



# Larp Politics

## Systems, Theory, and Gender in Action

Edited by Kaisa Kangas, Mika Lopenen, and Jukka Särkijärvi

Solmukohta 2016

Ropecon ry

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■ Kaisa Kangas

## Introduction

About ten years ago, I took a class in creative writing. When we discussed writing about societal and political issues, most of the students said they wanted to do art for art’s sake, instead of what they called propaganda. However, as I wrote in my learning diary back then, art cannot exist outside the context of society (and politics) anymore than architecture can exist outside the context of physical law. Choosing not to take a stand on political issues is also a political statement, an observation that seems particularly pertinent in today’s Europe, with nationalism, fascism and xenophobia on the rise.

This is as true for larp as for any other art form, if not more so. People and the systems via which they interact are at the heart of larp, and larp plays at making imagined communities real. Along with the ability to create strong personal experiences this makes it the perfect medium for political art. Larp designers have taken advantage of these qualities to make political larps, and both politics in larp and the politics of larp have been much discussed in the “Nordic larp” community. However, there has so far been no book explicitly devoted to this topic, and I believe it deserves one.

Some themes in this book reflect European political discourse right now: refugees, fascism, and trans\* politics. Others deal with the interplay of larp and politics or individual political games. Several articles focus on identity issues. This is no wonder, as playing with identity can be said to be the essence of larp. However, larp can also create and simulate social systems, perhaps even change them. For example, many Russian larps have revolved around complex systems, and treated e.g. various aspects of economy. I am happy that this, too, is represented in the book.

The book is loosely divided into four sections: *The Game*, *Change & Systems*, *Theory: Politics & Larp*, and *Gender*. A larp scene, not to mention larp discourse, could not exist without larp, and so the first section is devoted to individual games. Historical settings come up in several articles. The essays by

Erik Pihl, Lorenzo Trenti, and the four-author team consisting of Aladino Amati, Matteo Miceli, Andrea Capone, and Annalisa Corbo illustrate that history is politics. Pihl participated in the Russian larp *Игра-поэма* 1905 (Larp-poem 1905) which aimed to recreate the social, political, and economic atmosphere of the 1905 Russian revolution. Trenti interviewed organizers of two Italian larps, *I ribelli della montagna* (The Rebels of the Mountain) and *La fiera di San Martino* – 1939 (Local Fair of San Martino – 1939) that treated fascism during the Second World War. Amati, Miceli, Capone, and Corbo analyze the dynamics of power and oppression in various historical settings. Syksy Räsänen writes larp critique from a political perspective and discusses the aspect of tragedy in *Inside Hamlet*, a game that was introduced as a Marxist reading of Shakespeare’s play. Juhana Pettersson presents *Baltic Warriors*, a campaign that tackled environment politics – an unusual subject for political larp.

The second section, *Change & Systems*, examines larp as a tool. Larp is often used for educational purposes, and it can be also seen as an instrument for political change. Probably we are only beginning to see the many ways in which larp can be applied to several fields. Daniel Steinbach discusses how games have been used to create empathy for refugees. Larson Kasper and Tina Leipoldt offer a different point of view on the refugee issue in their recollections of larping with Syrian refugees in Turkey. Jasper Murphy envisions larp as a means to build solidarity and unite working class people. Vladimir Servetnik and Alexey Fedoseev describe the Lomonosow Moscow State University’s educational larps, which are designed to teach students about complex systems such as economics and politics. Eleanor Saitta takes a look at larp and systems thinking in a more general framework.

The third section, *Theory: Politics & Larp*, draws on both larp theory and other disciplines such as political science and organization studies. Moyra Turkington discusses how larp can have political effect in the personal, communal, and public spheres. Tanja Lehto examines the challenges of political larp, J. Tuomas Harviainen analyzes political larps within a framework from organization studies, and Teemu Rantanen brings forth the intriguing possibility of using larp as a forum for *deliberative democracy*. Larp is commonly conceptualized as *play*. Katherine Castiello Jones, Sanna Koulu, and Evan Torner challenge this by giving an alternative approach: looking at larp as work. This provides an interesting framework that exposes new political questions, such as the division of labour in larp.

The last section treats the sexy subject of *Gender* and is closely connected to the wider theme of identities. In her essay, Shoshana Kessock expends from the second-wave feminist motto “The personal is political”. Muriel Algayres treats expressions of feminism in larp practice and communities, with a focus on the French scene. Minna Heimola and Mikko Heimola provide two case studies on how to create interesting female characters in historical settings without being unfaithful to historical facts. Both Neko Koski and Erik Winther Paisley recall their experiences as queer larpers – good and bad. Koski discusses the difficulties faced by trans\* players and gives tips for more inclusive game design. Winther Paisley writes beautifully about gayness and about the legendarily queer game *Just a Little Lovin’*.

I hope this book will inspire further discussions on larp and politics. In particular, I would be intrigued by investigations of larp as *political art*. All political games are not necessary art – some of them might be more in the realm of education, and others might be preachy in a way that makes them banal. A game that inadvertently ends up having questionable political content or one that contains an oppressive meta-structure (e.g. casting players strictly based on their appearance or only providing servile roles for female players) can still be great as *art*, and it can have aesthetic value. However, to qualify as *political art*, a game must have both a political message and artistic merits.

But here it is, *Larp Politics*. I hope the articles in this book will inspire you, make you think, and maybe even provoke you.

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We are most grateful for Solmukohta 2016, without whom this book would not have been possible, and the editors and writers of previous event books. It is a good tradition we are joining.

**The Game**

■ Syksy Räsänen

## “These but the trappings and the suits of woe” Tragedy and Politics in *Inside Hamlet*

*Inside Hamlet* was a larp envisioned to be “faithful in plot and spirit to Shakespeare’s legendary play”. According to the game website (2015), *Inside Hamlet* was set in the year 1939 in “an alternate reality where the French revolution never happened and the great noble houses of Europe stayed in power” (the quotes are from the Inside Hamlet website). The organisers set the scene thus:

*You are the rot in the state of Denmark.*

*Your country is aflame with the fires of revolution. The court of King Claudius is isolated in a bunker beneath the castle-fortress of Elsinore and you refuse to let go of power.*

*Anyone could see that the days of the Kingdom are numbered. But not you. You linger on the edge of action, escaping deeper into decadent madness and murderous paranoia.*

*Your folly is the curse of Hamlet - a numbing fear of decisive action. It will kill you in the end.*

*All of you.*

The game was a reinvention of the larp *Hamlet* organised in 2002 in Stockholm. It was played in two separate runs<sup>1</sup> in March 2015, at the Danish castle Elsinore where Shakespeare set his play. The five-act structure of the play was condensed into three acts, planned around the themes of decadence, deception and death, with rising intensity. The events of the play were used as scaffolding for the

<sup>1</sup> Insofar as verbal instructions by the organisers or specific game events are concerned, I refer only to the second run, in which I played. My reading is, as always in larps, necessarily coloured by my personal game experience.

larp, and at intervals the players of central characters acted out scripted scenes from the play, line for line. Other action stopped during such sequences, which provided rhythm and carried the plot along.

In the first act, players were instructed to play out a wild, decadent party. This embodied ignorance and denial, not only of the kinslaying, central to Shakespeare’s play, but also, more vitally to the larp, of the rising communist tide against the feudal-monarchist-fascist-capitalist rule. In the second act, players were instructed to tune in on plotting, paranoia and finally despair, as the inevitability of the collapse became evident. The third act was devoted to death: death of the characters, and death of the old order they had ruled over, as it was swept away by revolutionary armies. “This is the end times for all with noble connections or noble blood”, the organisers had outlined on the game website. Most of the characters were killed, whether by their own hand or through the actions of others, whether through murder opportunistic, planned or passionate. By the time the third act drew to a conclusion with the army of the Norwegian prince Fortinbras (portrayed by *Inside Hamlet* co-designer Martin Elricsson) storming the castle, only a skeleton crew of a handful of courtiers was left there to surrender.

Fortinbras was not only a prince, but also a communist leader: standing in front of the vacant throne of Denmark, he declared the age of tyrants over, and promised that in this new age those who deserve to live would live, and those who deserve to die would die. The characters had to choose whether to live in the new order, or be shot on the spot (the players had been instructed to judge whether they thought their character deserved to live). The final words of the larp were on track with the play: “such a sight as this becomes the field, but here shows much amiss. Go, bid the soldiers shoot”. Indeed, the carnage of the incestuous court having turned on itself was so much amiss as to make the court of Shakespeare’s play blush with modesty. Unlike in the play, the final shots that rang out were not in honour of the soldierly prowess of fallen prince Hamlet; they were those of an execution squad, closing the curtain on an era of unbridled villainy.

Martin’s closing speech as Fortinbras, together with his opening statement in his role as a co-designer, bookended *Inside Hamlet*. In the briefing just before the beginning of the larp, delivered on the same pedestal as the final speech, moments before our minds turned it into the throne of Denmark, Martin said that since the 2002 *Hamlet*, we have entered into an era of revolutions, referred to the Arab uprisings, and invoked the last days of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi. Coupled with the Marxist interpretation suggested by the organisers, this put *Inside Hamlet* in the frame of not only tragedy, but also politics, areas of contested virtue both. However, I feel that while *Inside Hamlet* was an excellent larp and a wonderful experience in many respects, it was confused in its aspects of tragedy and politics.

### “Our state to be disjoint and out of frame”: Virtue and Tragedy, Context and Politics

According to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, tragedy is concerned with good people coming to bad ends. Theatre had progressed by Elizabethan times, and it can be argued that Aristotle’s idea of tragedy is too narrow to capture, for example, *Macbeth*. Nevertheless, while not definitive, Aristotle’s measure is useful in sizing up drama, and it fits *Hamlet* well.

In *Hamlet* the play, Hamlet is presented as an admirable man and ideal courtier, scholar and soldier, “th’ expectancy and rose of the fair state, the glass of fashion and the mould of form”. He is a loyal son who, like his murdered father, represents the virtues of monarchy, and his main flaw seems to be hesitation to commit revenge murder. One should perhaps specify that Hamlet is virtuous in the context of the play, and was presumably intended to be viewed thus by the audience that it was written for. Seen from a wider perspective, Hamlet’s virtue is in doubt, because the presuppositions of the play are morally questionable; more on this below.

In *Inside Hamlet* the larp, the focus shifted from prince Hamlet to the denizens of the court. Many of them, if not most, were presented in the game materials as being morally admirable neither according to the morals of the society portrayed in the larp, nor (one presumes) from the point of view of the players. Evaluated according to the Catholic doctrine prescribed for Claudius' court by the writers of the larp, there was hardly a soul not drenched in sin; nobles, in particular, were more distinguished by hypocrisy than dignity of spirit or deed. Not only were many characters decidedly lacking in virtue, it was not uncommon for them to be unabashedly villainous, if not downright monstrous.

Personal failings of character (including things such as proclivity for rape and murder) aside, the noble houses engaged in human trafficking, slavery, routine torture and murder, drug trade and colonialism; all this according to the materials provided by the organisers, without venturing into depravities introduced by the players during the game. Such practices are in lockstep with the characters being "the rot in the state of Denmark", itself a colonial empire presided over by fascists, clinging to mores of the feudal era.

The character writing reflected questions of morality and power from the sphere of personal tragedy into the political arena. As in the play the poisoning of the king Hamlet transforms Denmark into an "unweeded garden" possessed by "things rank and gross in nature", so in the larp the personal turpitude of the Danish notables, be they loyal or traitorous to the king, highlighted the rottenness of the monarchist-fascist regime. It perhaps bears mentioning that many characters were not nobles, but soldiers, entertainers, businessmen and hangers-on at the court, so this observation (along with the organiser injunction to be the rot of the state) applies less to them, but this is only a matter of degree.

Given such a cast of characters, it is easy to feel that they well deserved their fate, though many players did enjoy empathy towards their character. Nevertheless, it is possible to feel sorrow for the passing of a villain, even if it is coupled with relief, as in the case of Macbeth. In tragedy, we witness fateful mistakes being made, and lament that the wheel cannot be turned back. In *Inside Hamlet*, in contrast, it was possible to look to the future with anticipation and hope, as audience members, if not as characters. Many deaths in the larp were pre-planned by the players between the acts, with much laughter. As it was possible to opt out of any threatening situation in the game, there was no risk of a character dying against the player's will, of having schemes foiled by fate untouched by the player's hand. *Inside Hamlet* had the trappings of tragedy, with ineluctable fate and tangled weave, but the core was hollow. Aristotle (*Poetics*) located the spirit of tragedy in pity and fear, writing that:

*"Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. Such an event, therefore, will be neither pitiful nor terrible."*

Indeed, rather than tragedy, *Inside Hamlet* was a morality tale, where the wicked were punished in the end, and those who deserved to live were spared. One can hardly imagine Shakespeare, or Sophocles, concluding a tragedy with an escape route for the virtuous.

The morality was underpinned by the Marxist reading suggested by the organisers. As revolution swept away the feudal-monarchist-fascist-capitalist order, the fate of tyrants provided absolution for their terrible deeds (for the players, if not for the characters), enabling players to make light of the damndest wickedness, and make sport of cruelty. The characters' sins were wiped away by death, and the sins of court and state were cleansed through the intercession of the saviour Fortinbras.

The larp intersected the play at the scripted scenes, and in the play, the tragedy of *Hamlet* is all. However, as the stories progressed, the events of the play seemed less and less relevant to the larp.

The death of Hamlet seemed not so much the culmination of tragedy as the last gasp of a miserable world before the dawn of a better age. (Of course, Hamlet was here part of the supporting structure, not the centrepiece, unlike in the play.) Indeed, death by sword, death by poison and death by innumerable other means had descended on the court like a virulent plague, so that there was hardly time to drag the corpses out. So although the scene was well set and the players of Hamlet and Laertes left nothing to be desired, the final duel felt more like a final pointless ritual amidst decay and ruin, rather than the passing of a good man.

Unlike in the play, in the larp few players would lament the downfall of the Danish court, and this extends to the person of Hamlet – if Hamlet is a loyal son of the fascist regime, why should we mourn his passing? Indeed, the question of Hamlet's virtue is thrown into stark relief by the differences in setting and theme between the play and the larp. In the play, the character of Hamlet is written to embody the virtues of monarchy, which is to say that he also represents all the injustice that is inherent in that terrible system. (The misogyny of Hamlet the character, and the play, inherited from Elizabethan England, would deserve separate discussion.) In the play, it is taken for granted that men of royal breed not only have, through their descent, the right to hold power over the lives of others, but are uniquely qualified to do so. This idea, part of the mainstream ideology taken for granted in Elizabethan England, seems preposterous to us today. Yet, it hardly interferes with our engagement in the play *Hamlet*, because the issue has little relevance for the questions tackled by the play. Not so in the larp *Inside Hamlet*.

Imagine that the larp had been set in the court of Muammar Gaddafi or Saddam Hussein, mentioned at the larp's beginning. Would we regard their sons as heroes, whose virtue is estimated based on tortuous revenge schemes inside the palace walls, without reference to their role as leading members upholding a dictatorship, or at the very least benefiting from being at the top of an inhuman pyramid? We come back to the issue of tragedy: Muammar Gaddafi could make for a Macbeth, but would we treat the parties and murders of his court lightly? Or, to take an example where we could be sure our larping is untainted by colonialism and racism, consider setting the Italian fascist excesses of Pier Paolo Pasolini's film *Salò* as a larp. Even if the ending were changed to the protagonists' ruin, it would be hard to view them as tragic heroes.

To tackle tragedy, rather than horror (which *Salò* could suggest), one could switch to protagonists whose fall arouses anguish as opposed to elation, such as reversing the roles of the communist revolutionaries and fascist functionaries. What if the revolutionaries had taken over the state of Denmark and ensconced themselves in Elsinore, only to lose it all as fascist forces regroup to retake Denmark bit by bit, in the end overrunning Elsinore and executing those who refuse to recant and betray the revolution?

Themes of abuse of power, decadence and deception would remain relevant, with factions fighting each other and paranoia over counterrevolutionary traitors running rampant – history offers ample examples. Decadence could be enhanced for tragedy by play guidance making intimate acts negatively charged by default. The feeling of anguish over tragic mistakes, missed opportunities, broken promises and heroic hubris would be sharper, as there would be hard-won victories to squabble, and virtues to taint, unlike in the case of entrenched fascists of the *ancien régime*. One dare say this would be more appropriate in light of the fate of the Arab uprisings. In the game's Facebook group, Martin Elricsson responded to such a suggestion that this had in fact been his original idea for the resetting of the larp, but it was felt that it would change the nature of the game too much and require a lot of work.

In the end, there is nothing amiss in using either tragic fate or political turbulence to dress up larps, to provide moody scenery and mental props, without intention of tackling them seriously. But tragic decadence without a heart can descend into burlesque comedy, and disillusion beckons when some



probe political issues in all earnestness while others approach them as performance art. For the sake of organisers and players alike, it behooves designers to be clear about what is theme and what is mere story, and with what intentions and in which spirit a larp is to be partaken in.

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■ Erik Pihl

## Larp-poem 1905 Re-writing Russian History

Re-creating one of the most important, but less known, historical events in modern history: the revolution of 1905. A Nordic larper's perspective on a high-end Russian political game.

*Larps can let us understand history and politics, seeing and feeling it from within. Make a larp big and complex enough, and you have an experiment. What would happen if...*



*The painting 17th October 1905 by Ilya Yefimovich Repin.*

One of the major Russian larp events in 2015 was called *Игра-поэма 1905* (Larp-poem 1905). It was set up by a group that has done some of the world's biggest larps. *Larp-poem 1905* had around 500 participants, which meant it was far from “big” in the Russian sense, but it had a quality and level of detail that even many small larps can't accomplish. The game portrayed the turbulent year of 1905, the many political movements and the circumstances that lead to the revolution. We were two Scandinavians visiting the game: Erik Pihl, playing the historical figure Konni Zilliacus, a Swedish-speaking Finnish nationalist, and Frida Aronsson as a fictional journalist with communist sympathies.



*A family from the historical house of Yusupov. Photo by Erik Pihl.*

## Complex Revolution

While most people have heard of the Russian revolution in 1917, fewer know about the revolution in 1905. If you have seen the film *Battleship Potemkin*, which is based on historical events, you may remember that it is set during the 1905 revolution. There were at this time various strong political factions pulling the country in different directions. The political plot writer of *Larp-poem 1905*, Slava Rozhkov, explains that this was an important factor for the choice of this year as the setting for the larp (Rozhkov 2016). The many political movements enable several plot openings, and it is a less painful part of history than the recent communistic period.

The main political branches were the monarchists, the liberals and the socialists, with a palette of different factions under each. The monarchy was in power but the nation was in unrest, due to several factors. Failed policies led to peasants having too little land to sustain themselves, leading to their displacement and increasing dissatisfaction among workers. There were ethnic conflicts. An educated body of students wrote propaganda, took part in demonstrations, and supported strikers and political prisoners. Russia was in war with Japan, the Russo-Japanese war, which Russia would lose, and that added to the problems for the government. The uneasiness would eventually escalate into uprisings, mass strikes and a revolution.

With this backdrop, the organizers created a game based mostly on real history and a little fiction for spice. The top political plots centered on which countries Russia would ally with, the Tsar's conflict with his brother Mikhail, and the political struggle between the different ideologies. Russia was involved in a diplomatic war of position that would eventually lead to the First World War, in the

game dramatized by having the embassies of England and Germany as active entities. The enactment of industry suppressing the workers, and industry men opposing the nobles and demanding more power, were important conflicts. The larp also drew from the religious conflicts between the Orthodox, the Catholics, the Jews, the Masons, the anti-Masons, the Grey Cardinals, etc. (Molodykh 2016, Rozhkov 2016).

Many of the characters were based on actual historical persons. This includes all the noble and prosperous families that were portrayed, as well as known political leaders, poets and other prominent characters (Molodykh 2016). There was a long list of characters to choose from. The game masters would help players find a suitable role, discuss it with them and cast selected people on some roles. Women could, however, only take roles as men (which were a majority of the politically important roles) if agreeing to cross-dress with glued-on or painted moustaches, which a couple did. Even then, the most influential characters, such as the Tsar, were for men only. The same rule applied reversely to men, but few chose to cross-dress as women. Women who wanted to be involved in high politics could play members of the royal family or wives of important people. As Vorobyeva (2015) has noted: even though Russia has one of the most gender equal larp scenes in figures (54% men and 44% women, according to the International Larp Census 2014) there is a greater divide than in the Nordic scene when it comes to what kind of roles and play each gender has.



*Embassy district in Saint Petersburg. Photo by Erik Pihl.*

## A Living City

The game was played in an old Soviet era children's camp, in the woods south of Moscow. It was turned into a larp version of Saint Petersburg and bustling with life. There were restaurants, bars, cafés, a casino, opium joints, hairdressers, hat makers, an opera house, an amateur theatre, photographers, a telegraph and post station, and several newspapers.

Not only did these things exist, but they offered services of remarkable quality, all for in-game money. The restaurants and cafés were serving delicious food, cake and tea most of the day. Each newspaper printed two daily issues, which were sold by newspaper boys running around town. The telegraph station gave the option to send letters and telegraphs to other players as well as to the game master (GM) team. From the station some twenty telephone lines spread out, leading to houses all over town. The players could communicate over the phone, through a player-operated, old-fashioned switchboard in the telegraph station.



*Well-dressed family at  
one of  
the many cafés.  
Photo by Erik Pihl.*



*Opera at the Mariinsky  
Theatre.  
Photo by Erik Pihl.*



*In-game photographers  
with authentic vintage  
equipment, in front of a  
tarp district limit.  
Photo by Erik Pihl.*



Perhaps the most impressive was the Mariinsky Theatre. It had new, one to two hour ballets and operas every night. Their quality was almost what you would expect from a real opera house, embarrassing most larp entertainment worldwide. Yet, the singers and dancers had not met up before the game. They created the four evening shows in a week, starting with rehearsals on Monday and playing the final act on Saturday.

Many things were represented symbolically at *Larp-poem 1905*. The palaces, city halls, and other grand buildings were constructed by large plastic posters with the edifices printed on. As strange as it may sound, they did create a fairly good illusion once you were used to them. The canals separating the city districts were manifested by blue or white plastic tarps.

## Lost in Time and Space

*Larp-poem 1905*, like several other Russian larps, spanned a much greater time and space in the fiction than in reality. The in-game town symbolised all of Saint Petersburg. It was divided into different districts, separated by symbolic rivers. The distinct division of the city emphasized the unequal social statuses of the time: nobility, aristocrats, bourgeoisie, workers, etc. The only way to pass between the districts was over wooden “bridges”. These would be drawn at some instances, hence effectively preventing characters from getting to other districts. One reason for this was to prevent revolutions from spreading too easily, since the revolutionaries could be contained within one district (Rozhkov 2016).

The on-going Russo-Japanese war took place in Manchuria. It was possible to go there as well, by taking the Trans-Siberian Railway. The organisers considered the war important since it became a huge national crisis and one of the main causes for the revolution (Molodykh 2016). They had built a train car out of wood, painted it nicely and added speakers with sounds to give atmosphere. The train only left three times a day in each direction, so a trip to Manchuria took most of the day. The war in Manchuria was played out at a battle front of sand bags, where volunteers from the GM team playing Japanese troops would regularly show up for a fight. The game weapons shot soft felt bullets. It didn't hurt to get shot, but it was noticeable.

One very exotic aspect, from a Nordic player's perspective, was the constant fast-tracking of time. In the larp, one day for the player was three months in-game. In this way, politics could speed for-



*The sandbag front in Manchuria, with the Grand Prince Michael Alexandrovich far right. Photo by Erik Pihl.*



ward and it was possible to cover a larger range of events. There were no act breaks, the clock was running constantly during the three day game. It made some things more logical, like the fact that it took months to go to Manchuria and back, while other aspects were confusing. Something like “I’ll have this done in a day” usually meant an off-game day for a player, not an in-game day (which would be about 15 minutes).

The practical way of looking at time was that there were actually two parallel time streams: one “personal” time for the character, which was in real-time, and one “political” time which was fast forward. Important events for the game as a whole happened in the political time stream, with weeks or months in between, while personal matters took place in the personal time stream. When going on a long trip or getting pulled into grand events, the characters jumped on-board the political time stream for a while. The characters also had to relate to the political time stream while being in personal time. For instance, the evening newspaper reported on weeks of events that had taken place since the morning edition came out. The parallel time system may sound confounding but it worked pretty smoothly. There were only tiny glitches, like when someone asked “what did you do this morning?” and got the reply “I was on a (several weeks long) journey to the Far East”.

Extending time and space opened a lot of options. It was possible to create a full, functioning city and cover complex historical events. However, it also created some ambiguity. For example, the shooting in Manchuria could be heard in St Petersburg, which was a bit confusing, since shooting was also possible within the parameters of the city and would be natural to react upon.

## Land of the Dead

A special place on its own zone was the Land of the Dead where the players of dead characters ended up. It consisted of three rooms.

The first room was for debriefing. The players would come there still in character and sit down to write some personal documents like poems, memories or letters to friends, or political texts like articles or pamphlets. This written material would come back to the game and influence the plot.

In the second room, the players could talk with each other (out of character) and the GMs. They would discuss lessons they had learned from the game, the plot or their thoughts about Russia. The players could make a decision on what they wanted to change in Russia or what they wanted to play and implement. The players were also asked to add something – a picture, a motto, a poem or a newspaper clipping to a large “Map of Russian Soul” to further reflect on the topic.

Lead plot writer Yuri Molodykh explains that Russian mentality, like in most other cultures, has changed more rapidly in some aspects than others. At the larp in general and in the Land of the Dead



*The second room in the Land of the dead, with the Map of Russian Soul billboard. Photo by Erik Pihl.*

in particular, the players had the chance to see this for themselves and understand how some parts of the past century still live on. He adds that “it’s a mix of nostalgia for naive good old days, before all the suffering of 20th century, and a view of modern society with today’s agenda. Sometimes I look at today’s political figures: their words seem genuine and new, and they seem impossible 30 years ago during the Soviet era. But then I read diaries of Nikolai Wrangel and see that modern political agenda is surprisingly relevant to what was actual 100 years ago.” (Molodykh 2016)

The third and last room was for generating a new character. Most players accepted pre-written spare characters to continue some stories the GM wanted to be told. The last room was also a waiting hall. The players, in their new characters, sat down to wait for the train. They could chat in a black box fashion with other new characters and get to know themselves and each other. They would eventually board the train, arrive on it to Saint Petersburg and start playing again.

## Intricate Mechanics

The GM team consisted of about a hundred people and were deeply involved in the operations of the larp. They would walk around, with more or less in-game clothes, distinguished by orange sashes. Not only did they arrange correspondence, but they overlooked and acted as judges in crucial actions, from settling deals to determining what injuries a character would suffer in a battle. Yet, there were plenty of things that operated by themselves, through intricate mechanics and physical representations. To give one example: those who for some reason wanted to hamper the Russian war efforts could disturb the factory where players were making felt bullets. That meant less actual ammunition for the guns at the “front” and the players there had to resort to hand-to-hand combat.

The players showed great agreeability towards the many and complex rules and mechanics. It was important to play one’s part in the greater whole, such as a newspaper editor working hard to get the next paper out. In a sense, characters could be viewed as pieces in a very large and intricate board game. There was little emphasis on acting out, as many players considered it “fake”. Instead, players focused on the inner emotional experience and adjoining spontaneous expressions. Breaking character play to settle issues, like asking a game master for advice on rules, was fairly common.

The game had a well working economy. The fact that there were so many things to spend in-game money on meant that all players had good reasons to try to get and hold on to money. The bills and all kinds of paperwork, of which there were huge amounts, were of high quality. After the first larp day there started to be inflation, a planned design feature from the GMs, which escalated through the participants. The economy was not only a fun plot driver, it was essential for the political enactment.



*Russian soldiers with the train station and Land of the Dead in the background. Photo by Erik Pihl.*

Economics were key drivers for external politics, for the war and the pressure that ordinary people felt.

The producers had successfully created a strict hierarchical system with large gaps in income; rich people had thousands of roubles while poor workers were dealing with kopek coins. The wealthy people who had property would receive a handsome daily income, while workers were given a petty salary. Although anyone could enter any district, workers were in most cases effectively excluded from play with the higher classes. The economic and structural inequalities were an important part of the game design, since they were leading drivers for the revolution. The game was rigged to give a first-hand experience of the unjust class system. Having an excluding game design can in some cases be problematic for the players that are excluded, but less so in this game, because with 500 participants you have more than enough play within your own ranks.

An unexpected result of the economic game in the larp was that the workers were not those who would fare worst. They were important for the war effort, and hence, there was a limit to how underpaid they could be. Instead, the worst life came to be in the palaces, for maids of honour (Rozhkov 2016).

### Follow Your Dream



*Officials handling papers at court hearing.  
Photo by Erik Pihl.*

*Larp-poem 1905* sported a hefty set of rules and meta-techniques, of which only the most important can be covered here. Many aspects of the game were determined by rules. One fundamental rule was that things only mattered if they were written down. Letters, contracts, articles and even propaganda leaflets became very important, and there was much play around them.

Life and death were dealt through special rules and systems. There were districts in the city where you could not be murdered, others where you could. It was in most occasions impossible to kill someone without having declared a threat beforehand, for instance in a letter or pamphlet. In addition, a murderer had to leave some evidence for the police. During a “revolutionary situation”, which would occur during special circumstances, these rules changed and it was suddenly possible to kill a person spontaneously on high street – although it would take a minute and the victim would be able to scream for help during that time.

Many of the rules were set to make certain actions, like diplomatic contracts, saboteur attacks, and revolutions slow and difficult processes. That meant players would be engaged throughout the larp in achieving their goals. The rules also prevented terror attacks from claiming random victims, so as not to kill the players’ carefully prepared characters without reason.

There were myriad rules for hurt and injury. Game masters would check if wounded people had received correct treatment. They marked it all in a journal, which the patient got when the treatment started. Even if all the boxes were checked, there was a significant risk of infection that could maim or kill. For this purpose, the GM had a pouch of marbles and the player had to pull one out on random. Getting the wrong colour meant the character was in trouble.

A meta-technique developed specifically for *Larp-poem 1905* was a system based on three aspects of a character: Dream, Method and Pain. These were the pillars of one’s soul and identity. The mechanic was based on the idea that deep inside, all people are good. Dream was an image of a perfect world that gave the character strength to live, a poetic vision of the good Russian Motherland. Method was the way to achieve this ideal world, like moral principles. Pain was the thing that worried the character most in life. These aspects were attached as notes to the players’ documents, which combined both in- and off-game material.

The aspects could be lost or sacrificed during the larp, with some dramatic consequences. A character who lost their Dream would have nothing to live for and would hurry to follow somebody else’s Dream. A character without Method would go crazy, not knowing how to react and behave. Those who lost their Pain could not exist. They would be completely empty and not able to do anything but commit suicide. An important rule was that it was impossible to murder another character without losing one’s Dream, Method or Pain.

For example, one person sacrificed her Dream, when asking journalists to publish an article about an imprisoned poet. The Dream note continued to pass along with the papers, telling players that someone had made a great sacrifice for the article and that it should therefore be given certain attention.

Many rules were about symbolic representations. For instance:

- Five persons with flyers and banners were considered, by the rule book, a revolution.
- A bomb going off in an act of sabotage was shown by exploding confetti.
- One could not jump from the open window in the police station cell. In reality, it was barely a meter from ground, but in-game it was on a high floor. However, you could find a ladder and help a prisoner escape.

Regulations, or at least guidelines, affected even social play. For example, if you were sitting close to someone on the train for more than ten minutes, you had to tell them your life story or political position. If you ate from the buffet, you had to discuss a hot topic with someone. If you sat down to



*A nurse checks on a wounded soldier in Manchuria.  
Photo by Erik Pihl.*

drink tea with another player, a very important social situation in Russia, you had to tell them about your Dream, Method or Pain.

## End and Motivation

The larp ended with a scene where a parliament (Duma) was elected, with one person representing each social class. The Tsar voluntarily gave up some of his powers, for the benefit of his people and to avoid a revolution. This is fairly close to the historical events, with the main difference that the larp had significantly less bloodshed.

The game was designed to be open-ended, but the organisers predicted that it would end in one of three possible ways (Molodykh 2016, Rozhkov 2016):

- A complete destruction of the revolution and the monarchy staying totally in power.
- Following the real historical events: a revolution, followed by creation of a parliament.
- The complete end of monarchy after a devastating revolution (more or less jumping directly to the events of 1917).

The game ended in a situation that was kind of a compromise. There was no revolution, yet the Tsar chose to give away some of his power to a parliament, the Duma. This ending can be said to be a more positive “dream version” of what actually happened. Perhaps this was because the players took their responsibility to think about their Dream and Method. Or maybe it was just the result of letting people from 2015 solve the conflicts of 1905?

The larp can be said to be part of a strong trend in Russian games to investigate political themes and revisit grand historical events to better understand what was going on back then. *Larp-poem 1905* was designed “to maximize the discussion, action and reflection on the larpers’ part. These goals were more important than historical accuracy.” (Molodykh 2016). Slava Rozhkov explains that in Russia, change has often come through revolutions. There were several of them both before and after the one in 1905. The revolutions claimed many victims. In contrast, the less bloody ending of the larp showed a more humane way of driving progress. Ending the “revolution larp” without a revolution gives some hope for the future.

## Notes

For those who want to read more on larps in Russia, the best written material readily available for the Nordic audience is probably *Nordic-Russian Larp Dialog* (Fedoseev et al 2015). Another account available in English is *Larp Instead of Communism* (Kann 2010).

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#### Larp-poem 1905

Producers: Organizing group “Stairway to Heaven” led by Vladimir “Nuci” Molodykh.

Date: 29th July – 2nd Aug 2015

Length: 3 days (active game time)

Website: <http://1905.rpg.ru>



■ Aladino Amantini, Matteo Miceli, Andrea Capone, and Annalisa Corbo

## A Trilogy of Power and Oppression

Confrontation with an authoritarian force is a popular, recurrent theme in larp. Many players enjoy impersonating the cruel oppressors exploiting innocent people or the heroic rebels fighting for their freedom. And since they accept the setting from the beginning, scenes of conflict are not avoided, but rather embraced. Players often actively seek them and put a lot of effort into enacting verbal disputes, threats, intimidation and physical aggression.

It is a theme that can be easily found in any setting: contemporary, fantasy, sci-fi, or historical. The oppressive authority can be embodied by a tyrannical fairy tale king, empowered by a mystical artifact, by an alien race who conquered the Earth, or a real dictator of the past (or present). It is a very adaptable subject which can be addressed with different approaches. It also offers the organizers a very straightforward way (e.g. in the form of orders and directives from figures of authority) for setting challenges and pushing players to take decisions, which is the juice of a larp.

A fancy for this genre has been observable in the Italian community of larpers with a more “Nordic” taste as well, and in the past few years, the Terre Spezzate larp collective has promoted three Nordic style larps centered on the theme of oppression and abuse of authority. All three games were in three-day format with about 70-100 participants per run. The games ended up forming a thematic trilogy.

The first one was *La fortezza dei vinti* (The fortress of the vanquished), staged in the medieval Castle of Paderna, near Piacenza. It was run in 2013 for the first time and re-run in 2014. In a fantasy setting, a quiet country stronghold is occupied by an enemy army, turning it into the focal point of the ongoing war between two kingdoms.

Then came *Black Friday*, created by a collective of people coming from different larp teams, inclu-

ding Cronosfera and Chaos League. Played twice in the rustic mountain village of Lusernetta (Turin) in 2014, it will be run again in 2016, this time in English and for an international audience. In a contemporary setting, heavily inspired by TV series, the regular life of a group of miners living in a small company town is suddenly disrupted by the arrival of governmental security agencies investigating a mystery and holding the power to restrict freedom and civil rights if necessary.

Finally, *I ribelli della montagna* (The Rebels on the Mountain), played in 2015 and again staged in Lusernetta, was an historical larp. It was set during the Second World War and inspired by the 1944 Marzabotto massacre, a tragic act of reprisal perpetrated on Italian civilians by withdrawing Nazi forces. A small mountain town, in which the local Fascist blackshirts are keeping a fragile stability, must face the arrival of Nazi and Fascist military from one side, and from the other the upsurge in the activity of the partisans hiding in the woods.

### Dynamics and Tools

Simply put, the writing of a larp based on authoritarianism means keeping in mind that there will be two major factions in the field: the oppressors and the oppressed. The main purpose of the first is to preserve or impose their dictates by any means, while the latter will mainly suffer and choose between rebellion or collaboration. The authoritarian figures will exercise their control on physical and psychological levels, through force, violence, fear, intimidation, murder, or the threat of any of these.

Generally speaking, the presence of an oppressive authority offers several inputs that can be used to shape and define the game. Everybody has to confront it, and even characters trying to avoid choosing sides can be forced to take a stance. Characters have to choose how to relate to abuses and such. Are they going to bear them and bow down to those who commit them? Will they protest for the violations of their rights? And how will they do these things? Openly to inspire everybody? Or will they act secretly, trying to come into contact with those siding with them?

Nonetheless, the persecutors must decide how to behave with respect to the orders they receive. Will they be totally loyal to their side or will they doubt the actions they are carrying out? What will they do when their duty will put them against their friends and family? Regardless of whether you play a victim or an oppressor, there are many ways in which your character could act. For personal gain, joining one side to take advantage of the situation. For a strong belief, an uncontrollable urge to follow your own ideals, or to seek revenge – or just to survive one more day. Everything depends on which kind of personal qualities one wants to give to their character, and on what type of experience the player is willing to have.

So there is a lot on the plate in a game revolving around a story of oppression, and the organisers’ use of the higher-level political powers plays a crucial role in the setting. This is the most obvious tool, and it can be used both as a regulator and as a *deus ex machina* to initiate plots and events. Usually, a coercive power does not need to provide explanations for its decisions. Civilians know it is dangerous to challenge the actions of an unfriendly military force, and enforcers themselves are normally not allowed to discuss orders. For this reason, the political power can be used as a *deus ex machina* to steer plots and events. Every task the players are expected to perform can be imposed just by using the words: “It is an order.” This works to trigger quests, to provide inputs, or to force decisions the player are expected to take.

While it might sound cheap to use the “It is an order” trick, it does allow to do away with an amount of justification which is often cosmetic, and to get down to the juice of the game when it is needed. However, the trick needs to be used wisely: each time a game resorts to this method, the level of tension and hostility rise, and while it can bring the characters to a sought-after climactic confrontation with their beliefs, it can also frustrate the players if overdone (which is less than inter-

esting). This makes it a matter of fine tuning, but the tool remains a powerful way to raise the stakes and create the conditions which add pep and create interesting developments.

Another tool we used in all three larps was adding a third “faction” other than the oppressors and the oppressed. This provided ampler room for choice and fluid allegiances, and we experimented with it in three very different ways in the three larps.

In *La fortezza dei vinti*, the despotic side was embodied by a foreign army occupying the castle and imposing their will with intimidation and viciousness. A sudden power vacuum, occurring in game, left the inhabitants of the castle, the oppressed side, without their former benevolent political leader, and they had to choose whether to oppose the occupation or accept it. The third side was a group of “uneasy allies”, a whole team of characters formerly taken captive by the invaders and forced to serve them. They had no bonds with the people of the castle, and their friends and families were kept as hostages to prevent their rebellion. They had a hard moral choice to make, holding the balance of power: inflicting on strangers the same injustice they suffered, in exchange for a share of the treasures, or helping them fight the oppression at the almost certain cost of the lives of their beloved ones.

In *Black Friday*, the authority was still coming from the outside, but this time it was not a hostile stranger. It was represented by respected organisations of the society. In this case, the civilians had to face the gradual change in the attitude of the institutions that switched from protective to restraining. Trust in them, and in their own convictions, was called into question and undermined. The third faction here was represented by scientists as a rational, potentially heartless force, upon which everyone else was relying for answers.

Finally, in *I ribelli della montagna*, the oppression was internal, and a historical one in this case. It had been present for several years before the beginning of the game. The Fascist party was in charge of caring for the village and trying to keep the order. The Fascist military had to support the Nazis during their withdrawal and were less concerned with the civilians while focused on the war effort and the partisans’ actions. The Fascist oppression had already been going on for several years at the starting point of the game. Many characters had already chosen their side, and they eventually had to account for their actions during a crisis. They could change their mind at the very last moment or follow their beliefs till the end.

## Lessons Learned

First of all, the principle of authoritarianism must be put into practice through a careful analysis of the forces in the field. Since the beginning, the oppressors shall have, as dictated by the plot, the resources to show their superiority over the oppressed. This means, in practice, that in the beginning, the odds will be very unbalanced in favour of the oppressors. Weapons, dominating positions, protection, reputation, and roles: everything can flow into the concept of “strength that turns into authoritarianism.”

The oppressed are ruled and deprived of their rights not because they want to, but because they are afraid of the consequences that rebelling may – and will – bring. Thus, violent repercussions become a medium that makes the plot proceed, an absolute conflict scenario that is often resolved with the humiliation of the oppressed through beatings, imprisonment, torture, and so on. To create a fruitful level of tension, it becomes essential to push the players who play the role of, for example, the invading army, to play in a brutal, almost exaggerated way. Therefore, physical contact should be allowed by the rules of the game as much as sensibly possible (within the limits of safety and consent).

The authoritarianism, in addition to following a line tied to physical interaction, should be felt by the players on a psychological level as well. This is meant to facilitate the development of a sense of revenge (or any other resolution) in the minds of those playing the oppressed. A larp in which the

oppressor acts undisturbed from the beginning to the end becomes boring and tiring. And most of all, it does not allow the players to reach the last climax, in which – in one way or another – the two forces should be able to deal with each other or give vent to the conflict. The psychological aspects of exerting oppression thus become perhaps the most important ones, considering that the beatings and other forms of aggression are simulated, and so is the pain. On a psychological level, the emotional catharsis is what transforms the action and moods in resolution. Feelings of fear, not knowing what is going on, threats, deprivation, or imprisonment – all should be pushed to the extreme by the oppressors so that development is made possible.

In *La fortezza dei vinti*, the pressure was dictated primarily by the presence of an army that replaced the former ruling power, and by the awareness of a coming war with an uncertain outcome. In *Black Friday*, authoritarianism was put into practice through psychological pressure caused by the ignorance of the ongoing events the oppressed players experienced. In *I ribelli della montagna*, the core oppressive entity was the presence of Nazis who had taken control of an Italy that did not want to be controlled. One of the factions had already chosen rebellion, but they didn’t have the means to fight the enemy head-on.

As one may expect, it is fundamental to prepare players carefully. This means making clear from the very beginning, at least through a detailed player’s guide and ad hoc workshops, that there will be parties in the game that will set the pace of the conflict through humiliations and harassment, and that through such dynamics the players will be brought to fight or surrender – and to really experience the emotions involved with a sensitive theme such as oppression. The risk here is to either have players immerse too little and show an implausible degree of rebelliousness (like being pestiferous rather than brave), or too much, and be paralysed. The beauty of a larp is that it provides a safe environment to experience finding the courage to raise one’s head and believe in an ideal – and maybe die for it. All in all, things worked well in these larps, and players proved able to stay true not only to their characters, but also to the general mood and pace of the events.

Speaking of pace, one of the most crucial issues in this kind of larp is managing the crescendo of tension, gradually leading to a final face-off. Threats and abuses have to rise in frequency and intensity, but without blocking the game of the victims. In order to reach this purpose, we worked on two levels. To make it unlikely that things would escalate explosively, we designed a degree of rivalry among the oppressors, resulting in internal clashes and partially conflicting agendas that prevented them from acting as a dull, monolithic block. To turn the heat up, the oppressors would receive orders or other communiques from superiors (a herald of the king, a call by the FBI boss, or a radio message from the German HQ) leading to an increase in the intensity of the conflict, or there would be a sudden turning point in the plot, still generally an unheralded outbreak of violence or subjugation. Examples include the unexpected attack of the king’s army, shooting fireballs over the castle walls, the exposure of lies and treachery affecting the group at large, the public execution of a beloved father accused of betrayal, and so on.

## Playing the Bad Guy

Contrary to what one might think, playing the “evil bad guy” is not an easy task and it also includes its own psychological stress: if you immerse enough, you can feel the weight of doing horrible things pretty much on your skin. It is worth mentioning that in one case, during the first run of *Black Friday*, a player with an oppressor character left the game after the first day, feeling totally uncomfortable with the role she was invested with. However, most of the time, this stress was embraced as being insightful. This was something experienced by the players who volunteered to impersonate Nazi soldiers in *I ribelli della montagna*. Before the first run, during an interview for local media, a reporter asked the player who impersonated the leader of the Nazis why he had chosen to play such a cha-



racter. The player said he was really curious about impersonating someone with political ideas totally different from his own, and he wanted to experience what it could feel like to immerse himself in the political and moral convictions of a Hauptsturmführer of the Third Reich.

The players who played the oppressors generally described the emotions they felt as of a different quality than the rest of the lot, but equally intense. A player who during *La fortezza dei vinti* found himself interpreting an extremely violent scene which ended in the public scarring of a woman (a scene with blood and screams) reported: “At that time, I wondered if I was not exaggerating. But while all this was happening, I realised that every participant in the scene was feeling very intense emotions, and that after my actions, everyone’s game would have gained in terms of involvement and action.”

