telling me about some cool larp organized within the framework of any of these 3 models, the players not only describe "immersion," but reproduce it on the spot, while describing bright in-game moments.

Studying specific personal traits seems more of a perspective for researching the reasons that impede "immersion" or make it discontinuous. For instance, we can mention neuroticism, the role of which has already been demonstrated, e.g., in the development of anxiety disorders and chronic depression. What is it? Neuroticism can be described, in a simplified way, as increased emotional reactivity to negative incentives. Most probably, such players will easily lose their "immersion" as a consequence of even trifling troubles happening during a larp. I think that a high level of anxiety and social phobic traits cause rapid decrease of involvement into a larp.

The article assumes that an "average larper" usually features high extroversion indices, but this statement looks very disputable. I suppose that such players, at first, attract more attention to themselves, play key roles, and communicate actively during a larp. It doesn't mean that at this very moment a player having the same extroversion indices isn't sitting in his tent seized with anxiety and hurt by some trifling trouble. I think that frustration and anxiety indices are much more important than the indices on the axis of extroversion and introversion. Many larpers note that no two larps are ever the same and connect this to the quality of a certain project and with in-game events. However, when we try and think about the state in which we come to this or that larp, we may find interesting trends. Alternately, we may find nothing. In-game events frequently touch our sore spots, which we have never suspected of existing. One of my latest larping fails was connected to the fact that I happened to get into a large team of people little-known to me and they mostly ignored my existence. This situation dropped me back into my teens and to the problems I had long since forgotten about...

Turning to the ideas represented in the article, I would like to support the author in his desire to use the notion of dissociation in order to understand the essence of immersion better. I think that larping dissociation described by Lauri should greatly differ from pathologic dissociation (dissociation of personality), first by the degree of controllability. I have seen players immersing into their characters until complete identification of oneself with, say, a first-born elf. Somehow, it not only didn't help other people to play, but, in the long run, caused problems to the player himself. Dissociation leading to immersion and being efficient in the larping space is, most probably, of a fragmentary nature and differs significantly from an actor's state. If an actor is limited with a certain role and a period of time, a larper is immersed into his character for several days in a row and is improvising all the time. Studying "immersion" as a variant of dissociation can be interesting both from the point of view of psychology and of the larping world.

As long as we are all, to various extents, imperfect and have problems with the quality and length of "immersion," I suppose that a really efficient method will comprise gradual replacement of pre-game meetings with rehearsal larps featuring "immersion" elements. Within the framework of such rehearsal larps, one will be able not only to practice, but also understand before the larp what hinders his immersion into his character and try to change the situation.

Commentary by Ludmila Vitkevich

The article describes not just an immediate issue, but a fundamental one. Immersion, as the author notes, is the state and the process without which a role-playing game, in a certain sense, cannot be considered a larp. The presence of immersion makes a larp natural and, what's especially important, belong to a player: adopted and experienced by her.

It is really great that the author actually grounds the process of immersion on a substantial psychological basis. In spite of the fact that some terms are not clear after the first reading, being primarily interested in the text is sufficient to understand their meaning. The psychological background adds comprehensiveness to immersion perception, as now you can view the issue from the point of view that is different from the theoretic and practical knowledge of larp theory. The essential value of this article involves the fact that it was written at the intersection of disciplines; that's what is of interest about it. However, I haven't managed to discern what criteria establish the five factor model of personality traits.

For a long time, I was absorbed with the section devoted to the reasons or personal traits that bring a player to larping. As the author notes, referencing some other works, "openness to experience was linked to tendency of being interested in art but not artistic abilities. Intelligence had inverse relationship with the trait: higher intelligence was related to visual giftedness but not interest." The only common feature I know is the players' craving for new experience for their souls.