In all three larps, the oppressor characters had very diverse moral qualities and motivations, degrees of identification with their group, and a choice of approaches that were critical of the choices of their group or their leaders, which they could enhance or minimize depending on the game experience they wanted.

We have observed that the majority of players who played the most violent, extreme, and morally questionable characters were still able to play the larp as protagonists and to make their characters their own. They achieved this by focusing on the opposition of their own attitudes, finding in it the key to identify with their characters.

The authors were very careful in leaving these players the freedom to find their own personal interpretations of their characters. Between the different runs of each of the larps, there was a huge difference between the two representations of the same characters, with repercussions on the overall plot which sometimes became spectacular. This shows that the human factor is never to be underestimated, especially in stories of violence and oppression.

## Close to Home

There is no doubt that the players did not perceive the oppression in the same way in the three larps. Although no quantitative instrument was employed to assess this, their general impressions were very different. All in all, the oppression was less perceived in *La fortezza dei vinti*, more felt during *Black Friday*, and reached its peak in *I ribelli della montagna*. This might be explained by the distance players were able to put between themselves and the setting, a concept often referred to in larp literature as close(ness) to home.

This distance can be roughly depicted by assigning three values in a virtual coordinate system: the first value can be all-round “realism,” with the second being the distance in time between the players’ context and the one of the larp, and the third being the cultural distance. From this perspective, *La fortezza dei vinti* would be much more distant from the players than the other two larps. This is totally reasonable: it was a larp set in a medieval fantasy world, the players could see non-human races around them, and death was dealt with swords and axes. The chosen location was a castle, which drew the players away from their usual surroundings. On the contrary, *I ribelli della montagna* was set in an imaginary Italian village quite similar to a real one in terms of both the location (a small, private mountain village in north-west Italy) and its description in the setting. Most crucially, it was not about a fictional story but about a true, painful event of the country’s recent history (the players’ grandparents’ times for all but the youngest), so the cultural distance was next to none. *Black Friday* was somewhat in the middle: the contemporary setting allowed an extremely small temporal distance, but the cultural differences and the “TV series” atmosphere kept the players slightly more distant from their characters.

It was striking how far from the common idea of “fun” *I ribelli della montagna* turned out to be, possibly due to this short distance between the players and their characters: we collected and published a hundred pages of written reactions from our players, and while many of their stories describe the

strong emotions they felt in the game, nearly none of them say that the players “had fun” playing the larp. When directly asked, most of them answered that the notion of “having fun” was out of context for the larp. Even so, the players described it as a precious, almost life changing experience.

Interestingly, *I ribelli della montagna* had the greatest recruiting issues of the three games. Neither of the two 84-players runs were sold out, and in particular it proved difficult to fill all of the oppressed roles and the female oppressor roles. This may have several reasons, and a conclusive analysis is impossible (it could even be that there just was less trust in the organizing team, which did not include some of the most experienced members of the community), but the best bet is on its closeness to home, making it very controversial for many people. In comparison with the other two games, it had a mixed reception in the community: many of the regular players were hesitant about taking part in the larp or even outright against the idea of an event which dealt with a bloody event from our contemporary history. There was criticism on the choice of the theme, which has been unheard of in previous games. This is consistent with the anecdotal knowledge that players are more weighted down by their own feelings and beliefs when interpreting characters who are “close to home.”

## Conclusions

The experience of three different larps having oppression and conflict with authority as their main themes has taught us valuable lessons from which we have learned some good practices.

Firstly, the importance of presenting the event in a proper way. If the main theme of the event include subjecting the characters to abuses and injustice, the players must be aware of it so that they can prepare themselves and be ready for the intended mood. This will lead players to share the same idea for the game. Not only will they accept unbalanced scenes of conflict with one side having an excessive advantage, but they will also ask for them.

Secondly, it is important to balance the oppressive actions with attempts of reaction. A game in which the authority has total control and all the rebellion uprisings are prevented is not functional for anyone. Analogously, if the controlling power is not perceived as a real threat, it will be ineffective, and the larp will miss its purpose. It is vital to set the initial tension to a high level but not too high, since it will have to increase properly during the time available.

Finally, it is important to remember that not everyone is willing to play an intense game that could include mistreatments – even if fake ones. This is even truer if there are sensitive topics in the main plot – the Second World War and the fights between partisans and Fascists are still discussed in Italy, and it can be difficult for people to view a larp about them as a game. This, in our opinion, demonstrates that larps like this are needed.

*The writers would like to thank Pierpaolo Vittoria for the huge help in editing and proofreading.*

## ■ Ludography

**La fortezza dei vinti** (Oct 2013; Apr 2014), Castello di Paderna, Pontenure (Piacenza, Italy). Terre Spezzate.

**Black Friday** (Nov 2014), Villaggio delle Stelle, Lusernetta (Turin, Italy). Terre Spezzate, Cronosfera, Chaos League and others.

**I ribelli della montagna – L’ultima notte di Montelupo** (Jul 2015), Villaggio delle Stelle, Lusernetta (Turin, Italy). Terre Spezzate.

■ Lorenzo Trenti

## Larping to Resist

Last year marked 70 years since 1945. This means that 70 years have passed since the end of the Second World War. The year 2015 was a year of celebrations in several countries involved, and Italy was no exception. However, the so-called *belpaese* (“beautiful country”) had a very complex history during WW2, so celebrations for the anniversary aren’t a simple issue.

Mussolini’s Fascist dictatorship lasted from 1922 to 1943. In 1938, the Italian government promulgated racial laws against Jewish people. After several defeats in the war, the king – still the formal ruler of Italy – deposed Mussolini on July 25, 1943, and had him arrested. However, he was in prison for two months only before being rescued by Germans. On September 8, Italy surrendered to the Allies and the king fled to the South, leaving the troops without orders. A civil war started in Italy. Before 1945, Nazi Germany captured thousands of Italian soldiers and conquered Northern Italy, creating a protectorate (Republic of Salò) under Mussolini’s rule. In the South, the Allies slowly began to march North and push back the Nazi forces. In the meantime, Italian partisans fought Nazis in antifascist brigades. On April 25, 1945, Rome was freed from the Nazi forces and soon all of Italy was restored.

April 25 is still a national holiday in Italy, but the events of the civil war of 1943-1945 were lacerating for the society. Even after the end of the war, many soldiers, bureaucrats and sympathizers of the Fascist regime were executed, often without a proper trial. It took a long time to have a real peace in Italy. One could say that even today Italians are trying to build a shared national memory of those events.

So in 2015, it was 70 years since the liberation from Nazis and fascism. Time flies away, and more and more witnesses of those times are passing away. There is a risk that after no survivors are left, April 25 will become a mere institutional celebration: just a number on the calendar without signifi-



*The leader of the local fascists.  
La fiera di San Martino  
(in game).  
Photo by Daniele Gardinazzi.*



*A soldier. I ribelli della  
montagna (in game).  
Photo by Alessandro Genitori.*

cant content that could be grasped by the new generations of those who weren’t there.

Perhaps because of the round number, on the 70th celebration of the Liberation the Italian larp scene produced some events on these political themes. It wasn’t just a matter of flavour or game setting: the explicit goal was to explore shared national memory by the means of larp.

I’ll explore the purposes and the backstage of two of the main events<sup>1</sup> that dealt with this theme, even if from a symmetrical angle: *La fiera di San Martino – 1939* (“Local Fair of St. Martino 1939”) by Cyber Masters, and *I ribelli della montagna* (“The Rebels of the Mountain”) from the collective Terre Spezzate. The first re-enacted a local country fair in 1939, in the Fascist regime, while the latter told the story of a little town resisting Nazi occupation in 1944. I interviewed two of the organizers, Marco Della Corte for *La fiera di San Martino* and Elio Biffi for *I ribelli della montagna*, to get some insight into their larp design.

<sup>1</sup> There were other events too, namely two games during “Play!” expo in Modena: *70 anni dopo* (“70 years after”) by CyberMasters, sort of documentaristic time travel into a dystopian 2015 where Fascism never fell, and a larp treasure hunt organized by Cronosfera along the city’s places of Resistance’s memory.

## History Is Politics

How do you design history? Larping in a real setting has pros and cons, in terms of staging and documentation.

*La fiera di San Martino* was played in a former country school from the Fascist era.

“It was ready for us,” says Marco della Corte. “We just had to ‘demodernize’ some elements and block access to areas that we couldn’t stage in a proper way. But a lot more important were experiential activities: cooking together, playing traditional country fair games, discovering day-to-day character plots... We also had small but significant props, like an old radio (always on) and advertisement posters from the 30’s. As for the documentation issue, we didn’t want to focus on epic elements. Our larp didn’t have to be the fulcrum of a resounding historical event, but the re-enactment of a normal little country town where the daily routine slowly breaks up. This is historical: at the time, Fascism in the villages wasn’t perceived as a true dictatorship; but rather as something folkloristic. Life was already hard for farmers, and one could get a blow from the stick of the landlord or one of his henchmen. So our design work was mainly on characters on a human scale.”

“Larping in a historical setting is not more or less difficult, it’s just a different task,” says Elio Biffi about *I ribelli della montagna*. “On one hand, of course, historical verisimilitude and strong documentation surely make the writing process heavier (especially since combining them with the playfulness of the larp is a difficult challenge). On the other hand, historical reality gave us a lot of resources, depth and complexity. With a fantasy setting, none of this would have been possible. There’s also much work on “culture calibration” – i.e. sharing our vision about an event so thick in terms of storytelling – and it was easier thanks to the amount of novels, movies and documentaries about the Resistance, the Republic of Salò, the Waffen-SS, etc.”

Della Corte: “*La fiera* had only one location. It lasted two days, and there was a break for the night. There was no central plot, but the country fair had two “trigger events” that involved characters in a delicate balance of choices. These events were designed to disrupt the social equilibrium on Sunday. There were groups and factions, and each one of them had its own subplots. Some of the subplots could unleash consequences on the whole larp, and others were played in a close circle of 4-5 participants”.

Biffi: “*I ribelli* didn’t have a central plot, at least not in the common sense. The storytelling structure was based on relations between the factions (Nazis and Fascists, local villagers and partisan brigades).

There were fixed junctions – the arrival of the Nazis and Fascists, the entrance of the partisans to the village – until the final resolution, which was largely left to the players. The larp lasted 36 hours without interruption and it took place in a very large location: the whole side of a hill. We had different gaming spaces (the partisan camp, the village, the house occupied by the SS) but all of them were within reach, 5-15 minutes walk.”

Creating a historical larp with this theme also means trying to convey the political aspects of the setting. Both larps did most of the work before the event, with practical information and workshops for fine-tuning.

Della Corte: “We gave a lot of real social rules in the player’s manual. Women were not equal to men, and landlords had higher social position than all the rest. The following were among the practical rules: you don’t use foreign words (Fascism prohibits them!); you don’t have the right to vote; you must publicly endorse the regime and respect the landlords; you are Catholic and everyone who isn’t will go to Hell; if you’re a woman, your opinion doesn’t count; you don’t smoke; some jobs are for you and others aren’t; and you don’t kiss in public. Also everyone had to address each other using the old fashioned pronoun *voi* – similar to the English “thou” (it was considered “very modern” and mandatory).”

Biffi: “We worked a lot before the event and used Facebook to give stimuli to the participants; we wanted them to focus on political elements, since many of the characters and factions were based on politics. We had the Fascist philosopher, the Communist political commissar, the ex-Fascist who had repented, etc. The groups were identified by their ideology – Communist, Catholic... Many of the props highlighted this, from the Nazi party membership card to Mussolini’s bust in the House of Fascism. During the workshop, our signal for silence was the Roman salute with straight arm, obviously not for ideological reasons but to accustom the participants with a daily gesture from 1944.”



Winning in the raffle. *La fiera di San Martino* (in game).  
Photo by Daniele Gardinazzi.



In game photo documentation. *I ribelli della montagna* (in game).  
Photo by Alessandro Genitori.



## Creating Resistant Characters

It's interesting to note that both *La fiera* and *I ribelli* decided to play out the political part of the scenario to a large extent in the inner field of moral choices. This was a deliberate design choice from both larpwriting teams. It could be argued that its origins are rooted in what historians call the grey area of Italians: the huge mass of those who weren't Fascists but neither openly condemned the regime nor tried to resist it. It's a deep moral wound that still needs tending to. Having the participants live those dynamics is a strong political statement. The subtext is: what would you do in the same situation?

Writing a larp character means creating a unique point of view on the world. The problem is how to treat negative characters like Nazis and Fascists. Larpwrights are at risk of writing them as purely evil (thus making them one-dimensional cardboards) or, on the other hand, humanizing them too much and maybe even justifying fascism. The two organizing teams were aware of this challenge from the very beginning.

Della Corte: "Actually it wasn't difficult. First things first, you need to make them believable. Their actions must be comprehensible. The Black Shirts (Fascist militia) weren't just "bad": they were individuals serving that system. Each of them had ambitions, fears and doubts; among them there was someone who feared for the worst, and some of the peasants felt protected by them. Good and evil are human aspects that can make a functional character. You don't need one-dimensional stereotypes. A bad person doesn't know that he's bad. Maybe he just thinks he is right, and very determined behaviour can be seen as evil by someone who's shy. Also, a baddie can be evil towards someone and kind to someone else, and this makes for other non-stereotypical elements of gameplay. Our purpose was to enter the daily life of every house wife, farmer, artisan, landlord and black shirt, to humanize them, and to let everyone understand that the whole Fascist system worked that way. Humanizing doesn't mean justifying, and playing those characters made the participants understand that they had ethical choices to make. Do I have to pick a side or not? Shall I strike vengeance or am I able to forgive those who have harmed me? Will I keep all my possessions, or share them with others? Will I betray someone to save myself, even if it will cause suffering on someone else?"

Biffi: "I shared the task of writing Waffen-SS characters with another organizer, and we also shared the anxiety involved. There were many risks. But yes, just saying that there were good people on one side and evil people on the other would be simplistic, and erroneous too. Once you get past under-



*La fiera di San Martino. Photo by Daniele Gardinazzi.*

standing the Nazi values (without endorsing them, of course), it's both fascinating and terrible. You understand that in the end they were men like any others, made of flesh and desire, born under bad stars. "Our" Nazis weren't good or bad: they were Nazis, some of them more, some less. I agree that it can be seen as a controversial topic, but in our opinion (shared by the participants who played those characters), being in *I ribelli* on the side of those that are always painted as purely evil was a great achievement. We, the organizers, are antifascists and believe that in our larp we must analyze also the point of view of the defeated – not to save them from moral judgment or to redeem them, but to understand that they too were human beings, guilty of being children of their time".

The two larps differed slightly in character design processes.

Della Corte: "Every character had a goal: an ethical choice to be followed, a debt to be paid, a person that must be protected... Someone had a secret that was known just by them (e.g. being a Jew), so the player was constantly under the pressure of having a mask on. And this mask could break, from the inside to the outside, because of fear, or the desire to find confidence in a friend. Other characters had a fixed purpose, like "keep this clandestine issue of *L'Unità*", the communist newspaper. These purposes were usually strategically designed to put the whole story in motion without having the organizers play a specific character. "A" gives an envelope to "B" and "B" feels the need to confess to "C", the priest, after reading it: it was enough to trigger some social mechanisms without being invasive".



*I ribelli della montagna. Photo by Lisa Murer.*

Biffi: "The characters were defined by the organizers, except for some blank zones where each player had the freedom to fill in details and specifics. Design-wise, we first outlined the factions, and then put the character concepts into them. Then, for each character concept, we tried to focus on a crisis: the big choice that defines the character. That said, not everyone had a strong tragic element. We created bonds with a minimum of strong relations (family, love, life debts) and weak (friendship, economics). There were some secrets here and there, but the game – and the writing process – wasn't focused on them".

The general supervisor of the Fascist Party. *La fiera di San Martino* (in game). Photo by Daniele Gardinazzi.



Traditional women's tasks. *La fiera di San Martino* (in game). Photo by Daniele Gardinazzi.



## What Would You Have Done? What Will You Do?

Personal history almost always intertwines with capital-H History, so looking at the latter from the perspective of a character is a good way to understand a society and its dynamics.

We started from the observation that witnesses of the society during WW2 are disappearing, and larp can be one of the keys to let us understand that era. It should not be surprising that the overall success of both *La fiera di San Martino* and *I ribelli della montagna* was based on the choices that the players made during the games and the experiences that they created. As we've seen, both larps were designed around the theme of having the participants consider what they would have done 70 years ago. Without being blatantly educational, both larps also compelled players to think of their personal choices in real life after the game. This suggests a further political question that sticks in the players' minds when the game has finished: what would you do if you lived in a dictatorship here and now?

Predicting the individual choices of every character would of course have been impossible, but both organizing teams knew in advance the likely social dynamics that would emerge from gameplay.

Della Corte: "A system with 20-30 characters, even when broadly set, creates unpredictable interactions. Anyway we provided two endings: a bitter one where, after an arrest, the country fair would seemingly go on, but everything's changed forever; and another one where the villagers rebel against the Fascist Party rulings."

Biffi: "The experiential choices from players' part were, more or less, what we expected: the big intimate choices, the narrative crisis. Sometimes we were baffled by small practical choices that the players made during gameplay, like trekking a less taken path in hope of surprising the enemy... and then getting lost in the woods."

Della Corte: "We had very good feedback. The participants of *La fiera* brought home an inner experience – that of the characters and their ethical choices – but also a practical one, like learning how to make bread in the oven or to cook homemade pasta. *La fiera* was designed without strong cliffhangers: there were just some social dynamics that were functional and helped to paint a picture of 1930's society. The game depicted the moment when normality breaks apart, and nothing can return back to how it was."

Biffi: "We had a whole Facebook group filled with positive feedback and comments. The thing that touched me was reading the reports of the most memorable scenes from the game. The players gave life to moments perfectly fitting the themes of the game. So, reading them I understood we had made it and that *I ribelli* had arrived where we wanted it to be. I think I have maybe one remorse: having written too few Fascist characters among the villagers. Perhaps having more of them could have further highlighted some of the themes."

Finally, I asked the organizers some suggestions on writing a larp with a historical/ political intent as they did.

Della Corte: "I suggest to focus on what we've lost of those times and to communicate it during the larp: the inferior position of women, the almost absolute respect paid to the landlords, the feeling that the black shirts can do anything without opposition, the emerging of racial laws..."

Biffi: "I'd suggest to focus on documentation: remember that history has less known wrinkles and that they are abundant in thrilling opportunities for storytelling. Pay also attention to combining history and playfulness: don't lose the balance between the two, or the game won't be significant for every participant."

### ■ Info

#### **I ribelli della montagna**

Organizers: Andrea Capone, Elio Biffi, Aladino Amantini, Andreana Vigone, Annalisa Corbo, Federico Barcella, Matteo Miceli, Mauro Vettori, Paolo Benedetti.

Location: Villaggio delle Stelle

Duration: 40 hrs

Participants: 76

Participant's fee: € 90 (average)

#### **La fiera di San Martino 1939**

Organizers: CyberMasters.

Location: San Martino Secchia, Carpi

Duration: 18 hrs

Participants: 15 the first run, 35 the second (on a maximum of 64 available)

Participant's fee: € 40

## ■ Ludography

**I ribelli della montagna** (2015): Andrea Capone, Elio Biffi, Aladino Amantini, Andreana Vigone, Annalisa Corbo, Federico Barcella, Matteo Miceli, Mauro Vettori, Paolo Benedetti, Villaggio delle Stelle, Lusernetta (TO) – Italy.

**La fiera di San Martino – 1939** (2014, 2015): CyberMasters, San Martino Secchia, Carpi (MO) – Italy.

## ■ Juhana Pettersson

# Saving the Baltic Sea with Larp

“When discussing the privatization of the sea, there is only one question: how do we divide the shares?”

Political larps rarely tackle environmental issues. The larp medium works well for creating strong experiences and exploring human interaction. At first glance, environmental problems seem to come down to abstract scientific facts rather than relations between individuals and personal conflict. This makes it hard to approach them using larp.

This is particularly so in the case of a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon, such as our topic, eutrophication of the Baltic Sea. Agriculture and other industries in Russia, Finland, Poland, Sweden and other countries pump nutrients into the sea. For example, farmers use fertilizers to increase the yield from their fields, and they end up in the water. Fertilizers lead to unchecked growth in the sea, which uses up oxygen in the water, creating anoxic, lifeless dead zones. On the surface, the problem manifests as an expanse of blue-green algae on the shores of the Baltic Sea in the summer.

The *Baltic Warriors* project is about tackling this issue through transmedia and larp. Thanks to the interest of Goethe-Institut Finnland in the new art form of larp, we got funding for seven larps touring countries around the Baltic Sea in the summer of 2015. With this larp campaign, we wanted to affect change, but also explore how larp could be used for political ends.

## Zombie Politics

Eutrophication is an abstract topic that you cannot interact with. Thus, we chose to approach it by means of allegory. In the game fiction, eutrophication manifested as Viking zombies rising out of the





*A Viking zombie eating a traffic sign in Copenhagen. Post-game. Photo by Jubana Pettersson*

dead zones in the sea. This represented the simple environmental idea that we can't debate forever and time is running out. In real life, the talk goes on and the situation gets worse invisibly under the sea, in the larp the problems shamble to the shore to attack the living. We thus made the problem concrete in a brute way.

The zombies gave us action, but the larps also needed interaction, which we got from the political processes centered on environmental issues. We aimed to demonstrate how lobbyists, interest groups and activists shape the views of politicians.

Each *Baltic Warriors* game featured a public meeting about an environmental question that was going to be voted on in parliament or council. The meetings were attended by politicians, lobbyists, activists, media, and concerned citizens. Politicians were trying to make up their minds on the issue. Lobbyists were trying to pressure them to make decisions that would benefit certain interest groups in the short run, while activists were trying to influence the decision making in order to save the Baltic Sea.

Every politician controlled 5, 10 or 11 votes in her party. We told the participants that votes from outside the larp would go even, so the votes controlled by the characters in the game would be decisive. The politicians were written not to have strong opinions on the issue, so that they would be swayed by whatever views they came across in the game. The players of politicians were instructed that they'd assign half of the votes based on public opinion as seen in the game, and half based on personal choice. Every politician had a personal goal and a dirty secret. Thus, the decision-making could be affected by blackmail, bribes and threats. In most of the larps, the industry side won the vote, perhaps because it's easier to effectively play cynical lobbyists than earnest activists.

Once the meeting had gone on long enough, zombies would appear. At this point, the game switched to zombie action. The characters had to co-operate to perform a ritual to defeat the zombies. This symbolized the fact that in the end, preserving the Baltic Sea is in everybody's interests and collaboration is needed to avoid environmental catastrophes.

The playing style bordered on political satire. Indeed, the grande finale of the campaign, set in Helsinki, featured an international summit where privatization of the Baltic Sea was proposed as a solution for the zombie problem. This is an actual proposal made by a Finnish celebrity billionaire, although never dealt with as seriously as in the larp.

The Helsinki game was designed as a city larp, where the participants had preliminary meetings and other adventures around Helsinki before attending the summit. To fit the satirical style, all events were hosted by the Finnish media personality Niko Drake (played by Mike Pohjola), a vain neoconservative. He moderated the discussions, often heavily favoring the lobbyists.

To make the activism side of the larp more interesting, and to take into account the fact that acting inside a political system is not the only way to create change, we also had more radical activist characters. There was a group called Earth Without Borders who took direct action and who confronted the views of the lobbyists in a more straightforward manner.

Players seemed to take to the theme of direct action, and in many games Earth Without Borders players created materials for themselves to use in the game. In St. Petersburg, the players made a big black banner, and in the final Helsinki game, the activists infiltrated a high-level private meeting to shower people with leaflets. This happened early in the game, so they had disguises that allowed them to come back to the conference and sit beside the very people they had disrupted.

## Local Issues

Eutrophication is a complex issue, and the causes and solutions change from country to country. Each game approached the common theme through a specific, local issue. In Helsinki, politicians were deciding on a new environmental law to restrict the use of agricultural fertilizers. In Tallinn, the focus was on a new power plant that would pollute the sea, and in St. Petersburg the game centered on building a wastewater processing plant. The idea was to use the larp to model the political decision-making process in different places and how various groups can influence it.

The choice to go local flowed naturally from the nature of larp. Larp is a process of co-creation, so we wanted each game to engage with the particular participants, venue and locale. As the games moved through the countries around the Baltic Sea, the project changed, accumulating ideas and experiences from different places.

Focusing on local issues was a way to connect individual participants in a clear way to the overarching issue of eutrophication. Eutrophication affects the entire Baltic Sea, and the keys to fixing the problem lie in many individual countries surrounding it. We tailored the game anew in each country, and localized our written characters.



*One of our local producers in Kiel, Maite Ruygemoreno, playing the game. In-game. Photo by Jubana Pettersson*

In most areas the biggest problem is agriculture, but we did not want all the games to be about limiting the use of fertilizers. In St. Petersburg area the biggest problem is untreated sewage from rural settlements such as villages and country houses. In Sweden we used an actual current project to limit agricultural emissions called Greppa Näringen (Focus on Nutrients). The idea of the project is to educate individual farmers around Sweden in reducing nutrient emissions and to increase energy efficiency on their farms.

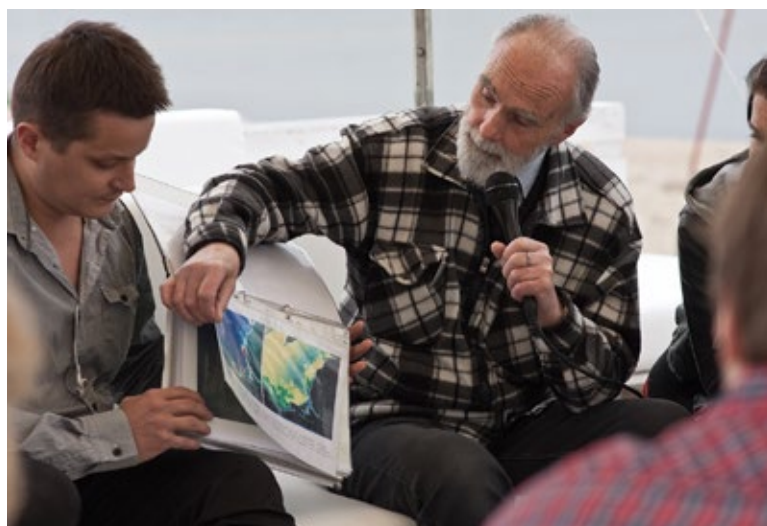
In some countries we extrapolated from reality. In Poland, for example, there is a disused gypsum waste stack near the Vistula River. Finnish authorities accuse the stack of leaking massive amounts of phosphorus to the river and from there to the Baltic Sea, making it a major source of nutrients. We used this as basis for the game fiction. The characters were discussing re-opening the waste stack so it would be used for dumping gypsum again.

The strategy of going local was not an unqualified success. In many places it worked well, but in a few countries our understanding of the local political situation regarding eutrophication was insufficient to make the issue compelling enough. We had local producers in each country, but to be really successful, we would have had to customize the game even more.

## Real World Experts

Each *Baltic Warriors* game was followed by a panel discussion featuring real scientists, politicians, and other experts. The Helsinki game that concluded the campaign was preceded by a workshop that included lectures on eutrophication. The players also had the chance to pose questions to various experts. This included a Skype conference with a lobbyist who was talking via his mobile device from a golf course in Britain.

Since the issue of solving eutrophication is so complex and dependent on local politics, we didn't have a ready-made set of solutions that would work from St. Petersburg to Stockholm. In this way, the panel discussions following each larp also fed into the design of the remaining games. We also used the discussions to try to lure experts and politicians to actually play in the larp. Once people signed up for the panel discussion, they became interested in participating in the larp too. Often they decided to play at the last minute, and their participation connected the issues more strongly to the game fiction.



*Panel discussion in progress in Sopot. Post-game. Photo by Paweł Matuszewski*

Inviting people to the panel discussions was its own hurdle, and had some rather cynical features. It turns out that when a minister joins the panel, previously reluctant panelists suddenly become very interested.

One of the stranger participants in the debates was a fatalistic Russian public official who had been working in the field since the Soviet times. He had lost all faith in protecting the environment unless the structures of our societies are changed. In a way he was right in not promoting simple personal solutions, but on the other hand major changes do not appear out of nowhere. Fatalism can work as a convenient excuse to do nothing.

In Sweden, a lobbyist in the debate tried to hide the fact that his job is to lobby the audience. When the host did not stop him, Mike Pohjola, representing the organizing group, had to attack him on stage, asking whether he was paid to speak these obfuscating untruths. He admitted he was.

## Looking for a Media Hook

Using larp for explicitly political ends is still largely virgin territory. Some of the ideas used in the Baltic Warriors larps came from the wider transmedia framework, while others came to the projects as part of the personal experience of team members who had worked on games such as the Palestinian-Finnish larp *Halat bisar* (State of Siege, 2013).



*In-character, giving an interview to real media in Sopot. In-game. Photo by Paweł Matuszewski*

Our political analysis of the problem of eutrophication focused on the gap between rhetoric and action. This issue is not new, and people in countries around the Baltic Sea have been discussing it for decades, but concrete measures have been lacking. There's lots of talk but little action.

Because of this, we didn't have to challenge people's preconceptions or present them with radical new ideas. Rather, the question we wanted to ask was that since we've known about this for more than thirty years, why is nothing happening – and should that change?

In *Halat bisar*, there was a dual strategy of engaging people. A fairly small number of participants got the intense experience of the larp itself, while the media story reached people in Finland and abroad in a more diffuse form. This two-tier strategy was quite successful, so we attempted to replicate it in the seven countries we took *Baltic Warriors* to.



*Halat hisar* had a simple, compelling hook: Palestine and larp. In contrast, *Baltic Warriors* had a less sexy subject (eutrophication) and a more moderate, discursive political position, and the events seemed to be harder to grasp. We didn't have a solid "elevator pitch" to use in press releases, and I'd say this was the main reason we failed to attract more attention.

Unfortunately, we came up with a possible solution to this problem only after the last game was over. If we had focused on saying that the larp shows how political decisions are made (something that the larp design indeed does), we could have had the clear message we needed.

## Lobbying with larp

To further a political goal, we can affect ordinary citizens and get the story out in the media. But there is also a more direct route: we can use the larp to affect politicians and other decision-makers, who can influence things more directly. Perhaps by playing in the larp, they get a new view of the issue.

This was not a major part of our design although we had some success with it, but it is something that can be deployed in future political games to greater effect. It might be worthwhile to design a political larp purely for politicians.

In our test game in the summer of 2014, the Finnish Minister of the Environment Ville Niinistö, of the Green Party, participated in the panel discussion following the larp. In the Kiel game, we had Anke Spoorendonk, the Minister for Justice, Culture and European Affairs for the German state of Schleswig-Holstein. She both played the larp and participated in the panel discussion afterwards. We were very happy to have a few players of this type. After you have run for your life to escape from eutrophication, you are more likely to take it seriously in parliament, even if it is represented by something as non-serious as a Viking zombie.

On a slightly lower level of influence, we had participants who were industry lobbyists or environmental activists. We tried to cast them in opposite roles, so the lobbyists would play activists and vice versa. Here again the goal was to use larp to directly influence people working on the issue of eutrophication, although in practice this seemed to affect the lobbyists more than the activists. However, suitably for political satire, many environmental activists relished the opportunity to play lobbyists, and brought a vicious sense of authenticity to their portrayals.



Minister Anke Spoorendonk (right) in the midst of zombie action in Kiel. In-game. Photo by Juhana Pettersson

*Baltic Warriors* was an exploratory political game in the way it approached its goals, but also in the way we tried to test and develop ways of using larp for political purposes. The games started from the basic premise that it's not enough for a political game to be a good larp about a political subject. Rather, the larp itself has to be used in some way to directly affect the world around it. It's a work of art, but also a tool for activism.

## ■ Info

### Baltic Warriors

Produced by Kinomaton

Made possible with the support of the Goethe-Institut

**Producer** Sarita Sharma

**Creative producer** Harmke Heezen

**Transmedia and larp design** Mike Pohjola

**Larp producer** Juhana Pettersson

**Character writer** Kaisa Kangas

**Media and social media** Cecilia Dolk

**Documentation** Jaak Kilmi & Petter Karlsson

Helsinki, Finland. Pilot. August 30, 2014. Allas.

Tallinn, Estonia. May 9, 2015. Suur-Töll. Local producer Aapo Reitsak.

St. Petersburg, Russia. June 7, 2015. Taiga. Local producer Olga Vorobyeva.

Sopot, Poland. June 22, 2015. Klub Atelier. Local producer Piotr Milewski.

Kiel, Germany. July 11, 2015. Kiel Kunsthalle. Local producers David Pusch and Maite Ruizymoreno.

Copenhagen, Denmark. August 8, 2015. Christiansborg. Local producer Claus Raasted.

Stockholm, Sweden. August 22, 2015. Historiska Museet. Local producer Cecilia Dolk.

Helsinki, Finland. September 12, 2015. Ateneum, Goethe-Institut, Rakennusmestareiden liitto.

Partnership with Zero Hour.

## ■ Ludography

**Baltic Warriors** (2014-2015): Mike Pohjola, Juhana Pettersson & al., Helsinki, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Kiel, Sopot, St Petersburg, Tallin, Helsinki. Organized as a part of project Baltic Warriors by Kinomaton Berlin in cooperation with the Goethe-Institut Finland. <http://www.balticwarriors.net/>

**Halat hisar** (2013): Fatima Abdulkarim, Kaisa Kangas, Riad Mustafa, Juhana Pettersson, Maria Pettersson, Mohamad Rabah, Parkano: Pohjoismaisen roolipelaamisen seura. <http://nordicrpg.fi/piiritystila/>

# **Systems & Change**

■ Daniel Steinbach

Translated by Katharina Kroll

## Refugees Are Welcome Larp as a Method for Creating a Culture of Welcoming and Acceptance

Currently, nearly 55 million people worldwide are fleeing (UNHCR 2014, 7). The Federal Republic of Germany alone expects approximately 1 million new asylum seekers this year. Similar numbers of refugees arrived to Germany in the 1990's. Back then, the issue was presented in a negative light in politics and the media. This led to pogrom-like riots in Rostock-Lichtenhagen in 1992. There, right-wing extremists committed acts of violence against asylum seekers. The state apparatus failed miserably: the police withdrew in anxiety and abandoned the asylum seekers to their fate (see Dieckmann 2012). Miraculously, no one died. A year before, there had been attacks against an asylum centre in Hoyerswerda. As an immediate reaction to this, the 60 people living there were deported directly (see Honnigfort 2014). Despite all this, people's attitudes have changed little. The riots of Rostock-Lichtenhagen and Hoyerswerda are just two examples of violence against asylum seekers that has taken place in all European countries.

In the following years the number of fugitives arriving in Northern and Central Europe reduced greatly due to a new EU legislation. Under the so-called Dublin Regulation, the country where the asylum seeker first arrives can be made responsible to process the application for asylum. The regulation has shifted the problem to countries on EU's external borders, such as Italy, Spain and Greece, which are hopelessly overburdened. Moreover, the European Union started reinforcing the "protection" of its external borders. Frontex was established as a border protection agency and fugitives were now rejected already on their way to Europe. This has led to horrible and deadly situations where ships with refugees have been forced back to the high seas.

For several years now, the border policy of "Fortress Europe" has been looser again, and more fugitives are allowed to come to Central and Northern Europe. Italy has contribu-

ted to rethinking it by initiating operation Mare Nostrum that aimed to help refugees in distress and bring them ashore (the operation was unfortunately closed in 2014). Fugitives are also more freely permitted to transit to other European countries from the country of entry. As in the 1990's, the arrival of large numbers of fugitives is seen as a negative phenomenon in the media and in politics. As then, there are protests against asylum seekers and there is a sentiment of hatred targeted at foreigners. In many places it seems like this is supported by a large part of the middle class. In 2015, there were more than 800 arson attacks and other acts of violence targeted at reception centres in Germany (see Bundeskriminalamt 2015). In other countries, such as Hungary, fugitives and asylum seekers meet with state violence. Some countries don't even allow refugees to enter (as the example of Denmark shows), nor do they participate in an EU distribution key to relocate refugees from the overburdened border states (see *Die Zeit* 2015).

In the 1990's it was predominantly right-wing extremist groups that operated the mood against fugitives. In contrast, now anti-immigration movements are attracting middle class people rather than youth with transfigured worldviews. Examples include the German anti-Muslim groups PEGIDA and HoGeSa, and the alliance of anti-immigration parties in the European Parliament called "Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom". According to a study by Wilhelm Heitmeyer and others, people supporting these movements in the German states are not young people without alternatives. Rather, the new xenophobia emerges from the "everyday racism" of the bourgeois society. It can be described as an ideology of inequality, and it arises from economic ideologies that divide people into those who are useful to the society and those who are not. (see Heitmeyer 2002-2011) The racist theories of the German politician Thilo Sarrazin have further fuelled the fear of foreign infiltration.

The fact that asylum seekers on the flight are not accepted by everyone is proven not only by the extremist attacks on hostels for asylum seekers, but also by the toughness of the negotiations for a reasonable and equitable distribution policy within the European Union. The public discourse often neglects the distress of asylum seekers – the grief for family members who have been lost or left behind, the hardships caused by travelling all night, and the fear of deportation and refoulement. Instead, people tend to emphasize the populist distinction between real asylum seekers from the current crisis areas and the so-called economic refugees. Only the former are seen as vulnerable. In reality, the latter are also highly threatened by death, yet they usually have no chance for asylum and are directly rejected at the border or deported to their countries of origin. Even people from Afghanistan are now expected to return to their home country although it is still ravaged by war. It is currently considered a safe country, although Afghan refugees are often threatened by the Taliban and other radical groups.

This threatening development must be countered with awareness and acceptance. Exactly at this point Walddritter e.V. (Forest Knights) joins in with the larp method. Walddritter e.V. is a non-profit organization in Germany. Since 2007 Walddritter has been working with larps in an educational way, with pedagogical aims in different areas. The target groups are mostly children, youth and young adults. Walddritter organizes fantasy larps for the younger age groups but does also larps and seminars for the adults with focus on civic education and themes such as prevention of right-wing extremism, migration and asylum, surveillance, environment etc.

### Objective

A couple of years ago, Walddritter started doing asylum-themed larps. At first, we searched out larpers who were interested in refugees, flight and asylum. Then, we started working with school classes, youth clubs and groups with an educational or pedagogical background. We run the games mostly with German players, but sometimes we have had participants from other countries as well in

our seminars, e.g. in youth exchange with other European countries. Many of our games are under a Creative Commons licence, so other education centres, groups and larpers are also playing them.

One of our aims is to create acceptance for fugitives and asylum seekers. The participants will learn to understand what it means to leave one's life behind in order to go to a completely foreign country without local social contacts. Many fugitives risk their lives fleeing, as they have no hope for an acceptable future in their home country. The participants are challenged to experience the individual conditions that force people to leave their homes. This will help them understand why you can't just make a polemical and populist distinction between "genuine refugees" and "economic migrants" even though it is done by e.g. the UNHR. The games cover the topic in its full complexity.

We have had participants from different European countries at European seminars, and even Syrian refugees have played the games. Our experience has shown that larp is a wonderful way to work with these issues. The German participants could draw parallels to their own history. After the Second World War, almost 14 million Germans were forcibly displaced from Central and Eastern Europe and moved to Germany. In addition, other countries had taken in countless people who managed to escape the Nazi regime.

## Our Projects

Our larp events on the topics of flight, asylum and migration usually consist of three parts. First, the participants receive and gather information on the situation of people who are fleeing and on laws regarding asylum processes. Then, in the actual game, they get to experience in a protected environment how it feels to be in the situations that refugees face. Finally, we reflect together on the lessons learned and aim to transfer them to reality.

In the first part, the information can be provided in different ways. Examples include keynote speeches on the fundamental cornerstones of European and national asylum policies and on the circumstances of people on the flight. The participants can also work independently in groups to find more information.

In the actual larps, we focus more on players' own feelings, experiences and empathy than portraying the outward mannerisms of a character. If one is completely absorbed into a character, if one feels and experiences with it, then one will learn empathy for the fictional person. Emotions that one feels in character are often real emotions. Through character immersion, the participants have the opportunity to gather experiences in a safe space and to personally undergo the topic of refugees, instead of just being presented with numbers, facts and pictures.

After the game, the experiences are addressed in a reflection. There's room for discussing emotions. The purpose is to establish connections to reality and to point out parables, but also to contemplate on the actual circumstances of refugees. The game experiences works as a motivation to examine the topic closer. The participants can come to their own conclusions on the subject. Furthermore, the participants are encouraged to contemplate on how to raise acceptance for refugees and asylum seekers. Another topic for discussion is how to face people with anxieties and prejudices in order to cooperate in a pluralistic society.

## Selected Minilarps

In the following, I present some of our games. Each of them sets a different thematic focus on the

topics of flight, asylum and immigration.<sup>1</sup> Some of these games were created by myself, others in our working teams. In Waldritter e.V., we like to work in project teams that have people with different knowledge, experience and attitudes. This way, we get more ideas and more input. As part of the game design process, we talked to refugees and other immigrants, read books about the topics and watched movies and documentaries. The idea is to have short games that are easy to participate. All our minilarps can be run in a seminar room without costumes and big props.

## Happiness in Lampedusa

In *Glück in Lampedusa* (Happiness in Lampedusa), participants experience various scenes of a possible escape from an African or Arab country. They have to part from their family, meet a trafficker, have to get registered in a reception camp, are discovered by tourists at the beach, get treated like criminals by the police, or undergo scenes that pushed them to flee. A common theme is the boat scene, in which the participants realize their hopelessness.

A blanket on the floor represents the boat, and the participants sit on it. This gives them some kind of an insight on how it feels to cross the Mediterranean. They have to sit together in a narrow space, and this leaves a strong impact on them. Only now they realize what it's like to squat penned up in a dinghy. This is not a realistic depiction of actual circumstances, but it can still convey an idea of it. Once it's time for reflection, we can bring up actual examples and make distinctions between realism and abstraction.

After one of the runs, the participants (adults with educational and pedagogical background) met a Syrian refugee. He told them his personal story of the journey to Germany. The participants were impressed, and they found lots of parallels to the game and the scenes they played.

*Glück in Lampedusa* can be played by 6 to 20 players. We have run it about 20 times altogether, with school groups, larpers, pedagogues, etc. A run of the game itself will take from one hour to one and a half hours. Preparation and de-briefing take one hour each.

## The Quota

In *Die Quote* (The Quota), the government has passed a new law stating that citizens get to decide in asylum processes, like jurors. Participants get selected to decide the fate of twelve migrants. Because of a shortage of possible positions of asylum, only five out of the twelve applicants can be granted asylum. The rest have to be rejected because there is a lack of work, housing and social funding. With this short explanation, the jurors get twelve asylum applications including short profiles, personal data sheets, and later also photos. They get one hour to come to a decision, and it has to be a decision by majority. If they don't arrive at a decision, every applicant will be deported.

Since we wanted to discourage hiding behind a character, the participants play this game as themselves. The dilemma of the game is that they have to make a decision even though they don't want to. It quickly becomes clear that the state and the government have to make these rulings on a daily basis. The state makes decisions based on the origin, profession, age, and civil status of the applicant, without considering the personal and individual circumstances.

It is precisely this that makes the game thought provoking. It leads to a stimulated conversation with the participants. If there would be just a discussion about asylum processes without the game, many of them would probably become indifferent. With this game though, they will be optimally sensitized.

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<sup>1</sup> You can download the game at [www.drama-games.de](http://www.drama-games.de) or request it from [daniel.steinbach@waldritter.de](mailto:daniel.steinbach@waldritter.de). Some games are already translated into English, others are only available in German, but they can be translated if needed. If you're interested in international cooperations feel free to contact the Waldritter e.V.

*Die Quote* has been implemented to many different international contexts<sup>2</sup>. The game can be played with more than two players, and it scales up to about 25 players, but the discussions are more effective in smaller groups. The actual game takes one hour, and the after game discussion an hour or more.

## Green Card

Green Card lets the participants slip into the role of migrants who have to overcome the last obstacle before successful immigration to Germany, the citizenship test. They get a test with the actual questions. However, in a number of questions some words are replaced by foreign expressions to simulate the language barrier.

After the test, which everyone usually thinks they have passed, a time leap happens. The migrants then find themselves in detention pending deportation. Only now they have the opportunity to get to know each other. There is a mechanism that will motivate them to talk about their lives. The warden can release one of the prisoners, but they'll have to decide for themselves who it will be. Because of this, the characters will start talking about the reasons they want to stay in Germany. Through the character background stories, players become familiar with various reasons for emigration. When we have run the game, many participants didn't understand beforehand how consuming a deportation can be.

The original version has eleven characters, but it is possible to add some more. The playing time is one and a half hour, half-an-hour for preparation and one hour for de-rolling and de-briefing.

## Thematic Integration with Larger Larps

### Projekt Exodus

*Projekt Exodus* (Project Exodus) was inspired by the Swedish larp *Monitor Celestra* set in the world of the TV series *Battlestar Galactica*. *Projekt Exodus* took place on an old destroyer in Wilhelmshaven in February 2015. The players adopted the roles of crew members, passengers and refugees aboard a commerce freighter during a newly started war against the Cylons. The characters were refugees from the great Cylon invasion. Typically for *Battlestar Galactica*, there was also a conflict between the military and the civilians, between soldiers and refugees. The narrow spaces onboard the destroyer helped to create right atmosphere.

The game has been run only once. It lasted for five days including preparatory workshops and debriefing. More than 80 participants played the game.

### The Escape – on the Way to New Land

In *Die Flucht – Auf dem Weg nach Neuland* (The Escape – On the Way to New Land) the participants also adopted the roles of refugees. They were in flight, and they had to survive a winter weekend without electricity, cell phones or warm water. The game was set in the present, but it worked on an abstract level and many details were left out. For example, the countries were not named. This gave more freedom to the participants.

The game consisted of many episodes. These included meeting aggressive people who approached the characters in a hostile manner, encountering incomprehensible bureaucracy, and a conflict where the participants were not able to understand the language of the other party. The survivalist aspect of the event – sleeping on the ground, camping in a cave at a slope, trading one's few belongings – made the experience even more intense for the participants.

<sup>2</sup> *Die Quote* was played at the European education centre Europhaus Bad Marienberg in Germany with different youth groups from several European countries. It has also been played in Turkey with Syrian people. You can find more about the latter run in the article by Kristina Leipolt and Larson Kasper in this book.

The game was designed for 15 players. It has been run twice at different locations. It lasts for a whole weekend, including half a day for debriefing.

## Closing Words

None of these games really depict reality. However, they can still convey ideas on how refugees, asylum seekers and migrants might feel. They can give you an impression on what it means to leave behind your whole life. An impression on what it is like when the native population has a negative attitude towards you. Taking new people in always leads to problems, but these problems have to be approached inclusively, and the population needs to rethink them. Refugees often have to change their attitudes, principles and behaviour to get accepted, so it's high time that Europe also changes and meets them with respect, tolerance and acceptance. The current political situation is a chance for the world to finally reach a common cooperation without differences.

Refugees are very welcome!

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■ Larson Kasper and Tina Leipoldt

## Playing Stress, Guilt and Identity – This Ain’t Politics, This Is Syria

In the Nordic scene, larp is seen as a strong instrument for political education. In our work with Syrian peace activists, we have noticed that for them, this prospect of larp is currently less relevant. It is our humble understanding that the opportunity to identify larp as a tool to change political agendas is born out of a rather stable political situation, not one that undergoes transformation and significant changes (such as in conflict and war zones).

Our tendency to use larp for political purposes is often based on our wish to experience something new and unfamiliar. Larp provides a safe arena in which one can experiment and play around with different behavioral options and positions. Pushing boundaries has become an integral part of larp, and extreme scenarios can provide interesting play. As German larp designers we tend to create dystopian settings, but one of the first lessons we learned from Syrian participants was that they strive for utopian settings of peace and understanding.

### The Context

In March 2011, peaceful protests erupted in Syria against the government of Bashar al-Assad. They gradually turned into a civil war. Since the onset of the protests and the subsequent eruption of violence, more than 250,000 persons have reportedly been killed and more than half of the population has been forced to flee their homes – often repeatedly. More than 6.6 million individuals are internally displaced and according to latest statistics published by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN-OCHA), at least 4.3 million have been forced to flee Syria. As of November 2015, 2.2 million refugees were registered in Turkey, 1.1 million in Lebanon

and more than 600,000 in Jordan<sup>1</sup>. The United Nations estimates that about 13.5 million individuals are in need of assistance.

Since the beginning of the uprising, local networks and activists have initiated coordination and provision of emergency assistance as well as first reconstruction and rehabilitation measures in areas that are no longer under government control. Civilian opposition actors have set up local administrative structures and started to register Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in neighboring countries. These are gradually starting to address the concerns of the civil society. Most international actors are working on direct humanitarian needs, and few are operating with transitional mandates that allow them to address needs beyond “lifesaving”. Strengthening especially the NGOs working on transition and early recovery therefore opened up an ideal window to introduce innovative methods and techniques – such as larp - to work on community rehabilitation, non-formal education and other areas of concern.

## Placing Larp in the Syrian Context

Our experience is that in the Syrian context, larp is seen as a group activity that unites and creates a feeling of belonging. However, it is valued even more for the possibilities of self-reflection and personal development in a safe space. The aspect of humor is an important component that nearly all participants mentioned. Some of them could not remember when they had laughed freely the last time.

Political agendas were often overshadowed by a feeling of helplessness and powerlessness, and thus dropped out. At a first glance this seems to be starkly in contrast with the idea of changing society for a better future through larp. However, digging a bit deeper brings up quite hands-on ideas on how to approach conflict-related issues through larp. Larp is a strong tool for education and development, but for the time being, it was seen as more valuable as a tool to cope with dramatic and traumatic experiences.

The original idea to introduce larp to Syrian activists did not evolve out of the need or even passion to contribute to the political discourse on the Syrian crisis. In 2013, Tina was hired on a project with a stabilization and transitional mandate that had commenced earlier that year. We needed to find activities in the fields of civic education and psychosocial support that would be both useful and feasible.

The options were limited in terms of approaches, innovative ideas and room to maneuver. Training Syrian participants in Turkey meant working with refugees who are not welcomed by everyone - just like anywhere else on the world. The Turkish governor had to permit the training, and two policemen were placed outside the venue for the whole time. Some participants did not show up because they had got stuck at the border, and others had to make their way through Northern Cyprus.

Thus, the trainings were always focused on individuals and community services. There were few possibilities to contribute to a broader agenda of peace building and conflict transformation. However, over the last one and a half year, larp has become a promising tool to provide psychosocial support. It is a useful arena of reflection for individuals who are living and working in midst of an ongoing crisis.

The project started with two general trainings in Arabic with Palestinian trainers<sup>2</sup> to introduce the method and basic concepts such as interactive gaming, teambuilding techniques and simple larp design. Pretty fast, it became obvious that the participants were constantly referring to the ongoing crisis - less on a political level but much more on the level of individual impact. It was an underlying

theme in all games played and developed as well as a backdrop against which all interactions and reactions were interpreted.

Furthermore, participative training methods and techniques were not that commonly known, compared to other crisis/developing contexts with strong cultures of international workshops. Especially in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, NGO representatives as well as community members have usually been exposed to very particular techniques of adult education and training (e.g. brainstorming methods, group-work, presentational skills, scenario playing) for decades. In the Syrian context this was rather limited prior to the uprising, and the educational system of the regime had been rather restrictive.

Hence, we had to balance between creatively exploring what would be useful and appropriate, and forming distinct ideas about where our inputs should lead. After a refresher training with the Palestinian trainers, the project organized a full weekend of mini-larps without any theoretical inputs in April 2015. An advanced training was organized in August 2015, together with Larson Kasper from Germany as a co-trainer.

## Prison and Asylum Larps

Already during the first two basic trainings, we realized that more “pure playtime” would be needed. We wanted to stop talking and start doing larp. Thus, we organized a minilarp weekend at Mount Nemrut in Turkey in April 2015. There, we did not have any theory or workshops, but several short larps were played.

We used some rather casual games such as *Nightmares in Residence* and *Tiere Essen* (Eating Animals) as icebreakers to shift the mood from training to exploring and experiencing. In the former, old-fashioned nightmares like the old witch, the monster under the bed and the mean math teacher are conspiring on how they could scare the modern children. The latter is a game about animals who are taking representatives of the meat-producing industry as hostages.

Some of the reactions from the participants showed that all of them did not understand the purpose of this weekend exercise right from the beginning. For example, we needed to clarify why nightmares would be an appropriate topic for adults. There were also interesting discussions on differences between the kidnapper animals and the real human extremists who kidnap people in Syria.

On the second day, we sought to fuel up discussion with larps like *Die Quote* (The Quota) and *The Prison*. *Die Quote*<sup>3</sup> is set in Germany, and the players have to function as a local court that decides on asylum applications. *The Prison* is a Russian science fiction larp set in a prison for people convicted of capital crimes. Every ten minutes, the warden chooses two inmates who then act as judges and decide on the next execution. Amnesty is granted at sunrise, but there is only vague hope of surviving that long.

Playing *Die Quote* had some interesting aspects. In the first round, the participants rated all applications for asylum from Syrians as “to be granted”. However, after going through several rounds of discussions over all individual cases, this changed. *Die Quote* opened up discussion on a more globalized perspective on asylum policies and their unfairness. It also left a high level of frustration regarding personal fate, powerlessness and the impression that one cannot serve everybody.

<sup>1</sup> See: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>)

<sup>2</sup> Mohamad Rabah, Riad Mustafa, and Urieb Samad.

<sup>3</sup> In the original version of the game, the participants play themselves. However, we altered the game so that the players were assigned characters that embodied German middle class stereotypes.

Many of the players had been detained either by the Syrian regime or by Daesh<sup>4</sup>. Some of them had been in detention only for a few hours, others for months. Despite this, all of them were willing to play *The Prison*. We played for only about two hours, but took triple the time for debriefing, discussion, stories, and (hopefully) healing and reconciliation. In *The Prison*, “winning” became a central impetus for the players: they strived to avoid execution, to survive the game. However, this shouldn’t be seen as a counterpart to the Nordic notion of “playing to lose”. It was rather an individual motivation of the players to overcome personal experiences from the past. Larps like *Die Quote* and *The Prison* were originally designed for exploration and imagination, but now they were rather used for reconciliation and reflection.

During the third training in August 2015, the focus was put on writing, forming ideas and creativity, rather than pure playtime for larps. This theoretical approach was loosened up with minilarps, games and media inputs. On the last day, when we test-played the larps designed during the training, we could see how the participants’ preferences were reflected in their own pieces.

### Forwards, Backwards, Sideways – Who Has a Damn Compass GPS Anyway?

Nordic larps can challenge you with innovations and new techniques. Doing larp with Syrian refugees made us re-think these approaches in many ways. It is fantastic to get to know and to experience techniques like *ars amandi* and to see how they impact the way you can act out things in a larp. Nevertheless, it is equally challenging to larp with a majority of participants coming from a cultural background where women cannot even dance in the same room as men who are strangers to them, and where homosexuality is a taboo.

Before one of our minilarps, we told the participants that they could choose their character’s gender freely, even though the characters were written gender-specific. All the players chose their real-life gender, and since we had a majority of men, one of them ended up having a homosexual love interest. The character committed suicide in the game. In the debrief, the player explained that it was too difficult for him to play a situation where he would have to admit that his character was a homosexual.

In the last training in August 2015, a female participant went steady forward with her idea to write a feminist Syrian community larp, although it seemed unlikely that the male participants would be interested in it. Beautifully, in the end everybody wanted to participate anyway. There are so many pathways and alleys to explore to make larps more inclusive and culture sensitive that sometimes you are not sure if you should focus more forward, backwards or sideways.

### What if... Damascus 2025

One of the games developed during the training is called *What if... Damascus 2025*. It serves as a perfect example on how game mechanics can lead to the desired effects within seconds. The larp is set in a rather peaceful Damascus in the year 2025. It is not defined which side “won” the war or what significant political changes took place. There is a group of friends meeting, who have known each other since school. Some of them stayed in Damascus throughout the crisis, some were refugees in neighboring countries and some found a new home with relatives in Europe.

The first run did not have any game mechanics, and it did not lead to the intended outcome. Peo-

<sup>4</sup> Also known as IS (Islamic State), ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant)

ple did not express their emotions openly. For the second run, the trainers suggested some changes. After implementing an act structure with some guiding instructions for each act, the whole scenario flipped within seconds to an arena where the participants, rather than the characters, found a valve to express their helplessness, frustration and guilt over the ongoing crisis. “You are the reason why Syria has no soul anymore - you left and we stayed behind in complete powerlessness” was the key expression, which led us to a situation where we had to address stress, guilt and implied accusations in an improvised debrief.

### Death of a Martyr

One of the pivotal motivations for some of the participants is the wish to design larps that would help fellow Syrians to cope better with their personal situation, especially with grief and sorrow. Ghaith, an active young man in his early twenties, pointed out that usually after someone he knew died in the Syrian conflict as a martyr, a lot of people would write on Facebook how much they loved and appreciated this person, that they would feel left alone after his sudden death in combat.

Ghaith was frustrated and angry because people did not take the opportunity to express these positive emotions while people were still alive. He was pretty sure that a lot of young men, like him, would not take up arms if they would realize in what kind of situations they would leave their beloved ones if they would die in combat.

He designed a larp for four participants, which tackled this openness and communication between people before it is too late. The game takes place at the deathbed of a martyr and circulates around the grief, last words and farewells of the parents and the best friend of the deceased one. In both *What if... Damascus 2025* and *Death of a Martyr*, as much (if not more) time was needed to prepare the debrief as to design the larp. The participants of the first run of *Death of a Martyr* demanded intense debriefing.

### Holidays for the Mind

Within the project-team we were often in doubt whether larp was the right approach. We had a fear that we were just convincing ourselves that our ideas and input would eventually prove fruitful. It is true that children’s larps were organized and that the participants had started borrowing books and magazines that we had brought from the last Knudepunkt, and there definitely was a vivid online discussion going on in some Facebook groups. However, the daily needs, and problems to deal with inside Syria - either personally or professionally – felt so much bigger and more pressing. People were constantly worrying about their family members, and there were safety concerns when crossing the borders. Sometimes the borders were closed for days. The efforts with logistics and coordination were tremendous. Furthermore, we were not certain that the funding for the larp projects would continue nor if the more active participants would stay in the region.

The most discouraging fact was that there were only little participant-driven initiatives and most inputs had to come from us. At some point Tina confronted the participants with her frustration and got an answer that she really did not expect. Larp had become a mode of “holidays for the mind” for them. With all the stress, pressure, hassle, fear and uncertainty going on around them and having major impacts on their daily lives, it was difficult to allocate “time to rest” or even find ways to hibernate and recharge energy. Larp had become an activity where they could allow themselves to “switch off” while they were at the same time convinced they were using this “time-out from reality” effectively.

So, never give up. Never surrender. There are a lot of plans in the pipeline for 2016 – wanna explore and give some inputs yourself?



## ■ Ludography

**Death of a Martyr** (2015): Ghaith Arrat, Turkey.

**Die Quote** (2014): Daniel Steinbach, Germany. Waldrutter e.V.

**Nightmares in Residence** (2013): Martina Ryssel, Germany

**The Prison** (2002): Sergey Kolesnikov, Russia. Aleksandra Danilenko and Mariya Grubaya, Russia.

**Tiere Essen** (2013): Daniel Steinbach, Germany. Waldrutter e.V.

**What if... Damascus 2025** (2015): Basem al Moussa and Amal Jumaa Mustafa, Turkey.

■ Vladimir Servetnik and Alexey Fedoseev

## Educational Larps for Political Studies

Studying politics implies not just knowing political history or even understanding theories from political and social sciences, but rather analyzing, acting, and making political decisions. At the same time, the reconstruction of real political situations and power structures for educational purposes is not an easy task: this requires a lot of resources, and the price of mistakes can be very high. That is why simulations and games of any kind are very popular educational tools in this field.

We will describe the experience of creating and conducting several educational live-action role-playing games for integrating students into the political activity: *Ukraine-2010* (2008) – a larp about the electoral process including political struggle, electoral strategy, public relations, etc.; *The Capital* (2009) – a larp about the genesis of a financial crisis; *Chile: 1970-73* (2009) – a larp dedicated to the political system of bipolar world, the historical situation of Allende's reforms and Pinochet's coup d'état; and *The Roman Senate* (2011) – a larp that reconstructed the political activity and the harmonization of interests in the classical form of the Republican Rome. These larps recreated the main aspects of political activity: analyzing and taking up political positions and political interests, using communication as political action, and leading the people in any kind of political struggle.

### Introduction

At all times, educational content has been continuously updated and improved in order to make it answer better to the requirements of society and culture. Nowadays the speed of social development and introduction of new knowledge is so high in all fields, that new requirements are being set to the contents of education. Among them, there is the natural need of transition from knowledge to

activity. It is not enough for a student to learn the information: it should be tried out. Thus we can say that activity-centered education can greatly supplement the existing syllabuses of academic subjects.

Activity-centered approach becomes especially relevant when it comes to professions and competences belonging to interdisciplinary fields uniting several academic and scientific subjects. The field of politics provides a vivid example. This sphere requires training in law and economics, as well as comprehension of historical processes together with the skills of expressing one's thoughts, explaining them to a mainstream audience, making decisions, etc.

New forms of education such as simulations or larps are widely used for schools, universities and professional learning (Crookall, Oxford, and Saunders 1987; Henriksen 2010; Hyltoft 2010). Educational larps represent a particular form of activity-centered learning (Fedoseev and Vdovenko 2014). During such larps, students analyze and make decisions directly in a situation specially arranged by the organizers. Each player takes up one of the available positions, performs certain activities, and reaches goals mastering social, political, economical, or other processes.

Talking about political education we should not leave out the historical nature of political knowledge. Facts describing modern political life have no sense when not grounded on analysis of historical processes and their development principles. That's why such subjects as economic and political history form the very important background for a politician. The globally integrated modern world states new requirements to politics. A person who makes decisions must understand global processes, including political, economical, migration, ecological ones, etc. It is necessary to have a multi-polar view.

The activities performed by a politician can be represented in terms of activity-centered approach. Let us consider some examples of separate aspects of such activities, which were brought to light within the framework of educational larps conducted at the Faculty of Global Studies at Lomonosov Moscow State University during the period from 2008 to 2010.

## Election and Political Struggle. Ukraine-2010

One of the most important competences of a modern politician is the comprehension of the operational principles of democratic regime and of the election procedure as being one of its major mechanisms. Educational larp technology provides the possibility to create a model of activities in neighbouring areas of social life, these areas being closely related and interworking with each other. When simulating an election campaign, such areas as economics, foreign and domestic policy, and mass media activities were chosen. The larp *Ukraine-2010* (2008) provides an example of such training and game model. The larp was devoted to the presidential election during a ruthless election campaign and a conflict of interests based on the real political situation in Ukraine<sup>1</sup>. The major didactic content of the game comprised activities of the candidates for presidency, election campaign teams (including political experts, image-makers, economists, analysts, etc.), representatives of external forces, and independent political strategists at all stages of the election campaign, from creating the campaign strategy to carrying it out via specific initiatives. The game background was provided by reconstructing the geopolitical situation in Ukraine and its surroundings at the time (the end of 2000's). Another important objective was to raise the question about possible ways out of the crisis in the relations between Russia and Ukraine.

Within the framework of the larp, the political area of modern Ukraine was reconstructed, in-

cluding the presidency and the government, representatives of popular political parties, national and international business, and external forces: Russia, the European Union, and the USA. Each role implied a certain set of available tools, including political and economical ones. The players formed teams of the candidates for the presidency, their election allies, and the teams of representatives of other countries and political forces.

Starting goals for the players varied depending on the role, yet they were all related to the common features of the election. The ultimate goal for the candidates for presidency and their election teams was to win the vote. The representatives of business interacted with the candidates in order to secure the victory for the candidate whose political program allowed full-scope implementation for economic interests of their companies, and the representatives of other countries tried to make maximal political use of the situation. So the larp was designed in a very simulationist and gamist way (Böckman, 2003).

The larp implemented a model for the candidates' popularity in the form of ratings: every day the participants received new information on the electorate's preferences. It was continuously updated as a result of an analysis of the game participants' activities. Any moves, public appearances, and other player actions influenced the ratings of the candidates for presidency. The organizers calculated the changes of the candidates' ratings by means of expert evaluation, taking into account statistical data and each candidate's traditional electoral base.

Election campaign finances provided one important model: all the game participants had virtual financial accounts and could use their money to reach their political goals. The major mechanisms of election campaign were public debates and media. Debates allowed the candidates and other participants to present their programs and to discuss important and pending issues in public in real-time. The topics of the debates were related not only to the election campaign, but also to the real problems of modern Ukraine. Media expressed current views of various political forces on the election campaign. Over ten continuously working news agencies were simulated in the larp: television channels, newspapers, and popular internet sites in Ukraine, Russia and other countries. Each had its own editorial policy and interests within the framework of the election campaign, and most of them were influenced by different participants of the game. Their influence on various categories of the electorate was taken into account in the rating model. All the media information was posted at the game organisers' website.

The larp included three major stages: preparation, gameplay, and discussion. The preliminary training started two weeks before the game. During this period, the participants studied the modern political situation in Ukraine and specific features of the roles they had chosen, and attended meetings with experts. The experts covered various issues of real politics: election technologies, election team operation, the political, social and cultural situation in Russia and in Ukraine, the relations between these two countries, contemporary political history of Ukraine, etc. Thus the participants could see the frontier of real political knowledge.

The larp continued for two weeks simultaneously with the educational process: the main larp activities were planned to the second half of the day or holidays to allow students to continue studies. All this time, the participants could plan and carry out various political moves (events, meetings and concerts in various Ukrainian cities and towns), interact with media, and conduct negotiations. Three times a week, common larp events took place. They were in-game political events such as economic conferences, political debates, and the first and the second rounds of the elections. These events demanded the presence of most larp participants. The first round of elections took place at the end of the first week. The game was finished by summarizing the results of the second round.

During the discussion and debriefing, the participants together with the organisers analyzed the events which had occurred during the larp, as well as their own actions and possible political consequences of those actions. At the same time, the discussion went beyond the framework of the game

<sup>1</sup> The larp *Ukraine-2010* was designed and conducted in 2008. Therefore the game was a kind of foresight. Surprisingly, many political decisions of the characters were represented later in the real political history of Ukraine. Interesting discussions between players happen even now when they compare the diegetic situations and the real contemporary politics.

and touched pending problems of Ukraine and its relations with other countries. Working out a list of political steps that Russia should take in relation to Ukraine was an important result of the discussion.

The game involved over 50 students of the university, most of them first-year students. Many students found themselves in the midst of a political conflict for the first time in their lives as they took part in debates and spoke in public.

The high degree of the participants' involvement in the process should be noted, both at the preparation stage and during the game. Personal motivation and motivation of the players within the teams let them acquire great amount of knowledge about the modern political situation in Ukraine and also check their previous knowledge and skills through real activity. During the game and reflexive analysis, they raised the issues of a politician's personal responsibility to the country and the world, of social and cultural identity, and historical memory.

### Comprehension of Economical Processes. The Capital

Another important part of the didactic content of the curriculum for training a politician is the comprehension of how market systems operate and of the interaction of their various parts. In order for students to acquire such knowledge, we developed an educational larp called *The Capital* (2009). The larp was inspired by the financial crisis of 2007-2008. The main idea was to reconstruct the development of an economic crisis generated by overproduction and bubble growth to help students understand this process in practice.

This training and gameplay model reflected the impact of several types of economical factors at the same time. The model included entities producing resources (oil companies), producers of certain products (construction companies), insurance and investment companies raising funds and investing them into various profitable projects, state banks, and structures controlling financial flows. Each participant took the role of one of the top managers of various companies, e.g. an analyst, a negotiator, etc. Thus, successful management of a corporation required joint efforts of students with different competences.

The whole larp was divided into separate economic cycles. During these cycles, it was possible to carry out production processes and scientific research and make various deals. After each cycle, the situation at the market changed depending on the actions of the players.

All businessmen started with comparable capital, but the situation allowed them to make good and fast money. The markets were growing! One could see how the young boys and girls became profit addicts. The numbers were rising, and the participants were becoming blinded. They could not see that the bubble already had blown up and would collapse soon. This was exciting: the students knew that an overproduction crisis can arise and they knew how it could come true, but the competitive conditions of the larp prevented them from using this knowledge. The reflection of the game was very amusing and usually full of emotions.

Here we introduced an interesting and typical Russian larp technique – the level of consumption and luxury (Prudkovskaya 2015). This feature has become the real stimulation for the characters' enrichment. Every several cycles (the interval comprises about an hour and a half) there were coffee breaks when the participants were rated according to their wealth. As a rule, the participants used the breaks for forming coalitions, as well as making strategies and tactics for further actions. These breaks were organized by specific rules: the characters were divided into several groups according to their riches. The wealth really mattered on the level of food and drinks: the most successful businessmen got a splendid meal and fresh juice, but the worst got just bread and cola. The wealthiest participants also had a chance to encounter some external guests (e.g. an Arabian sheikh or a general from Venezuela), so this was not only about lunch but rather about making connections.

Unlike Ukraine-2010, *The Capital* was implemented as a closed-loop model, intended for the par-

ticipants to master activities in the field of economics. Furthermore, the experience of repeated implementation in training allows us to speak about the efficiency of this method in a situation when it is necessary for students to comprehend how the world market system operates together with the ways and conditions of an arising economical crisis.

### Playing the Bipolar World. Chile: 1970-73

The next larp was a part of the bigger scientific and educational project *Chile: 1970-73* (2009) devoted to political history. The educational goal of the project comprised building up the students' ability to conduct an integrated research of a political situation, select reliable historical sources, work with experts and archive recordings, and construct adequate explanatory and prediction models. The background for the project was the historical situation in Chile in 1970-73, starting from the election of S. Allende as the president and ending with A. Pinochet's military coup. Senior students guided by larp professionals joined into project teams and developed the larp as a model of the Chilean society of 1970-1973, while the first-year students played the larp.

The theme was chosen for a variety of reasons. First, socialist changes conducted by President S. Allende in Chile from 1970 to 1973 are still lost among the revolutions and reforms crowding the history of Latin America. Traditionally, this historical situation has been considered only as the background for A. Pinochet's military coup and the further development of the country under his rule. However, unlike many other victories of the Left in Latin America, the accession to power and short rule of Allende is doubly interesting, being unique both for this particular region and for the whole world, as President Allende rose to power in a democratic way when the coalition of the Left won the election. Secondly, this historical situation provides a perfect illustration for a bipolar world structure and for the ideological conflict of two systems – the capitalistic and socialist ones – which determined the whole history of the 20th century. Thirdly, the famous English scientist and cyberneticist S. Beer worked in Chile during the rule of President Allende. Within the shortest possible time, he and his colleagues from Chile and Great Britain developed and implemented a unique project on cybernetic management of Chilean economy. This project – called Cybersyn<sup>2</sup> – still remains a unique experiment. Finally and fourthly, we should not forget the numerous parallels of the historical situation in question and the current state of affairs. Chile provides a typical example of a “primary production” country, so studying its history may help to predict the results of economical policies in other countries that export vast amounts of raw materials, such as Russia.

One of the goals of *Chile: 1970-1973* was deep immersion into the historical situation. The participants had preliminary training, and during the larp they got first-hand experience on what exactly moved Allende's supporters and opponents during political events; what economic and social factors influenced their decisions and why, after all, Allende's project of “cybernetic democracy” was possible and why it failed.

Certainly, it was impossible to get such results based only on standard textbooks and newspaper headings – the true background of many events, as well as actions and decisions of many parties differ greatly from what we see when we study the issue cursorily. That is why we speak about historical research performed by senior students when they are coordinated by the teachers. The students worked with real historical documents of that period; historians and experts in the period in Chile, and also Raul Espejo, a participant of the described events, President Allende's associate who worked as the technical director of the Cybersyn project aimed to modernize the Chilean economy in the 1970s. Students could interview the experts and ask them questions in order to deepen their understanding of the simulated social fields.

2 See the site devoted to this project of the 70's - <http://www.cybersyn.cl>

As a result of team work on creating social models crucial for the game world (distribution of political powers, principles of economy organization, the role of media and representatives of other countries, etc.), the students acquired profound comprehension of specific features of the Chilean social life in the 1970s. All these issues comprised the background for the model of the Chilean state and society which laid the foundation for the larp.

The larp went on for one academic week. Major in-game activities were performed at a specially arranged time during the second half of the day. However, the students could interact with one another continuously during the whole period, make agreements, join unions, etc. The players were operating mostly in preset groups (parties, families, foreign representatives); nevertheless, we should note certain students who performed like true leaders and managed to organize the game around them in the political way they needed. We can speak surely about the development of communicative and analytic capabilities of the students who participated in the project.

The narrative of the larp repeated the historical scenario to a great degree, culminating in President Allende's famous speech in the presidential palace while it was already being attacked by the tanks of the rebellions generals. Such a finale was logical, as the interests of the parties and the distribution of power together with game models and rules were based on the features of the real historical situation. In addition, the project resulted in finding the students who did especially well in analyzing the political and economical situation and showed other outstanding qualities.

We should note the incredible interest and motivation of both the senior students during the preparation period and the first-year students when they participated in the game. There can be no doubt that the technology of educational larps allows making students' scientific and educational projects in humanities not only more interesting and absorbing, but also essential from the point of view of getting real-life experience of political analysis and actions.

## Ethics versus Politics. The Roman Senate

*The Roman Senate* (2011) was developed for junior students of political science oriented faculties as a part of the introductory course to political theory. The game was based on the politics of ancient Rome and went on for one academic week.

The purpose of the game was to make students understand the essence of the political process and develop the skills necessary to participate in it. Didactically, the game created the conditions for students to acquire experience of integrative political activities, including coordination of different interests, political decisions making, negotiating practice, and public debates. The game events took place within the Roman Republic, approximately between the First and the Second Punic Wars. However, the goal of the game was not to stick to historical facts, but to simulate the Roman political structure.

Each player got a role of a Roman Senator belonging to a noble family (that was his or her team within the game environment) and ruling one of the provinces (located on the strategic map), having a voice in the Senate, the Parliament of the Republic which also elects the executives. Each player's goal was to acquire the maximal number of "fame" points. The major means to achieve this goal were successful participation in the elections and in the economic and strategic game. The system of interests inside the game was based on the prisoner's dilemma – the teams had no tactical interest to cooperate with each other, but this rational behavior of not cooperating would lead the whole Roman Republic to an inevitable collapse.

The larp was based on the free action principle: after receiving the initial character plot and the role, each player can act freely and define tactical tasks and strategic priorities on their own. At times, the roles provoked players to break agreements or even deceive other players directly. Such behavior was allowed within the framework of the game, as it shows the sharpness of conflicts and the cruelty of methods of real political struggle. Yet, the players should understand the concept of alibi.

An important part of this model was the final assessment performed by the participants in a form of a written essay after the larp. These texts showed, first of all, the great role of the communication skills acquired by the participants during the game. In most of the reviewed essays, the students noticed that they had managed to exercise and improve their communication skills in the broad meaning of this word: from the skill of reaching a compromise and accepting someone else's point of view (the game also showed how careful one should be while choosing allies and how crucial it is to stick to previously discussed and accepted agreements) to the ability to speak in public and to defend one's own position. One fifth of the respondents highlighted communication skills and the comprehension of communication processes as crucial components of victory.

A poll conducted among the 54 students who were most interested in the game demonstrated that they were greatly concerned about the ethical component of the events of *The Roman Senate*. The students were asked what they had learned and what creed, in their opinion, would help achieve a political victory. About one third of the respondents (18 and 20 people in two different runs) answered in a way that showed their sharp emotional reaction to the situations which did not correlate with their views of morality. The students responded that they had learned to deceive and manipulate and that these are the very skills you need to win.

## Conclusions

In these examples we have considered educational larps dedicated to the specific competences and values of a politician, including:

- applying specific knowledge in history, economics, philosophy, etc;
- soft skills crucial for political activity: leadership, building communities, emotional intelligence, negotiation, situation analysis, and so on;
- ethics and values: responsibility, humanism, national vs supranational interests.

Using larps we could combine these features and reproduce political activity as a whole, to give students the possibility to make decisions and evaluate the consequences. When this is done, students will be able to become full participants of diegetic political activity, and their experience can be reflected and transformed after the larp.

The considered larps show the wide spectrum of design techniques: from the deep dramatism of Allende's death (*Chile: 1970-73*) to the simulation mechanics of overproduction (*The Capital*); from the real character-based agenda (*Ukraine-2010*) to the extremely open introduction and thin roles (*The Roman Senate*). In this article, we have highlighted that the educational content of a larp can be implemented in very different ways, and the techniques can be chosen explicitly according to the desired effect.

As game designers we can use the powerful tool of larp to mix the history and present politics to make political issues much closer to a wider audience. As educational designers we reach two supplemental goals: to intensify learning and to evaluate the students' professional knowledge and skills. Moreover, this kind of larps can be used as a way to perform civic initiatives and similar extra-institutional education.

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## ■ Eleanor Saitta

# Infrastructural Games and Societal Play

The 21st century will be defined by sociotechnical infrastructural systems. In many ways, this renders it identical to most of its predecessors throughout the history of human civilization. Two important things have changed, however – first, we’ve noticed what’s going on, and second, the systems themselves have changed in scale and integration. Understanding how these systems work and fail is becoming a core part of being an engaged member of society. Often it’s necessary just to navigate the world, and it’s even more important if you design or critique parts of these systems. Larp may be a key to understanding these systems, as it provides us with a toolkit for diagnosing their unpredictable social implications. Not only that, but we can go beyond just using games to diagnose and teach and use them to intentionally and collectively design the social scripts we want to live within. The tools larp provides here are well-tuned and unique and it’s time we learned how to apply them, but we’ll have to unpack a few things to see how and why.

When we talk about infrastructure, we picture things like bridges, container ports, or underground powerlines and fiber networks. All of these are bits of hardware, invisible in day-to-day life, that act to enable other unrelated activities. When we go to watch a film on Netflix, we’re focused on the film, not on the cable connecting us to the Internet or the data center serving up the film. However, this infrastructure we’re busy ignoring not only determines many of the conditions under which we live our lives, it also enforces power relationships. For instance, the structure of financial payment systems determines what kinds of otherwise legal work is marginalized and risky, and what is mainstream and profitable. All infrastructure is political; indeed, one might better say that all politics is infrastructural; we ignore it at our peril.

When we talk about sociotechnical infrastructure, we broaden our view beyond just the hardware.

From the perspective of someone taking a shower, not only are the water mains infrastructure, the water quality inspectors are too. From the perspective of someone attempting to hire new graduates, the entire educational system and all the social relationships it contains are also just so much infrastructure. We can have deep and meaningful relationships with others that we still understand fit into this infrastructural frame. The infrastructural perspective on social relationships can be dehumanizing, but it doesn't have to be, and it's a core part of making social structures scale. Keeping both the human and systems perspectives in view at the same time is critical to understanding how our world works.

The shift from sociotechnical infrastructure to sociotechnical infrastructural systems is one of mindset and viewpoint, but with profound consequences. Looking at these entities as systems means seeing them as whole units and in the context of their interactions with other systems. It brings a different – and much newer – analytic toolkit to bear. Instead of just seeing a piece of fiber in the ground, we see that fiber in the context of its role in the global Internet. Separately and simultaneously we also see it in the context of the supply chain that created, shipped, and installed it and may dispose of it. We also see it in the context of the systems of zoning law, telecommunications regulation, and speculative finance that permitted it, govern it, and paid for and profit from it.

Many of the systems we're talking about have existed in one form or another for a long time, even at a global scale. What's changed is their degree of interconnection and dominance. For instance, we have evidence of long-distance trade going back over 16,000 years, but since 1970 the tonnage of global shipping fleets and intermodal freight have both jumped by a factor of three and the value of that trade has increased by a factor of thirty, adjusted for both population and inflation. Not only are these systems having more impact, they're also being managed as global systems. While large, vertically-integrated, cross-industry corporations were an artifact of early 20th century industrial capitalism, most of these companies were centralized in single countries with uncomplicated and loosely-managed supply chains. Indeed, one of the drivers of vertical integration was the difficulty of managing external supply chains. The discipline of systems thinking, complex transnational supply chains, and related infrastructural systems co-evolved with the information systems needed to manage them. While a century ago looking at the world through the lenses of culture, politics, and economics without thinking in terms of systems was sufficient to read the shape of society, these ways of seeing do not account for this century's management and control structures – what we might call our societal metacognition framework, or how our world structures its self-awareness. As this framework changes, how we see the world must also change.

**Kranzberg's First Law:** Technology is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral.

While sociotechnical infrastructural systems will continue to define our century, their unintended consequences deserve particular scrutiny. Unintended consequences can be large, like the climate change that threatens the future of human civilization, but they can be smaller too. Any system of sufficient complexity will demonstrate emergent behavior, which is to say behaviors exhibited by the system as a whole that were neither designed nor observable within the behavior of any subsystem. Whenever two complex systems interact, their interaction usually demonstrates emergent properties. Sociotechnical systems necessarily contain at least one complex component (the social side of the system) and most systems at scale contain many such components.

As we become better at building large-scale systems, we see more emergent behavior, not less. All intentionally-created systems have a set of things the designers consider part of the scope of what the system manages, but any nontrivial system has a broader set of impacts. Often, emergence takes the form of externalities – changes that impact people or domains beyond the designed scope of the system. Especially when operating in accumulative domains like capitalism, systems tend to evolve more complexity whenever they can increase relative or absolute returns on their primary structur-

ing metric (income, under capitalism), until they reach either the limits of their problem's space or of the capacity of their control system. Managing a system is much simpler than analyzing how it is working, let alone predicting what it may do next. This means few systems stay small enough to be within the envelope where their behavior can be predicted, and many cannot even be analyzed, as neither of these are necessary for the systems to function under normal conditions. In almost all cases, the system (or rather, the interests of those operating it) will not permit modeling for the control of externalities to constrain growth or optimization, as mitigating harm in those cases is by definition optional.

When a team of folks sat down in Estonia to create the program we now know as Skype, they wanted to solve the practical problem of making calls cheaply using the Internet. They could take advantage of the fact that the Internet didn't (and still doesn't, for the moment) allow existing national monopolies to extract economic rent from users on the basis of the content of their traffic. This philosophy – that all packets are equal – is baked into the architecture and history of the Internet. Shaking up the global voice telecommunications market was an expected emergent outcome of Skype's success. As the effect of this was to allow people to stay in touch across the world when they couldn't otherwise afford to, we might be tempted to judge this technology as "good". This ignores other emergent impacts, however. In addition to making it cheaper to call people, Skype made it cheaper to surveil those calls, to the same degree and for the same reasons. The expansion of Internet communications (and the conversion of most traditional voice traffic to similar technologies) is directly and causally linked to the expansion of surveillance states around the world, and thus to the concomitant mass violations of human rights that have occurred. Hearing this, we might be tempted to call this technology "bad", but this would be just as wrong.

The creation of new infrastructural systems changes the possibility space of the societies which interact with them, but not in simple, reducible ways. One of the unexpected emergent effects of Skype and similar systems was to invert the financial power balance between international aid agencies and international migrants with respect to the economies of the countries the migrants came from. In 1970, countries spent about five times as much on international foreign aid as migrants sent in overseas remittances. As of 2011, remittances were almost three times larger than aid, despite aid spending in constant dollars having more than doubled. The lines crossed in 1994, but remittances really accelerated around the turn of the century, following the timeline of drops in the cost of communications. As communication got cheaper, families weren't split up by migration but rather stayed in regular social contact and migrants had both the incentive to send money and the necessary understanding of social context to see when and where it could be most useful.

Mutual aid and the state support always exist in direct opposition, as they are different ways to structure solutions to the same need. A shift of this magnitude from one structure to the other has significant implications for sovereignty and inter-state relations in the medium term, and was profoundly unanticipated.

## Technology is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral.

As ethical creators of systems, we want to understand the impact of the things we build. As a public, we see that engaging with the impact of these systems before they're a foregone conclusion is in our interest. This can mean becoming involved in the evolution or operations of specific systems, but it can also mean investigating larger dynamics or specific scenarios we each see as important. Global-scale sociotechnical infrastructural systems are by definition the result of millions of people interacting over time. They are as shaped by culture as much as by our technical capabilities. We can have a voice in these systems if we choose to have one, and it can be argued that we have a civilizational duty to do so.

Any system, when seen as a thing in the world semi-intentionally created and changed over time, can be thought of as existing as the focus of a loop of activities: plan, decide, execute, monitor, repeat. Of these, the first and last are most interesting to us as civic outsiders.

Unless you're high up in the power structure of a system, you have little direct say in the decision process for changing a system; if you are, that process (itself a system) will determine your actions. Likewise, during the executive phase, the system follows its intended operation pattern. Unless you're a direct part of its operations, there's little to do here but interact with it in the ways it affords. The goal of infrastructure is to be boring and invisible and to function as planned; the interesting bits are elsewhere.

This leaves monitoring and planning. We could liken these to reading and writing – reading the pattern of interactions caused by the last cycle of execution and then writing a new set of instructions. As civic outsiders to a system, we can take part here in a critical or speculative mode. Regardless of our involvement with the system, these phrases are where the majority of the metacognition, analysis, and creativity takes place.

Both reading and writing systems have well-established associated disciplines. However, these disciplines exist mostly for the structural aspect of systems, across both the technical and legal domains. We have few tools for reading and writing the social and emotional (or affective) aspects of infrastructural systems. To better understand the infrastructural systems shaping our lives, it's critical we have a basic level of literacy across all of these quadrants:

	Sensing	Changing
Structural	Reading	Writing
Affective	Immersing	Embodying

The structural reading techniques are the traditional domain of systems modeling. This can mean anything from the tools of systems engineering, the core field that looks at systems and control structures (and the related mathematical, statistical, and computer modeling disciplines) to a number of more specialist fields. These include everything from electrical and telecommunications engineering to supply chain and logistics studies and the civil engineering of physical infrastructure. There is a core set of topics and techniques that form the civic literacy of system structures – what everyone should understand to be a literate citizen of a system-driven world – but it's still evolving and we're still figuring out how to teach it. Thankfully, this work is already ongoing. While I recommend going digging here if you're interested in how the world works, our story lies elsewhere.

There is a similar variety of tools used to write systems into the world. The intersections between modern finance, international technical standards, enabling laws, international treaties, intellectual property, and zoning and industrial regulation are a mess. Worse still are the extralegal tools used to drive infrastructural systems that intentionally benefit or harm specific groups – propaganda, outright bribery and graft, lobbying, and abusive uses of state or corporate power like censorship, choice architecture, or malicious legal actions. Again, understanding these tools and their impacts, how to counter or influence them, and some of the stories of their use is a civic duty, but one we'll leave as an exercise to the reader.

With so many tools for the structural side, surely we must have something for the affective? We're not completely bereft, but we are much closer to the edges of disciplines and practices – critical and speculative design, science fiction, participant-observer anthropology and ethnography, experiential futures, diegetic prototyping, and some parts of experience and service design all come into play. All of these can be described as at least larp-adjacent fields, if not larp proper.

Eirik Fatland said in his 2014 Nordic Larp Talk that he didn't know if larp was important, but that larp design definitely was. This is part of why.

As larpers, we experience and understand the emotional content of a situation by immersing in it. Where the reading process associated with the structural view of systems creates a definite “truth” – or failing this, a set of probabilities and their accompanying truths – immersion creates a personal, subjective experience. The emotional and social meaning of a system can be generalized – we can talk about more global “truths” in this domain – but only after experiencing the system singularly and subjectively and then triangulating between and paying attention to many personal truths. Even then, any generalization must admit its incompleteness, must allow that all real meaning can be lost as soon as details are abstracted out of sight, must acknowledge possible contradictions, and most of all must be aware that it carries with it a specific set of points of view that can eliminate some other points of view.

Immersion is most useful as a tool to either understand someone else's point of view, to understand the potential social impact of a system that doesn't yet exist, or both. Traditional system development processes make use of prototyping, but their aims are functionalist. Prototypes are built to see if a system is fit for its primary purpose or whether users can complete their tasks within the system. With immersion, we can ask questions about people's emotional relationships with a system. We can surface subtle and emergent power relations that appear as a system becomes embedded in society.

Emotion is considered in normative system design processes and structural tools for reading systems, but only from a single viewpoint. Every time a design team talks about the branding associated with a system, they're designing intended emotional reactions. The tools of emotional shaping in capitalism are sophisticated, detailed, and rarely admit challenges or other viewpoints. The structural tools of system development that come from these contexts have the emotional relationships they are most effective at constructing embedded within them. Our larp-world tools, without these limits and coming from outside that context, are uniquely powerful when used to surface emotions and relations outside this scope.

Emotional resonance across time is an interesting example of this. Every sociotechnical infrastructural system we interact with today has historical equivalents that shape how we understand today's systems. How we see the historical system depends on history that has been transmitted to us via a lossy, biased system of reconstruction and revision, at least in terms of popular narratives. As folk singer, storyteller, and political troublemaker Utah Phillips once said, “the most radical thing you can have today is a long memory.” It is no accident that most of us have lost those memories.

When we look at a system like labor allocation via waged employment today, we see a historical inevitability. Depending on our position within that system, we may have various feelings about it, but it's unlikely we have an intuitive understanding of the range of emotional and social relationships that people had with the equivalent system 150 years ago. Without that understanding – that memory – it's difficult to understand what our relationship might be (or what we might want it to be) with new systems of labor allocation. Upon understanding this history, we may find a new desire to resist some systems or exploit their cracks. We may also see resistance as more possible than we thought. Understanding our history tells us what we are capable of now. Immersion lets us reclaim history as our own.

Much of the successful function of globalization depends on the ability of transnational entities to play different legally and territorially restricted populations off against each other. One emotional meaning of this is encoded in the invisibility of workers within the supply chains that bring us goods – their absence speaks of organized violence at scale. Like globalization, geopolitics between states rests on the notion of a homogenous state and foreign “others”. Much of the power of the state in practice comes back to this emotional identity, especially during conflicts. Unwinding abusive state power and its corresponding social manipulations and making visible and working to flatten or route

around global neoliberal infrastructural oppressions both depend on transnational solidarity. Until we not only feel for but understand the practical and emotional realities of fellow humans in other countries, it is difficult to act. A practical understanding can help us figure out how to act; solidarity and emotional experiences teach us why to act. Immersion can help bring us to both.