1. It was curious to see the emphasis on opposition between the immersion school and the school of dramatic/narrative approach, described by Lora Bocharova in her article *The Theatre of Meyerhold vs. the Theatre of Stanislavsky* as early as in 2007, as even before I read the article, I had had the impression that this opposition is not very typical for Nordic larping.
2. The contradiction between immersion into a role and the empathy to a character looked extremely interesting, as before I had thought these processes to be, more probably, alike. We can add that empathy should be not just divided from immersion; it is simply impossible together with immersion, as empathy requires at least minimal distancing from the character. At the same time, a player can be either subjective or claim objectivity; it depends on the goal and the state of the player. In other words, these are opposing processes and one should remember that in order at least not to go to the organizers to complain of her character's unfair lot while in the state of immersion. The contradiction between immersion into a role and the empathy to a character looked extremely interesting, as before I had thought these processes to be, more probably, alike. We can add that empathy should be not just divided from immersion; it is simply impossible together with immersion, as empathy requires at least minimal distancing from the character. At the same time, it can be either subjective or claim objectivity; it depends on the goal and the state of a player. In other words, these are opposing processes and one should remember that in order at least not to go to the organizers to complain of her character's unfair lot while in the state of immersion.
3. I cannot completely agree with the thesis that even if "the acting is exquisite, the character is subjectively experienced as distant," as one of the immersion techniques known to me comprises exactly enacting and sometimes the character actually appears during enacting. First, the player enacts her character, figures out her moves and reactions, adopts them in the course of the process, makes them natural, and suddenly becomes immersed into her character that, at first, was unusual and not completely transparent.
4. I would also like to supplement the following phrase: "While the experience of immersion is fundamentally internal, in the game it is an inseparable part of social interaction." We cannot deny that, being alone, a player can also work on the process of immersion, deliberately focusing her thoughts on those particular details of the space and synthesizing her attitude to them in a way that is intrinsic for her character. Individual activities – for instance, taking diegetic diary entries – also work on immersion.
5. It seemed strange to me that, while describing immersion as a process, the author puts comprehension of the world via the prism of the character next after the player's understanding of her own goals in the diegetic universe. At the beginning, the diegetic universe is perceived, more likely, from a player's point of view (from a reader's position) and only then – via the prism of a character – as it is impossible to develop the character if the player doesn't understand the intrinsic parameters of the diegetic universe.

6. The author expresses the following crucial idea: “Once the player has immersed into the character, the worldview of the character guides their attention primarily to the factors reinforcing this view, strengthening it and guiding their attention further. This is a self-reinforcing confirmation bias – a perspective, once achieved, upholds and strengthens itself.” Never before in our practice have I met such a coherent wording, showing clearly that our trigger models of behaviour are necessary not only for increasing drive intensity, but also for immersion.
7. The dissociation process described by the author is absolutely recognizable at the levels of both personal and shared experience. The author doesn’t state that the dissociation level is crucially related to the length of the larp as an event and a space. Here, we send our best wishes to *Hogwarts Seasons*, which influenced the players’ minds so much: that a diegetic personality could replace a real one almost completely not only during the larp itself, but also for some time before and after it.
8. The danger of larps and the level of their impact on people’s minds have been discussed within the larp community approximately since 2002. However, besides the importance of being careful with people, there is the position which states that a real larp catharsis is achieved only at the point when an event pierces both the character and the player. In other words, the issue that is important for the character and unimportant for the player can be no reason for deep feelings and re-evaluation of the diegetic reality and one’s own real-life experience. It seems that the truth appears at the point where a player, pierced by some new experience, is ready to defy the danger and embrace this experience; at the same time, her partner or an organizer is aware that their own actions can cause, above all, serious harm, and they remember to be merciful.

Epilogue. Having written this commentary, I had a conversation with my colleague-in-the-guild, viz. Lora Bocharova, to whom I refer at the beginning of the article. She asked me to tell her about the article I had read and to express my opinion on it, and in her reply she wrote the following that I can never contradict, “. . . it seems to me that we cannot do without a sacred rite. The coolest immersive larp is religious fanaticism. By the way, all the mechanisms are known to psychologists.” I am sure that the necessary immersion essential for the existence of the larp and diegetic world magic is accompanied by the deep Faith in the predominant reality of the diegetic universe. (My wording is clumsy, but by saying “predominant” I mean “exceeding our daily life on some parameters”: for instance, from moral, aesthetic, ethic or some other point of view). It is like this particular “religious” reality that shows itself via *The Sermon on the Mount* and *Bhagavad Gita*: that is, via religious texts describing the Better Spiritual World. We believe in it not because it is very realistic, but because we are humans only as long as we take it into consideration.

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