Even within our society and in our own time, there are stratifications, divisions, and oppressions that are not always visible to us, and likewise, perks, privileges, and commonalities. Many of the aggressive parts of systems that perform social enforcement are held out of sight of people not subject to them (albeit more out of irrelevance than malice). The social arrangements people subject to them to manage their interactions with these enforcement systems, and how those arrangements unite, divide, or color the experiences of communities are even less legible. If we want to do our duty and understand and feel the systems in our own societies, we need to take the time to see them. Immersion can show us the lives of others.

Each of these examples points to a type of goal-oriented (telic) empathy that we might want to build. This kind of empathy is a diagnostic tool for the health of a social structure. Immersion lets us diagnose viability, power, and affect.

Viability is the most basic of the immersive sociotechnical diagnoses. When presented with the lived interaction pattern and even just a thin simulacrum of real lives, we're good at understanding how forced a social situation feels. All novel social interactions feel awkward at first, but larp gives us a toolkit to get past this while still maintaining a meaningful critical perspective. System designers sometimes create systems that assume a specific social script that, in practice, isn't functional. Sometimes this leads to systems failing to reach their goals. For example, toward the end of the last decade, a bunch of tools were built to help people share goods they were no longer using. Many of these systems failed because the social interactions they built drove both conflict and awkwardness, without providing more utility than existing social exchanges. While this is a trivial example – indeed, the interaction is so thin that building a meaningful game on it would be difficult, which may be part of the failure of such systems – they're a good example of the pattern of system building and failures to diagnose social viability.

The larp toolkit for building power relationships is well-tuned, as are the sensibilities of both players and game designers for reading the power balance of a situation. Introducing structural changes in a system during play allows us to see how power structures shift. This experiential and immersive reading yields a higher resolution understanding than an a priori analysis. When sociotechnical systems cause unpredicted shifts in social power relationships, it often indicates unseen dependencies between different social scripts, or stratifications in society that give different social groups different abilities to interact or adapt to change. For example, one of the goals of Uber was to change the power relationship between passengers and taxi drivers. They were successful at this, but differentially; in many countries, minorities who had a hard time flagging down taxis at all got to be first-class users of the system. Of course, a number of other power shifts were also designed into this system, putting Uber itself at a significant advantage over both passengers and drivers, but in different (and in both cases intentionally opaque) ways. Diegetic prototyping in play could have exposed many of these effects. Critical use of narratives extracted from that play could have informed the debate around regulation and licensing for Uber and similar services.

Immersion also lets us ask questions about the broader emotional nature of a potential sociotechnical infrastructural system. Things like the affective labor requirements of interactions with a system are often illegible to traditional design tools, and the differential impact of that affective labor can be even more opaque. Often, designers will be blinded by the brand intents they wish to convey, and will fail to see that many of the people who interact with their systems will have a different emotional relationship with it.

Sociotechnical infrastructure has been having unexpected emotional impacts for a long time. One

of the clearest examples is the evolution of the telephone and the impact that it had on social lives and the kinds of emotional labor that young women were asked to perform as telephone operators. Today, having seen enough examples of new communication mediums, we expect that almost any new medium will become a place for flirtation and gossip (regardless of gender) along with everything else, but the phone companies intended the telephone to be a business tool and their worldview didn't leave room for anything else. When it turned out to have other uses, moral panics ensued as the companies struggled to understand and control what they'd built.

So far, we've talked about reading – immersion – but what of writing? As larpers, the moment, if we can define it to a singular point, when we write a thing into existence is when we embody it and bring it to life. When we think about larp as immersion, we're focusing on picking out emotions and feeling them deeply, letting them lead us where they will. When we focus on embodying, we focus on larp's ability to make things real and to create or draw out emergent responses from systems. We have traditional prototyping tools to make not-yet-existing systems functionally real, but we need embodiment to make them emotionally and socially real. As with immersion, larp embodiment is most effective at realizing those things that exist outside the mindset embedded in existing structural tools.

While critical perspectives are often introduced either speculatively or reactively, embodiment can introduce them as a co-design tool. For example, consider a system designed to give people a way to report failures in public water points online. In most rich-world countries, this would be a boring city service; an afterthought or a minor convenience at best. In a place like Dar es Salaam, where only 8% of the population has direct access to clean water, getting water points fixed when they break is a life or death issue. There's a neat tool called *Taarifa* that works as a ticketing system for community-reported issues, so they can be tracked, shepherded through bureaucracy, fixed, verified, and everyone in the chain notified. The system is great and having an impact, but it relies on a centralized system and its basic structure was created outside of the deployed context. Technically, it's possible to build a decentralized system that provides the community with a greater degree of flexibility in the social patterns the system supports. The evolution of new social patterns for interaction around infrastructure is usually slow and constrained by their current forms – this is known as the path dependency of system evolution.

With larp, we can help communities prototype their own organizational structures directly. With the technical constraints removed, embodied play used as a design tool has the possibility to allow the community to design and implement new social patterns more quickly. Lived prototypes allow a higher-resolution collective understanding of the social dynamics of a system to emerge. When built honestly and inclusively, games for either testing a specific social script or exploring and generating alternatives also hand interpretive agency to the participant co-creators. Determining who is permitted to authoritatively describe the social meaning of an interaction is a critical step in creating systems that support political ideals. Inclusivity here has far-reaching effects.

Another opportunity for this kind of lived prototyping comes from the architectural program diagram. We think of architects defining buildings via floor plans, cut-through section drawings, and external and perspective views. While the final design representation these days is mostly a 3D model, these drawings still define much of the creative process of the building-as-structure. Before an architect thinks about form, they need to understand what the building is trying to do. This phase is called program design – what activities people intend to perform in the building, how much space will they need, what activities should happen adjacent to what, etc.

Architects at their most egocentric would happily claim to be designing the social scripts being performed in the building, but they have no formal toolkits to represent or work with these scripts. Architecture is a conservative field. While firms work closely with the folks paying them, it's rare to



see them work with the people who will be performing the building-as-social-system. When they do, it's mostly by survey and drawings. Larp offers us a tool to both represent social scripts and to collectively redesign them. Christopher Alexander's work in *A Timeless Way of Building* (1979), *A Pattern Language* (1977), and other books comes halfway here, but he still focuses more on form than script – and forty years on, he's still seen as a radical, well-outside the architectural mainstream. Tides are shifting however, and functional tools can help them move more quickly.

We're all familiar with educational larps, but when the students are understood to be the human elements in a sociotechnical system, they go from a way to convey skills to a way to reshape one of the most complex parts of a system. While tools can carry ethics with them, where those ethics are located and what their sensitivities are is complex. In larps, a lot of the political structure and impact is encoded in the co-creative nature of the medium. While some of the tools we've built, or their equivalents, can be used from various political positions, doing so often means changing their structure and losing much of their impact.

The US Department of Defense (DoD) has a long history of both systems thinking and of thinking of people as part of its systems, although it rarely chooses to do so in ways that preserve their humanity. They're also heavy users of simulations, some of which are larps in all but name. In education larping it's a truism that the real learning happens in the discussion after the game, not during play. It's less clear that this is true for rehearsing new social reflexes. DARPA, DoD's research wing, has a specific series of games they put new soldiers through to try to give them instincts that will lead them to being "better strangers". Much of this is focused on de-escalation and moving tense but not hostile interactions in calm or cooperative directions (the inverse of much of the rest of their training). The political and structural impacts of projects like this are complex and hard to see; more humanity in the force projection of Empire may be a net good, if a messy one. Regardless, it points toward possible uses of educational larp to modify systems, drawing on a more complete version of the larp toolkit and a less dehumanizing political standpoint.

When we describe embodiment as building, the core of what it allows us to build is pastness. As mentioned, traditions and interactions often feel unreal, uncomfortable, or even ridiculous when they're new, and the more they change our personal lives and how we interact with each other, the more this is true. Diegetic prototypes let us skip this step and assume we have already integrated a new interaction – they let us confer the patina of time all at once. In combination with the co-creative process, this can let us shortcut and shape system adoption. We do this all the time in games – every time we create a set of rituals for a game, rehearse it beforehand, and then begin play with the assumption that we've been acting like this our whole lives, we're conveying pastness onto a social script so we can explore what it means.

In the ideal world, a tight loop exists between the more structural design processes (which are extended to create the material for diegetic prototypes) and the immersive and embodying modes of larp-driven systems work. The larp side begins with a focus on immersion as the system is explored, and shifts toward more embodiment-focused play as systems become more firm. At the start of a process like this, much of the experimental diegesis can be built around metaphorical or parallel constructions. This allows designers a maximum of flexibility in how systems are represented and helps players move away from their lived contexts, improving immersion. Later, play can become more representational, to help emerge subtler issues and to drive embodiment.

Larpers are familiar with building rituals and social scripts. As embodiment conveys pastness to collectively-constructed social scripts and new systems move from theory to deployment, embodiment can become teaching, helping the community integrate new social scripts while retaining the political framing they've worked hard to embed.

Larp is no more a magic bullet for fixing the politics of sociotechnical infrastructural systems than anything else is. Many conflicts in these systems are inherent in the management of scarce resources,

even before we add greed for money and power, moral biases, and the systemic issues of capitalism and state violence. Neither better tools nor even more carefully designed systems can erase these forces. However, without larps we lack the most basic tools for the diagnosis and construction of politics and sociality in this domain. The degree to which systems run our world is only increasing, and our ability to create political change depends on us coming to terms with them. As larpers, we have the toolkit. It's time to put it to work.

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■ Jugular Malloy

## Larp as a Tool (for the Demolition of Capitalism)

*“We don’t need another hero... all we want is life beyond.” -Tina Turner*

Can larp be a tool that people use for their everyday struggles? Can it help people find a way out, work together, turn the tables? I think so. I think that larp can change the world, but only if the world can larp.

*In a small room above a church hall in East London, a bit of masking tape on the floor indicates the top deck of a pirate ship. In another square of masking tape, below deck, Maryam the pirate is discussing strategy with Grant, the pirate captain. The British have been chasing them for a week now and everyone is focused on the task of staying alive.*

*On top deck Barry the pirate puts down his binoculars and calls out, “Maryam!”. The skin on Maryam’s forearm crawls where he touched her in the last scene. The sound of his voice revives the sick swirling mess at the pit of her stomach.*

*Grant looks at her expectantly. Barry will have spotted a British ship and will be needing her cannon skills. “What’s wrong with you? Do you want to throw away everything we’ve fought for? Get up there and sink some ships!”*

*He’s right, she’s needed and there’s no one else for the job. She walks over to the top deck and grabs hold of the legs of an upturned school chair, her cannon. And no one can use it like her. She feels the sour cold air between her and Barry and rehearses what she’ll say to Rushna, the only other woman on the ship, when she gets a chance to. “This isn’t what we fought for,” she thinks “It has to stop.” She manoeuvres the chair to the left, getting the enemy ship in her sights. “I became a Pirate so that I could be free. But I feel trapped.”*

*Ibi the pirate baby cries from the other outpost where his mother Rushna discusses their survival chances with Jack the Quarter Master. Ibi cries louder, he’s tired.*

*“TOILET!” shouts Hafiza, Rushna’s player. Everyone responds “TOILET!”; it’s their agreed stop word. Jo, who played Jack, walks over to the light switch, she flicks it off. Grant returns to Gladys as she plays a piece of music from her phone. They close their eyes for a while and Hafiza comforts Ibi.*

*Jo flicks the light back on and they open their eyes. Hafiza brushes a tear from Ibi’s cheek with her thumb “He’s tired”.*

*The players all nod. They’re tired too and most have work in the morning. It’s time for the debrief.*

*Nezza cries. She played Maryam. She speaks of how she feels compelled to be nice to her perry housemate because they’re all trying to figure out what to do about the huge rent increase their landlord is threatening. The women listen, they know this, of course, this is why they are here and why they designed the larp in this way. Gladys put the kettle on. Jo breaks the last samosa in two and bites into the smaller half.*

*Batia, who played Barry, asks Nezza whether it’s too much for her, does she want a different character? Nezza thinks, then she asks, “Can I push him in the sea?”*

*They laugh, agreeing that she definitely can. “Then I think I’ll stick to Maryam.”.*

In the spring of 2013 the violent eviction of an occupied park in İstanbul sparked a wave of protests and strikes across Turkey. Over seven million people took part in the Gezi Park protests in İstanbul alone, expressing a huge array of discontent towards the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s authoritarian government. I arrived in İstanbul as a tourist in June that year while the unrest was still simmering. I made some Turkish friends and they showed me what had been going on.

A rich culture developed around the protests. Jokes and internet memes and songs and graffiti referencing those memes sprung up everywhere. People identified themselves as *çapulcular*, the word the Prime Minister used when dismissing them as looting marauders. When the Turkish CNN decided to show penguins in the Antarctic while its US broadcast showed the Turkish unrest, penguins appeared on walls across the cities and the internet.

After the occupation of Gezi Park was evicted, people started to organise Park Forums in other parks across the city to collectively discuss the progress of the protests. An outbreak of singing each evening at 9pm marked that it was time for us to head to the nearest Park Forum. People arranged themselves in a semi-circular formation like an ancient Greek theatre. Two or three people sat down in the centre, spoke, and facilitated others from the crowd who wanted to speak. Sometimes people came down to the centre to speak in front of everyone. Other times, they just stood up and spoke where they were.

The forums I saw had a lot of women present, and it seemed easy for anyone to speak who wanted to. The open semicircle in a public park made it a public forum anyone could join. It didn’t seem pre-planned; rather, I got the feeling that people were collectively developing their understanding of the situation they found themselves in. In all this, there was a beauty, and I cried. The beauty was in the culture of collectivity I was witnessing – a culture where people formed new ideas and knowledge together. And I cried because I had never seen it before.

I’m a working class Londoner trying to survive in a city in the grip of a housing crisis. London’s housing crisis means different things depending on who you are. To me, it means barely existent social housing and expensive and insecure private housing run by landlords and letting agents with too much power. This is exasperated by low wages and insecure work. I’m lucky enough to have contracted hours but “zero hours” contracts, where the employer is under no obligation to give you work, are on the increase. I’m trying to fight back. Where I’ve been affected in my own life I’ve tried to bring people together to fight back as a collective. It’s proven to be difficult.

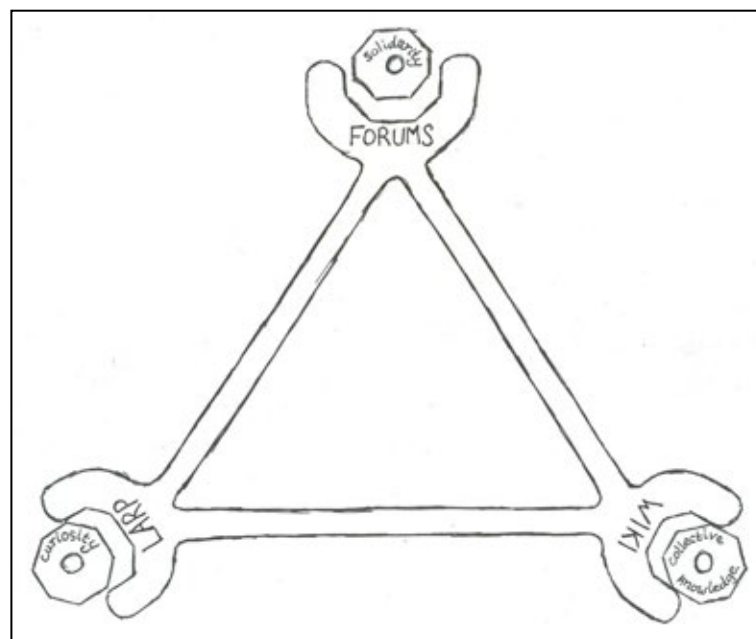
As an example, when the town council tried to evict the converted warehouses I lived in, I tried to set up a tenants’ association. In addition to fighting the eviction, we wanted the association to provide

a forum to talk about rent increases, a result of the warehouse district becoming fashionable. The association attracted tenants with larger budgets who wanted to change the image of district residents from “dirty squatters” to creative professionals like themselves. They tended to have more time and energy to devote to the association. It also attracted subletting landlords, who had a monetary interest in keeping the income they got from subletting rooms. The landlords shut down conversations about rent negotiations. The people with higher budgets shut down conversations about people on lower incomes who would be made homeless by the eviction-because it contradicted the middle class image they wanted to project.

One woman, who worked for a professional lobbyist and put a lot of time into the association for career reasons, pushed to structure the association in the professional manner she was accustomed to. This professionalism gave it a closed hierarchy which established a small core group and made it difficult for others to take part in the main work of the association. People with lower budgets felt disempowered to act and had less time and energy to take part in something that they weren’t sure would be to their benefit. After some heated arguments over allowing landlords in the association, I duly bowed out.

These complications permeate throughout the rest of my life. At my work, we don’t have a union and one of the bosses is a bully, so I attended a training for organising in non-unionised workplaces. I found the training useful, but it was based on the assumption that you saw all your co-workers on a regular basis throughout the week. There were in fact three isolated workers (like me) at the training for whom a lot of the material wasn’t relevant. My work situation is also atypical in that the company was formed as a Community Interest Company where my bosses are volunteer Trustees who are not allowed to financially benefit from the company. This means they have their own jobs or rely on welfare. This doesn’t make for a perfectly peaceable work environment, but it does make for a different power dynamic.

As I have struggled over the years to fight the challenges of capitalism with ideas and tools I inherited from my grandparents, I started to realise that capitalism has adapted to these weapons, but we had not yet adapted the weapons to modern capitalism.



Three pronged spanner.

I started to wonder why anarchists like me behaved as if we had the answers and that all we needed was for people to listen. I realised the world is complicated, and we don’t know the first thing about it. I decided we needed to start learning and inquiring about the world around us, starting from the principles of humility and curiosity. Perhaps if we started thinking about political education as an opened-ended process of communing minds, something exciting might start to happen.

*“Where were we?” Batia looks around at the other women as she sips her tea.*

*“There was a British ship on the horizon and Nezza, I mean Maryam, was just on the cannon next to, urgh, Barry.” Jo glares at Batia in feigned disgust.*

*Nezza laughs. “Can we do the same again? But this time I don’t want to stay quiet, I want to say something, just to see what happens.”*

*Everyone thinks that this is a good idea. Batia shakes her head in mock protest.*

*Play resumes and Grant, Gladys’ character, starts, “Hey! What’s wrong with you? Do you want to throw away everything we’ve fought for? Get out there and sink some Brits!”*

*Maryam, Nezza’s character, says, “I’m not going, Grant. Barry is a pervert and I’m not going near him. I know I’m the best but you’ll have to go up there yourself. Because if I have to smell his stinking breath one more time he’s going in the sea.”*

*Grant sighs, “Maryam. This is not the time. The ships are coming now. We have to stick together. I’m not arguing with you, get up there!”*

*“I’m not moving, if we don’t have time you better get up there yourself because I am not moving.”*

*Grant glares at Maryam. “Don’t expect to survive this.” He turns his back on her to join Barry at the cannon.*

Inspired by the forums in İstanbul, I wanted to see if I could set up a structure for people to set up their own forums, but with a focus on inquiry and problem-solving rather than protest and activism. I wanted to see if there was a problem-solving mechanism people could use to put themselves into a different head space, to process and explore the struggles they found themselves in. I’d been thinking about using drama, so upon the advice of a friend I researched Augusto Boal’s Forum Theatre. It looked interesting but it was somehow more limited than I was expecting.

While I was thinking about this, my friend Eleanor was staying over at our place in London. I mentioned to her what I was looking for over breakfast. “Huh. That sounds like Nordic larp.” I knew what larp was and I knew what “Nordic” meant, and I probably imagined lots of people dressed as Sarah Lund from *The Killing* in woolly jumpers boffing each other about the head with giant foam axes. I had no idea what she was talking about.

“What’s that?” I can’t remember the explanation, but it must have been pretty good because the next thing I said was “That sounds like it. That sounds like the thing.” She gave me a reading list, a Youtube playlist, the dates for something called “Knudepunk”, and a few months later I was in Denmark larping for the first time in my life.

The italicised passages throughout this piece are a speculation on what larping as a tool of political organising, or what I’m calling “union larping”, might look like. I’m visualising the idea as a three-pronged tool based on the three principles of solidarity, collective knowledge, and curiosity. Each principle has a corresponding tool; respectively, forums, a wiki, and larp.

The idea is to make something people can use to set up their own forums where they can meet in person to provide each other with support and solidarity over any struggle. There, they can share and explore the realities of their lives and try to come up with new solutions to their problems.

One of the tools people can choose to use at forums will be a system for creating union larps. They can design games relevant to their lives and use them to explore their situation. Exploring situations from the perspective of a game, with different consequences than in the real world, can free people

up to experiment. During and after forums, participants can record what happened or start discussions about lessons or new tactics on some form of wiki, which other forums can edit and develop further. A simple idea for a tactic from one forum can expand into a fully-fledged investigation of the idea with numerous examples of how it works in practice as other groups pick it up and experiment with it.

Each prong of the spanner is an ambitious project in itself, so I'm going to focus on one at a time, starting with larp.

*Nezza's landlord is putting up the rent. She shares the house with four others and they want to resist the rent increase together. One housemate, Charlie, has repeatedly sexually harassed her. The others know this but while they don't approve they haven't said anything to Charlie. Nezza doesn't know what to do. She can't afford to move out, and she can't afford the rent increase. She feels stuck and feels like she can't speak to her housemates about it. She's heard of a website called [solidarityforums.org](http://solidarityforums.org) where people arrange to meet each other to discuss difficult problems. She searches for a forum for private tenants. She finds several but feels like she needs a women's group where she'd feel comfortable talking about sexual harassment. She does find one, but the wording makes her feel like they would exclude her as a trans woman, so she clicks "create" and sets up a new forum. She lists it as "for insecure tenants who", she thinks about the wording and settles on "are oppressed as women". It's the summer, so she sets the location to a park with good bus links near her home in East London.*

*During the next couple of weeks her smartphone pings a few times with people joining the forum. When the number reaches about five, they arrange to meet. This is England, so even though it's summer the weather turns grey and wet. They decide to ditch the park and one of the members says they can get a room above a church for around £2 each. One of the women says she can't even afford £2 so the rest agree to cover it for her and they meet.*

*Nezza admits she doesn't have a printer; fortunately Gladys is an office worker who prints off materials for the forum from the [solidarityforums](http://solidarityforums.org) website. They all have different days, off so they agree to meet on an evening after work. Hafiza checks with everyone that it's okay to bring her baby and it is.*

*They are all a bit nervous so, following the recommendations, Nezza stops by an Indian snack centre on the way and picks up some samosas. They sip tea and eat samosas, talk about how tasty they are, and gradually conversation moves on to their housing situations. They go around the circle and each of them describes their housing situation. They try to keep it to less than a minute each and they go over what kind of contract they have, what their relationship is with their housemates (if they have any), and any problems they have at the moment.*

*Nezza talks about the sexual harassment she's experiencing. Although none of the women are being harassed by a housemate, every single woman has experienced sexual harassment, and they receive her words with empathy. Batia tells Nezza that a few years ago a guy at work kept pinching her bum, but he was her Union rep so she didn't know who to go to.*

*After sharing some experiences, they decide on a focus for today's forum. They decide on the issue of suffering sexism from someone who is meant to be "on your side". They decide to try role-playing, so they get out the "build-a-union-larp" kit that Gladys printed from the website and start building the framework for their game.*

For a larp system to work as a universal tool for political change, it needs to meet a number of criteria to ensure the games are accessible and relevant. It would need to be a system that is infinitely customisable and adaptable to any given set of circumstances. It needs to allow for the creation of larps that can be played almost anywhere, with no budget. The games need to be something people can play after a long day at work without feeling drained. They need to be cathartic to give the same feeling of release as dancing on a Friday night. Most people don't have the time to dedicate a whole

day to larping, so they need games that can be played in an hour or two or serialised into segments about that long. As we want people to pull reflections and ideas from play, there will need to be ample time and space for debriefs. The games will need to function without an experienced GM or facilitator and still provide a safe experience for all of the players, with people being able to leave when they want.

## Criteria for Union Larps

- Play anywhere
- No budget
- Cathartic, not draining
- Comprehensive debrief
- Quick set up
- Short or serialised into short segments
- Adaptable
- Player control
- Player creation
- No Game Master

The larp system I'm describing will be aimed at people directly affected by the political issues they want the larp to address. This is not about awareness raising, but empowerment.

Out of all the pre-existing larp practice, the larps developed in Palestine and Syria seem the most similar. From conversations with Palestinian and Syrian larpers, I learned that one of the values of larp for them is that it creates space and time for emotional release. I initially imagined union larps being more tactical than emotional. Can a primarily tactical experience provide the catharsis needed for it to fit into people's stressful lives? Or will it just be draining? Only play-testing will tell. Even with testing, the things that we learn work here may not work in other contexts. Life in London is hard, but it isn't Palestine. I may not be able to create a universal framework from London, but my hope is that the resulting framework will be robust enough that people can adapt it to their context without much difficulty.

Playing *When Our Destinies Meet* (Jarl and Karlsson, 2013) at the Larpwriter Summer School made the idea of a union larp creation system seem plausible. *When Our Destinies Meet* is a black box role-playing system where players co-create the story in a workshop before the larp. It has four fixed elements: a party, some social roles, and one or more destined meetings. The details are decided in the workshop.

The social roles are things like "The Parent", "The Child", "The Co-Worker", "The Boss", and "The Friend". These are randomly handed to players in the workshop and they use them to simultaneously come up with their relationship to each other and the circumstances of the larp. As they do this, the drama emerges.

The authors based this process on German playwright Bertolt Brecht's concept of social roles. "We exist in relationships with each other, not as isolated archetypal psychological entities." (Jarl and Karlsson, 2013). Players seemed to find the process comfortable and easy.

This is relevant to union larping not just because it's a system for co-creation but because people

will be larping to process a social problem. As social problems involve sets of social roles, a system that helps people identify social roles in their lives may provide them with the raw materials they need to co-create an effective larp, when combined with an alternate set of circumstances.

*Precariat!* (Dixon and Giles, 2015) is a table-top role-playing game about survival as a member of the class of workers whose work and housing is in a constant state of precarity. *While When Our Destinies Meet* uses a fixed set of social roles, *Precariat!* uses a fixed set of economic circumstances and leaves players to fill in the details through co-creation. There is ‘rent’ that has to be paid and ‘bad stuff’ that happens when it isn’t. Players are free to co-create any universe they want, but the economic conditions are set and the game uses maths to ensure that there is a set relationship between the amount that the players are able to earn and how much the rent costs (and the rent is high!). As players co-create, the game asks them a series of questions about the economic reality of their fictional world:

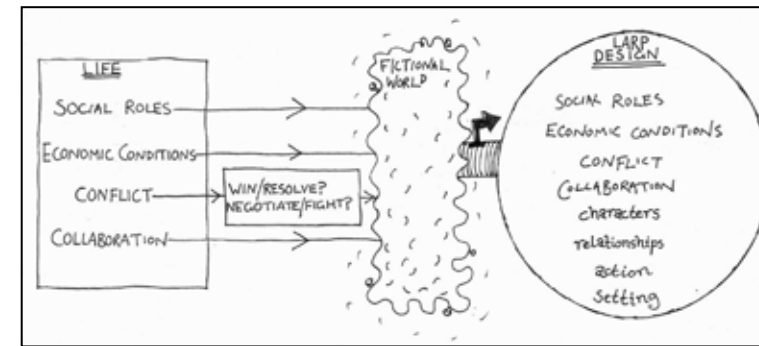
**What resources do you need to get by and why are they so hard to get?**  
**Who controls the resources, and what are their tools for keeping power?**  
**Why is it so hard for most people to find a steady job?**  
**What will tear us apart if we let it?**

Our system could ask similar questions of players; not to fill in dramatic details, but to ascertain the economic structures of our player’s lives. This can then be used as a framework for the economic circumstances of the larp world, which, combined with a thin layer of theme, genre, and world-building details, players can use to hash out the economic drama of their larp.

I’ve identified two frameworks – social roles and economics – that can form the backbone of any union larp, as defined by the reality of players’ lives. Now I want to think about the dynamics between players; the extent to which a game is competitive, collaborative, or a mix of the two. These dynamics alter the whole feel of a game, and given that most union larps will be about some kind of conflict, it’s worth asking players to make decisions on them in their larp design. We can expect that most games will be a mixture of the competitive and the collaborative, with two or more sides who compete against each other but collaborate among themselves. A union larp where all players compete as individuals against each other would be unlikely.

With conflicts it may be worth not only drawing from reality but also asking people what they want out of it. Do they want to try and win the conflict? Or do they want to resolve it? If people are fighting an eviction, they will probably want to win the conflict and won’t be too interested in sitting down with their landlord for a lovely mediation which won’t do anything to alter their opposing economic interests. However, if the conflict is between arguing neighbours, they may want to resolve the conflict by seeing each other’s point of view. If the players want to win the conflict, they may want to choose in the design of the game whether they will negotiate or fight.

These questions may also be things that players wish to explore through the larp. However, as they affect the nature and structure of the game, it makes sense to give players the option to pick the degrees of competition vs. collaboration and negotiation vs. fight beforehand where it makes sense, as this should provide a more robust game structure.



Union larp design system

*“So, we’ve got two conflicts, haven’t we? There’s the conflict between the landlord and the tenants because he wants to raise the rent, and there’s the housemate who is harassing Nezza.”*

*“Okay, so what if we just have the British Navy as the landlord? Then all the tenants are pirates... trying to fight the navy”*

*“Great! But what about the sex pest?”*

*“One of the pirates is sexually harassing a fellow pirate? That’s the other conflict.”*

*“Do we want actual sexual harassment or something like... he’s abusing your parrot?”*

*“If we can do it without anyone actually touching me in that way, I think it should be sexual harassment.”*

*“Okay. If you’re fine with that. Next it asks, and it says we don’t have to choose, but it asks if we want to win the conflict outright, or resolve it. And if we want to win, do we want to fight or negotiate?”*

*“Hmm. I don’t know, can I leave that open?”*

We now have all of the elements for the prototype of a union larp design system: theme, social roles, economic conditions, conflicts and collaborations, and a setting. To create their larp, the players start by picking an aspect of their lives that they want to change. This will be the theme of their union larp. Their theme could be housing, where they want to resist a rent increase, work, where they want better sick pay, their neighbourhood, where they want street harassment to stop, or anything at all.

They then need to identify the social roles in this situation. The roles don’t have personalities and one person can occupy multiple roles. Roles in a situation could be the boss, the employee, the landlord, the tenant, the abuser, the abused, the friend, the mother, the comrade, etc.

Next, they need to identify the economic and social power conditions of their situation. Players figure these out by answering questions like “What do people need to survive?” “Who has more control over resources?” “Why?” “What obstacles stop people getting the resources that they need?” “Is anyone reliant on others for their survival and in what way?”.

After this, the players need to identify who is in conflict and who is in collaboration with each other. If there is a conflict, players can decide if they want to try and win the conflict, or resolve it, or leave it open during play. They can also choose whether they want to pursue this outcome by fighting or negotiating.

Once they have identified these structural elements, the players should pick a fictional world. This could be a historical period, a fictional genre – anything big and open enough to contain their imaginations and the nuances and complications of their lives. Just as the system has prompted the players and given examples for other things, a few examples will make this easier. Players will have the opportunity to flesh out the world as they continue.

Once the basics are all decided, players take the social roles they listed earlier, cut them up into individual bits of paper, and distribute them amongst themselves randomly. They can then go around and flesh out the relationships the roles have with each other in the new fictional world, turning them into characters. They no longer need to worry about mirroring reality, as the basic structures they need for the game to do its job are all built in. As the world gets richer, the players can fill in the new fictional blanks with regard to the economics, conflicts, and collaborations of the fictional world. The players now have all the elements they need to start playing a union larp in a fictional world based on the economic and power structures of their own lives.

The most important part of the union larp will be the debrief. The debrief is the bridge between the larp and the forum. During the debrief, players may feel like they've identified certain truths about their circumstances that they wish to share with other groups. For example, they might conclude that "some will call for unity as a way of silencing and controlling dissent." They might then want to create a page about this observation on the wiki, which can then be read and developed by other forums around the world. New tactics that players experimented with during play can be discussed in the debrief, used in real life, and developed on the wiki. Most importantly, because players will be touching on important and personal issues in their union larp, the debrief will be a means for players to support each other emotionally. In order for a forum to work well, people will need the atmosphere of solidarity and mutual support that a debrief can foster. As the union larp allows people to step outside of themselves, the debrief will ease players back into their skins and bring the ideas from the play into the forum.

I want to universalise the tools of inquiry. I want to universalise access to the knowledge that inquiry creates.

I want to universalise the means of getting together with people in similar situations and forming a network of solidarity.

I want to universalise the tools of hacking reality with larp to see if we can make a better one.

In anarcho-syndicalism, there is an idea of creating "One Big Union" for all. I don't want to create a universal union, but I do want to universalise the tools of the union for all working class people, wherever and whenever and however they are oppressed. It's only when people have access and ownership of the tools of the union that they can make them work for them, on their own terms and in ways that are useful to them. It's only then that people can create better tools when the old ones no longer work. We are the experts on our own oppression. No one else is better placed to understand and fight it.

I don't believe that the ideas I've sketched out in this article comprise a toolset to change the world. But if I can find a way of putting them in the hands of the world with a concrete means for developing them further, with all the cleverness and experience that's out there, they might just evolve into a set of tools that will dismantle capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy once and for all.

*"So, Nez̧za and Haf̧za, your characters pushed every male character overboard and into the sea. The guidelines here say that you should try and think about how you could adapt this to real life. Do you think you could apply this to your own life?"*

*"Er, I don't know? But I definitely feel better!"*

*"Hey, isn't there a river near your house?"*

*"Oh yeah! There is..."*

## ■ Ludography

**Precariat!** Vol 1 (2015): Adam Dixon and Harry Giles. #rentpunk gamejam 2015. <https://harrygiles.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/precariat.pdf>

**When Our Destinies Meet Vol 1.1** (2013): Morgan Jarl and Petter Karlsson, <https://whenourdestiniesmeet.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/when-our-destinies-meet-130711.pdf>, 21.12.12

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**Theory: Politics & Larp**

■ Moyra Turkington

## Rehearsing Difference

### Introduction

What does it mean for a larp to be “political”? Is it something it is about, something it is, something it says, or something it does? What mechanisms can larps leverage to engage and influence political movement?

Larp is a practice of rehearsing difference. When we larp, we create alternative worlds and contexts to live in, we immerse ourselves in alternate mental models, engage with radically different paradigms, and we physically de-mechanize the body from its accustomed behaviour. Individually – and collectively – we use the alibi that the larp provides to give ourselves permission to practice difference together, often intentionally making ourselves vulnerable to the experience of it. As such, larp has a broad capacity to challenge and to change us. And likewise, this means that the act of larp design is political: the designer makes a series of choices that shapes the collective alibi inviting participants to practice in a designed direction: reinforcing existing paradigms and behavioral models, resisting them, or trying to build new interactive patterns.

Understanding the ways that a larp can influence people and the approaches that can be used to shape play can help designers reach targeted goals, develop effective strategies, produce desired experiences, measure success, and identify where a larp produces unintentional meaning. Participants can also benefit from such a language and framework: in choosing what larps to engage with, in working to unpack their play experiences, and to challenge themselves with intention where desired.

This article aims to examine some of the ways that larp can affect engagement, and some of the approaches that can be used to create political opportunity. This is not meant as an exhaustive list,

but as a basic language and framework with which we can begin to articulate goals and analyze play. Not unlike the Mixing Desk of Larp (Andressen and Nielsen 2013), the modes of influence and methods of approach described in this article are nonexclusive and are meant to be set and adjusted to the context of a specific game. Methods and means blend to create the political footprint of a larp. This is a practitioner’s approach to examine and articulate different aspects of political design, and understand how methods blend to affect the output of play.

### Methods and Means

Larp acts within different spheres of influence (personal, communal, public) using different approaches (via minds, hearts and bodies) to move or secure our paradigms. In the personal sphere, larp can challenge our very identities: who we are, how we interact with the narratives of ourselves and the world around us. In the communal sphere, we collectively use alibi and set apart space in larp to rehearse new ideas and new ways of being with each other. In the public sphere, the larp itself interacts in alignment or challenge to its public – and often changing – context. Moreover, in each sphere, larp creates discussion, narrative, and movement in different ways: by affecting our thinking, our emotions, or our behaviours and actions. This enables larp to challenge or shape the narratives of both participants and non-participants.

This article will examine the capacity of larp design for political action. It will use this model of political spheres and approaches to discuss how we create design intention, and it will demonstrate how this is being practiced in (Nordic style) larp designs.

### Spheres

As any rhetorician would tell you, the first step in any effective speech act is knowing who your audience is. Thus when looking at political engagement in larp, a starting point for examination is: who is included in the sphere of a larp’s influence?

When we larp we do so both as individuals, and as a group that exists within a community of practice, as well as in the context of a wider public sphere. A larp can affect any of these spheres, individually or all at once, and can affect each similarly or differentially at one time. Identifying the opportunities for access allows us to understand the potential and reach of any given larp.

### Personal

Historically we have been strong at thinking of larp in terms of personal engagement. There is a tendency to think of the player as the default access point of a larp; and to habitually look to the player experience to understand the game. As such, much work has already been done to develop a basic language to describe the player’s personal experience with the larp (alibi, immersion, bleed, etc.). How we psychologically interact with larps is a wide and fascinating subject and the nuance of that is well beyond the scope of this article. However, I’d like to have a look at a selection of ways that larp can shape our relationship to ideas to get to an understanding of how larps can politically affect us.

As games in which we exchange our identity as a core activity, the obvious starting point of observation within the personal sphere of engagement is how larp frames our relationship to ourselves and our identities. Larp generally disrupts the very idea that we are static beings with static behaviours and remind us that reinventing ourselves is not only possible, it is interesting and can be fun. When we come out of powerful experiences in games – especially long form games in which we suspend our own realities for a marked amount of time – we often have to go through an extended process of debrief to reassemble who we are and reconnect with ourselves.



This creates a personal discipline of malleability as well as a powerful opportunity for political engagement. Even apart from the specific design or content of a larp, the very act of practicing unbecoming and rebecoming is in itself a political act that challenges conventional notions of reality. We build intense relationships with people that we do not actually know and we carry away with us memories of things we experienced but did not actually do, in situations or worlds that do not actually exist. Repeating this process over and over with dedication can develop, like any practice, into a skill set that strengthens and normalizes the process of challenging notions of what we think of as objective reality. In so doing, larp can be a gateway to re-evaluating other ideas that we hold as static truths or ways in which we feel held to conventional rules. This both primes participants to become politically engaged and empowers them with the ability to willfully personally work at reframing their own identities and the ways they experience the world.

In *Mad About the Boy*, Raaum, Edland, and Lindahl created a larp in a dystopian near-future where a plague had killed all men. Women combined in new kinds of family units to petition a government program to receive the pre-plague banked semen in hopes of raising a child. The player characters were all women. Most runs of the game have been offered in pairs: a women-only run coupled with a mixed-gender run. This is a great game to dissect to understand political opportunity in larp in general, but here I'd like to shine a spotlight on two demographics and the larp's affect on personal identity.

First, the women-only run was open to anyone identifying as female. This meant that not only were transgender women welcome to play, but that their legitimacy as women could not be in question. This is a powerful political stance in terms of identity acceptance established between the player and the game, particularly for players that may not have had prior opportunity to exist in a space where their identity as trans women was explicitly reinforced. At the same time, as the larp's fictional explanation for the plague was based on chromosome designation (XY), this (unintentionally) created a point of identity dissonance for some potential players: while the social environment around the game framed the play experience inclusively, the fiction in the game framed trans women within the umbrella of male experience. The larp also provided other opportunities for self-engagement: I know of one trans woman who had not yet begun to present as female who came to play the larp specifically to understand the emotional impact of that transition. She was undergoing a process of intentional identity practice. I also know of another player who had just begun struggling with questions about their gender identity and chose to play in the service of self-provoking identity discovery.

Secondly, I know that many male players came away from the mixed-gender run having had profound experiences after immersively practicing female gender socialization (which was aided by workshops for those playing across gender). While some players did report struggling to perform femininity and frustration with trying to navigate female social norms, there was also an overwhelming response to the unexpected joy experienced in the freedom to express emotion, to engage with touch in ways that are not traditionally permitted to men. Here, the process of identity exchange with the Other allowed many male players to undergo a process of identity reassessment of the quality of their experience as men.

We can see from the above case how larp has the capacity to deeply affect a person's relationship with their own identities across a very wide spectrum of expression. However, while I have chosen to use identity as a starting point, it is only one relationship or angle existing in the personal sphere that can be accessed by a larp experience. Relationships to ideas, to society, to other people, to our own behaviour, to our paradigms, to abstract concepts, to specific agendas and conditions all have their own spectrums to examine. The important thing to come away with from this section is: the personal sphere of influence relates to the internality of a single player, and their many-faceted internal relationship with something.

## Communal

Where the personal sphere is about individual player's internal relationships, the communal sphere is about the collective environment of the direct participants of the game. Once we understand the complexity involved in the personal sphere, we can start to see how players together compound that complexity into a diverse network of influence. Players individually still engage within the personal sphere, but when playing in a collective body, the larp can affect the participants communally as well as personally. Social reinforcement or challenge can happen between individuals, social models can emerge or be destroyed and communal meaning is made. The communal experience will affect the personal experience and vice versa, but the personal and communal spheres can be individually targeted by the larp's design. Moreover they can be targeted in complement or in tension with each other to produce different play experiences, and to alter the conversation of the game.

Notably, there are a number of larps that specifically explore the personal sphere of influence as themes of the game. Two examples are particularly interesting to examine in this context, because they both target the personal and communal spheres in tandem to produce interesting thematic development within the communal sphere. In *Before and After Silence*, a nonverbal game about silence and perception, Hossman and Holter directly introduce isolation in the communal sphere by providing each player character contexts that quite literally exist in different dimensions/realities/forms (e.g. ghosts in a purgatorial hell, people waiting together in a hospital while a loved one is in surgery, movie stars from long forgotten films). The design then constrains the communal sphere by prohibiting verbal interaction. In the absence of language, mutualized meaning cannot be made and the game reveals in play how much people rely on their own paradigms to interpret the actions of others.

In *Hvid Død* (White Death), an abstract blackbox larp about a group of settlers struggling together and dying, Essendrop and Hansen target the personal spheres of players by providing each with a unique and uncomfortable physical constriction. The design also prohibits the use of language to constrain interaction in the communal sphere, but instead of seeking silence, it encourages the use of vocalizations that enable the participants to express emotion. Moreover, there is a conflict over abstract resources that represent spirituality, dreams, and sustenance, and are important for personal development. This all produces an emotional experience of both personal and communal affect, exploring themes of attachment, loss, misery and the human social capacity to ease and escalate each other's pain.

One popular design element used to target the communal sphere in games with political intent is intense group negotiations. These negotiations often carry high consequences to characters who have little control over their situation and are both isolated and vulnerable. Here, play specifically targets exploration of the social structures that arise out of the conditions imposed. In Harviainen's *The Tribunal*, soldiers are under pressure to falsely testify against innocent peers. *The Prison*, by Danilenko, Grubaya, and Kolesnikov, is a larp about death row prisoners having to put each other up for execution. In my own game *Against the Grain*, there is mediation over a racially motivated labour dispute in a defense plant in WWII America.

Like we saw with the personal sphere, there are a lot of places within the communal sphere that design can target and calibrate. The valence of emotional interaction, the process of collective meaning making, the ability to complete actions, the ethics of social engagement, the social climate, the bonding capacity of participants and their characters are all communal sphere targets for design optimization and political affect.

## Public

Of all the spheres of influence, the public sphere is the one we are most likely to overlook. We think about games as something we privately engage with. In most cases the games occur in private spaces behind closed doors. What relevance do non-participants have when designing political games?

The easy first answer to this is that some larps do have spectators, and sometimes they are peripherally participating. In *Ghost Court* (Morningstar) a judge deliberates on court cases lodged between ghosts and humans while an oft rowdy courtroom audience attends – and can decide spontaneously to jump in if desired. In *Sea Dracula* (Richmond and Smith), wacky animal lawyers prosecute an important court case in which a peripherally participating audience settles fictional conflict by voting on in-game dance-offs.

Some larps have public bystanders – observing non-participants who may or may not be aware that the event that they are observing is a game, and the enactment of the game in public space may or may not transgress or transcend the rules of that space. *Too Much Slap on the Ecaf* (Dillymore) explores the lives of closeted queer men in 1950's London by inviting them to covertly enact sexually intimate scenes in public. *Tonnin stiftat* (Thousand Mark Shoes, Järvelä and Niskanen), an episodic city larp about Helsinki in the 1920's, was played in a public city grid as were some *Vampire: the Masquerade* campaigns in the early 1990's. In *System Danmark*, Munthe-Kaas situated a larp about a dystopian society within a public square in Copenhagen where people could walk by and observe. *Dublin2* (Kaljonen, Raekallio, and Motola) was made with an express political intent to provoke public debate about the European Union's Dublin II regulation which mandates that a refugee's first port of arrival is the country responsible for the application for asylum. The larp was staged in a visible public location in Helsinki and contained a large multimedia art installation. To ensure deliberate and powerful public sphere engagement, the game even had an outreach team that included a lawyer, journalists and NGO workers. The larp attracted significant attention from bystanders, some of whom interpreted it as a real refugee camp, and responded with hostility.

When larps have non-participant audiences, they begin to formally share territory with theatre practice. Further, when designing with political intent, larps with non-participant audiences closely resemble Augusto Boal's set of participatory political theatre movements within Theatre of the Oppressed. Forum Theatre has actors that allow non-participants to take over their role in an effort to practice resistance to oppression, Image Theatre demonstrates political ideas and provokes reactions to street audience who recognize it as a performance, and Invisible Theatre incites thought and affective response in bystanders who do not know that the activity has been staged.

Some games produce artefacts which essentially create a remote consumer for the larp. *The Dream* (Morningstar) has players produce a silent film that can be viewed by others. Larp documentation books (*Tonnin stiftat*, *Life Under Occupation* [Pohjoismaisen roolipelaamisen seura]), and the *Books of Just a Little Lovin'*, *KAPO*, and *The White War* [Rollespils Akademiet]) include in-game artefacts, ethnographic documentation of the larp, and essays that discuss design and production intent. These books extend not only the reach of the larp but the reach of an individual run of a larp. They serve as a yearbook for the participants as well as a reference for academics, larp practitioners, potential producers and players, and the general public. And of course, books like this one also contribute to the reach of the larps discussed within.

Another fascinating instance of extended reach is Oszadilk's *What Are You Worth?*, a larp centered on unemployed Danish citizens needing to justify their existence to social welfare under the threat of execution. This larp was re-written and produced by Raasted and Nielsen specifically for the cameras of the Discovery Channel who turned it into a segment on Nordic Larp for the television show *Forbidden* which aims (in a sensationalistic way) to introduce little-known subcultures. These examples of

extended reach demonstrate how larps are expanding their sphere of influence for engagement and exposure, and as the sphere expands, so does the potential for affect.

Importantly, larps do not exist in isolation. They are a part of a long series of overlapping cultures and communities. Many larps have a shared community of play; Grasmø and Edland's *Just a Little Lovin'*, about the effect of the 1980's AIDS crisis on the New York queer community, has a group on Facebook and a yearly reunion at Solmukohta which are both open to all past participants: a social network based on shared experience. In environments like Fastaval where high volumes of players experience multiple runs of a game within tight timelines, players bond over their experiences across the runs. Some larps have found an ensemble of participants that replay with fair frequency, and therefore a sizable population of players that can connect around the game. Examples include *The Tribunal*, *The Forgotten* (Medeiros), a short game about civilians caught in the middle of a city at war, *Klassfesten* (Play the Cards, Grasmø, Jansen, and Lindahl) on teenage life, and *The Upgrade* (Fritzson, Wrigstad, and Jonsson) a larp about reality shows that foster infidelity.

Additionally, larps have a context within a community of design and practice: writers of new larps look to, learn from and adopt practices of established larps. In designing *Mobilize*, a larp about queer female WWII mechanics in the Women's Army Corps, Magrann informed the game's process for character community development with lessons learned from Edland's *I Say a Little Prayer*, a chamberlarp based on *Just a Little Lovin'*. This community of design and practice extends beyond the boundary of larp to related game forms both in terms of input and output. Baker's tabletop game about insect sex *Spin the Beetle* introduced call/response mechanics which Olsen adapted for the *Faye* scenario about a robotic sex worker, the mechanic who fell in love with her, and the revolution that it incited. *Faye* then inspired the game experiment *Drive* which explores sexual consent. The community also extends to and from other disciplines as well. March and Karlsson's larp *När våra öden möt* (When Our Destinies Meet) was inspired by Brechtian theatre. Later, they published it as a black box role-playing system under the name *When Our Destinies Meet*. Candy at OCAD University has used it (and other larps) with undergraduate design students, and graduates in the Strategic Foresight and Innovation program, to demonstrate larp's potential for co-creation of transformative experiences. Some students in turn have designed larps of their own.

And of course, larp is not just part of a subculture, it exists within the context(s) of culture at large. The thematic exploration of *What Are You Worth?* targets the public sphere of Danish society. Re-run the game in Ghana and the experience would change. I understand that *Sista paret ut* (The Last Couple Out, Nordin, von Post, Barkå, and Åhlvik), a game in which players are forced to participate in a government-mandated matchmaking program is an affectionate send-up of state meddling when played at home in Sweden. However, it took on dystopian shades with some players in modern America. We know how *Just a Little Lovin'* plays in Norway and Denmark, but what would it become if you put it in New York, at the center of the community that lived and died through the AIDS epidemic?

This change of tone and difference in cultural acceptance can be a point of influence not just for participants, but for the non-participating public as well. In the 2013 US run of *Mad About the Boy*, controversy ignited over perceived sexism in hosting a game in which only women were welcome to attend. This snowballed into a chain of debates in which the larp came under fire. Players and supporters rallied in defense of the game as a larp about women in a sea of games tailored for men. This polarized debate led to the game being tagged as "the larp about women", and given that its dominant themes and constraints (emphasis on pregnancy, childrearing, relation to men, and the fictional constraint around trans women) are not inclusive of the whole of women's experience, the discourse cascaded into further conflict.

And this last point illustrates a critically important thing: larp exists within a body of creative works

(art, literature, television, theatre, role-playing, etc.). Creating opportunities for narratives, experiences and exploration that are scarce in that public body, or challenging trends and norms within it can have small and large political effect.

## Approach

When mapping the political effect of a given larp, it is important to note that people engage with ideas, beliefs and behaviour in many ways, and on many levels. We have complex emotional relationships with our paradigms, we struggle deeply to understand our world, and we recreate and reinforce all of it by continually re-enacting reality as we understand it. When we encounter things in the world, they act as disruptors, and provide opportunities to reinforce or challenge the equilibrium of our existing ideas, beliefs and behaviours. Whether the stimulus encountered is school, propaganda, art, television or larp; each is an opportunity to sway our minds, our hearts and our bodies. This next section aims to unpack these three approaches and explore how they are used in larp today.

## Winning Minds

Larps can be effective at helping us to think about things differently (and can be just as effective in confirming what we already think). As high-engagement, context-controlled experiences, larps can facilitate the acceptance of information by providing a framework of enhanced investment in acquiring and integrating information. Larps can be seen as applied learning engines because one core skillset of roleplaying is to accept information, fictionally integrate it, and move forward. Performing this process efficiently is rewarded with a smooth, continuous sense of play and can reinforce a sense of immersion.

Pedagogical approaches to larp can be cleanly transparent and educational. As an example, *Just a Little Lovin'* included specific educational components for contextualization. In workshops before the larp, players were taught about the rise of the AIDS epidemic. This process informed the exploration of the game's themes, but also educated the player base – many of whom were not old enough (in the Denmark 2015 run) to have a personal recollection of the era. After the larp a second round of contextualization occurred to bring participants back to the modern era and raise awareness that the AIDS epidemic still continues today, with an especially devastating impact in the developing world.

Learning can happen both through the process and the context of play itself. *Till Death Do Us Part*, a joint design by Fantasiförbundet and The Peace and Freedom Youth Forum, is a terrific example of larp as a practice of experiential learning. The larp featured an international wedding between a Norwegian man and a Palestinian woman and was an exercise in cultural exchange. Nordic players traveled to Birzeit to play, explored the Occupied West Bank and experienced the daily realities of Palestinians. While the larp itself was not meant to be politically charged, the public experience of going to play the larp was revealing, educational, and emotionally affective.

Exploratory pedagogical approaches can also focus less on instructional learning and more in the discovery of systems. *Against the Grain* is a chamber larp based around the historical 1944 Western Electric hate strike in Baltimore Maryland. White female workers in the wartime defense industry went on strike to protest the employment of the first African American woman assigned to their crew. The larp aims to provide participants the opportunity to explore how the mechanisms of intersectionality work, and how they are systemically reinforced. It does not however, proscribe a fictional or experiential outcome; it does not tell players how to feel or what to think, but invites them to look at the complexity of the situation, and to think through it on their own.

## Winning Hearts

Larp design can also target how we feel and provide affective outcomes. In the world of larp, feeling is a powerful tool, especially when the larps we play are designed to create emotionally immersive experiences. Players come prepared to strip themselves of who they are – if only for a time – and agree to become someone else in the full extent that they are able. Moreover, some designs and play goals intentionally aim for bleed: facilitating the crossover of emotional experience from player to character (and vice versa). Inciting feeling is the beating heart of many a Nordic larp, and as any speechwriter would tell you, inciting (or constricting) specific feelings as part of political action (anger, empathy, affiliation, shame etc.) is a powerful method to incite change.

When we think of using emotions politically, we tend to think of anger because we think of politics as a polemic act; Revolution, after all, is raised up on the back of an angry mob. *Autonomy* takes place in a gender-flipped setting where men's bodily autonomy in medical pursuits is restricted in similar ways that women's autonomy is historically and currently restricted in the United States (e.g. situations where marital or parental consent is required to obtain birth control, or invasive medical gate-keeping is implemented to limit a woman's access to abortion). Play centers on US senate hearing where men's advocacy groups are trying to pass a bill to give men the right to bodily autonomy. Casting is performed strictly according to player gender. Workshops teach reversed socialization patterns (men are socialized in the fiction as women are socialized in our world) and highlight the gender barriers that affect being heard and taken seriously. Play is essentially an exercise in systemic disenfranchisement for male players and an exercise in systemic empowerment for female players (and the game is fully transparent about its goals and methods). Players who find the game powerful often report feeling strongly angry in a way that unpacks into a developing empathy for the experience of women in the real world. The game incites anger during the play experience, which results in a deeper understanding in post-game reflection.

But anger is not the only emotion that can affect us. Establishing empathy and connection to characters, situations and ideas can make abstract ideas feel real and suddenly relevant. Proximity affects affiliation, world view, outlook and political acceptance. Non-choleric emotional incitement often does not register as overtly political, especially in activities such as larp, where feeling things intensely is part of the point. My *Model Protectorates* is a chamber larp about a Danish family under WWII German occupation. One of its goals is to reveal through familial affiliation, love and worry the ways in which women do act (and are prevented from acting) and the ways men sometimes are reluctantly forced into action under the expectations of their gender roles. The game aims to raise questions about how that gender based dynamic affects who and what is remembered as heroic in war. Though play has proven out to stoke that thematic exploration, most players do not see the game as a particularly political game. It is a feeling game that is not about expressing political anger but affiliative exploration.

## Winning Bodies

Besides thinking and feeling, larp also has the capacity to challenge us through the body, and through action. Un-doing and re-doing how we act (and move) is as important a concept to changing paradigms of behaviour as un-becoming and re-becoming is to changing paradigms of identity. This too is a core tenet in many forms of political theatre. Boal (1979) describes this un-doing as de-mechanization, a process by which participants are challenged to release their normal behaviour (actions, tensions, postures, stances, sensory responses, muscle memory, emotional and imaginative

patterns). De-mechanization is intended to put the body off-balance, and in so doing, dynamize the sensory system in a state of acute alertness to prime participants to learn and behave differently. This is done through physical exercises that force the body into awkward and unbalanced poses, and through abstract emotional and vocal workshops.

*Hvid Død* targets bodies in exactly the same way as the practice of Theatre of the Oppressed. As described earlier in the article, players are de-mechanized: they are given highly constrictive physical limitations that make movement and action awkward and they are made to vocalize emotions in a raw, non-verbal way. When freedom is finally given, it is a liberating and physically releasing experience. In the run I played in, many players had difficulty explaining their experience of the game – even days later – but described it as singularly powerful.

Other larps use extreme physicality and discomfort to target the body. *Cegos* (Blindness, Garcia) was a Brazilian larp about patients quarantined in a military installation after a sickness has struck them inexplicably blind. *Kapo* (Berner, Hedegaard, Holm, Mikkelsen, Munthe-Kaas, Nylev, and Peterson) was about political prisoners in a Danish camp for dissidents, and *Delirium* (Schønnemann Andreasen, Thurøe, Munthe-Kaas, Heebøll Arbjørn, and Kromann) treated the experience of mental delusion, revolution and love. All these used extreme physical tactics to affect the mechanization of the participants. These included discomfort, neglect, isolation, sensorial dissonance, and time displacement.

But targeting the body is not only about discomfort. A wide swath of games about gender use workshops that recondition behaviour through cross-gender socialization for some or all participants (*Mad About the Boy*, *Autonomy*). *Mobilize* contains gender performance workshops to challenge hetero-normative expression of the feminine and masculine to position the characters for play as queer women. *Just a Little Lovin'* helped women become men who were also performing as drag queens during the game. *Mellan himmel och hav* (Between Heaven and Sea, Wieslander and Björk) reinvented gender, heteronormativity and monogamy in the fiction and for the players.

Other games encourage and normalize in-game activities and expressions that de-mechanize the body through high-engagement practice. *Just a Little Lovin'* encouraged players to partake in private and “public” sex acts, including provision of a full BDSM dark room. Sex was simulated fully clothed, using a phallic prop. Playing sex scenes required explicit player consent, and there were well-defined touch boundaries. This led to players practicing intense queerness, public vulnerability and intense desirability in positive, permissive ways. By targeting the body in this way, the larp created an unfolding, vulnerable community experience of powerful affect. I know of one player who discovered their queerness as a result of the game, another who embraced their gender identity, a bisexual player who found radical re-engagement with queerness and described the game as “breaking open the cage of erasure” after years in a monogamous, opposite-sex relationship. Players described how they finally discovered how to be safe, be vulnerable, be sexual, be soft, be safely desirable, and be fierce as a result of play, and many report that to be a lasting effect of the game.

And of course, there are a thousand other ways that larp targets the body. I'm sure that larpers who engage in physically demanding games (like boffer larps) could provide a million other examples about how physical challenge resulted in deeply affective play. I would love to see more exploration into this area of study.

## Conclusions

Larps touch, change, and challenge us. We meet them with both vulnerability and a willingness to play with new possibilities. The act of play is political, and thus the act of designing play is political, as it sets the direction we play in. The political affect of a larp can focus on individual players, players as a communal body and even on non-players who may watch, learn from, or be exposed to the larp

through wider communities of play, design, study or practice. The approaches that larp can take to affect us are wide and vast. However by winning our minds, winning our hearts and winning our bodies, larp can reinforce, change or challenge who we are, how we live, and how we exist with one another.

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■ Tanja Lehto

## Where Can Political Larp Go?

Larps have been used in the past years to raise awareness on political themes, such as gender and the Dublin II -regulation (*Mellan himmel och hav*, “Between Heaven and Sea” 2003; *Dublin2* 2011). In some projects, the attention of the media has been sought to extend influence beyond the players (*Halat bisar*, “State of Siege” 2013; *Baltic Warriors* 2015). Previous writings have already commented on political larp (for more information on political larp see for example Gerge 2004; Wieslander 2004; Munthe-Kaas 2010; Kangas 2015). In this article, I will attempt to dissect the political in larp, using previously run political larps as examples. This effort is made partially to illustrate the repertoire of available, and partially to provide a language for strategic planning of political larps.

### Influences Flow

Influences flow both way in arts and politics. Many artists use their art to convey a political or societal message, and activist groups tap into creative ways of protest to capture the interest of the media and the general public. In larp, political themes have been brought forth many times. Examples of larps with an open political agenda include *Dublin2*, *System Danmark*, *Mellan himmel och hav*, *Halat bisar*, and *Baltic Warriors*. Kangas (2015) states that all larps are designed from a certain political perspective. According to her, what seems neutral, seems so, because it corresponds with the dominant view of the society, and this is rarely the view in need of advocacy. The subject of conveying an outspoken political agenda through the art of larp was written about already in 2004, by Wieslander and Gerge. Since then, political larps with awareness raising goals seem to have entered the larp scene for good.

Larp productions with political ambitions face similar challenges to those faced by any other form of activism, but as a medium of protest, larp has its particular challenges. Larps are usually arranged for a limited set of players, who have to register in advance. Some players participating in political larps might do so out of non-political motivations and resent the political aspirations of the organizers. Larp is a slow media, reactions required in the world of political activism do not come naturally. Larp communities built on the premise of larp as “mere entertainment” might pose an internal challenge for political larps. Differing dispositions towards political action among players evoke a need for ethical considerations when campaigning through larp.

## Awareness-Raising and Skill-Development

Creating awareness is the baseline of bringing an issue into political debate—politicizing an issue. If change is to occur, enough people need to be convinced that the problem in question, is in fact a problem. In some cases, this may be enough for change to take place: if the problem is individuals behaving in a racist or sexist way, then changing their minds about race and gender may well be enough. Often, though, awareness is not enough, and legislative steps have to be taken to correct an experienced wrong.

Larps are easily suited for honing several skills useful in activism. A larp can work well in demonstrating how something as complex as campaigning for an election functions in practice, as well as practicing the required skills. One can include the use of skills necessary in politics in most types of larps. These might include (but are not limited to): writing and giving speeches, negotiating, organizing a protest, arranging educational events, writing opinion pieces, and running a social media campaign.

One example of an educational larp with a political theme and a focus on developing speech communication skills is *Ulkoavaruuden mukalaiset ja enemmistön tyrannia* (Strangers from Outer Space and the Tyranny of the Majority, 2015) by Maija Korhonen. In the larp, the players are responsible for writing the final speech for an electoral campaign. The educational goals of the game include learning skills related to presentation, group work, and rhetoric. Korhonen’s game has been designed to be suitable for high school education, and the politics serve in giving substance to the story.

Another example, focused on learning democracy skills, is *Gaia – kansojen kokous* (Gaia – Assembly of the Nations, 2008), where the players are political decision-makers in a parallel world resembling Earth. The object of the game is to prevent the imminent destruction of the planet Gaia. In the game, the players have to operate in a democratic system and reach a transgovernmental solution, through negotiations, votes, and lobbying. *Gaia – kansojen kokous* is reminiscent of a *Model United Nations* event, where the skills required and developed include research, writing, public speaking, critical thinking, and debating. *Model UN* is a roleplay simulation of UN committees and is usually organized by *Model UN* -clubs of educational institutions (Villanueva 2007).

The examples of edularp provided in the two previous paragraphs are not political larps in the sense, that they do not have an outspoken political agenda. Taking some suitable tools from edularp, and bringing them into political larping could serve to bring variety to techniques available.

Focus on skill development can work well combined with an orientation towards empowerment. Giving the players an opportunity to learn, practice, and apply skills, may empower them to use those skills later in other pursuits. Empowerment is described as “a process in which individuals, groups or communities become able to take control of their circumstances and achieve their own goals” (Adams 1990). The empowerment perspective (of social work) does not entail pushing an agenda on those one is supposed to empower.

## Direct Action and Reaching Beyond the Magic Circle

Sit-ins, lock-ons, street reclamation, and media hacking may provide tools of protest adaptable for larp. One example of a ludic take on a demonstration was seen this summer in Helsinki. The final game in the *Baltic Warriors* campaign had an element of demonstration in it. It was a larp played in Helsinki city center, where the diegetic zombie invasion spread across the city. The event was coordinated with the non-larp zombie-themed event called *Zero Hour – The Walking Dead*, which was held on the same day. This allowed for a showier scene. The political agenda of *Baltic Warriors* was to enlighten its players on the powers involved in environmental politics. *Zero Hour – The Walking Dead* was a non-political promotional event for the television series *The Walking Dead*.

Transmediality can refer to storytelling that allows the audience to both access the story through multiple media as well as actively participate in the storytelling process (Ciancia 2013). *Baltic Warriors* was a political larp about the problems of the Baltic Sea that announced itself as a transmedia project. In *Baltic Warriors*, the organizers made use of e.g. YouTube-videos and social media in addition to the larp to tell their story. Especially for political larps, such as *Baltic Warriors*, transmediality can be a way to widen the audience of the political message.

Transnational activism requires transnational means of communication. Traditional activism has had to transcend national borders, and methods used by activist organizations can be adopted into political larp -design. Personal digital media has been adopted into pervasive game design as well as coordinating political activism (Bennett 2003, 144). Media democracy makes producers out of consumers: using open software, anyone is able to create digital content ready for distribution (Bennett 2003, 144). If player created media is to be used in a larp, the organizers face the challenge of inventing use(s) for this player created content. If the goal is to distribute digital media content openly, another challenge is the ability of player created content to portray the message intended by the organizers. In larps where the organizers have clearly stated political goals, it is necessary to adhere to those goals in communicating with the outside world.

The challenge of controlling activist campaigns and maintaining coherence in goals is discussed by Bennett (2003, 145) in the context of transnational activism. The same challenge is faced by political larp organizers, especially in the cases where player created media content is used in communication. Digital media such as audio and video content could be – and has been – used in communicating information regarding the player characters between the players and the organizers.

In pervasive larps, the game world may be designed to touch the mundane world in several ways. In *Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum*, several design choices were made to make the larp pervasive (see Stenros and Montola for information on the larp). In light of this article, the larp is of interest, since the game had a political message according to which changing our perception of the world also changes the world. The players in *Momentum*, had to organize a demonstration that served a certain diegetic purpose but occupied the spatial realm of the real life Stockholm. In this sense, *Momentum* combined awareness raising, skill development, and direct action methods (Stenros and Montola 2009, 114115).

Using participation fees as a way of fundraising can be a way to support a cause materially through a larp. In *LARP: Sosialismi* (LARP: Socialism, 2015), a voluntary participation fee was collected, and what was left after paying for the costs of the game was donated to the human-rights work of Amnesty International. Any event that includes getting a lot of people to the same space, can be suitable for collecting donations of either goods or funds, and so can larp. In some cases, the props acquired for the scenography or accommodation could be donated to other organizations.



## Conclusion

Where political activism is concerned, larp faces serious challenges that need to be overcome if the goal of successfully disseminating a political message is the priority. If a larp happens in the woods, and no-one else hears it, did it really happen? For the players, certainly, but effective political campaigning requires a larger audience. The main challenges of political larps, in my view, are the difficulties in reaching large audiences and the relatively slow production process, making the response times of larp-mediated interventions fairly slow.

In any form of political protest, be it a demonstration, strike, political performance, or a denial-of-service attack; visibility and media coverage are usually high on the list of priorities. If the end goal is to educate or empower the participants, media attention is probably not paramount. If the desire of the organizers is to affect political decision making, inform the general public, or advocate a cause in the society, media attention and visibility are something to pursue vigorously. Websites, blogs, video-sharing sites, and social media services – these all provide an affordable platform to be used by larp organizers. What services to use, and for what purpose, depends on the design of the game.

Wieslander (2004, 237) writes that “[a]ll larps have agendas”, and encourages openly communicating the theme of the larp to the players. When the players have information on what the point is, they have an opportunity to take the game where it is supposed to go (Wieslander 2004, 237). In political larps, the organizers certainly have to have a very clearly defined agenda. Wieslander (2004, 241) comments that in the creation of *Mellan himmel och hav*, having had the agenda guide the organizing process did pay off. Throughout the creative process, there may be a need to make choices concerning focus and allocation of resources. The written-down political agenda can work as a tool when making compromises, so as to avoid the message of the game getting watered down by creative compromise.

In the realm of political larp, there have been dystopias such as *System Danmarc*, (partial) utopias like *Mellan himmel och hav* (see Gerge 2004), and contemporary political impropriety as in *Baltic Warriors*. In participating in the political discussion, larp as a medium has its strong experiential and participatory features as strengths. These are combined with an affinity for creating temporary and fictional, but concrete alternate worlds, just aching to make points about our current economical, judicial or cultural systems.

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■ Teemu Rantanen

## Larp as a Form of Political Action: Some Insights from the Theories of Political Science Political Larps: Two Audiences

Like other art forms, or even other social activities in general, with larps there's quite a lot of vagueness about what is meant when something is called "political". Sometimes larp is called political if it covers a subject that is linked to a political issue, current or historical. At other times political larp is understood as larp that simulates a political situation, even if it's completely imaginary – like political negotiations in a fantasy setting, with or without allegorical references to real-life political questions. The problem with these kinds of definitions is that "political larps" classified this way don't really have meaningful, unique attributes that would differ from "non-political larps", besides being a genre of larps that have themes related to a concept of politics.

For practical purposes, in this article we define "political larp" as larp that acts as means or medium for political action. In this sense, political larp seeks to affect society, either by narrating a message about a political idea, ideology or specific question to the participants, or by seeking to bring these issues forth to wider media attention through arranging of an event addressing these issues. This way, political larp is seen as a form of political action: a viewpoint that opens it up to the analytical tools of political science, and that allows us to better understand how larp can affect people's political opinions and thus have an effect on the politics that shape our society.

When speaking about political messages in art, we often tend to focus on more radical and revolutionary messages, or more generally on messages that in some way question or challenge aspects of established, hegemonic ideas or power structures. This is understandable, because such political messages are often easier to point out as examples; and this article is not an exception to these tendencies. It should be noted, however, that just as a larp can serve as a means to introduce new political ideas, it can also serve to strengthen existing attitudes and ideologies; and this is just as political as challeng-

ing them. A game advocating traditional gender roles as a normal way that society is and should be constructed is sending as political a message as a game that seeks to challenge them.

In this article, we use the term “audience” to mean the audience of the political message: those people who are meant to be affected by it, and who the political message is meant to persuade to think in a certain way. In this regard, larp is an interesting political medium, since it can have two different audiences that are affected in very different ways. These are the participants of the actual game, and the wider public that is reached via media reporting about the game.

A political game can focus on either one of these audiences, or on both of them at the same time. With mass-media coverage the game usually seeks to primarily raise awareness of the general public about a certain political question, although it can at the same time seek to frame it in a certain way. Good examples of political larps where the aim has been to raise public awareness about a political question through public visibility are *Dublin2* (2011) and the *Baltic Warriors* campaign (2014, 2015). Both<sup>1</sup> used public, open locations, where anyone could interact with the game, for their events. In *Dublin2*’s design this interaction between the players and non-players was especially emphasized through game mechanisms that urged players to have in-game conversations with non-players and pass information about the topic of the game (asylum process and issues related to it) to them.<sup>2</sup> Both games were also covered widely in the media.<sup>3</sup>

When seeking to gain attention to their message via publicity, political larps are quite similar to the majority of political activism seeking to raise public awareness through public events, demonstrations and performances. Where the possible uniqueness of larps as a form of political action or as a medium for political discourse comes forth is when we inspect how political larps deliver their message to the participants of the game. The abovementioned framing, an important aspect of political discourse that we will discuss more later, is far more central to the participant-audience – who are often presented with a more detailed message in a considerably more embracing form than the non-participant-audience. Because of this, we are focusing primarily on this side of political larps for the rest of the article.

## Utopias, Dystopias, Simulations and Allegories

While political larps come in forms as varied as larps in general, two styles of presenting the political message of the game are perhaps especially typical. I would like to call these styles “utopias/dystopias” and “simulations/allegories”.

Larps that present their political message in the form of a utopian or dystopian setting, depending on whether they want to promote or argue against a certain idea, can use either direct or metaphorical reasoning as their way of trying to convince their audience about their interpretation of the political issue. In political discourse, metaphors allow the drawing of inferences that could not be drawn on the basis of direct evidence or experience, and metaphors are used for reasoning about politics (Chilton 2004, 203). For example, when describing an international conflict as “fire” metaphorically, a politician also introduces to her audience that certain things that are entailed in that audience’s knowledge about fire – like that it is liable to spread and can be increased by someone adding fuel – are also entailed in the audience’s knowledge about the international conflict (Chilton 2004, 146-147). In utopian/dystopian political larp, the writers present not only an alternative reality that is positive or negative, but also suggest their reasoning as to why it is so, or what political decisions, values or

ideologies would result in similar consequences in our world. In a nutshell, political utopian/dystopian larp presents a narrative about what kind of politics would result in either a desirable or an undesirable situation.

Not unlike modern politically ambitious fiction in general, in larps dystopias have been far more common than utopias. One well-known example of dystopian political larp would be *System Danmark* (2005), a game situated in a dystopian future where the weakest citizens had no part in the welfare state. It criticized contemporary Danish society and raised awareness about societal problems already present in it. Sadly, I can’t name a single example of a utopian political larp: but that doesn’t mean there hasn’t been one. There have been some larps set in more or less utopian settings that I am aware of, but none of those have been political larps in the sense we are using the term here.

What should be noted is that not all dystopias or even utopias are necessarily very strongly linked to an explicit political issue, or even to a broader ideology. A zombie apocalypse is sometimes just a zombie apocalypse, not a metaphor about the consequences of modern consumerism. Sometimes dystopias also have the focus of their political message not so much on what is the reason for the dystopia and why it is bad, but on how society and individuals deal with it and what kind of issues it brings forth. In that case, the political aspect of the game has more in common with what I call a “simulation/allegory” political game.

The political larps I call simulations or allegories present an interpretation of a real-life political issue or situation: either directly, like a simulation modelled according to real-life situation (via the interpretation of the modeller, of course); or allegorically, presenting some central themes of the political issue in a setting differing from its real-life model. The line between these two is blurred, and is presented here mostly to point out how varied are the forms that these kinds of games can take in their relationship to the real-life issues they are commenting on. Examples of this kind of political game would include *Den Hvide Krig* (The White War, 2012) – a game about culture clash in an occupied land, where the setting of the game was fictional but drawing influence from occupation of Iraq and can be seen as an analogical presentation of issues related to that conflict – and *Halat bisar* (2013), a game about living under occupation.<sup>4</sup>

Halat hisar is in many ways a very good example of how this kind of political game can work. The game was based on Israel’s occupation of Palestine; and the situation of Palestine was deliberately mentioned in the publicity of the game in order to raise the awareness of a wider audience as described above, but using the fictional occupation of Finland as a setting. The game sought to give its participants Palestinian perspectives about the occupation, with a setting that mirrored the current situation in Palestine. While giving the players a picture of everyday life under occupation, it sought to raise awareness of the hardships that people living under it suffer, and how they regard their situation and the reactions of the rest of the world to it. The game was set in an alternative version of the real world, where Finland’s situation in the world was changed to mirror the situation in the Middle East and Palestine. Among other things, this provided a familiar frame to help the process the experiences of Palestinians living under occupation and the organizers’ perspective about the situation.

An interesting ongoing development related to simulation/allegory political larp is the appearance of workshop simulations that seek to give policy-makers personal experiences of political issues. While previously, simulation workshops concerning political issues have been rather far from larps, and often more in the vein of the Model UN, recently there has been a development to include more larp-like elements to these kinds of simulations as a move towards more immersive simulations. For example, Crossroads Foundation ran a workshop called A Day in the Life of a Refugee at the World

<sup>1</sup> Or in *Baltic Warriors*’ case at least some of its runs. *Baltic Warriors* was a campaign of several games organized in several different cities in cooperation with local organizers.

<sup>2</sup> For more information about these mechanisms and *Dublin2* in general, see Kaljonen and Raekallio (2012).

<sup>3</sup> Other political larps mentioned in this article also used publicity and public locations to a varying degree.

<sup>4</sup> The previously mentioned *System Danmark* (2005) could also be seen as ‘simulation’, insofar as it sought to raise awareness of issues already present in contemporary society, rather than what the present situation could lead into.

Economic Forum annual meeting at Davos in January 2016. This workshop sought to recreate, through a simulated environment, some of the struggles and choices that refugees face to survive (Crossroads Foundation 2016). The participants, who included many high-level policy-makers in global politics, were put in the shoes of refugees and made to experience their hardships in order to give them a stronger emotional connection to these issues. According to comments by participants,<sup>5</sup> this was done in a considerably immersive way, including personal experiences of abuse, disempowerment and frustration. If these kinds of workshops are moving towards a more immersive experience in order to communicate their message to their participants in a more personal, emphatic way, it would seem that they could benefit considerably from the experience of larp designers.

## Framing and Coercion

Two concepts from political discourse analysis are perhaps especially useful in order to bring forth the specific characteristics of larp as a medium of transmitting political messages. The first one, framing, is maybe the more popularly known of the two outside the academic circles of political science.

According to Entman (1993), framing means “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation”. Framing construes the meaning of an issue in a certain way, consequently making certain interpretations, conclusions or solutions to a problem become more salient (van der Pas 2014). This is a very common tool in politics, so it is not surprising that virtually all political larps use framing to at least some extent. Since they are commonly promoting the idea that a certain issue should be regarded as a problem, or that a certain solution should be considered best to solve a problem, they present their subject accordingly.

Framing is not just a discursive way of promoting a certain solution to a problem, used only to argue for it and then discarded. When framing a political issue in a certain way, the speaker seeks to establish these frames as a viewpoint through which the audience addresses the issue in the future: the way that the issue should be understood. These include also metaphorical mappings, like the example about fire and international politics above, which according to cognitive theory of metaphor are used for reasoning – often unconsciously, and especially about target domains that are ill understood, vague or controversial (Chilton 2004, 52). When stored into long-term memory, these frames are used for reasoning about the political question in the future, and guide the understanding and interpretation of subsequent political messages. It should be noted that with larps framing is especially strong if characters are written to support the framing of the game, forcing players to immerse in and interact with the game only according to the frames; but we will come back to this a little later when discussing coercion.

One specific phenomenon related to framing deserves its own mention, and that is the significance of historical myths in political discourses. Certain interpretations of history are commonly used in political discourses. Framed history renditions are used to justify and strengthen certain ideologies and values, as in the concept of Manifest Destiny in the United States of America and historical myths about American settlers related to it. They are also used in historical analogies, where the message is that the political issue at hand is similar to a historical situation, and thus the correct way to address it would be the one suggested by the history rendition. For example, the history interpretation that world leaders could have avoided World War II if they had stopped Hitler earlier is often used to suggest that some current situation in world politics demands immediate military intervention.

Because of this, how history is interpreted in historical larps is not as apolitical as people sometimes want to think; and organizers of historical games should keep in mind that their choices of rendition of history can have an impact on people’s political understanding.

Historical myths, i.e. certain ways of framing history, are established and reinforced through their repetition in the media, including in larp. Of course, larps reinforce other framings of social issues, such as the causes of crime in games situated in contemporary society, or gender roles (whether in medieval fantasy or otherwise). It is important to recognize the framings, historical or otherwise, that are politically important, and be aware of how they are treated. Otherwise there is a real risk of ending up unwittingly bolstering a particular political stand.

The other concept of political discourse analysis that can offer insights to how political messages work through larps is the notion of coercion. By “coercion”, we mean a strategic function that is used in discourse, where addressees are caused to act in a way that otherwise they would not have chosen. What we are especially interested in is the form of coercion where actors act coercively through discourse “in setting agendas, selecting topics in conversation, positioning the self and others in specific relationships, making assumptions about realities that hearers are obliged to at least temporarily accept in order to process the text or talk” (Chilton 2004, 45). With coercive discourse, certain assumptions are presented in the framing of the issue in a way that others need to accept in order to engage in the political discussion, narrowing the discussion inside the desired borders.

As you can immediately see, this type of coercion is often present in politically themed larps. The assumptions about realities of the political issue addressed by the larp are usually given in the setting of the game, its background and character materials. This affects more than just the framing, discussed above. It also restricts the ways that the players can process the message of the game and how they are able to participate in its formulation during the game. In order to participate in the game, and thus perhaps in shaping its discourse on a more abstract level, the player has to accept these preset constraints. Players can rebel against these assumptions, but most often this would mean breaking the game: equivalent to walking out of the discussion. Larps are often built on certain assumptions that the players are not supposed to question, and these kind of assumptions can easily serve to set the borders inside which the political issues will be addressed.

Political discourse analysis cannot really tell us what kind of long-term effects being coerced into viewing a political issue from the perspective of a character, designed to support a specific interpretation of the issue, has on a subject. Perhaps no effects at all, and the subject just shrugs off the framing of the issue when the game ends. Or perhaps some of it is stored in her long-term memory, and frames the issue when she encounters it again. What we can say is that characters can be designed so that they coerce the players to address the political issue in the game from a certain point of view. This affects at least how it is presented during the game and what kind of arguments are possible to raise about it through the game. It also probably shapes the player’s interpretations of the issue, at least to some degree.

Both framing and coercion can be seen to be in effect in a typical political larp as methods to enhance the transmission of its message. Furthermore, certain characteristics in larps, namely how background material establishes the way questions can be addressed in the game and how players approach issues through the viewpoint of characters that can be strongly shaped by the writers of the game, would seem to be ideal to support these effects. How effective these methods actually are, and how much they can affect the subject’s attitudes and reasoning after the game, remains to be seen, since there isn’t much research about this side of larps<sup>6</sup>. Particularly, how immersion into the character and observing political issues through her perspective affects the player is a question

<sup>5</sup> See for example Beale, in *Independent* (23th January 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Or at least about the effect that participation to a larp has specifically to political attitudes and values of an individual, when such effect is deliberately sought.

perhaps more in the field of psychology than (even the cognitive school of) political science. The power of framing and coercion shouldn't be overestimated, but they should be recognized as what they are: methods that are used to more effectively convince the audience of a political message to adopt the desired interpretation of a political issue. How likely it is that this convincing will succeed depends on many things, not least among them the preceding attitudes and beliefs of the audience.

Much of what is discussed above is presented from the point of view of Finnish larp culture, which often tends to have strong, "auteur-type" game organizers who provide a strict framing of the game to players in the form of pre-written characters, and extensive background material, etc. This is because this culture is most familiar to myself, and it should be noted that more player-driven methods of building larp – for example, characters written by players, or world-building done through workshops – do change the way that framing and coercion take shape. However, neither of these phenomena disappears just with taking a more player-oriented approach to larp-building. The framing can be (and often is) present in workshop exercises, guiding players towards certain kinds of outcomes. Players can also create coercive constraints upon themselves and other players in workshop exercises, because of socially shared presumptions and those frames that the game organizers have established beforehand to guide players.

## Conclusion: From Influencing to Deliberation?

As we have seen, larps have the potential to act as a powerful tool for spreading political messages, both to a general audience as well as to players participating in the game. Acting like traditional political activism performances, larps can attract media attention and raise general awareness of an issue. Immersion into a character that is built to embody a certain point of view, supported by the game background materials and the game situation, provides a powerful framing that can greatly influence the participant-audience's interpretation of a political issue. However, the impact shouldn't be over-estimated. The larp medium can provide strong experiences, but that doesn't make it the ultimate brainwashing tool. If games are open and honest about their choice of perspective, in my view they are not doing anything morally questionable. All political discourse uses methods like those described above. But could political larps be something more than just another passive communication channel for political ideas and ideologies?

One interesting approach, which has been, at least to my limited knowledge, sadly uncommon among political larps, stems from the theory of deliberative democracy. Taking some general ideas from this (much wider and more detailed than what is presented here) normative theory of democracy, I would suggest an alternative approach to the making of political larp, making it possible to turn it into a more discursive form of political action.

Deliberative democracy theory rejects conceptions of democracy that base politics only on power or interests, aggregation of preferences, and competitive theories. Instead, it demands that citizens and their representatives should give reasons for their political claims and respond to others' reasons in return in order to justify themselves. (Thompson 2008, 498) The theory is a normative take on how democracy should work, with an idea of public deliberation as a vital part of responsive and responsible democracy. Mercier and Landemore (2012) define deliberation as an activity where reasoning is used to gather and evaluate arguments for and against a given proposition. What is needed for deliberation is both the exchange of arguments for and against a given proposition, and that the participators also use reasoning to evaluate those arguments.<sup>7</sup> Typical political practices grounded on

the ideas of deliberative democracy theory include deliberative opinion polls<sup>8</sup>, different kinds of citizen assemblies and forums, and consultative initiatives seeking democratic empowerment of citizens through deliberative discussions.

While lacking the power to make binding decisions, which is seen as a requirement for deliberative democracy in some deliberative democracy theories,<sup>9</sup> the idea of deliberative discussions could be something that political larps could use: not to replace the transmitting of political message, which clearly has its own much-needed function, but to diversify the ways of participating in the public discussion that politics consists of. After all, merely talking with other citizens can be seen as a form of discursive participation that "provides the opportunity for individuals to develop and express their views, learn the positions of others, identify shared concerns and preferences, and come to understand and reach judgements about matters of public concern" (Delli Carpini, Cook & Jacobs 2004, p. 319). Deliberative discussions can add knowledge to their participants and motivate them to political action even when discussions are not actual decision-making bodies.

If approached as an opportunity to deliberate political issues, instead of as a medium to pass political messages, political larp could offer an arena for political discussion instead of just serving as one 'speech' in the more general political discussion happening in the society. While this can be done through writing different argumentative sides into the game, in a similar way that Mercier and Landemore describe "private deliberation" where a person simulates several opinions and uses reasoning to find arguments for and against these opinions (Mercier and Landemore 2012, 247), this kind of artificial deliberation would still be framed by its writers and portray their views. If a more open deliberation of an issue is desired, players should be given agency in defining their character's standpoint in the deliberation that is done through the game. It is also important to communicate the deliberative aim of this kind of game clearly to the players, so that they have an understanding of their agency in the shaping of the game and don't presume unnecessary frames to constrain themselves.

In some ways political larps can already be seen to act as deliberation, since players are not mindless drones but subjects that react to the political message of the game from their own perspective and participate in the game shaping its entirety with their own voices. However, what should be noted here, and perhaps the most important lesson of this article, is that if the game is not written to support the deliberation of players, the framing that organizers have made will guide and limit the ways the players can participate and change the political message of the game. If the organizers don't seek to merely present their political message (and I once again emphasize that there is nothing wrong with that, quite the opposite), but to establish deliberative discussion in larp, they need to give their players agency to freely shape the framing of their characters and the game in general, so that they can participate in the political discussion happening through the game without unnecessary constraints.

<sup>8</sup> The polls conducted by The Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University provide one example. They describe the process as follows: "A random, representative sample is first polled on the targeted issues. After this baseline poll, members of the sample are invited to gather at a single place for a weekend in order to discuss the issues. [...] After the deliberations, the sample is again asked the original questions. The resulting changes in opinion represent the conclusions the public would reach, if people had opportunity to become more informed and more engaged by the issues." (see <http://cdd.stanford.edu/what-is-deliberative-polling/>)

<sup>9</sup> See for example Thompson 2008.

<sup>7</sup> While conflicting viewpoints are often regarded as a necessary condition for deliberation, other scholars have pointed out the importance of 'enclave deliberation' among like-minded people for political articulation and mobilization, especially for those in disadvantaged positions (Grönlund, Herne and Setälä 2015, 996).



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■ J. Tuomas Harviainen

## Political Larps, or Larps About Politics?

Defining larps as political is a tricky business. Which definition of “politics” are we using? Which of “propaganda”, or “society”, and so forth? Should we discuss the aims of the organizers, game content, or both? In this article, I discuss those questions alongside examples of larps that deal with various aspects of politics. As will be shown, huge differences exist between the ways in which a larp can embody politics.

To illustrate the differences, I apply organization scholar Richard Whittington’s (2006) division of strategic processes. Part of a tradition that looks into how strategy is embodied in discursive and operative practices of organizations rather than just in upper-level formalizations, this framework allows us to see how design decisions on political content are reflected in game structures, as well as where they might be absent. According to Whittington (2006), we can observe strategizing taking place on the levels of practices (e.g., tools, procedures and norms), praxis (strategy-making activities, including established process forms) and practitioners (the people involved in the process).

In my viewpoint, this division also illustrates the ways in which design strategies manifest in play. In trying to carry out the provision of political content larp designers are making strategic decisions and enacting strategic practices and discourse that strongly affects both the play that emerges and the things players remember after the game and the debrief are over. The division thus also represents the focus of designers, in the sense that different political larps are intended to influence their participants in different manners. Furthermore, I will be looking at how larps flirt with propaganda, in the sense of Lasswell’s (1927) definition of it as “the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols” or, in less technical terms, deliberate decisions and actions made by the people to influence others towards predetermined viewpoints, through psychological manipulation that can be

carried out with various tools. Lasswell's book, written after World War I, is not only a classic that is still popular among propaganda professionals many decades later, but also remarkable in that it takes no stance on ethics whatsoever, just looks at what is effective propaganda and what is not. I have chosen to apply it here, as its pragmatism fits well with the analysis of game content and goals without forcing a commentator to take a stance on whether a single game's viewpoint was appropriate or not.

In the following sections, I first describe the different levels of engagement, and then move into hybridization, style, and finally describe my view on the current state of larps connected to politics. Despite the apparent focus on political representation, at the core of each approach is the fact that larps in many ways exemplify the adage that the personal is political. In physically playing the game as personas, larpers are engaging in political experiences. The three points described below just exemplify, at the core, different ways of making that personal political experience count, for the play or maybe also something beyond it.

## Practices: Politics at Play

Larps in the “practices” category are often ones we do not even consider political per se. They might have elements that external analysis would reveal as political, but these are perceived by players and designers alike as just enjoyable gameplay. This is exemplified by larps that feature intrigue: from court games to *Vampire*, we play social interaction, backstabbing and making deals. Through such exercise and maybe some natural talent, we may also become quite well versed at it.

In general, practices larps have their dynamics built around politicking, but are not designed to function as political tools. They therefore embody the practices of politics but lack an external goal. This is a double-edged design decision: on one hand, players enjoy politicking for its own sake, but on the other it is rarely sufficient to carry a game on its own, unless made an explicit (and thus often externally stated) goal. To fix this problem, designers tend to include also other types of content into games of this type, ranging from social intrigue (which can be a type of politics of its own) to action.

Practices-level political content may be highly enjoyable, but too often only for a select few. It is a clever, eloquent player's game, and access to playable political content is highly restricted in many recreational games. Those whose roles are cast high enough (or sometimes subtly enough) are allowed to play the political parts, while others are forced to wait in the sidelines. Unless designers take careful note of it in advance, political game content can be just as disabling as a violent character who kills off at will characters who are important for the plot.

Furthermore, without an external function for politics, entertainment game politicking tends to remain unrealistic and petty, “office hallway politics” or “water cooler” style. Power is not shared as it would be in real organizations and normally logical or natural constellations, networks and alliances are not formed between peers and between levels of hierarchies. If such exist, they tend to be planned in advance. As a result, entertainment larp politics are likely to stay non-complex, limited by short time spans, and most of all opportunistic rather than properly pre-planned. Your scheming vizier and plotting wizard are more likely to seize short-term options than to construct cunning political plans. In order to represent political processes thoroughly, or even semi-realistically, larps usually have to be about politics. This is where the actions of praxis start to appear.

## Praxis: Illustrating Oppressive Structures

Praxis relies on the existence of the social interaction of practices. In a sense, a praxis-oriented larp seeks to intentionally make visible that which a practices-oriented larp considered implicit. The line between practices and praxis larps can thus seem a bit blurry, but what counts is designer intent. If the larp is first and foremost intended to showcase a political process, either during play or in the

debriefing, it falls on the side of praxis orientation. Whereas practices larps are usually organized for entertainment, the primary focus of political praxis larps is in education.

There is a long history of serious games of this type. The classical examples include *Model United Nations* and Harold Guetzkow's *Inter-Nation Simulation* (1958), political simulations in which the player may be physically present and play roles, but with many restrictions on what they can do. The goal of what I consider to be praxis-oriented larps is to show how political processes function and of what sort of established concepts and implicit guidelines, in addition to practices, they consist. I designed *The Tribunal* (2010), a mini-larp about soldiers waiting to testify before a kangaroo court, with the same idea in mind: to show how people become complicit in their own oppression.

Having run *The Tribunal* for more than 40 times, I've noticed that in games of this type, arguing tends to take such a strong role that players rarely apply formal, thought-out techniques of convincing others (e.g., planned argumentation traps, choice architecture, data-based appeals). This became prominent when running the game for business economics students who were taking a class on decision-making processes. While playing, they seemed to forget about all the techniques they had just carefully studied. In some sense, praxis larps seem to approach the realism of how people actually tend to argue – circularly and ineffectively. At the same time, the kind of prepared formalism some of the characters would bring into the situation, were it real, is missing. That makes the activity more equal between players, but simultaneously less realistic. Therefore, in adding playability, we reduce some politically illustrative aspects the play could otherwise contain.

A central borderline between practices and praxis larps can be observed if one looks at e.g., historical larps about themes that are generally considered evil. The larp *1942: The Police* (2011) intentionally depicts the ways in which the Nazis forced some people to help them through its display of what volunteer police trainees went through in an occupied land. And what about the many other larps about living under Nazi occupation? Should we consider them illustrative of everyday politics of survival in a hostile political environment? Or as statements on the horrors of the dominant political system?

## Practitioners: Influencing Players

A focus on the practitioners is a far more complicated thing. In essence, such larps seek to take advantage of a kind of political bleed, with the intent of illustrating a point to the players in such an experiential manner that they can't help but take some of the viewpoints with them into the outside world. In many ways, such games reflect Kaprow's (e.g., 1966) and Boal's (e.g., 1995) ideas that some performative pieces are first and foremost made to influence their own participants.

A practitioners-level larp usually states its goals in advance, at least indirectly. For example *Halat bisar* (2013), set at an alternate reality version of a Finnish university under siege by an occupying country's forces, announced outright that it was about life in such a situation and that its intent was to offer the players at least a glimpse of what it would be like. The strength of the larp medium is at its most visible in such larps: the first-person experience combined with one's bodily presence in the game forces a player to confront the situation in a visceral manner. At the same time, the time span, lack of perceivable character depth in others (e.g., occupying forces' soldiers) and its strong presence in others (e.g., visibly played differences between political parties among the occupied), players' presence in their own bodies (leading to the “fog of larp” where they do not know what happens elsewhere; Fatland, 2005), and heightened level of drama typical to larps together bring such games close to the border of becoming propaganda – at which point the message can be perceived as decidedly one-sided and thus unrealistic.

Notably, not all sides deserve a “fair” representation in a game, nor are all fair representations versions the party in question would accept. Nevertheless, if a political larp consists of deliberate decisions made by the designers to influence the participants towards predetermined viewpoints

through psychological manipulation, the larp would definitely fit Lasswell's (1927) criteria for what is propaganda. Given that political larps have in my observation a tendency to present one-sided political viewpoints more often than not, I find it a remarkably good fit as a framework. Such larps can be fun (as can be pseudo-propaganda and actual propaganda movies), but their message is much less likely to be accepted. While humans do like information that confirms their existing viewpoints, an experiential tool for conveying it can quite easily seem "false" to them, if it is perceived as too propagandistic. If participants feel that the message is more important to the designers than creating interesting play, they will neither enjoy the larp nor be receptive to its political goals.

What in turn helps the reception is that this practitioner-bleed effect is usually guided along by the fact that any player signing up is already quite likely open to exploring the issue, often even pre-disposed to supporting it. Someone wanting to play a refugee in *Dublin2* (2011) is not a blank state receiving game-based indoctrination, but more likely someone whose views on humanitarian crises carry more shades than just two. Likewise, those who will attend an installment of *Baltic Warriors* (2015) a game where aquatic zombies were used as a metaphor for eutrophication, will already have an inkling of what ecological crises may mean. As a result, such players are also more likely to see beyond the knee-jerk reactions of "this is true" and "this is propaganda".

## Scale and Hybridization

Many large scale political larps contain all these levels, and in forms where not all players witness all three during play. This is exemplified by *System Danmark* (2005), a cyberpunk larp about being an outcast in an unequal society. The game was actually based on trends prevalent in present-day Denmark, not just visions of a harsh future. It featured diegetically oppressive political structures, internal politics, and had a strong political message. After the game, the players were shown a video that explained the connections between the fiction and reality (Opus 2005). The organizers wanted to make the political content and message explicit, even at the cost of potentially harming the post-play experience and game memories of some players.

In general, hybrids are less drastic about their means. As a basic rule, larps seeking to influence their participants on a practitioner level will also include the other two levels, and praxis games very likely include a lot about practices. Especially larger scale larps that have highly political content in at least some of their parts will contain mixtures of all levels, regardless of designer intent, because of the imprecise nature of larp as a medium. And even if a designer seeks to provide just practices or praxis level engagement with politics, some players may perceive the topics to represent the organizers' own intent and thus interpret the larp to be something that tries to influence them on a practitioners level. This is a situation where claims of propaganda are also very likely to pop up, fuzzy as they may be. (The only more likely situation is when outsiders hear about a political larp which they did not play, and then assign it a presumed propaganda message.)

## Dystopia and Conflict

An interesting phenomenon about political larps is that they are more likely than not to present the dark side. They are about dystopias rather than utopias, warnings and reminders rather than positive examples. Some crucial exceptions exist, however, and they can also exemplify the harmonious co-presence of all three levels of political at play. A classic example is the gender de/reconstruction game *Mellan himmel och hav* (2003), which created a society based on a new gender system. It may not have been a utopia, but it did show a different extension of how a society might look like. And a few games, like the hunter/gatherer larp *KoiKoi* (2014), have nevertheless been described by some of their players as utopian experiences.

The reason for this dearth of utopian content is easy to understand: the more perfect a society we can envision would be, the harder it is to invent meaningful game content within it. Conflict and disharmony offer us activities, immersion and competitive triumphs, in both winning a political battle and in enjoyably failing to do so. As a result, the more political our larps are, the more they will continue to flirt with propaganda. Extravagance is easier to play than domestic realism (Pegg 2011), even if the latter might in fact tell us more about the politics at play in the society that we are depicting.

## Discussion and Conclusions

In order to present all layers of politics to the players, a political larp on the practitioner level has to be a true hybrid. If participants cannot perceive all three levels of political engagement, the message will either be missed or it will look pasted upon and illogical. For example, a practitioner-level focus in a larp that does not also allow a sufficient number of its players to engage in practices will feel false and overtly propagandistic to many participants. Because of this, many larps that are supposed to be hybrids become lost in a combination of personal experiences and a formal story that assigns their experiences a political value during debriefing. While the personal may indeed be political, in larp it might not always be. The same roles that allow people to experience alternative political environments work as filters that prevent the experiences from becoming truly personal. Without building bridges that go through all three levels, our larps will stay as glimpses to alternative politics, not as works of political significance.

Partially due to design strategy differences and even deviations, it is frankly impossible to really say which larp is exactly presenting just practices, or praxis, or maybe even propaganda. With people experiencing only parts of the play, the same larp can appear very different to different participants – the ones engaged in nobles' politicking and the ones feeling systemic oppression (or player boredom) will not interpret the game's goals similarly. Likewise, because of the focus variances described above, diverging post-game interpretations can be applied to what happened. Following Lehrskov (2007), we can in retrospect identify an orc attack on the king as a revolt of the oppressed masses against the ruling elite, as a racist message about the dangers of an alien culture, as just harmless fun, as a depiction of the right to bear arms in order to protect one's possession, loved ones and life, and so forth. Each of these carries within it the seeds of creating or enforcing a viewpoint, radically different from the others.

We are currently at the stage where political significance in larps is more often accomplished through heightened drama, media visibility and flirting with propaganda techniques than through the care and tailoring that would really take the practitioners level to the practitioners' hearts. Perhaps, if we want larps to really change the world, we should start to think about changing that first?

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■ Katherine Castiello Jones, Sanna Koulu, and Evan Torner

# Playing at Work Labor, Identity and Emotion in Larp

## Introduction: Playing at Work

Most of larp can only take place thanks to an enormous investment of volunteer and fan labor. Organizing a larp event is almost self-evidently a non-profit pursuit: larps frequently lose money or barely break even, and only a handful of individuals worldwide are able to claim that they make a living from larp design. Yet labor is what gives these experiences any value. A larper's labor power – what Karl Marx (1847) defined as one's mental and physical capacity to do work that has use-value to others<sup>1</sup> – remains fundamentally under-theorized.

In order to analyze cultural phenomena such as larp, a number of assumptions about the nature and meaning of the phenomena are essential. One of the core conceptualizations in studying larp, or other games, relates to the nature of the endeavour as play. Play is often seen as distinct from non-play, specifically from work. Bernard Suits defines work as “technical activity ... in which an agent seeks to employ the most efficient available means for reaching a desired goal” (Suits 2006, 173). In Suits' schema, play is simply technical activity that uses inefficient available means, “voluntary obstacles.” On the structural level of Suits' theory, the lines between play and work blur into a conti-

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<sup>1</sup> Marx's own definition raises questions about who has the excess labor-power to commit to an activity like larp. See also Kirk and Wall (2011) where the authors highlight the gradual change into more positive conceptualizations of work, from a grind into an issue of dignity.

num of voluntariness. Both play and work are required for enabling larp.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, we argue that while game studies frequently conceives of larp as a site of play and playfulness, much can be gained by framing larp as a site of labor and work. Just as fandom and social media constitute forms of digital labor (Scholz 2013; Stanfill and Condis 2014), so do core larp activities – playing roles as supporting characters, pretending to dig ditches, putting up with off-putting players – involve labor during the game’s runtime. Recognizing these activities as labor allows us to analyze them from new perspectives, such as with a view to political economy or the sociology of work, and reach a more robust understanding of larp as a cultural and social activity.

A thorough analysis of larp as a site for work would be a rather ambitious project. In this article, we have a more modest goal. We would like to present examples of labor at larp; formulate a taxonomy for understanding those forms of labor; and analyze labor especially in terms of character identity and emotional labor. Finally we suggest areas relating to larp as a site for labor that we see as meriting further research. We focus on labor carried out by the participants during a larp event, while acknowledging that larp as a cultural practice has connections with many other sites for labor and consumption.

Drawing on examples from *Just a Little Lovin’* (2011–), *Revived* (2014), *College of Wizardry* (2014–), and other larps, we look at how we create a sense of character self, and how we might see ourselves as laborers as well as players at a larp.

## Labor at Larp

### Larp as a site for labor

Larps usually require a sizable commitment of time and resources. Depending on context and community, this commitment might be evenly distributed across a large group of participants, shouldered by only a small cadre of organizers, or some mixture of the two. Efforts for the larp might be perceived through the lens of art, or perhaps community, or even customer relations. Regardless of the framework by which we appraise those efforts, however, the work of a larp does not end when the event starts. We would say that for the purpose of understanding larp, the work undertaken during the larp is especially interesting, as it illuminates a little-discussed side of the role-playing activity.

Examples of labor during a larp are many and varied. Labor during a larp can involve taking care of actual, “real-life” needs of players, such as participants cooking food or making a fire in the camp. Or perhaps a player breaks down, and another player has to comfort him; or a player has an injury, and someone must provide medical care. However, the work is not always so tangible. Labor at larp might include therapy counseling at zombie larp (*Revived*, where this counseling is a large part of the game); players researching material in the game; or an engineer of a starship “working” on the engine for 10-15 minutes.

Below, we bring up some anecdotes from our own larping experience, and the labor involved. In the first, the labor closely resembles non-game-related work:

*“When I signed up for the 2015 Danish run of Just a Little Lovin’, I wanted to play the former organizer character Tony, because Tony is a DJ and I work on the side as a DJ in real life. The job involved playing three consecutive nights of parties as a character in the game, as well as playing the music for the drag show. In order to maintain my in-character credibility as a decent DJ, I had to listen to and prepare proper set lists*

*out of over 300 tunes from the 1970s and 80s. But when I arrived at the larp itself, I realized that no one served as an intermediary between the drag performers and me, so I found myself also working as a stage manager, arranging the order of performances, and making sure the sound on the mics worked. In short, Just a Little Lovin’ was what I call a “working larp experience” for me: in the real world, I might’ve gotten paid for what I was doing. Instead, I paid money to do it in game. And if I didn’t do a good job of it during the game, it might have negatively affected my fellow players’ experience. Or at least the drag queens would have thrown me some shade.”* –Evan Torner

The anecdote also brings up a sense of responsibility for the whole game, and for providing a necessary resource. This responsibility is not wholly unlike that of directors or organizers. Larp communities sometimes refer to “run-time game-mastering”, the active shepherding of game narrative and plot. This work can be taken on by player-participants as well as organizers, as in the following example.

*“I first heard of College of Wizardry a bit before the ticket sales for the first run in late 2014. I had the option of signing up as a teacher, and jumped at the chance. My day job is as a researcher and university teacher, and I wanted a chance to play at subverting the professional role of my day-to-day life. It turns out that being a fictional college teacher brings with it many of the same responsibilities, of preparing classes and exams, of working out scheduling conflicts and curricula, and making sure students knew what to study. I was also prepared to manage the structure and flow of play for students I came in contact with: in numerous small encounters sprinkled throughout the event, I kept track of plots and narratives and did my best to distribute them to others. However, due to in-game events I also needed to step up and give twice-daily speeches for the whole group of participants, tracking information from players and organizers alike, and delivering it with some semblance of brevity and narrative coherence. In the end, I rather enjoyed being able to contribute to the event in these ways, but the practical demands of the work put a damper on my plans for an emotional arc for the character.”* –Sanna Koulou

In the previous *College of Wizardry* experience, labor came to be a source of satisfaction but also an obstacle to the experience that was planned. However, labor at larp can also provide a way to enjoy the larp in a different way, or access a character more fully:

*“When I played in the 2012 U.S. run of Mad About the Boy, my character, Zabida, was a medical doctor who’d been unable to practice medicine in the U.S. before the disaster. Throughout the game my character became more and more frustrated by the denial of this important aspect of her identity. When the Last Man finally appeared, it was my character who was asked to provide medical attention for him. Though I lack any sort of medical knowledge myself, I suddenly had the experience of being thrust into an episode of ER. My character finally got the opportunity to prove her capabilities as a doctor. As a character who had spent much of the game feeling hopeless and uncomfortable, these actions allowed her to shine. By performing this medical “work” – even though it was completely faked—I was able to access a different piece of this character. Zabida’s experience of feeling capable and recognized for her medical training gave me some of the most intense and memorable moments of the game. Though it came late in the game, doing this work was integral to solidifying my character’s identity. It impacted my relationships with other characters, as well as the way my character felt about herself. Had I not gotten the opportunity to do this work during the game I would have had a completely different overall experience.”* –Katherine Castiello Jones

### A three-fold taxonomy

Human work becomes labor when it has a use-value to others, with this use-value determined by the needs of other humans and their systems. This use-value is of course contextual, depending on

<sup>2</sup> One current understanding of play relies on the notion of the “playful mindset”, elaborated by e.g. Sicart (2014) and Stenros (2015). Although this line of thinking with regard to games and playfulness in general is persuasive, in this chapter we have chosen to focus on activities instead of mindsets.



the current needs of the individuals involved. To study human motivation, Abraham Maslow (1954) famously suggested envisioning these needs as a hierarchy, since one's need to do one's homework might be superseded by one's need to sleep or stay hydrated.

Although Maslow's hierarchy has been soundly criticized for its lack of empirical evidence and broad assumptions about all of humanity (Graham and Messner 1998), his framework is nevertheless helpful in two ways. One is that it simply reminds us that our larp experiences are actually structured not only by a game's design, but the material conditions of the playsite itself (Torner 2013). The framework also helps outline the needs that larp designers and organizers potentially have to minimally fulfill: When will the players' meal breaks be? Will the scenery and props convince players that they are in the diegesis? At what point will players help each other get the most satisfying play experience? Maslow's hierarchy of needs permits designers to set priorities.

However, the contradictory nature of role-playing as a constantly-negotiated social activity (Montola 2008) in which character actions can bleed over into player emotion and decision-making (Montola 2010, Bowman 2013) means that it is not always clear what needs take precedence when. Larpers in *Dystopia Rising* (2008–) willfully deny themselves sleep in order to enhance the experience of being attacked at random by zombies and boost their in-game advantage. In larp, we regularly prioritize fictional needs over real-world needs. Nevertheless, all labor is not created equal in terms of real-world use-value and exchange value. Thus we have created our own hierarchy of labor in larp:

First-order labor in larp addresses the most basic of needs in Maslow's hierarchy, namely anything that helps keep the larpers alive beyond processes of valuation and exchange: cooking, cleaning the bathrooms, and safety. First-order labor may be done in character. One of the best examples is Pepper's Diner in *Just a Little Lovin'*: Pepper and his crew are in character, but the players also have to work 16-hour days to make sure that the entire group is fed. Organizer characters may be in a tunic and carry a foam sword, but they also have their cell phones handy in case of medical emergencies or security threats. First-order labor is work that generally everyone agrees must be done, would definitely be remunerable in other settings, and may or may not be completed in character.

Second-order labor in larp involves doing a real job that would be ordinarily compensated with money, but which is otherwise not required to survive. Instructors in the *College of Wizardry* preparing and teaching lessons would be an example of second-order labor. DJ work at *Just a Little Lovin'* would be another. Major leadership roles such as serving as a commander on the *The Monitor Celestra* (2013) or as a head of a household in *Fairweather Manor* (2015) would be others. Second-order labor serves the game experience at the cognitive and aesthetic levels, but would otherwise be remunerated outside of the larp context. These may or may not be completed in character as well.

Third-order labor is for purely diegetic purposes and diegetic rewards: pretending to dig a ditch, dishing fake food onto a plate, etc. Some servant positions at *Fairweather Manor* qualify as this. In the Intercon game *Expedition: Riders on the Storm* (2011), one of the jobs was to pilot the ship, meaning one player could choose to sit in a chair and stare at the wall. These third-order tasks are usually only completable in character. Third-order labor is meant to serve the fiction itself: helping a game and other players' play appear more "real." In some situations, it is not always clear whether completing these tasks adds actual value to the larp: rather than enhancing the player experience they may be viewed as busywork or as mindless tasks.<sup>3</sup>

The above hierarchy sees larp as a medium that, rather than merely enabling play, exposes the

messy nature of work itself. Doing work for the larp, after all, frames the overall experience. Players and organizers perform work for a variety of reasons beyond seeking excitement or "fun" (see e.g. Montola, Stenros, and Waern 2009a, 107). Whether or not larp work appears to be vital to the success of a larp cannot always be determined from the design of the larp. The hierarchy above goes so far as to disavow the already-spurious distinction between a "player character" and a "non-player character" (Stenros 2013), letting us instead break down the activities of each individual participant and how they meet the needs of the larp.

## Interactions between Labor and Other Modes of Larp Engagement

### Labor enabling the larp experience

One of the most immediately fruitful aspects of a hierarchy of work is that making distinctions between different kinds of labor lets us see that labor more clearly. Of course, a perspective emphasizing labor in larp does not supersede other approaches, but rather complements them. For instance, this perspective allows us to inquire into how second-order labor is used in enabling larp; or how third-order labor might be experienced by players when it is pure make-work; or how first-order labor is divided between different participants and how the commercialization of larp might affect that division. This article merely marks the beginning of those inquiries. In this respect, we would like to highlight two issues: first, the usefulness of second-order and third-order labor specifically in enabling larp, and second, a tension that can result from engaging in work in a larp.

There are indications that second- and third-order labor can both enable more rewarding larp experiences. But, labor that is at odds with the experience that a player desires from the larp may make the event less rewarding. From anecdotal evidence, it seems that second-order labor can be an important resource in creating and sustaining a character identity. For the DJ in *Just a Little Lovin'* as well as the lecturer in *College of Wizardry*, the occupation is a fundamental part of the character's social setting. Interacting with others as the character may or may not require performing second-order labor. In many larps the professional activities of the characters take place off-camera as it were: the criminal gang's accountant is not expected to file a tax return in a cyberpunk game, and the elven hunters of a fantasy larp will usually not hunt game. (Indeed, it might be considered one of the key design features of *College of Wizardry* that nearly all player characters are engaged in second-order labor such as studying or teaching, during the game.<sup>4</sup>)

Yet some forms of second-order labor are specifically brought in as parts of the game and form a key part of characters. Photographers, for instance, often take pictures in character, and are sometimes deliberately given "non-player character" roles. Engaging in these kinds of second-order labor might require the players to "steer" their character (Montola, Saitta, and Stenros 2015) in that direction. A photographer character may have to abruptly leave a scene to take pictures at a scheduled event that the player knows will happen at a specified time. Players may need to be aware of the labor their characters need to perform, and expend effort in making it happen.

However, players can also engage with second-order labor as a way of sustaining their experience of the character, or aiming for a specific character identity (Pohjola 2004). Here it can be difficult to distinguish between second-order labor and other effort expended in character. We hold, however,

3 Despite its sometimes unclear use-value as labor, third-order labor can still be analyzed in our schema, as choosing to do it constitutes performative support of the larp itself and its proposed diegesis. Fake guards standing around with foam swords are not simply "playing guard," but also performing on behalf of the non-quantifiable gestalt larp experience. Interestingly, then, the value of the third-order labor being performed becomes distinct from the use-value of the labor that it represents.

4 Effectively all the participants had access to two of the elements that Waern, Montola and Stenros highlight with regard to immersive play: authentic activity in combination with immersive play (Waern, Montola, and Stenros 2009b, 2-3). The game offered an inner experience of a character that fit well together with the social setting. The social context also acknowledged and recognized the activities performed by the character, reinforcing the individual experience of meaning in a somewhat similar fashion as Kirk and Wall discuss with regard to constructions of identity in general (Wall 2011).

that the distinction can be a useful one. Second-order labor often requires the player to draw on additional skills beyond role-playing, such as putting together a lesson plan, assembling a playlist, or staging a burlesque performance. If we return for a bit to the concept of a playful mindset, we can say that a player engaging in second-order labor may have a playful mindset, but that the character usually does not. The distinction becomes blurred when we note that a character's labor can also be invisible, for example because of its nature as emotional or caring work.

It is worth noting here that using character labor as a way of constructing identity is not specific to larp or role-playing. Instead, as Kirk and Wall (2011) emphasize, work can be an important source of identity and meaning. Thus it should be no surprise that in-character work or a character's occupation can be an important resource for character identity and for situating the character in a social setting. A number of larp-specific questions rise up, of course: for instance, the distinction between second-order and third-order labor in enabling the play experience, or the role of first-order labor in creating meaning for the larp participant.

### Labor as a source of tension

To some extent, labor is necessary for the larp experience, but the larp activities are not coded as work outside the game even when they involve a noticeable amount of effort. The labor that they require is, if not exactly glossed over, at least re-interpreted in terms of fun. However, as labor in various forms is required for the larp to take place at all, and often for creating specific kinds of content, the amount of labor undertaken by different players can become a source of tension or discomfort in social contexts.

The experience of labor at larp may become a source of ambivalence on a personal level for a player. It seems safe to assume that as different players are looking for different experiences at larps, some players are more motivated to do labor at larp than others, and some players experience labor as more, well, laborious than others. Insofar as labor at larp provides richness to the experience of a character, or a way of creating and sustaining character identity, this labor may be experienced as necessary or meaningful, but other forms of labor might detract from the desired larp experience.

This dimension of meaningfulness is perhaps the most essential factor in engaging in in-character labor. On a personal level, it helps make a player's contribution in performing as a DJ or as a teacher more legible: these contributions are not purely selfless, or effortless for that matter, but a way of creating personal as well as communal meaning in the larp context. On a more theoretical level, focusing on meaning-creation in labor helps us conceive of larp as a meaningful cultural medium – a paradigm that creates a bridge towards other, non-fun modes of play. Here it is worth noting that understanding larps in terms of effort expended to create shared meanings is not only limited to “art-house” larps, but that the paradigm also covers “entertainment” larps such as the afore-mentioned College of Wizardry series or the *Dystopia Rising* franchise.

### Case Study: Emotion Work

Focusing on meaning may help re-conceptualize work as enabling rather than diminishing playfulness, but a certain tension remains. This tension might be especially visible in terms of emotional labor (Hochschild 1983). Hochschild's conceptualization of certain forms of service-sector work as emotional labor is over 30 years old, but emotional labor often remains less visible in conceptualizations of work. Yet, as larp often focuses on offering emotionally significant experiences to participants, the issue of emotional labor is especially topical for larp. Emotional labor also ties into identity, highlighting the connection between the character experience and a player's out-of-character self.

During games both players and organizers may find themselves managing their own emotions, along with the emotions of others. As Hochschild argues, socially determined “feeling rules” determine not only the emotions that one should feel in a given situation, but also how those feelings should be expressed. For instance, feeling sad and crying at a funeral are common “feeling rules.” A failure to obey feeling rules can result in social censure or even being ejected from a given social situation. Thus individuals find themselves performing emotion work wherein they manage and shift their emotional expressions through “surface acting” or their emotional states through “deep acting.”

The concept of feeling rules translates easily into larp as an activity. Role-playing is largely made possible by participants choosing to manage their emotional states, and the “feeling rules” of a larp enable players to share their emotions as fuel for playful activities. There are then two aspects of emotional work that map easily onto player activity during a larp event: the management of one's own emotions and the management and care for others' emotions.

The management of one's own emotions is not often recognized as work<sup>5</sup>, but it is pervasive and necessary for smooth social interaction. For instance, if a male player makes a sexist remark to a female player during a boffer battle, she may engage in surface acting to mask signs of distress, anger, or sadness. She might brush off his remark with a clever rebuttal or pretend she didn't hear the comment at all. Yet, if she is still feeling negative emotions that she doesn't want to or feel able to express during the game, she may engage in “deep acting” in an attempt to change her emotions about the encounter on a player level. She might tell herself that the other player was just tired or hungry, she may think of other more positive interactions she has had with the player, she may throw herself harder into the battle, or focus on the feelings of her character in order to change her emotions as a player.

While it might be easy to see all larp as a form of emotion work, there is an added layer to the emotional labor in question. This extra layer is characterized by the fact that it takes place on the level of the player's emotions, and that it adds to the work involved in evoking or experiencing the emotions that a character should, or is expected to be, feeling. Of course, both layers of emotional work may expand outside the timeframe of the larp itself. Emotional work in its different dimensions is necessary for the larp to be connected both temporally and socially with its context.

Current scholarship also highlights the fact that emotional labor is disproportionately done by women. Whether this remains true in the case of larp requires further research. Yet it raises the question of whether certain types of players or organizers do different amounts of emotional labor, as Lassila (2009) suggests. While this labor might on the surface seem “voluntary”, it does not alter the fact that some individuals may experience playing and organizing larps as more draining, leading to potential burnout or frustration with the hobby (e.g., Stark 2014).

This also raises questions about who has the resources to do the labor required of larp. While this work may be “fun”, it still requires time, energy, and effort. In play cultures where it is expected that players will communicate with each other prior to the game, read play documents and memorize important details of character and setting, or even do additional research to more fully embody their character, these aspects of larp may be overlooked as labor. Yet these activities undoubtedly take time and effort, as well as adding substantial value to the play experience.<sup>6</sup> The ability to do the required labor may tax an individual's reserves of time, energy, or emotion. This is particularly dangerous if the expectations are not clearly communicated by organizers, if a player is new to the hobby, or if the player comes from an alternate play culture with different expectations.

5 Indeed, the management of emotion is a factor in many occupations, but it is rarely renumerated as work. Hochschild uses flight attendants and bill collectors as examples, showing that while emotional work is not often considered as adding value, it is crucial to the performance of many jobs (Hochschild 1983).

6 For some very rough estimates on the effort included, see Montola's survey on *College of Wizardry* (forthcoming).

## Incompetence and emotion work

One of the tensions of labor in larp is the threat of failure or incompetence. While first-order or second-order labor is often done by professionals, it may also be trusted to volunteers who are performing their tasks in a new context. The pressures to create a successful play experience may lead to this type of work becoming onerous. Even third-order labor may produce a similar pressure. Doing jobs in-game, even when other players are not truly relying on them for food, safety, or aesthetic experience, can produce negative emotions such as stress, frustration, or sadness.

Players doing jobs that they are unfamiliar with, but that their characters are supposedly experts at, may feel pressure to perform competently. Incompetence at first-order or second-order tasks especially may provoke negative reactions towards the player. Even when these reactions take place “in character” they may still be experienced negatively by the player taking on the incompetent role. For instance in Jason Morningstar’s game *The Dream* (2015) players attempt to make their own silent film while portraying the actors and crew members of the real silent film *The Dream*. The Director, the character put in charge of directing the film, is written to be incompetent and treated as such by the other characters. Yet, *The Dream* requires a real film to be made during play. So while the incompetence of the director enhanced the play experience with regard to some of the characters, some of the players taking the roles of the film crew found this incompetence added to their stress. Similarly, in the game *Revived* the two game masters take the roles of the slightly incompetent facilitators of a support group for recovering zombies. While this incompetence is sometimes used to provide play and steering, it can also raise feelings of guilt or other negative emotions when characters express their frustration or anger with the facilitators. Managing these emotions and the conflicts of identity and social connections may also require additional emotional work.

## Conclusion

Larps are created through work, and this work should be acknowledged. This article suggests that a framework for examining larp as labor and work is as useful as frameworks that understand the activity as game and play. It also offers a reflection on the distinction of larp as fun, or larp as art, insofar as artistic work is often conceptualized as relating to the highest levels of Maslow’s hierarchy only. In many ways, a labor and work perspective qualifies and validates the efforts exerted by so many players and organizers to make a larp function.

Larp may encourage specific meta-motivational states such as playfulness that permit players to re-prioritize their needs according those of the character and game (Stenros 2015), but one still steers play to make sure basic needs of others are being met (Montola, Saitta, and Stenros 2015). If a player has medical training and applies real first-aid in character, she is performing medical work without charge, with all the legal and ethical implications thereof. If there is an in-game character conflict and the players then meet privately afterward to debrief, they are performing emotion work. Whether or not this work is pleasant, or considered part of the game, does not obviate its need to be done and recognized.

When designing a larp, most organizers place the first-order labor under their jurisdiction: players should be fed and have access to proper facilities, and they should feel safe and have the opportunity to take care of their own needs. But second-order labor is often what secures players’ mid-level needs of belonging, competence, understanding, and aesthetic experience. Larps playing vampire princes and magic-school professors may have to hold extensive meetings outside of game or prepare lessons and materials, which in turn help coordinate plotlines in game. Players who put in 70 hours into a costume may be adding to the larp’s aesthetic experience in ways that players who spent less than three hours on theirs are not. Third-order labor is effectively labor-as-play, but we should be mindful

of when it slips into first-or second-order. And above all, first-order and second-order laborers are likely to feel the need to be openly recognized in some fashion for their vital roles.

Designers of larps should attend to – and prepare one’s players for – what types of work will be necessary to make the larp run as planned. What skills are required of certain character roles? Are certain players more valued because of their talents and abilities? Who might be asked to clock unusually large hours of emotion work? Will professionals be performing in the game, or will volunteers need additional training to complete their tasks? Such questions have no right answer, but should be addressed by the larp design and organization, perhaps as another set of faders on the Mixing Desk of Larp (Andresen and Nielsen 2013). Many organizers already think in terms of the efforts required to deliver an entertaining experience. As we formalize the larp medium, perhaps “entertainment delivery” does not quite adequately appraise what organizers and players actually do in a game. Perhaps we also need to call our play – as much as we wish to transcend the term and its requirements – “work.”

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# Gender

■ Neko Koski

## Not a Real Man? – Trans\* Politics in the Finnish Larp Scene

I’ve loved larping since my first game somewhere around 2000. But at one point I stopped, for almost five years. Missing some amazing games and people during that time is a thing I still regret. So why did I stop?

Because I’m trans\*.

No-one told me trans\* people couldn’t larp. But a lot of factors – both external and internal – conspired to convince me that it just wouldn’t be worth the trouble. The thought of playing yet another female character had become too painful, and I had experimented with crossplaying a male character in games where I knew everyone. But since I’m small and rather feminine, I believed that with unknown organisers and players I would have to justify my preference for and ability to portray a male character, in every game I enrolled in. Over and over again. And this thought was equally painful. So I stopped entirely, until I could grow some facial hair and no longer had breasts to hide.

Isn’t it paradoxical, that whereas playing a dragon, a fairy, or a werewolf would have felt easy, simply playing a man was something I thought was quite out of my reach? And isn’t it sad that I’m not the only one with this experience?

### Definition Land

Let’s take a small detour to Definition Land.

What do I mean by “trans\*”? Someone who has been defined a woman or a man at birth and has later undergone a transition to the other? Yes and no. While that is one possible definition and does accurately describe some trans\* people, I use the term here as a rickety catch-all-umbrella, in

which I include everyone who is not cis. Transgendered, a-gendered, non-binary, neutrois, bi-gendered, other-gendered, androgyne... Everyone who in some way falls outside the normative, binary, body-as-destiny gender system.

What, then, is “cis”? Cisgendered is a person who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth. Some might be tempted to think of cis people as “normal people”, but that is wrong. I’ll come back to the reasons later.

### What’s All This Fuss About?

During the Christmas holidays of 2014, a large Finnish larpers’ FB group hosted a discussion on LGBTQ issues in larps, started by one of its active members. They asked several questions to get the discussion going: “How are LGBTQ issues usually addressed in larps? How do LGBTQ people themselves experience larps and do they feel their issues are paid sufficient attention to? And do organisers think about LGBTQ issues when designing games?” The discussion lasted for eight days and had over 300 comments from over 50 participants. The original post gathered over 60 likes, and many comments were liked tens of times, with the most appreciated ones gathering over 40 likes. The discussion was freezed at one point for being too heated, and admins removed a number of comments – according to them, more comments were removed from this single discussion than from all the previous ones in the group put together. As far as I know, the discussion was a first of its kind in the Finnish larp scene. According to some commenters, however, it had been a long time coming.

In this article, I want to focus on just one aspect of the discussion – albeit a prominent one – that of trans\* players and themes. Since the original topic covered both gender and sexual minorities, there was a lot of overlap and mixed terminology, and even in retrospect it’s not always clear when individual commenters were talking specifically about trans\* issues. Nonetheless, there surfaced a number of recurrent attitudes, concerns and opinions, from which it’s possible to build a picture of current trans\* politics in and around the Finnish larp scene.

The participants can be divided roughly to those who openly identified themselves as trans\* (only a handful of people), and to those who did not (the overwhelming majority). The former – as well as participating in the more political aspects of the debate – shared their experiences as trans\* players and offered some pointers on how things could be improved in the future. The latter’s opinions on trans\* players and having trans\* themes and characters in larps varied from supportive and positive to doubtful, marginalising and outright discriminatory.

I’m hardly an impartial observer. I took part in the discussion, quite emotionally at times, in full support of all trans\* people’s right to be a part of the larp scene as ourselves, without needing to justify our presence, without having to fear discrimination, and without having to face the near constant ridicule and scorn many of us have to deal with in our day-to-day lives. Some commenters, as well as the admins, were concerned about the discussion not being neutral and civil enough. Of non-trans\* people being turned against us if we were too hostile, too demanding, too difficult. Endless, smiling patience in the face of hurtful and discriminatory comments is something which groups in an oppressed position are often demanded of, by those in power.

I won’t accept that. Trans\* players have no obligation to pander to those cis people who feel threatened by our existence. And so, this review will be unapologetically partial.

### We Feel Uncomfortable and Confused!

I’ll first take a look at the more negative opinions, which were – thankfully and a bit ironically – in the minority. Some repeated ones were: Trans\* issues are not important, because they are relevant to only



a small minority of players. Trans\* larpers demand special treatment and overprotection. Considering trans\* players' needs when designing a game and writing trans\* characters is very difficult and not worth the trouble.

A couple of people said outright that if they had a limited number of male characters to cast, they would cast them with male players and not with women or trans\* people – implying that trans\* men are not real men. This, they claimed, does not amount to discrimination. One person was willing to try compromising with trans\* players – presumably by offering them androgynous characters – but said that if that failed, they would not be cast.

The issue of crossplaying – playing a character whose gender differs from your own – proved to be a crucial one, in how it revealed hidden assumptions about trans\* players. Some wanted to ban it from their games altogether, saw it as too confusing, or claimed it too easily broke other players' immersion. Even people who grudgingly allowed it felt it generally brought no value to anyone's game. That some of these people were, however, ready to allow trans\* players to play as their "chosen" gender, shows they might not realise that trans\* people playing as their own gender sometimes looks like crossplaying.

Trans\* players who complained about not being allowed to crossplay, or about being cast into a wrong gender, were told they were being too sensitive. If you feel uncomfortable, we were told, you should find another game, make your own, or stop larping altogether.

However, one repeated opinion was worry about the comfort of cis players, especially those "forced" to play romantic plots opposite trans\* players. Here ignorance about trans\* people neatly combined with cissexism and homophobia; especially in the opinions of one commenter, who claimed that as a heterosexual man he would not feel comfortable playing such plots with other than "born females". That someone's trans\* background doesn't necessarily show, especially since we're rarely larping with our clothes off, didn't seem to matter – the important thing was to shield cis players from uncomfortable feelings. They were further protected by writing only cisnormative characters, along "traditional gender roles". This practice was justified with either the need for historical authenticity, or by claiming it only makes sense to stick to what is "normal" in our own society.

Some commenters complained that they just wanted to write neutral, fun games for everyone. They felt they were being pressured to turn their games political, by a minority of players who tried to brainwash others by forcefeeding them different worldviews through art. According to these commenters, including trans\* characters or other minorities made games political, while writing only cishetero characters kept them neutral. Some admins tried to quickly silence this part of the discussion, suggesting that it was both outside the topic and a sure sign of any fruitful debate having come to an end.

## **I Like You, But You're Scary...**

The above represent the opinions of only a few individuals, made quite clear by how little likes their comments received. But it would be overly optimistic to say all the rest were unwaveringly supportive of trans\* players and themes.

A few hesitantly positive commenters said they would like to write trans\* characters, but that they were too afraid of messing it up somehow. Others complained they didn't have enough time to research trans\* issues, and thus found it easier to avoid trans\* characters altogether, rather than risk offending trans\* people. For some, writing trans\* characters just for the sake of variation simply felt like too much trouble, compared to how little they felt it mattered to anyone and how much in-game confusion these characters might create. A few found the idea of writing gender neutral characters difficult, while one commenter questioned whether gender in the context of larps was relevant enough to be thought about at all.

Similarly, some questioned the existence of real discrimination against trans\* players, suggesting that most problems might rise rather from unfamiliarity, and could thus be resolved with open and positive communication. They defended everyone's right to write whatever kinds of games they want, and lamented that – what they saw as – our hostile attitudes might in fact be what caused some organisers to shun trans\* larpers. If only you accepted the crumbs we throw at you, seemed to be the message.

## **This Is the Later I Mentioned Before**

To be perhaps a bit too liberal about it, it's clear that no-one participating in the discussion meant to be openly hostile or discriminatory toward trans\* larpers. But it's also clear many were completely ignorant as to how structural discrimination works. Even some of the positive comments contributed to the marginalisation of trans\* people as "other", as a "minority" outside the "normal" order of things.

To be normal is to be like the norm. In our cisnormative society it's the norm to be cis, and everything else is seen as different, exceptional, rare. It's thus quite understandable for a cis larper to assume that normal, neutral games contain only cis characters – and indeed, only cis players. After all, to include trans\* characters would mean the game now deals with the exceptional. But what is exceptional to one is normal to another. From my trans\* perspective the cisnormative society appears neither normal nor neutral but constructed and barely maintained, with great cost to those who don't quite fit into neat binary boxes. That is, everyone.

Writing a cis-only larp with the intention to avoid being political, is as odd as writing a male-only larp with the reasoning that gender doesn't matter. It's easier to see how the latter would be a political choice. In a cisnormative society it's harder to see that so is the former. But cisnormative games reproduce a very particular and historical worldview, and in doing so reinforce its normalcy and domination over other ways of being. Treating trans\* players' concerns – even when meaning well – as a minority issue, as something extra to spice up a normal game, as something to be thought of only if there is time and know-how, contributes to their marginalisation.

Seeing only trans\* issues as political is outright structural discrimination. To demand that trans\* people quietly accept this view even more so.

## **We're Positive We Can Do Better!**

The more positive commenters raised exactly the above point: that there is no such thing as politically neutral games, since all games have the capacity to influence their players in various ways. Representing the mainstream is always a political choice, and thus those writing only cisnormative games should have well thought out reasons for doing so.

The commenters who were positive and understanding toward trans\* issues greatly outnumbered the negative ones, both by the number of comments and the number of likes they received. Some condemned casting trans\* players in a wrong gender, while others offered that players' gender shouldn't place any limitations on what they could play, since so much depends on the imagination of others. Thus, neither trans\* players nor crossplaying were seen to cause much confusion, and many cited their own positive experiences to back up these claims.

The claims that minorities were pressuring everyone to write only certain kinds of games were deemed to be greatly exaggerated, and trans\* players were only seen to be asking more awareness and sensitivity. Since cissexism is so widespread, one commenter said, it's better to be explicitly inclusive to counter it. Discrimination, people reminded others, is not only open hostility toward trans\* players. It's thinking that trans\* characters need not be included in games that are not centred around

trans\* issues. It's assuming that trans\* people have no place in historical games, even though we know our views on history are skewed by lack of evidence about subordinate groups. It's having time to invent new races for your fantasy world, but suddenly lacking time to figure out what queerness might mean to them.

It feels bad, one person said, that some can openly express their wish to not play with trans\* people – like others being okay with someone saying they don't want to play opposite a non-white person. The situation with trans\* players now was compared to how hostile people's attitudes toward gay people were 15 years ago. That openly trans\* identified players want to change the larp scene to be a more inclusive, safer space was seen as a good thing, something these trans\* players should not be belittled or called weak for. The call for trans\* people to stop complaining, to only show positive example by making their own games was seen to ignore how social change happens; discussion and evaluation – one commenter pointed out – are key to social development.

Allowing more room for trans\* players and themes in different kinds of games would simply make these games more varied. In general, some felt, separating character concepts from the most self-evident gender tropes would not only make larps better, in time it would make trans\* issues easier to handle smartly.

While many commenters expressed optimism about the whole discussion, feeling it showed people in general wanted to make it possible to include everyone, some felt it showed that trans\* issues were still strange and scary for many. A few organisers, however, did reach out, expressing their wish to make their games safer for trans\* players and asking for their help. Yet others wondered how they could be more considerate as players.

## Who's the Real Problem?

Participating in the discussion as a trans\* larper was quite intimidating – a fact several trans\* commenters expressed, myself included. The discussion itself was felt to be oppressive and marginalising, when cis players were allowed to refer to trans\* people as a “problematic dilemma”, but trans\* players challenging this were told off for being too mean.

Only a couple of trans\* players felt it was easy for them to be a part of the Finnish larp scene, saying they had never had to feel fear or anxiety off-game. The majority of trans\* commenters had more negative than positive experiences to share.

Casting had caused problems for many. Some trans\* men had been refused a male character, while others had been cast as female, despite their clear wishes to play men. Some felt they were often typecast as androgynous or somehow different characters, usually at the bottom of the social ladder, and made doubly invisible by having been left out of the world descriptions. Being offered only clichéd trans\* characters was another problem. As was common with gay characters some years ago, “a suffering trans\* person” is often the only personality and plot element these characters have. This does not accurately reflect the experiences of all trans\* people, and even if it did, many would not wish to face in larps the same problems they have in their own lives.

Crossplaying is something many trans\* players have used in figuring out their own gender. Disallowing it not only robs them of that tool, it creates problems especially for those whose appearance is not deemed to sufficiently match their gender. By disallowing crossplay organisers force these players to come out as trans\* – often in a remote place, among unfamiliar people – something which can be scary enough to drive them away from larping for good. Those of us who don't fit neatly into the binary gender boxes, whether it be by choice or not, face being marginalised by our appearance. Sometimes no amount of props and make-up can ensure that one's character is read unambiguously. If this is made to be solely the player's problem, a large portion of games and characters will be off limits to them. We aren't usually in the position to shop for suitable games, because generally none are.

Many trans\* players have found the Finnish larp scene – thought by many cis people to be tolerant and nice – to be a rather cis-centred environment. Being gendered wrong and forced to listen to cissexist jokes before, after and during the game are just some examples. In games where everyone is assumed to be cis, trans\* players might have a difficult time with such basic things as using toilets and changing clothes.

Those who accuse trans\* people of being too sensitive seem to forget how much hostility and ridicule we often have to deal with on a day-to-day basis. Strong reactions to problems which might seem minuscule to cis people can be the result of having run into that problem a hundred times before. Explaining the same thing over and over again can be exhausting. However, some trans\* commenters expressed a willingness to answer any questions larp organisers might have. Ignoring trans\* issues because you're not familiar with them thus ceased to be a valid excuse in the Finnish larp scene.

## Inclusive Organising 101

I'd love to be able to claim that considering trans\* issues when organising a game is always a simple and straightforward matter. It isn't. There are various in-game and off-game matters to consider, and even trans\* players will disagree on them. Almost every aspect of game design has some implications for trans\* players. However, paying attention to them can actually lead to better games for everyone.

A crucial thing to consider is whether and how to include trans\* characters into the game world. If taken as a positive challenge, this question should lead to a clearer understanding of how gender as a whole in that world works. Many organisers are quick to adopt a binary, cisnormative gender system, assuming that everyone will automatically agree on what it means for individual characters. But if not elaborated on, there will be questions and confusion – Are women equal? How to treat androgynous characters? – and confusion can breed bad play. Whether or not the game world will be a trans\* inclusive one, defining it clearly and writing it down for everyone to see will also help solve some more practical problems later.

Many trans\* players find games with gender neutral characters to be more inclusive, because they usually rely less on clichéd stereotypes and are more open to customisation. But whether it's better to write gender neutral characters or not depends largely on the setting and design of the game. If the game is based heavily on cisheteronormative, pre-written relationships, gender neutral casting will of course create more problems than it solves. Some also find it hard to write characters without a gender template to guide them. No hard rules here, but organisers should be aware of the reasons behind their decisions.

How to deal with crossplaying? To disallow or strongly discourage it will leave some trans\* players unable to attend. There's no denying that crossplaying can create some confusion – though less when combined with a well defined game world. In games where characters' genders matter for world or plot reasons, organisers might be justified in asking some players to accentuate their character's gender through props. Most problems, however, result from lack of communication, and can be resolved with careful planning and polite questions.

There's no need for extensive special arrangements, one trans\* player commented, if your game has a safe environment both in- and off-game. But how to create that safe environment? A first step might be to declare the game to be one, maybe by publishing a safe-space policy on the game's website. Arranging for gender neutral bathrooms and private changing spaces are good, concrete ways of making everyone – not only trans\* people – feel more comfortable. Not all game venues are flexible enough to do this, and while some compromises might need to be made, it's important to make sure trans\* people are not always those with the shortest stick. How safe a game feels has also much to do with the atmosphere. And while players can have a significant effect on the atmosphere of a given game, the initial tone is set by the organisers and their public policies.

## Listen, Learn, Explore

The discussion on LGBTQ issues in larps might have been the first of its kind in the Finnish larp scene, but I hope it won't be the last. I also hope the future discussions will revolve more around problematic game designs and less around whether it's okay to find trans\* people themselves problematic.

Protip: it's not.

Whenever trans\* issues are being discussed, trans\* people themselves are often talked over or not taken seriously, and sadly this discussion was no exception. If we really want to make larps more inclusive to marginalised people, those people's voices need to be heard.

For many, larping is about imagining and experiencing other possible ways of being. Shouldn't gender, then, be open to this exploration as well? Why think of trans\* themes and characters as being there solely for the sake of trans\* players, when considering queerness as an integral game element can open up possibilities for all kinds of cool new settings and plots?

Larping is always done through our bodies, but in the end our experience depends as much – if not more – on our imagination than it does on our physical surroundings. We can aim at 360° illusion, but there will always be something to break it. Shouldn't striving to overcome your own obstacles to immersion – be they non-period food or crossplaying – be a desirable and praiseworthy trait in a player? And so, rather than casting players who look the part, shouldn't we aim to cast players who are motivated to play that particular character?

Being inclusive doesn't take anything away from the majority – on the contrary, it makes games better for everyone.

## Baby Steps

In the summer of 2015, I attended a postapocalyptic game in Finland called *Marras*. While the game wasn't perfect in its inclusivity, for me it was a good example of how at least striving toward it can make games better.

Most information in the game was open to everyone, including the short, pre-made gender neutral character concepts. We developed them further together with the organisers and other players, and my character eventually grew into Henri Mäkelä – a sociologist and a leader with strong opinions, somewhat aloof nature, a trans\* background and a lesbian identity. But at no point during the game did Henri's background or his identity define him as a person. These things added depth to the character and to his interactions with others, but the game on the whole did not turn into a Pride Parade because of him – or because of the other queer characters, or the other trans\* players.

Nor did my game include any discrimination based on Henri being trans\*. *Marras* didn't have a safe-space policy when I enrolled, but when I told the organisers that – for the sake of my own well-being – I didn't wish to encounter any trans\*phobia during the game, their response was encouraging. They said they would let the other players know, and that if anyone had a problem with this, the game probably wasn't for them. This made the game safe enough for me to go to sauna in-game, and my character being trans\* meant that for once my character could sit fully in my own non-normative body.

While the game wasn't perhaps as safe a space for everyone, it had at least taken baby steps toward that goal.

If more games would strive to take those steps, if more games were openly and publicly trans\* inclusive, then maybe the Finnish larp scene wouldn't lose all those trans\* players who now feel unwelcome. And maybe, if the games back in the 00's had been like this, I wouldn't have missed those five years.

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■ Shoshana Kessock

## My Body Is Political The Physical Body as Political Action in Larp

Several years ago, a young woman I know attended her regular combat larp during the height of the summer in the northeast United States. She'd been out fighting in the woods for several hours and returned to her cabin to change out of her sweat-soaked clothing. Once inside, she removed her shirt to cool off, leaving her in a sports bra with her arms and stomach exposed. Before she could change her clothing, a fellow player walked into the cabin. This was a familiar man and the young woman got up to greet him in character.

Before the young woman could say anything, the man took one look at her and said, "You know, you really should shave your armpits."

The young woman was stunned. She confronted the man angrily about how it was none of his business what she did with her body. She told him where he could stick his unwanted advice. She then spent the rest of the summer growing out her underarm hair. In the hot game months she wore tank tops to show off her hairy armpits to the world.

When she told me the story years after, she recalled the whole thing with incredulity. The fact that anyone would have the gall to say something that uncalled for to her face was a shock. But beneath her surprise was a fierce defiance and happiness that she had taken action in retaliation. The happiness was not about her words to the man. She was happy to have turned the simple act of growing out her armpit hair into an act of resistance against normative, gendered beauty standards. She wanted to show any person that had a problem with a woman's hairy armpits that she didn't care what they thought. Her body was her own.

During the era of second-wave feminism in the 1960's, a phrase began circulating that was later popularized in an essay by Carol Hanisch titled "The Personal Is Political" (1970). The title phrase

was used by activists who believed that to effect change, women must step out of their traditional zones of influence (the home, the family, etc.) and become active in the larger political sphere. The saying proposed that simply by existing and embodying progressive ideas about women's rights in their everyday lives, women were enacting political activism in their personal spheres. Their presence and the choices they made influenced their communities from within. Those positive changes would then echo out from the personal spheres into the larger world and help influence political change.

The very basis of larp as a game medium and an art form is the idea of embracing a fictive scenario and character, and using one's physical body to embody the character during play. Of all forms of role-playing, larp engages the most in using the human body as a primary factor in the physical act of play. Yet while we as larpers embrace that notion and use all parts of our bodies to play our chosen roles, we run headlong into issues of discrimination and bias based on what is considered normal or socially accepted about the human form. Even the most politically-conscious games, meant to tackle charged topics about war, violence, political upheaval, or even discrimination itself, can unconsciously harbor discriminatory behavior.

Body bias is based on the notion that there are standards for what is considered "normal" for a human body. Though those standards might be slightly adjustable based on different cultural perspectives, anyone comes into contact with them just by interacting with media or other people. From a young age we are made aware that to be considered normal, your body must be

- 1) physically able and "whole,"
- 2) beautiful based on the society standards of the time and place,
- 3) within a certain acceptable weight limit,
- 4) a certain skin color based on what is accepted by the rest of your social group, and
- 5) representing your gender in a way that is accepted as the standard.

These factors are present whenever a person is viewed. Every one of us is held up against them and classified, either consciously or unconsciously, whether we like it or not. The very idea of judgment based on bodies is so engrained in our society that it permeates every part of our lives, from the words we use to describe one another to our sexual and romantic interests, to the way we design spaces around us or the clothes we make available for sale. Fall inside the boundaries of what society considers acceptable or normative, and while you might still face scrutiny, you're saved being slapped with certain labels.

Those labels include terms like "fat", "disabled", or "ugly". You can be told you don't physically present "acceptably" for your gender, or you can be called racial slurs because of your skin color. These are biases based on your body, and from the moment you enter into someone's field of vision, you are subject to whatever expectations that person brings to the interaction. This bias is at the heart of the complex issues of racism, sexism, transphobia, body shaming, and ableism. Larp communities may be progressive and strive for inclusivity, but body bias is difficult to unravel since it is so engrained in the very fabric of our lives. Body bias may not always be conscious, and it can subtly sneak into behaviors and decisions. Even the most enlightened larp scenes cannot be regarded as truly progressive until they consider whether they are welcoming to all different bodies. This is where the players come in, and the revolutionary act of being different in a larp begins.

### Spaces and Accessibility

Let's take a step back and look at how body bias can express itself in larp. As mentioned earlier, larp is one of the most physically expressive forms of roleplaying. The human body is used as a vector

for interacting with and expressing agency in the game. In video games, the player usually interacts with the game systems through a controller, and it rarely requires much physical action. In tabletop games, players interact with each other, but it doesn't usually get very corporeal. However, larpers must move through space to act out their character's actions, interacting with the locations, props, and other players within the game space. That very act of moving and interacting with one's body makes the body an object of assessment by fellow players, and an embodiment of the new role that the player is taking on.

These two factors, 1) the body as a vehicle for interacting with the game space, and 2) the assessment of others and its relation to their standing bias, present two unique challenges to larps when someone whose body is outside of the norm enters a game space. There's also a third issue of 3) out of character bias within the larp community as a whole that can affect a larper's standing within the community and representation within the documentation of larps.

The first issue is often related to physical capability. Larp spaces, like spaces in general, are often designed without consideration for those who are differently abled. Yet larp spaces also bear the double burden of trying to represent fictional spaces. Larps might require large props, special effects, historical locations, or even the great outdoors to make them complete. While games held within more controlled spaces, like acting studios or hotels, might easily allow for accessibility to players who are differently abled, historical locations or those out in nature can present unique challenges for designers if they want to keep their game accessible. Moreover, the question is not just about accessibility but about safety as well. For example, games held out in a forest at night might be completely impassable for someone in a wheelchair, and fairly dangerous for someone whose vision or hearing is impaired. This lack of consideration for different physical capabilities can lead to games being exclusively for those who are physically able, thereby making them inherently biased in their design.

A game design team may choose a game location for its authenticity. Examples include fantasy larps in the forest or large scale historical games in castles. However, those games are sacrificing accessibility for the sake of design and that must be acknowledged. One example of this is *The Monitor Celestra*, a beautifully staged *Battlestar Galactica* larp held on the destroyer *Småland* in Gothenburg, Sweden. While the game itself was gorgeous, the choice to use a real destroyer also meant that the space was restricted against those who might have been differently abled. Upon visiting Sweden for a past Knutpunkt, I attempted to go visit the *Småland* to see the location of *The Monitor Celestra*, only to be told that it wasn't accessible for the disabled. Similarly, some locations at Czocha Castle during the *College of Wizardry* were off limits to me due to being up or down enormous flights of stairs. For example, I couldn't go to the dungeons or the astronomy tower. These locations were obviously chosen for their adherence to the game's aesthetic, but they restricted what parts of the game a player could have access to – assuming that they could have access to the game at all.

## Body Bias in Larp

The second, and perhaps more difficult challenge, deals with the inherent biases that come with standards of beauty, gender presentation, racial acceptance, weight bias, and biases against those who are differently abled or not "whole." The biases influence how players treat one another, how organizers view players that enter their space, and what characters players are allowed to play. The biases also affect character interactions during play. The issue becomes more intense in games that insist on the 360 degree illusion, in which players interact with their environment precisely as they see it and do not stop to imagine a different world around them.

This focus on indexicality also means that the players' bodies directly represent their characters' bodies. The "what you see is what you get" ideal encourages players to treat others in character according to their own biases. If a player is overweight, the character will also be perceived as over-

weight. A player of color can become the target of in-game racism even if that isn't a theme they want to address in the game. The issue becomes harrowing when you consider that players who step into the fictive spaces of a larp may come to the game hoping to step away from the discrimination they face in the everyday world. Yet, the same issues are brought into play because their bodies are being once again judged based on society's skewed biases. The players' views on each others' bodies influence the fiction since they assume that the norms they are used to are in place in the game world as well. After all, body norms are so prevalent in society that for some it's difficult to imagine a different world.

Just how much a game puts stake in the 360 degree illusion can allow for this issue to be mitigated slightly. Many larps like White Wolf's *Vampire: the Masquerade* (1991), or black box theater games allow and even encourage people to play characters that are different from themselves. Yet even in a game where people are expected to imagine that a black box theater is the seventh circle of hell, or that a convention hotel's ballroom is a lavish vampire's mansion, the preconceived notions of those attending the larp can bleed over and influence players. Even in games where players are instructed to imagine one another differently than they physically appear, ("you see before you a six-foot-tall ogre with bright green skin and giant horns"), those who are out of character considered outside the norm might find themselves limited in their interactions because their fellow players cannot accept the fiction they're spinning as viable.

One example comes from a *Cthulhu Live* game run at the Dreamation game convention (2011), set in a 1960's nightclub. When the pre-written characters were handed out, I was given the role of a drug dealer's girlfriend. She was tough as nails and sexy. However, the guy who was handed the drug dealer character looked at me and said, "I can't play dating someone who looks like that." What he meant was fat, and that was clear. The organizers gave him another character, and I as a player had to recover from being told that this player was able to more easily accept that Cthulhu was trying to take over the world through a shady 1960's nightclub than to accept that I could play his sexy girlfriend in what is, ostensibly, a game of pretend for grown-ups.

I wish I could say that this is the only such experience that I've had in my time as a larper. But as a plus size larper who uses a wheelchair for mobility, I've been told that I cannot play a sidhe in *Changeling: the Dreaming* (2005) because I wasn't beautiful or skinny enough, or that a woman in a wheelchair can only play certain roles because it's "not believable otherwise." It's that dedication to believability, to the 360-degree illusion, that maintains the boundaries within which players who are outside the physical norm must exist. This problem becomes particularly insidious when players are denied characters or interactions based on their skin-color or because they are non-gender normative in appearance, expression or behavior. as that taps into the ugly questions of racism and transphobia. Players are expected to be able to envision worlds in which green face paint and prosthetic horns allow a person to physically represent a dreadful orc, or distressed clothing that originally came from designer brand name stores turns a person into a hollow-eyed dystopian refugee. However, players cannot be met halfway to be accepted as "normative" and worthy of equal power, respect, and acceptance for who they are even within fictional worlds.

## Documentation Is Representation

The third issue pertains less to the problems within the fiction of a game, but is equally important in any larp community. To ignore how body bias impacts the power structures and social capital that exists outside of games would be ignoring a whole aspect of the larp world. Bias against those who are outside the norm is so engrained in our society that it makes up an often subconscious network of responses to people's physical forms. If a person who holds social capital within a larp group expresses body bias against a fellow member of the community, whether consciously or



subconsciously, it can cause further discrimination. Examples can include silencing the voices of people of color because their concerns are foreign to the larger community body, or limiting the contributions of a designer or player based on whether they present their gender in a normative fashion. Keeping those who are different out of power or treating them as “the other” within the whole is the epitome of expressions of discrimination.

Concrete examples of bias can be seen in larp documentation and the creation of promotional material, such as photos and videos. These mediums capture larp events for posterity and serve as records of past games. If those organizing the documentation choose to edit out people they deem less attractive or desirable for their chosen aesthetic, they are contributing to the erasure of those people from the history of an event. Sets of photos or videos that are edited to “look good” by removing those that are overweight or not seen as attractive are perfect examples. This becomes important also when larpers choose who should be the representative for a game or a community group or a larp movement. If all representatives for an organization come from a normative, homogeneous group, then the organization has denied the contributions of those who are different. Being visible provides an individual with power in a community. If all representatives of a community are normative in their appearance, gender representation, or racial make-up, that indicates who has social capital within the organization.

These are only some of the ways in which larps may limit the space for those who are not physically normative. They present real challenges to game designers and communities. If designers and community leaders ignore the vital issue of inclusivity based on physicality, game spaces become narrower. Less people will feel comfortable being involved or even present at all. Some game designers may choose to limit their space as part of their game’s design, but they have to understand that they may be excluding people whose bodies do not meet the standards of the design sets.

If a game does present limitations to a player based on their physicality, the decision comes down to the player. And that is where the act of body as revolution enters a second stage, going from passive resistance to active resistance.

## My Body as Active Resistance

If a larp is not accessible, a player may choose to simply accept that fact. The idea that not all games are available or should be available to all players is one bandied about in the larp world. Sometimes a player’s options for how to play in a larp, in terms of interactions and characters, can grow slimmer until the player questions whether the game is meant to be welcoming at all. Then the player must decide if they will leave, or if they will remain and try to request accommodation.

Players can contact organizers and request allowances for their mobile devices. They can petition to be allowed to play a character that they were initially denied due to body bias. They can push back against discrimination. They can make their presence known and demand equal treatment as members of the community. This is active resistance to discrimination. And much like active political resistance in groups like the women’s rights movement, it tends to be direct and head-on.

Sometimes this resistance is met with positive responses and movement that allows for body bias to be combated. In response to player requests, the *Dystopia Rising* network in the United States provided accommodation for those with different physical and medical needs at games. When issues of accessibility due to different physical ability came up, the organizers responded by providing out of character medical sleep spaces for players who needed such accommodation. This allowed those who chose so to have a space where they could rest and attend to medical needs during a long weekend of zombie killing out in nature. This, along with suitable combat mechanics, allows for players to tackle physical discrepancies and play a physically demanding game. Another US game called Doomsday includes vehicles which drive out to the location of events during the game, allowing those who are

differently abled to reach remote parts of the camp grounds and woods. The vehicles are written into the fiction to maintain immersion.

All of these responses to body bias in a game require an active stance to be taken by those who are affected. To some, providing feedback and pushing back against the established status quo can be difficult, even if changes can be made. The pressure to step into the spotlight and point out body privilege in a game’s design, player treatment, or in the overall community can be grueling, to the point where many players may choose to withdraw rather than engage. These confrontations can also cause tension, friction, or even schisms between communities.

Being present within the community, despite the friction or dissonance, becomes an act of personal political resistance. The very act of being present in a non-normative body points out that no matter how progressive a community claims to be, their message is disingenuous unless they face the bias with which they are treating their members.

## Embracing the Political Body

When a non-normative member of the community raises objection to unfair treatment, it creates tension. The community has to confront the fact that it’s not free of discrimination and bias. When the bias is unconscious or ingrained in the culture or an individual’s way of thinking, the ensuing head-to-head of two different ideas of inclusivity requires negotiation. If a game’s community, from organizers to players, chooses to accept the raised concerns and needs for adjustment, then the political action has had the desired impact. Even if the community chooses to resist the requested change and the player is excluded, their very act of being present to raise the issue may raise awareness of inherent biases that affect those outside the physical norm. That might not be the answer wanted or needed by the individual, but each experience within a community continues to educate and inform future decisions.

The act of being present and then being one’s self when outside the norm within the community may not have wide, sweeping effects. However it allows the individual to counteract micro-aggressions or biased behavior on a smaller scale. The young woman who chose to show her hairy armpits to the world perhaps didn’t shift the entire community’s idea of normative beauty standards for women. But, as she told me, that man who made the unsavory comments was embarrassed and never bothered her again. It’s the little moments that create ripples, and gradually, the ripples will create real change. But change requires vectors, and in the physical spaces of larp, that very vector might simply be your body.

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■ Muriel Algayres

## Expression of Feminism in Larp

Is there such a thing as larp feminism? One can certainly say so. After all, in larp as in any other social environment, gender issues and feminist analysis have been abundant, and provide a rich ground for reflection. In this essay, I use the term feminism for any sociological movement whose central goal is ending sexism and gender-based oppression.

This is a short overview in which I endeavour to analyze whether there is a specific expression of feminism in larp. I will study both the practice of the activity and the community in a larger sense. I will present examples from diverse experiences and testimonies. Some of these examples come from my own larp community and experiences in France, which by no means implies that the problems I will dwell upon are unique to this particular scene, merely that I have a better knowledge of the way they manifest here. This article is not exhaustive, but I will try to consider aspects that might be of interest regarding these issues.

### The Feminist Critique of Larp as a Medium

#### Regarding Characters

I will first consider the character, since it can be seen as the gateway into larp as an activity. Indeed, in a not-so-distant past, the range of female characters could appear limited. The healer, the wife of an important male character, the damsel in distress, the prostitute, a lot of stereotypes inherited from mainstream media were transferred to larp. Usually they were not very compelling.

Some of the first feminist critics in the French larp discourse (see e.g. Artaud 2007) addressed the

development of female roles. As in any medium, representation issues arise when female characters are constrained to a position of inferiority, especially in fantasy settings where the duplication of patriarchal behavior under pretexts of “historical accuracy” can be easily denounced as invalid. In such instances, female characters are kept in inferior positions, or, to put it differently, influential characters are pre-defined as male.

In an online discussion<sup>1</sup>, a female player voiced the following critique:

*“This tiresome view that historical correct often only means that we have to use our prejudiced view of historical gender roles (no matter what historical age) taught to us by the patriarchy, while other things matter less” (Maria) (LWU, 2015)*

Another experienced player protested against the idea that “everybody has the same chance if doing X and Y, it’s just a matter of Doing it”, describing this opinion as “blindness towards the patriarchy’s way not to teach women to “just do it””, and arguing that “People brought up as women in a patriarchy need to be asked and encouraged (...)” (Elvira) (LWU, 2015)

Design and casting of female characters appears to be one of the first elements on which feminist inquiries had the opportunity to focus. How do we create compelling roles for females to identify with? How do we get over the gender bias? How do we enable female players to be more active in their own narrations?

Different ideas have tried to answer these questions. The most straightforward, of course, is to create characters as gender-neutral and do a gender-blind casting. (Kangas 2015) To many, it appears to be the simplest and most effective solution. Others even see it as an activist stance to let people play any character regardless of their gender, age or other physical attributes<sup>2</sup> (Choupaut 2015).

Another idea is to acknowledge gender biases, but to work character design in a way that still empowers female characters. While this take may not solve every problem, it has the advantage of enabling the growth of female characters within the constraints of their own gender. (Algayres 2015) The approach is interesting, since it requires designers to focus their creativity on female characters in order to make them interesting. Other authors suggest doing historical research. Through it, designers can learn to value the significant role of women in history and avoid gender stereotypes. Artaud (2007) advises to “get documentation about women during the period [to] create unique characters with a psychology that will make them different from others”.

## Standing Up Against Harassment

However, it is in the denunciation of sexist behavior and, above all, harassment, that feminism was expressed in the most active fashion, whether in online discussion forums, conventions, or articles. Therefore, there has lately been lot of focus on this sensitive issue. There have been demands to provide a safer environment for larp participants, especially female. The topic illustrates the seriousness of the sexist problems in the community.

The most important example that comes to mind would be the “tsunami of testimonies” that arose in the Larp Women Unite Facebook group<sup>3</sup>. When the subject of harassment was brought to

discussion, a concerning number of testimonies emerged. Many of them included shockingly violent situations. Kristin Nilsdotter (2014) describes it as follows:

*“There are a lot of perpetrators, and a lot of victims. The threads almost exclusively tell of assaults perpetrated by men towards women. There have been instances of sexual harassment, molestation, groping, assault and rape of sleeping or intoxicated larpers, aggravated rape with violent abuse, and even attempted murder. Some of these incidents have been reported, but a large amount of them have not reached the police, or even the larp organisers. Until now.”*

The topic was brought up also in the French larp scene:

*“Such a grave issue creates a focus for activism. In France, a discussion on these issues was started during LaboGN [summer convention], with mixed conclusions. While the necessity of respecting privacy and establishing clear consent was reaffirmed, the tendency of the French community to use rumors and blacklisting to exclude participants exposed for inappropriate behavior was also criticized” (Cailloux 2015).*

On a more practical level, more and more associations communicate on their anti-harassment policy, showing increased sensitivity towards the issue. The Canadian group Underworld LARP Ralinwood provides one example:

*“Under the Ontario Human Rights Code, every person has the right to freedom from harassment and discrimination. Harassment and discrimination will not be tolerated, condoned, or ignored at Underworld LARP. If a claim of harassment or discrimination is proven, disciplinary measures will be applied, up to and including permanent removal from game.”<sup>4</sup>*

Proactive action against harassment highlights the way some communities and feminist actors fight sexism. Larp feminists have successfully connected these problems from within the practice of role-playing to issues in wider society. However, feminist expression is not limited to criticism. It can also be found in positive and even creative elements.

## Sense of Empowerment, Sense of Community

### A Tool for Empowerment?

Female participants can have a rough time at any activity where they are a minority (according to the 2014 Larp Census, 61,8% of larpers worldwide identify as male and 35,5% as female)<sup>5</sup>. However, although sexist behavior has plagued role-playing communities, female players have also found larp a fulfilling activity.

Larp can, indeed, serve as a tool of empowerment for the female players. Many of them related to this when I started a discussion on the topic in an online group.<sup>6</sup> “I can’t count how many times sensitive professional situations [professional interviews, public speaking] have seemed manageable

<sup>1</sup> All quotes from online discussions are reproduced here by courtesy of their respective authors. My deepest thanks for their permission and valuable insight in these arguments.

<sup>2</sup> “I believe it is an activist act nowadays to allow any player to play the part he or she desires, regardless his/her gender and physical characteristics and I believe it is a stance I want to take”

<sup>3</sup> In summer 2014, Karin Edman started this group for Swedish-speakers identifying totally or partially as women, and an international version was created the following year.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.underworldralinwood.ca/harassment-policy/>

<sup>5</sup> Note also that the results vary greatly in different countries. E.g. in Finland, female larpers are the majority (49.4% female, 44.1% male). In France the numbers are 28.9% female, 68.4% male. See <http://larpcensus.org/>

<sup>6</sup> All quotes in this section, if not otherwise specified, are from Rôliennes de Charmes, collective discussion, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/219003884795478/permalink/1194879350541255/>, accessed 23/12/2015. Rôliennes de Charme is a French group mostly dedicated to feminist issues, support and self-improvement around the practice of role-playing games.

because of larp” (Marina) (RdC 2015). “Clearly larp has been a means of empowerment for me, it has enabled me to put myself in the position of speaking in public/ make progress in solving a problem/handle a group of people/be a one-time star.” (Laure) (RdC 2015)

This experience of personal growth proceeds from the capacity of fiction to let us learn about ourselves, and each other, in a controlled way. Fictional situations can allow us to leave our comfort zone in a safe environment, developing real skills through a fictional experience.

*Fiction allows us to practice, monitor and experience what are other people’s cognitive states and motives for behaviour without actually being in the factual situation. Through fiction we can understand other people, and ourselves, in a safe, simulated situation. (Montola and Holopainen 2012)*

The sense of empowerment can be even more pronounced in organizers, for obvious reasons. One female organizer recalls her experiences: “It helped me feel capable, to realize I was able to create (alone or in a team) [...] start preparing a project, complete it, being able to project things in the future (which I was unable to do before larping).” (Leila) (RdC 2015)

Others associate these two phenomena with each other and credit female organizers for empowering female characters: “Through focusing on female roles with authority and shaping the players’ understanding of history and power, female organisers also contribute to Larp (and society in general) by training girls in authority [...] Larp has, as its main characteristic, that it is a make-believe game. This offers the opportunity for girls (and boys) to increase their human capital in the area of authority.” (Hutchinson 2001)

However, other respondents participants tend to nuance this idea and underline the fact that, while larp can be a positive tool for self-growth, there is also a factor of insecurity when participants are faced with personally sensitive issues or the fear of not being “good enough” as a player. “[More than the games] the “community of larp”, the people I met there, helped me get more self-confident. I think that there are quite a number of us to be sensitive to being attentive, benevolent and open-minded” (Hortense) (RdC2015) They see the sense of empowerment and self-confidence more as an effect of being part of a community than of the practice of larp in itself.

## Empowerment Through Belonging

This will let me move to the subject of the community, and how it can be viewed as an inclusive and enriching environment. Within the larger larp community, there are some exclusively female communities that are sometimes even focused on feminist issues. Again, Larp Women Unite comes to mind, but another remarkable example would be Girls in Armour – an all female regiment in Danish war larp. It ended up handling the issue of sexism in larp smartly and bringing it attention in a unique way (Eriksen 2015).

The sense of community has sometimes been the product of exclusively female or feminist groups, but the positive effect of belonging doesn’t appear to be limited to those. Although the female respondents have criticized and confronted sexism in some groups, they also often bring up the positivity and benevolence of the community as a factor of personal growth. This experience is present in the wider community, not only the gender-segregated groups. The following quotes from online discussion illustrate the sentiments of French female larpers.

“Coming from a “complicated” family that is not big on empowerment, safety and feminism, I found in the larp community people who helped me evolve, think it through and question myself” (Barbara). “I observe many of us to be particularly sensitive to listening to others, goodwill, and open-mindedness” (Hortense), “Larp should be a benevolent and fun community hobby where we

get a space of expression that is difficult to find otherwise” (Laure ) (RdC 2015).

Therefore, it would appear that the larp community – taking the expression in the widest sense, as it would be more fitting to speak about diverse communities in most situations – can be connected to the issue of feminism. It sometimes mirrors the sexist issues of the wider society, but the sense of community and belonging often creates a safe place for women to express themselves, to gain more self-confidence, and to get a feeling of empowerment.

## From Feminist Issues in Larp to Feminist Larps

Most of this article has dealt with the position of female participants and characters in the practice of larp. However, I want to finish by examining how some larps handle feminist issues. Through focusing on gender roles, larps can give us a better understanding of gender issues and feminist subjects. They can help participants analyze stereotypical attitudes in themselves and in others.

*Mellan himmel och hav* (Between Heaven and Sea) (2003) should be quoted as a prime and early example of this approach. This game had an open political agenda inspired, among others, by feminist writings. It was set in a science fiction society with a gender system different from ours. Instead of the divide into females and males, people were categorized as “morning people” and “evening people” based on their diurnal rhythm. In addition, there was a third gender called sunnivas. The game included workshops on feminist theory and the analysis of gender as a construct.

As Stenros (2010) puts it, “The lasting legacy of *Mellan himmel och hav* is that it set the bar high for political larps. It politicized the personal, gender and sexuality in the Nordic Larp Scene, cemented a presence of feminist thought and even had an overall queering effect”.

*Mad About the Boy* (2010) is set in near future where all the male population save one individual has died of a mysterious disease, and puts the focus of the narrative on female characters, their roles in society and representation. Some runs of the larp were open only to female participants while others allowed for cross-dressing male participants. In any case, the focus of the game was to create a story about relationships between women, and how women react and resolve a crisis. (Edland 2011)

It should be noted that, even in a different context and maybe a different cultural bias, *Mad About the Boy* succeeded in conveying strong messages about gender and representation. Several participants of the French run of the larp reported feeling they had “grown” because of the game, and had a better understanding of the relationships between both men and women<sup>7</sup>.

For a more recent example, *Brudpris* (Bridal Price) (2014) was created with the idea to “‘turn up the volume’ on real world gender roles to make visible social norms and cultural practices we rarely notice in our real lives or would attribute to our own culture” (Krauklis & Dahlberg 2015). This game, by all accounts, succeeded in creating a powerful experience.

Some examples can also be taken from the French larp community, where games with a political agenda, especially feminist themes, have started to appear. *Carmen Chabardes* (2014) is an experimental game inspired by history (see Choupaut 2014). The condition of women in French XIXth century bourgeoisie is one of its core themes. *Les Fleurs de mai* (The Flowers of May) (2014) is a chamber larp set in a Parisian brothel in 1910 (see Orsel 2015). It reflects on gender and class oppression. *Still Water Runs Deep* (2015) is a Jane Austen and Charles Dickens-inspired game. It focuses on social pressure and past conventions, which segregated men and women. All of these games have offered de-gendered roles, or created fully gender-switched runs to enable players to experience the larp through the problematics of a gender other than their own.

To finish, the latest development in feminist-themed games would be the up-and-coming #Femi-

<sup>7</sup> Feedback on the game taken from former players, French FB group, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/804367392959927/permalink/808904952506171/>, published 21/11/2014, accessed 24/12/2015

nism anthology edited by Lizzie Stark, Misha Bushyager, and Anna Westerling. Its purpose is to collect “nano-games” on feminist themes as diverse as gender representation, intergenerational and intersectional gaps, family planning, seduction, street harassment and so on. The project underlines the fact that there are still many feminist issues to explore. The anthology brings together a huge, diverse team of authors to handle feminist topics in very short games, playable in under an hour. It presents as a fun and effective way to try and handle these issues.

It is therefore apparent that larps with feminist themes will develop and get more focus. As in any other subject, they will probably provide a great deal of material and inspiration.

## Conclusion

I have discussed some types of feminist expression in larp and would like to leave the conclusion of this short overview open. In its expression in larp as well as its own long history as a movement, feminism marches on, and is sure to provide more inspiration for political and social thinking, as well as the creation of potentially intense and thought-provoking games.

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■ Minna Heimola and Mikko Heimola

## Gender and Historical Larps: Two Case Studies of Women's Roles in Historical Settings



*Completorium: Relics of St. Lúgardis. Produced and photographed by Mikko Ryytty.*

### Introduction

Designing historical larps that offer equally interesting playing experiences regardless of character gender has proven challenging. Our perception of past societies is that roles offering opportunities for action and leadership are reserved to males. Consequently, in the Finnish larp scene it has been a common complaint from those cast in female roles that their larp experience was not as interesting or dynamic as it appeared to be for some male roles.

In historical larps, the issue of gender and roles of women can be approached in several ways, one of which is to eliminate gender as a social factor altogether. This approach means that while the characters are representatives of their gender, the gender roles and any cultural limitations are ignored. This however distorts the presentation of the past society, which is undesirable especially if the purpose of the larp is to provide education or re-enactment.

Another approach is to look for historical contexts in which female/non-male gender offered interesting possibilities for active agency. Taken as a design principle, this enables larps to both 1) offer more equal playing experiences and 2) provide insight into how gender dynamics were present in the past eras. In Finland, the majority of people that sign up for a larp identify as female and most of them also prefer to play female characters. This makes writing active, interesting and historically plausible female characters all the more important.

In this article, we explore these issues by discussing two larps in which we have been the main designers and organisers: *Completorium* (2012) which was set in a 13th century Cistercian monastery for women, and *Viena 1918* (2014) set during the eponymous military expedition in the aftermath of Finland's civil war. The latter featured as players a large troop of female militants who fought for socialist militias. These two larps were conceived within the larp tradition of Greywolves (Harmaasudet), an association for both historical re-enactment and live-action roleplaying (for more details, see Sahramaa 2010). As such, they were non-transparent, employed few explicit meta-techniques, and were run by the organisers with the aim of creating a continuous immersive experience for the players. It is important to note that these larps were produced by the effort of some twenty people, as acknowledged below. The opinions we express in this paper are, however, our own and the other people involved in these projects may have different ideas on the matter.

### Completorium: A Miniature World Run by Women for Women

*'Seven times in the day,' says the Prophet, 'I have rendered praise to You.' Now that sacred number of seven will be fulfilled by us if we perform the Offices of our service at the time of the Morning Office, of Prime, of Terce, of Sext, of None, of Vespers and of Compline, since it was of these day Hours that he said, 'Seven times in the day I have rendered praise to You.' For as to the Night Office the same Prophet says, 'In the middle of the night I arose to glorify You.' (The Rule of Saint Benedict)*

*Completorium* (Compline) was set in year 1230, in a fictional Cistercian monastery of Monsantrum situated in Mecklenburg, then part of the Holy Roman Empire. It was played in 2012 at a rustic camping center built near a historical hill fort (see infobox for full credits and details). For a longer description of the larp, see Heimola 2012 (in Finnish).

The leading design principle of the larp was to create an experience of living in a medieval monastery. To achieve this, we chose to recreate as closely as possible the daily cycle of monastical activity: the ora of Canonical hours and the labora of chores and tasks. The Canonical hours were prayer services taking place every three hours, signaled by the sacrist ringing the church bell, at which point all the occupants of the monastery were expected to gather in the church to pray and sing hymns. In between the Canonical hours, they worked the fields with mattocks and shovels, embroidered a new altar cloth, did calligraphical work in the Scriptorium, taught the novices, practiced singing Grego-





*Sacrist in her church. Pre-game photo by Piia Lempiäinen.*

rian church music and had meetings about finances and other issues. The choice of nunnery as the setting made it obvious that majority of the characters would be women. But more importantly, they were also women governed by women - the abbess, the prioress, and the other office holders of the monastery. There were some priests whose role was confined to taking confessions from the sisters and holding the canonical offices. But although they had spiritual power over the nuns, they could not govern, only advise. Daily life in a monastery revolves for the most part around mundane issues of economy, human relations, and daily chores. Managing these affairs is the domain of the office holders (the cellarer, the sacrist, etc.) who are chosen from among the sisters.

Even in a nunnery, there were also males, about one third of the characters. In addition to the priests, these included a group of crusaders returning from the Holy Land and spending a night at the monastery. Then there was the retinue of canon lawyers sent by the Pope to examine whether the founder of the community, one fictive Lugardis (not the Flemish abbess/saint), could be declared a saint.

## Themes of the Larp

Central themes of the larp were memory, religious experience and identity. The community had been founded by the now-deceased Lugardis, held to be a holy woman by the local lay people but considered heterodox (at variance with canonical Catholic church position) by church officials. Since her death, the community had been assimilated to the Cistercian order as the monastery of Monsantrum. However, some of the original members remained. They considered Lugardis a saint and rebelled (some more openly than others) against the new order brought by the Cistercian abbess and other office holders. We had on purpose set the larp in the historical junction when Rome tried to assert its control over who could be venerated as a saint. In the preceding centuries, this had been a grassroots decision, with every community having its own local saints. Now it was to become an issue decided by a thorough investigation held by the canon lawyers.



*The new abbess of the monastery, Agnes. Photo taken in the singing workshop before the game by Maria von Herten.*

The presence of the canon lawyers was central to the theme of memory. Their arrival prompted the residents of the monastery to come forth with their memories and stories of Lugardis. While few of them had actually met and known the woman Lugardis, all of them knew stories of her miracles, by now legendary and transformed by vagaries of oral tradition. Apart from these stories and memories, Lugardis was corporeally present in the community in the form of her relics: a breast, a finger and an ear.

While the residents of the monastery were all nominally Cistercian, beneath the surface there were strong tensions between their religious identities, which can be divided into three groups as follows. First of all, there were the original followers of Lugardis whose beliefs were concerned with issues of agrarian society and ecstatic, even sexual rituals inspired by a literal reading of the Song of Solomon. In addition, there were the Cistercians with their administrative, expansionist, and technocratic zeal. And finally, there were those inspired by St. Francis of Assisi or heterodox Cathar beliefs, and bent on new, even stricter ideals of poverty and breaking the claustral principle of monastic life.

These varying identities were supported (or sometimes confused) by religious experiences, spiritual visions and quests played out during the in-game night. All of these were played as scripted scenes, with organisers and assistant players in the roles of Christ, saints and other apparitions. Novices pondering on giving their vows had visions of Christ as their bridegroom (all of them separately, each including some different elements tailored depending on the character). Lugardis herself appeared in two different visions, once as a warrior-maiden of the fertility cult, and once as a St. Francis-like spiritual figure giving the stigmata to one of the most devoted members of the community. These experiences gave new flavour for the discussions concerning Lugardis and to the power play of the monastery in general for the latter half of the game.

## Assessment

The larp was lauded by the players as an outstanding success. We got a lot of positive feedback for managing to create an authentic and touching simulation of the life in a Medieval monastery. Strong atmosphere was mentioned in debriefs and feedback several times. For example, one player wrote in her debrief how the game was very immersive and the liturgical services both created a clear structure for the game and brought out strong emotions in the characters.

The role of a nun may not seem radical at the first glance. However, from a feminist point of view, it represented considerable freedom in the era of the larp. Nuns were not directly under the power of a husband or a male relative. They were in charge of running the monastery, socially, financially, and in practical matters. Religious experience and charisma could give them significant spiritual power even beyond that of the priests. And above all, monasteries were one of the first places in which women could dedicate their lives not only to Jesus, but also to scholarly endeavours, reading and writing.

It is our impression that the larp managed to portray these various roles of medieval nuns in a way that players considered interesting and believable. In this context, they could both lead the rites and participate in nocturnal escapades, in which men were left to witness and ponder on what just happened. Naturally there were the leading roles of the abbess and the other office holders. But also the novices had their own adventures: during the nightly vision quests they were taken to marry Christ in a church ceremony. This way, they were confronted by their upcoming monastic vows. However, each one of them had to face the dilemma of having to give up something in exchange. Members of the original community had their own secret ritual to guarantee the next harvest. The centerpiece of this ritual was a figurine of Jesus fashioned from stolen Eucharistic bread and wine, for they took quite literally the doctrine of transubstantiation (that in Holy Communion the bread and wine in reality become the body and blood of Christ), and wanted to marry him with the earth. More mundane adventures included wild relic chases, as the spiritual identity of the community was determined by whose relics were placed inside the church altar – those of Lugardis or those of some saint approved by Rome – something almost every nun had an opinion on.

The complicated relationship between womanhood, sexuality, and vows of chastity, and the relationships between female and male characters were named particularly interesting themes by a few

players in their debriefs. One of them wrote how the tension between the more liberal views about sexuality in the original community of Lugardis and the more strict ideals of the official Cistercian order created interesting play. This was exemplified by moments when short or even accidental touch between the nun and one of the priests felt forbidden and at the same time triggered feelings and memories related to the practices of the spiritual love of the original community. Another player described how the presence of corporeal relics of Lugardis, which included a lifelike breast of the saint, enabled immersion in the sexual rapture some believers felt in connection with their chosen saints.

## Viena 1918: Women in Arms

*"I received from the staff secretary of Salla regiment a desperate letter, of how the red devils are tainting the whole Northern Viena Karelia, how our men cannot breach the front there, and how the English are bribing the people, how the Finnish red guard boogymen, scoundrels with uncut hair, are inflicting the oh so innocent Viena with their syphilis, how smugglers, gamblers, etc. profit – how everything has become one red hell on both sides of the border – so badly are things at the Kurtti village, wherever that may be... I have however the belief that Uhtua, the centre of Viena Karelia, is still somewhat pure, even though I cannot be fully confident of the moral (I mean erotic) conduct of our White army." (Kianto 1918, translated by Mikko Heimola)*

*Viena 1918: tovereita ja heimoveljiä* (Viena 1918: Comrades and Kinsmen) was set in in Viena, Karelia, during the Viena Expedition of 1918, which forms a part of the so-called Kinship Wars fought between Finns, Karelians, and Russians in 1918-1922, in which Finns sought to annex eastern parts of Karelia from Russia. The game was played in 2014 in and around a scouting cabin located in a national park (see infobox for full credits and details). For a longer description of the larp in Finnish, see Heimola (2014).

Finland had been ravaged by a civil war in early 1918. The war had been fought between the socialist Reds, composed of industrial and agrarian workers and led by the Social Democratic Party, and the Whites, led by the non-socialist, conservative Senate and supported by the urban middle and upper classes and the land-owning peasantry. During the three-month war, the Whites advanced from their northern support areas towards south, and finally captured the large southern towns of Tampere and Vyborg in bloody conquests, effectively ending the war. The Whites received substantial military support from the Germans, who wanted to bring Finland to their sphere of influence and in the end effectively controlled Helsinki. After the war, large numbers of Reds, including women and children, were interned in camps or summarily executed in vengeance of the Red atrocities before and during the war.

In the aftermath of the war, White volunteer forces were sent across the eastern border in order to annex Viena and other parts of Karelia from Russia. In addition to economic and military-political interests, Karelia was seen as the homeland of Finnish epic poetry compiled in the Kalevala, and thus as a natural part of "Greater Finland". The area was sparsely populated by Karelians, whose language was closely related to Finnish, and who were seen by many Finns as kindred people. The Karelians, being Orthodox Christians and never part of the Swedish realm, had a somewhat different view on the matter: they called Finns "Swedes" in memory of a harsh history of raiding and maltreatment they had reserved in the hands of their Lutheran "kinfolk" for centuries.

The Russian empire was then also at the throes of civil war initiated by the October revolution of 1917. The Karelian areas were controlled by competing leftist groups: Lenin's Marxist Social Democrats (the Bolsheviks), and the leftist Socialist-Revolutionary Party ("Left SR's") who were more on the side of the smallholders. Then there were the Finnish socialists (the Reds) who had lost the civil war and escaped across the Finnish-Russian border in order to avoid imprisonment or death in the

### ■ Info

#### Completorium

Credits: Mikko Heimola & Minna Heimola (main organisers), Arttu Ahava, Olli Hakkarainen, Inka Harju, Maria von Hertzen, Juha Hurme, Hannu Niemi, Hanna Ristisuo, Rakka Salminen, Julius Väliaho. Additional help with props and execution by Valter Aspö, Nino Hynninen, Anniina Kero, Maiju Reiman, Mikko Ryytty, Cecilie Sundman, and Roni Saari. Musical services were taught and led by Riikka Hänninen and Martti Laitinen.

Date: May 5-6, 2012

Location: Linnavuoren eräkeskus, Masku, Finland

Length: Saturday afternoon to Sunday noon

Players: 40 players and 13 assisting players.

Budget: 1520€, supported by Greywolves and Ropecon.

Participation fee: 25€ (Greywolves members 23€)

Other material: <http://iki.fi/mhei/completorium/>

hands of the Whites. The situation was complicated further by the British forces, who had landed in the Murmansk area to prevent the Germans from reaching the White Sea and the Murmansk railroad. For the British, White Finns were allies of the Germans. With the customary ease of a colonial power, they recruited both Finnish Reds and Karelians to fight their war, forming the rather famous Murmansk Legion and the less known Karelian Otrjad.

With both the Great War and the Russian civil war raging, the political and military situation changed almost weekly in the summer of 1918. This made an excellent setting for a larp, with numerous groups, switching loyalties, and the flavour of a colonial adventure (which it was!). For a historical setting, it also had the benefit of being a less-known corner of the Finnish Civil War era, which most Finns know well. Moreover, Finns may still identify with one or the other side of the war, based on family history and/or political leanings. This made for passionate larping with surprising twists.



*The folk singer (on the right) crying together with other Karelian women. Post-game photo by Tiuku Talvela.*

*Kemi 1st Trousers Guard. Post-game photo by Tuomas Tammisto.*



## Roles and Groups

In 1918, regular military forces were almost exclusively male. Because sociohistorical realism was a major design principle, the expedition of the White Finns (10 players) and the group of British officers and legionaries (4 players) consisted of male characters. The White guards, while regular, were hastily drafted and drilled, which had the distinct advantage of allowing for greater player freedom in acting out the military roles (a group of larpers does not turn into a cohesive military unit overnight, whatever their background). The players of the Britons had the advantage of portraying exotic colonial lords whose behaviour did not have to conform to anyone's expectations: jolly affect and canned fruit in one hand, subtle hints of menacing military power in the other. There was also a small mixed-gender band of Finnish scholars hunting for folk songs (4 players). Rescuing the homeland of Kalevala from the Russians was a distinct element in the impetus of the historical expeditions, and academics did accompany them.

Then there were the Reds. During the Finnish Civil War, there were Red Guards consisting entirely of women. This was partly motivated by the socialist ideal of gender equality, and partly (especially at the later stages of the war) by the sheer desperation that made the Reds recruit anyone who could carry a rifle. These female "Trousers Guards" were treated with particular ruthlessness by the White forces, as their behaviour was considered unnatural and too far removed from the social roles available for women at the time. There are no known armed female guards who would have fought in the Kinship wars. But as the setting enabled (for a historical larp) a unique opportunity to offer female characters in military roles, we decided to create the Kemi 1st Trousers Guard (15 players) as the Red counterpart for the White expedition. The group was inspired by a historical example, the female refugee guard established in St. Petersburg by Toini Mäkelä, although this guard did not take part in the 1918 Viena conflict (for Mäkelä and the female guards she led, see Katainen 2005).

The final group of characters was the Karelians, who consisted almost completely of female villagers (17 players). This too was based on what is known of the social situation in contemporary Karelia: the everyday life of Karelian villages was run by women, while the men were away for weeks or months at a time, hunting, working for forest companies, or traveling around selling jewelry and handicrafts. This unbalanced gender ratio became ever more tilted during wartime, when men were recruited to the Russian army and transported to fight the Austrian empire in "Rumanian swamps", prompting those who remained to flee. In the larp, there were only two male Karelians: a mentally unfit boy and an infirm veteran of the 1904 Russo-Japanese war, a frustrating situation for the White Finnish drafters.

### ■ Info

#### **Viena 1918: tovereita ja heimoveljiä**

Credits: Mikko Heimola (main organiser), Tomi Gröndahl, Olli Hakkarainen, Minna Heimola, Maria von Hertzen, Juha Hurme, Anniina Kero, Mitro Kivinen, Mari Kyllönen, Maarit Neuvonen, Konsta Nikkanen, Miira Oksanen, Tuomas Tammisto, and Anu Varjo.

Date: May 9-10, 2014

Location: Tammisalon metsänkävijöiden retkikämpä, Sipoo, Finland

Length: Friday evening to Saturday evening

Players: 50 players and 14 assisting players

Budget: 2450€, production supported by Greywolves and Ropecon.

Participation fee: 35€ (Greywolves members 30€)

Other material: <http://iki.fi/mhei/viena1918/>



## Themes and Assessment

For many players cast in the roles of the female Red guards the experience was something new and exciting, for they had rarely been able to play soldiers in a historical setting. An important aspect of this was the fact that because the whole group was female, inside it they were not marked as anomalous “women in arms” (for a player experience see Kangas 2015, 1:01:45-1:05:30). The casting in these roles was done mainly on the basis of whether the player was willing to camp outdoors and hike around the forest. As the Greywolves larping tradition (see Sahramaa 2010) puts strong emphasis on psychological immersion, immersive playing environment, and hands-on activity, the players were expected to actually perform their duties as fully as possible. While not strictly forbidden, later-era camping gear and clothing was strongly discouraged and was to be kept out of view. The players held watch through the night, which at least one player commented as having never actually done in a larp. Because of bad weather (heavy rains turning paths into sludge) the experience was a little more extreme than we had originally intended, but seemed to contribute to the player experience of not being on a camping trip. The same was true, of course, for the Whites and the Brits.

As the larp was set in a combat situation, the military characters were “armed” with deactivated and replica guns. But instead of killing and dying, the players were instructed to immerse in the psychological side of combat situations: not to shoot straight (few of them were experienced combatants), to duck and stay down, and occasionally, decide to take a non-incapacitating hit and go along with the individual and collective psychological effects that follow. In the larp, we could perceive little difference between the (male) Whites and the (female) Reds in this regard. The fighting spirit soon engulfed the players regardless of gender, and there were some most amusing scenes, such as the forced retreat of the profusely cursing and swearing Trouser Guard simultaneously with the undermanned Whites (leaving the Brits to claim the field). For the most part both sides played realistically in the sense that they avoided direct, bloody conflicts, preferring to disengage when confronted.

While the Karelian villagers represented more conventional female roles, the absence of men gave them independence, ability to make decisions and strike deals with the various military groups without having to (or being able to) consult with any men. The moral and spiritual leader of the community was a folk singer who knew old tales, songs and traditional folk magic. A central part of her job was ritual crying for the dead, historically a task reserved exclusively for women. In the larp, the death of a drafted villager became known by means of a letter. According to the players, this initiated a spontaneous and highly emotional crying scene, which gave actual insight to the workings of such collective rituals in alleviating grief and reinforcing bonds. One of the Karelian women had also joined the Red Guard and returned now to her home village wearing trousers. Her encounter with her relatives and friends brought the theme of change in women’s roles to the foreground. Overall, *Viena 1918* depicted the changes the war brought, not only in international relations represented by various groups, but also in the social roles of women.

## Game Design and Gender in Historical Settings

The current situation in the Finnish larp scene: when signup is opened, players identifying as female outnumber those of male persuasion. In our larps, the ratio is around 70 to 30 between women and men, with a small minority of players identifying as something else. Our experience is that most players prefer playing a character of their own gender. In recent years, there has been some increase in cross-gender casting (usually female players or persons of other gender playing male characters), but the big picture remains unchanged. As game designers, we take the gender distribution as given, and it is one of the first things we consider when designing a historical larp.

We try to think about settings in which female characters would naturally outnumber males, while still offering interesting roles and dynamics to play. A monastery for women was obviously such a setting. The case of *Viena 1918* seemed first a bit more complicated, but in the historical sources, the absence of men in Karelia was constantly commented on. As admitted above, the female Red Guard required some tweaking, as none featured in the *Viena* context. However, we do not consider this to be at odds with our aim of re-enacting the social and political reality of past societies. Women wearing pants and carrying guns were an emerging phenomenon in 1918 Finland. They encountered prejudice and hostility even from their own, the Red men. The end of the civil war, the following flow of Red refugees to Russia and the White expeditions transplanted much of the revolutionary culture in the wilderness of Karelia. Certainly it was an odd flower there, but so were the British with their big ships and canned food (the Karelians called them *purkkimannit*, the “can-men”). History books don’t describe a setting that would strictly correspond to the events of *Viena 1918*, yet all the character and group dynamics present in the larp have their precedents in what is known of 1918 Finnish-Karelian culture. As such, we consider them to offer insight into the lives of the people of that particular era.

Some historical larps have adopted a different approach: Gender as a social factor is eliminated altogether. A person of any gender can be a soldier, priest, teacher, prostitute, or scribe. This approach was used, e.g., in *Tonnin stiftat* (“Thousand Mark Shoes”) campaign set in 1920’s Helsinki (see Niskanen & Järvelä 2015). We have nothing against approaching historical larping in this way, as it certainly offers more flexible possibilities for casting roles regardless of player gender. However, in this approach something is also lost: gender was and is an important element in determining how individuals and societies function, and eliminating it distorts the way they are presented in larp. This is undesirable if larps are to have an educational function and can lead to people developing biased views of how gender has influenced human history: We lose sight of societal structures that have developed around maintaining gender roles or regulating activity between gender groups – and also of those times and individuals that broke these structures (see Kangas 2015, 55:29-58:40 for a player experience about how this can complicate approaching the larp and the character). Also, eliminating/altering just one element of any given society is not possible, but has repercussions which make it harder to maintain a cohesive view of how that society functions. For these reasons we have wanted to retain gender as a socially relevant factor, alongside all the other elements people considered important in the societies we portray.

In this approach, there are three important things to keep in mind. First, while gender plays a role, it is never the only thing defining a character. Other factors such as social ties, means, and motivations also define a character and create variation. While this may sound like a truism, it means that saying that the character will have this or that kind of game because she is a woman is like saying her game will turn out like this because she is of old age. Or if it does determine everything, that is bad larp writing, not a necessity of history.

Second, historical roles for women are a lot more varied than is sometimes thought. There have always been women leading, fighting, making business, using moral/spiritual authority and creating stories or literature. Maybe fewer than men, but these historical models do exist, and frequently these somewhat exceptional historical characters have been used as inspiration for larp characters. In creating *Viena 1918*, we took inspiration from the real women who took arms against the Whites: the well-known women’s company of Raunistula, Maaria who took part in front line combat; female prisoners who inflamed the Wyborg prison massacre where 30 White prisoners were killed before the liberators could arrive; or even those in Women’s Battalions of Death that were formed in the Russian army to strengthen the wavering front against the Germans. When writing *Completorium*, we were inspired by stories and biographies of Medieval nuns, like that of the scholar and natural scientist Hildegard of Bingen; or Clare of Assisi, follower of St. Francis and a strong-willed woman who opposed her

father's attempts to marry her off, refusing to succumb to the role of a wife.

Third, exceptional times call for exceptional characters and both allow and force people to step out of their traditional roles. In *Viena 1918*, the Karelian women were independent because their men were away, fighting a war. As is well known, the 20th century wars opened up new roles and possibilities for women. For example, during the World Wars, women suddenly could - or were even expected to - take up new roles from ammunition factory work to ambulance driving and even piloting airplanes. Besides, the absence of men from the home front gave women new independence (for these themes, see Heimola & Heimola 2016).

In conclusion, creating diverse roles and interesting playing options for female characters is quite possible also in historical games. In our opinion, the need to focus on this practical question can actually make for more interesting and varied social dynamics, than if one were to simply ignore the gender issue, or opt for more contemporary settings where the gender question seems to matter less.

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■ Erik Winther Paisley

## Play the Gay Away Confessions of a Queer Larper

### Larping while Queer

#### Who's a Queer

I guess everybody knows I'm gay, but I don't think everybody knows I'm a queer, too. I like to incorporate gay culture into my speech and slang, and even used to flaunt my gayness, but I haven't been able to come to grips with being queer.

Being queer is to approach life from an oblique angle, to step into the world somehow askance, as an outsider, which is decidedly more difficult (Ahmed 2006, *passim*). Being left-handed must feel similar. There are all these scissors and tools and techniques out there that everybody can just grab and use, but for you, there's something amiss. You can't get a proper hold even if you know perfectly how people go about it. They just pick up the scissors and don't give any thoughts to the fact that they're custom-built to suit their take on the world.

It's the same for queers as it is for lefties. You find the world wasn't designed with you in mind. Straight love stories feel like wrong-handed scissors to me. I understand perfectly well – intellectually – what they're about, but they aren't immediately accessible to me. I can pick them up and use them, but only awkwardly. Their straightness is foregrounded. I guess stories that happen in queer settings must feel the same for straight people. Guess that's why they always call them gay love stories. *Broke-back Mountain* isn't about cowboys in love; it's about gay cowboys in something that looks an awful lot like love (except without the emotional impact.)

Until I played *Just a Little Lovin'* this summer (2015), I never understood why straight people were interested in playing love stories. It was abstract and I couldn't relate to it.

### The Gay Agenda

Once at the tender age of 16, a female player tried to involve me in a love plot at a Danish fantasy larp; I went along with the midnight moonlit walk in the woods, but felt alienated from the situation – somewhat worried that this would come across as off-game dating.

Since then love plots were only a source of potential awkwardness for me – either the awkwardness of feigning heterosexuality in-game, feigning interest in heterosexual love stories for fear of seeming unable to immerse, or – above all – the awkwardness I would risk if it looked as though I were steering my game in a romantic direction.

Imposing my queer agenda on the game for personal gratification seemed like the perfect way to become an outsider. When I was growing up in the Danish fantasy larp scene (c. 2000–2005), the games we played tended not to be accessible to players as queer people because they rarely or never incorporated queer themes directly.

It is not that people were homophobes; I just do not think it occurred to them that the king could be a big queen, that fierce lady orcs could love each other, or that gender transitioning could be a rite of passage for druids. Orcs were fine, but fairies stretch the imagination.

The only even remotely queer thing that comes to mind from that time are the cracks about *homoelvere* (gay elves). I was one, of course. I once received a letter in the post addressed to “Erik, the gayest boy in the world.” Bless the sender, who knows who he is, and bless my parents for not asking questions.

Any bona-fide queerness in the larp fiction would be something that I would have to introduce out of my own initiative. Maybe not at my own peril, but try telling that to a giddy kid who is only out of the closet when he is at larps. And does not want to fuck things up. What would it say about me if I could not even play a silly game without queerhacking it to accommodate my particular proclivities?

When you go to a larp that is not designed for queerness, and you bring up the issue and pursue queer themes, it can feel as if you are imposing your queer agenda on the game. There are not many good reasons for a person to do such a strange thing. Either you are doing it for sexual kinks or you are trying to make a point of it. Other players might not have given any thought to whether there are queer characters in the game or even in the game world. It sounds like reasonable accommodation, but it feels a lot like rocking the boat.

### Queens and Wizards

Two larps challenged that feeling. The first was close to home – the *College of Wizardry* (2015, 3rd run), a Harry Potter-esque game about the students and staff that has been making the headlines for the last couple of years.

I was not intending it to be, but *College of Wizardry* became queer larp bootcamp for me before I had to go full queer later in the year. It was the first larp I had been to where the organizers had specifically written the existence of queer relationships into the fiction – they dedicated a whole page of the design document (Rollespilsfabrikken 2015) to telling us it's OK to play gay. I guess they provided an affordance that I have not been used to having. If they had not made that design decision, I probably would not have asked. I mean, there are kids there. Can't I just get on with the game?

Luckily, that's exactly what I got to do. Seeing as I am a larper and love to cry, I wanted to play a mournful widower whose husband had been “scraped off the wall and buried with honors” during the Wizarding Wars. Playing it straight would have been a distraction, would have made it less real. *College of Wizardry* was a place where the queerness of being gay could be left in the background, and I could just be an angry widower instead.

Nevertheless, my character was studiously asexual and churlish. Three co-players conspired to tame the shrew and get me out into the world again. I am sorry to say that they succeeded. Once



again, I would not have done that on my own. A simple design choice from the organizers reminded me that queer stories were possible topics of play. I did still have to come out of the closet during the game, but that was because my character was an unregistered badger Animagus, not a gay widower.

And then there was *Just a Little Lovin'*, which has gotta be the gayest larp ever played. It is almost mythically so – leather men, drag queens, dark rooms, dykes, closet cases, AIDS, Abba, sequins, brotherhood, fisting. The aesthetics are camp and the theme is dead serious. Players portray a social circuit in New York in the 1980s as it is ravaged by AIDS during the years of 1982, 1983 and 1984. The stories that the larp produces are magnificent run after run after run, but for me and from what I know, the transformative part of the game is how it transplants players into a world where gay is the new normal. It was the best game I have ever played and I think that is true for a lot of other people, especially all the other queers.

## Playing Out the Closet

You would think going to *Just a Little Lovin'*, the gayest game ever, would be a chance to let my queerness fade into the background. For one, it was my first experience of being in a gay male world outside “the scene” – where I had never felt at home, anyway. I think I am too square for it. Everybody always thinks I am somebody’s awkward straight friend. It sounds poetic, “being a stranger among my own kind”, but when you’re in the situation it just makes you feel even queerer. Finally, my gayness would not set me apart – just my queerness.

In daily life, it is hard to trace all of the sources of my queerness. As a geek, I am queered once talk goes to mainstream topics I cannot identify with, which I imagine a lot of larpers have experienced. As a perpetual foreigner, as someone who wanders into the deep end of conversations, I am queer for a lot of reasons. I might as well be left-handed.

After *Just a Little Lovin'*, I even felt some resentment toward straight players. They get to read and play love stories without all the mental adjustments, caveats, and hypotheticals that gay people need to make in order to relate to them. They get to cringe at and enjoy Hollywood sex scenes for what they are. They get to have their stories served up straight. The rest of us do not have that. It is like we are listening for love songs, but through heavy white noise. Straight people have got it coming in loud and clear.

In the context of *Just a Little Lovin'*, it was safe to assume that everyone was either gay or gay-friendly, and the straight characters were an amusing backdrop.

On the other hand, I was still a very queer character – older, a drag queen, mother, always donning an alter-ego that I could use as a shield. I could be aloof and statuesque if I wanted to, and every time anything became too real, I could escape into a world of my own making. My character, gay guy Nate, could become the Queen of Diamonds. He even escaped death (for a time).

While *Just a Little Lovin'* did offer relief from a single source of my queerness, my orientation toward other men, it could not dispel my inclination. I did not go into the dark room nor participate in orgies. I only had three sex scenes, all of which involved straight players, and I still feel guilty about one of them and awkward about finding them all a bit arousing. Even in a gay larp, there are ways to feel like a big old queer.

My character’s story once again became a story about being drawn into the world and forced to unqueer myself – but I struggled to fully engage until I was literally grabbed by the hair in a sex scene and brought into the story, incidentally by a straight player, who I imagine has more experience being in the normal world and thus being more accustomed to love stories and play. I was a larp love virgin.

For some players, queer had become so normal that they had trouble readjusting to the fact that most people in the world are not. That was not my experience – but I did get to forget my gayness and play around with being queer, and boy did I ever.

## Queer Shame

Years before I played *Just a Little Lovin'*, I attended a workshop at Solmukohta 2012 where the sex simulation technique used at the game was demonstrated. Other people have described it better than I can:

*“Sexual scenes started with offering another player a pink feather<sup>1</sup>. If they took the feather then they said yes to playing a sex scene ... If you did agree, you took the feather and you walked off a bit from the other players, talked out of character about what sort scene you wanted to do, agreed on how you were comfortable playing it and then you played the sex scene.*

*When you played sex you could touch the other player, as long as you kept your clothes on, and as long as you didn't touch genital areas and the breasts. ... Penetrative sex and any other type of sex that might transmit the virus was played out by touching and stroking and playing with a phallic prop. Phallic prop.”* (Dalstål 2012)

It is hands-on. And it is a great technique, but it is also terrifying – which is why the organizers of *Just a Little Lovin'* go to such efforts to couch it in narrative meaning, with a symbolic way of accepting or declining an invitation to have a sex scene, a detailed negotiation beforehand, monologues afterwards, and so on. It is not like you just whip it out and start larp-screwing people.

The workshop facilitator tried to explain all of this and made an honest effort to make people – me – feel safe about trying the technique, but it did not work. Through the combined efforts of somebody’s toddler being present, casual onlookers passing through the workshop space, and general feeling of exposure, I was doused with buckets of sexual shame that in a way I had not experienced since my Dad once forgot to knock. That is only context, though. What was the proximate cause of my shame?

The exposure was bad enough. Worst was the fact that one of the mini-scenes was nice. I ended up snuggling up with a tall, dark and handsome French larper – though somebody older and different than the kind of guy I would usually go for – and stroking a candle. The candle did not do it for me, but the snuggling sort of did. Once again, the fear of exploiting the game situation for sexual gratification. Alongside a platinum wig and hooker shoes, that’s some of the luggage I packed for *Just a Little Lovin'*.

## A Queer Beauty

My character at *Just a Little Lovin'* was something of an alien. A one-time loner, drag queen, a man with a million pasts, who had swept into town six months before like Dionysus arriving from the east. In the game world, he had screwed his way through half of New York before setting up his nightclub. Par for the course.

For my own part, I could not see my character as very sexual. Being a gay man, appreciation of women’s beauty and desirability is abstract for me. I know what physical beauty looks like and what bodies are, so to say, attractive, but they do not actually do it for me. I can recognize attractiveness, but it does not arouse me. And although I love drag, I am not particularly attracted to men in drag. I like masculine guys, even though they can be intimidating.

I also like to think of myself as quite masculine and I dress to maximize that appearance. Even when I wear something more feminine, like a t-shirt with a low neckline, I do it to show off my male

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<sup>1</sup> Not every sex scene in the *Just a Little Lovin'* runs has played out like this. Feathers, for instance, are sometimes omitted in favor of diegetic negotiation. I myself am not sure I would have dared do without. For a more in-depth explanation, see Edland (2013).

strength. The feminine has a strange allure, if only because we grow in a world where men are supposed to be attracted by femininity. It does not matter that you are gay, or that you are a man. Growing up in a culture where the masculine is drawn to the feminine, playing around with femininity feels like playing with fire. On the one hand, there is an excitement to it and some plain relief from not having to perform traditional masculinity; on the other, there is a shame from feminization and a fear of losing your attractiveness as a man, demeaning yourself by being a nancy boy.

The effeminate is a no-man's land that you don't venture into lightly. Even gay men can be bitches toward fems. I mean, nobody wants to be a sissy, right?

I had not been in drag since I did a rendition of Geri Spice at a school show in the 6th grade. Sassy is fine; sissy is not. The prospect of playing a drag queen was quite intimidating. And the physical sensation of dragging was strange and foreign, but did not come close to the experience of seeing myself full-figure in the mirror and hardly recognizing the visage looking back at me. Queer almost does not cover it. As I wrote a few days later:

*Experiencing [Nate's story] and creating it as a player gave me a taste of being beautiful and admired in a way I have never been before. It's a foreign and different and dreamlike kind of beauty you feel as a drag queen of his time and age. It's made me look at myself, literally, in a different light. (...) I got to stand as a statue and lie half-undressed, makeup smeared, and look at myself in that big, gorgeous mirror in the dressing room. It was bizarre and I don't know how to square that image of myself with what I otherwise am. Nate might be someone I might have been, had I been born when he was. I don't know how I feel about that. It feels dangerous and horrifying, but the appeal of his life and his aesthetic is still there."*  
(Winther Paisley 2015)

For a straight player, reorienting themselves sexually and socially toward the same sex might have been a powerful source of personal queerness. For me, it was through drag.

I do not think your personal sexual desire toward a gender can be changed through a game, but I do think your orientation can be. For someone who is oriented toward men, whether sexually, romantically or socially, you read a room in a different way than someone who is "into" women (Ahmed 2006). If you coax yourself into looking toward, cruising for, play-lusting for the other gender, even if you are looking for narrative satisfaction rather than carnal, you can have a reorientation. At least until the curtain drops. When you leave the game, some of the angles of approach you had just begun to become accustomed to suddenly become unavailable. When that happens, the world gets a bit queerer.

My reorientation toward others came from being perched on heels, wrapped in foam and sequins and painted up like a glamorous old broad. With myself as the main audience, I tested out a new kind of queer.

The dressing room scenes were especially powerful, not just for the banter, but the undressing, too. You show a lot of yourself when you drag, even as you hide it. You wonder if you look alright – as a player who wants to have a good costume that isn't silly, and as a person who is vain and does not want to look stupid in a dress. My co-players helped dress me up and down, put on my lashes, and beat my face. I started each show by looking myself over critically in the mirror. The Queen would never ask, but I had to ask if I looked alright. Then I could parade proudly onto the stage to oo's and ah's.

It took a lot of convincing to play that kind of queer for real, not just for laughs. If anything I even distanced myself personally at first in the game. I could become a statue when I wanted to. Majestic mourning is a very safe, insulated place to be. Thankfully it did not last.

## Play It Straight

Before the second night of the game began, I mentioned in the intermezzo that I did not think of my character as someone who was particularly attractive. I had been channeling an old queen from *Paris Is Burning* (1991). I felt... sassy, impressive perhaps, but sexually attractive? Somebody disagreed. Shit.

That somebody was Mr T – “a perfect embodiment of a successful gay man played by a strikingly handsome Swedish player” as I described him a few days later – who found my character attractive. Maybe he thought I, the player, was attractive, and maybe that was bleeding into how he saw me.

Even my newfound beauty became a source of awkwardness for me, because I did not know how to handle the foreignness of my character and how to comport myself in this world. I can play gay – well, hell no, but I can try – but being the object of desire in a feminine persona was unrelatable for me, so I retreated into my aloof position as Queen.

Luckily, Mr T was there to help me shimmy out of my comfort zone. After flirting in the silly, normal ways people do on the dance floor, we took to the dressing room (in exactly the same way as you leave a party to go kiss! In a game!) where he proceeded to help me get undressed. Wig off, then shoes, then half the dress, then most of the persona. We ended up lying next to each other on the floor, looking into the ceiling, and laughing about hooking up for old time's sake.

It was normal. Relatable. A scene that I get. Possibly the least queer thing that happened to me during the entire game, but it would not have been possible if the game had not been heavily rigged for queerness. In normal life, I can't just drop the mask and kiss. I have the option of going into the closet – being outwardly normal, camping out – being outwardly queer, or going on as I usually do – feeling normal, but only until the context re-queers me by reminding me of the ways in which I'm not.

## Walk a Mile in My Shoes

It is hard not to have a bit of estrangement and bitterness when, at least in aspects of your life, you are stuck on the outside looking in. Being made to feel queer is something that happens to everybody once in a while, but for those of us whose sexualities, gender identities, or personal orientations are queer, it is a position we can struggle to escape from.

So, playing an embittered gay badger wizard let me feel normal, while being a gay man among gay men did not. It did more for me – it let me play with an even more fundamental part of my identity, as a queer, in a way that would not have been remotely possible in a game where my gayness had been in the foreground. This let me dig into some deep, dangerous, challenging play.

I was given a powerful backdrop for the drama that took place later. It was the final night of the game, in 1984 when we all knew, and I had not seen Walter, my in-game lover, for hours, until he found me on the dance floor. He had come to show me the letter from the clinic that said he was HIV positive. We had been living together for a year at the time.

We wept. We had sex. Just so it wouldn't matter. I had to have him grab my hair, push me down and drag me out of my isolation. My makeup was smeared and the dress crumpled. It was raw and visceral, and it was over almost before it started. Fittingly. Afterwards I left him and walked back on towering heels to the dressing room and collapsed onto the floor. I was tarnished, but I couldn't take my eyes off myself.

After a while my faghag, Diane, came, and she knew, and she helped me take my make-up off. Janie who did my eyes before the shows also knew, and she helped too. I sat still, and was undressed yet another time.

The scene tore my character out of the world I had spent the game trying to create; and I needed

the game to give me a chance to feel something normal before I could let it make me feel such a queer kind of loss. Without Mr T, no Walter. No queer storylines, no universal loss.

This kind of play is personally rewarding, but it is not a personal achievement. It would not have been possible without the conscious effort of writers, organizers, and co-players to make it so. If players with less experience of queerness want a chance to dig into these themes, I have got just the shoes for the occasion.



*Photo by Erik Winther Paisley,  
edited by Jonas Hjermitslev.*

## ■ Acknowledgment

I would like to thank the organizers of the *College of Wizardry*, the original creators of Just a Little Lovin', organizers of the June, 2015 run, and my co-players, especially Simon "Walter" Svensson and Arvid "Mr. T" Björklund and my extended drag family, for making this article and the thoughts behind possible.

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## ■ Editors

**Kaisa Kangas** is a Finnish larp designer who has been playing and making larps for 20 years. She is the fiction lead for the Palestinian-Finnish political larp *Halat hisar* (State of Siege) that will be run again in June 2016. She is also involved with designing and running educational larps for University of Arts Helsinki. Her other works include *Ghost Express* (2001-2002, together with Dare Talvitie), a pioneer of pervasive larp. She holds a PhD in mathematics and a BA in Japanese Studies.

**Mika Lopenen** is a doctoral post-graduate student at the Department of Modern Languages in the University of Helsinki. He is currently writing his PhD on the semiotic issues of cultural artifacts and irrealia in fantasy and science fiction. His interest in roleplaying games started in the late 80's and widened to larp in the mid-90's. Since 1995, he has co-organized or co-written larps and larp campaigns such as the Helsinki Camarilla (1995-2004), *Isle of Saints* (2000), and *Salatieteellinen Tiedekunta* (Faculty of Occult Arts, 2015). As a larp theorist, he sees himself as a semiotic post-immersionist.

**Jukka Särkijärvi** is a writer, editor, translator, game designer, conrunner and Pathfinder Society Venture-Captain Emeritus from Espoo, Finland. He is currently working on his master's thesis in English language and literature at the University of Tampere. His previous work include translations of the *Stalker* and *Whispering Road* role-playing games, game design on *Vihan lapset*, a great deal of role-playing game journalism for a variety of publications both on- and offline, and *Roolipelikirja*, a nonfiction book about role-playing games.

## ■ Writers

**Muriel Algayres** (born 1980) is a historian, teacher and larp designer from France. She has been organizing games for more than a decade, mostly of the historically-inspired sort, before branching into educational games and larp analysis. As of 2016, she has been a contributing writer on *Fairweather Manor*, the *#Feminism* anthology, and is currently producing *Harem Son Saat – the Last Hours of the Harem* in France. Her articles can also be read on the upcoming *Game Wrap*, *nordiclarp.org* and the French blog *Electrolarp*.

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**Aladino Amantini** holds a MSc. in computer science engineering and works as a software developer consultant. He started larping in 2012, and soon was involved in the organisation of events as a writer of plots and characters. Among the main larps he contributed to and he's working on, we mention: *La fortezza dei vinti* (October 2013, April 2014) *Sogno di una notte di fine inverno* (March 2014, February 2016), *Black Friday* (November 2014, November 2016), *I ribelli della montagna* (July 2015), *Dracarys* (August 2016).

**Andrea Capone** is a high school teacher of technology and techniques for graphical representation. He's an author of comic books for various editors. He started larping in 2001 with fantasy larps and turned to the writing side in 2005. He's a stark supporter of pure immersion, and in 2013 he met Terre Spezzate, where in 2015 he was author in charge for *I ribelli della montagna*. During the same year he also published his first novel, *Man eats man*. Currently, he's particularly interested in the making of historical and realistic larps.

**Katherine Castiello Jones** is a PhD candidate in the Sociology department at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where she has also completed a graduate certificate in Advanced Feminist Studies. She has written and co-authored several live-action scenarios including *All Hail the Pirate Queen!*, *Revived: A Support Group for the Partially Deceased*, *Cady Stanton's Candyland* with Julia Ellingboe, and *Uwe Boll's X-Mas Special* with Evan Torner. She's written for RPG = *Role Playing Girl*, *Analog Game Studies*, and her piece "Gary Alan Fine Revisited: RPG Research in the 21st Century" was published in *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing*. She has helped organize several gaming events including JiffyCon, Larps on Demand at GenCon, and Games on Demand at Origins. Jones has presented workshops on role-playing and larp at several conferences including Sigma Play, DiGRA, and Knudepunkt, and has appeared on several Indie+ Episodes of Gaming as Other.

**Annalisa Corbo** is a media relation specialist and social psychologist. She works as a psychotherapist at her own studio applying classic psychodrama methods, and as a freelance trainer, assessor and coach in high school as well as in several Italian large and medium companies. She has been playing and writing larps since 2000, and she collaborated with the staff of the international larp *I ribelli della montagna*, writing characters and taking care of the event's press office.

**Alexey Fedoseev**, 33, born in Moscow, married. Alexey is a larp theorist and game designer as well as interactive education scientist from Moscow, Russia. Together with the colleagues he has founded the Center of Interactive Educational Technologies in Lomonosov Moscow State University in 2008. From 2012 Alexey has been helping to build a bridge and share the larp knowledge between Nordic and Russian communities. Now his primary interest lies in engineering-related interactive and mixed (live-action and computer-mediated) education formats.

**J. Tuomas Harviainen** (MTh, PhD, MBA) works as a development manager and sidelines as a postdoctoral researcher of games, information and organization for Hanken School of Economics. Harviainen wrote his doctoral dissertation on larps and has contributed to Knutepunkt books every year. He is a former editor of the *International Journal of Role-Playing* and currently co-edits the educational games journal *Simulation & Gaming*. He does not have as much time to actually larp as he would like. Contact: [jiituomas@gmail.com](mailto:jiituomas@gmail.com)

**Mikko Heimola** (b. 1979) started larping in 1999. He has done larp writing and production mostly with friends and associates from the Greywolves, most recently in *Homefront* (2015), *Papukaija-Jussin rosvojahti* (Robber Hunt of John Parrot, 2015) and *Konna.info* (Crook.info, 2015). He focuses on active larping and larp writing and until now has rarely written anything on the topic. He practices historical re-enactment with the Greywolves and the musketeer group GARS. He works as a psychologist and has a PhD. He lives in Helsinki with his wife Minna and two children. He can be contacted at [mhei@iki.fi](mailto:mhei@iki.fi).

**Minna Heimola** (b. 1976) has larped since 1997. She has written and produced historical larps in the Greywolves historical larp tradition including *Homefront* (2015) and *Viena 1918: Tovereita ja heimoveljiä* (Viena 1918: Comrades and Kinsmen, 2014). She has also written other larps, including World of Darkness games, a political larp on the history of socialism and class struggle called *LARP: Sosialismi* (LARP: Socialism, 2015) and a Harry Potter larp aimed at children. She has a PhD in Early Christian studies, but she is currently studying social work. She lives in Helsinki with her husband Mikko and two kids. She can be contacted at [meira@iki.fi](mailto:meira@iki.fi).

**Larson Kasper** is a German larper and educator. Whenever possible he combines passion and profession into edularp. He has been part of different teams, writing and producing larps from 3 to 300 players such as the *Aelm-Arthosia Series* (1999-2002) and the *KultUr Series* (2004-2006), *yksi/üç* (2009), *Welcome to Wandaland* (2010), the crossover-project *The Innovation* for Liverpool Biennial International Festival of Contemporary Art (2010) and *KNB 109 M* (2012). He is one of the founders of the larp catering crew KampfKüche, a jack-ass larp photographer. He has done different larp projects for both traumatized kids and those with behavior disorders. He followed Kristina Leipoldt to Gaziantep to find out about the beauty of Syrian larp. Larson likes hummus but won't judge whose mother makes it best. You can reach him via facebook.com/larson.kasper or larson.kasper@gmx.de.

**Shoshana Kessock** is a writer and game designer, and co-founder of Phoenix Outlaw Productions. She is the author of games like *Dangers Untold*, *SERVICE*, *Keeping The Candles Lit*, *For Here Our Sister Lies*, *The Last Ten Minutes*, *The State vs. Captain Wonder* and *Welcome To ReaperCon*, as well as contributing writer on several larp and tabletop RPG products. When she isn't writing, publishing and organizing games, she writes academic papers, fiction, comics, screenplays, and a fiction podcast. She hails from Jersey City, NJ and can be reached at www.shoshanakessock.com or @ShoshanaKessock.

**Neko Koski** is a nonbinary identified Finnish larper and queer activist. He has a minor in Gender Studies from the University of Helsinki. His queer themed short story "Nurunukang" was published in Finncon 2013's anthology *Vastavoimat*. In his free time he also dabbles in theatre and writing games, striving in everything to break the cisheteronormative status quo.

**Sanna Koulu** is working as a university lecturer in child and family law, and combines legal scholarship with socio-legal studies in her research. Some other things that interest her are care work, identity and its social dimensions, as well as complex social phenomena such as larp. She has been playing role-playing games for a long time, and been involved in organizing several gaming events such as Ropecon, but has only started to dabble in game studies in the past few years. Koulu has a LinkedIn page at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/sanna-koulu-a029854>.

**Tanja Lehto** is a Finnish larper and larp organizer based in Jyväskylä, Finland. She currently participates in organizing Larp Factory Jyväskylä, which is currently her main connection to larp organizing. She has contributed to the academic literature on larp with two bachelor's theses: first in 2013 and second in 2015. She is a bachelor of social services and student of social and public policy at the University of Jyväskylä. Her previous writings have dealt with edu-larp and political larp. She tweets as @TanjaLehto.

**Kristina Leipoldt** has been doing larp as long as she has been a professional humanitarian. Combining these two interests became a logical thing once she found more and more prospects for edu-larp. Besides designing and (co-) producing social-critical larps and mini-larps – initially only for the German audience – such as *Vergessene Legenden II* (2003), *Kommissar Schmidt* (2005), *The living dead* (2010), *Welcome to Wandaland* (2010) and *KNB 109 M* (2012), Kristina stuck her nose also into training scenarios. She convinced her employer to use larp as a tool to train Syrian peace activists and social workers. She promotes it as an "in house" technique to train multi-ethnic teams, working in complex humanitarian and crisis settings, on diversity and such. Being pretty focused on the action-part of her creation, she has published so far one article in German in *Larp über den Tellerrand* (2011) titled "Check your reality – larps als mögliche Methode in der Erwachsenenbildung" and one in English together with Clara Biermann in *Birth of Larps in the Arab World* (2015) with the title "Make Larps Not War". You can reach her via email [kleipoldt@web.de](mailto:kleipoldt@web.de) and <https://www.facebook.com/teena.leipoldt>.

**Matteo Miceli** is a chemist, and holds an undergraduate in anthropology as well. Currently a Ph.D. student in biochemistry, he started larping in 2002 and was among the founders of the larp collective Terre Spezzate in 2005. After a seven years break, he returned to Terre Spezzate as a player in April 2014 for *La fortezza dei vinti*; eight months later, he was back to writing for *I ribelli della montagna*, where he took care of the SS group, both before and during the game. As an author, he is particularly interested in political and social exclusion/inclusion themes.

**Jugular Malloy\*** is a domestic worker based in East London. He has been involved in working class and queer politics for roughly ten years and larped for one year. His education is a mixture of formal and self education, mostly in the humanities. He is a 2015 alumni of the Larpwriter Summer School. He has produced a small amount of writing and is currently working on a comic about pirates alongside his solidarity forums project.

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**Juhana Pettersson** is a Finnish larper and game designer, novelist and tv producer. He has been part of the organizing groups of larps such as *Luminescence*, *Halat bisar* and *Baltic Warriors*. His roleplaying game *The Valley of Eternity* has been published in three languages. His first novel *Sokerisamurai*, a love story about BDSM and the music business, was published in 2013. He is the producer of the Finnish videogame tv show *Tilt*. [www.juhanapettersson.com](http://www.juhanapettersson.com)

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**Syksy Räsänen** has roleplayed for somewhat less than three and larped for close to two decades. He is also a political activist. His email address is [syksy.rasanen@iki.fi](mailto:syksy.rasanen@iki.fi), his home page is <http://www.iki.fi/syksy/> and he tweets as @SyksyRasanen.

**Eleanor Saitta** is a hacker, designer, artist, writer, and barbarian. She makes a living and a vocation of understanding how complex, transdisciplinary systems and stories fail and redesigning them to fail better. She edited the 2014 Knutpunkt book *The Foundation Stone of Nordic Larps* and has been in the larps community since 2010. Eleanor is also a freelance security architecture and strategy consultant to news organizations and NGOs. She is nomadic and lives mostly in airports and occasionally in New York, London, and Helsinki. She can be found at <https://dymaxion.org> and on Twitter as @Dymaxion.

**Vladimir Servetnik**, 30, born in Sverdlovsk, married. Has developed, implemented and refined educational live-action role-playing games for different purposes and audiences since 2006. Joined

CIET as leading developer in 2008 and designed a range of games based on historical events as well as on fiction, and supervised their implementation in several areas: business, academia, charity. While being specialist in practical application of his inventions, Vladimir Servetnik primarily sees role-playing games as a sort of art. He finds inspiration in ideas and findings of such philosophers as Guy Debord and other members of the Situationist International. Live-action role-playing games are for Vladimir the one most modern way of declaring and sharing the experience of true reality.

**Daniel Steinbach** (born 1984 in Germany) is an author, organiser and player of larps. Since 2008, he has been working as the CEO for Waldritter e.V. (Forest Knights non-profit). In his work he organises larps for children, youth and adults with different themes, pedagogical and educational aims. Before that he studied German language and literature and comparative literature. Moreover, he does volunteer work with refugees in his hometown. [daniel.steinbach@waldritter.de](mailto:daniel.steinbach@waldritter.de) - <http://www.waldritter.de/>

**Evan Torner** (Ph.D. University of Massachusetts Amherst) is an Assistant Professor of German Studies at the University of Cincinnati. Though his primary research focus is on East German cinema and science fiction, Torner has maintained an active presence in the role-playing game scene as a player, designer, and researcher. He co-edited *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing* with William J. White, and is currently an editor for *Analog Game Studies*. He co-founded the Golden Cobra contest, and has written numerous freeform larp scenarios.

**Lorenzo Trenti** (1977) is a journalist and works in communication and media in Italy. He has been playing rpgs and larps since he was a teen. One of the founders of the Flying Circus manifesto, he has written, organized and studied rpgs and larps as a form of contemporary storytelling. He's published articles and books about these topics and contributed to Larp Symposium (the Italian conference on larp) as an organizer and book curator. His website is [www.valis.it](http://www.valis.it)

**Moyra Turkington** is a Canadian larpwright, larp practitioner, and publisher with a background in Cultural Studies and Theatre. While she has logged many larp tourism hours in the Nordic countries over the last five years, she is most active in the northeast scene of North America. She publishes under Unruly Designs, writes for *Gaming as Women* and *Imaginary Funerals* and her older ideas can be found on *Sin Aesthetics*. She is interested in immersive, transformative and political games, and particularly in creating a multiplicity of media, design, representation and play.

**Erik Winther Paisley** (b. 1988) is a long-time member of the Nordic larp community. He began his larping career in Denmark in the early noughties and has been a Knudepunkt regular since 2003. He has authored four games for the Danish festival HyggeCon. He holds an MSc in Anthropology from Aarhus University and currently works in media industry consulting and as a blogger for the Danish daily *Jyllands-Posten*. [e.w.paisley@gmail.com](mailto:e.w.paisley@gmail.com), [@ewpaisley](https://twitter.com/ewpaisley).



## **Politics**

**Politics have always gone hand in hand with larp. Whether games portray politics, or internal politics have defined the deep structures of larps, there have always been games that have discussed and been shaped by political thoughts and realities. Larp Politics contains articles discussing theories, instances, and the implementation of interfaces between politics and games.**

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