



Issue #1: Bleed

Bleed is experienced by a player when her thoughts and feelings are influenced by those of her character, or vice versa. With increasing bleed, the border between player and character becomes more and more transparent.
– jeepen.org/dict

A word from the editor

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Editor-in-chief:
Matthijs Holter

Editors:
Sanne Harder Flamant,
Laura Kalli, Anders Nygaard,
Morten Greis Petersen,
Juhana Pettersson,
Jonas Trier, Even Tømte

Art Direction & Design:
Li Xin, Thomas Sørлие Hansen

Organization & Support:
Erlend Bruer, Martin Nielsen,
Erlend Eidsem Hansen,
Frida Sofie Jansen, Håken Lid,
Ane Marie Anderson

Cover photo:
Li Xin

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 **norden**
Nordic Culture Point

Printed in Norway

Print:
Elisa Trykkeri

Subscriptions:
subscriptions@
playgroundmagazine.net

Contact e-mail:
contact@playgroundmagazine.net

Tips and news:
tips@playgroundmagazine.net

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I like dangerous games. I like it when you're not sure what is you and what is your character; when the emotions come at you faster than you can process them, and they're really not all yours. When the alien inside decides to surface and take over for a while, and you only realize afterwards.

I like games where the organizers don't ask for your permission to make you feel bad. Where they play with you and you hope they have your best interests in mind, and that even if they don't, they at least know what they're doing.

I even like boring games. Bad designs that frustrate and annoy me. Events that make you think «why the fuck did I agree to come here? Why don't I just leave?»

“ I hate discussions about
game design ethics.

The idea that game designers and organizers have to be a benevolent ludocracy that takes responsibility for everyone's happiness and well-being at all times is bad for us. Should people be protected against bad experiences in-game, even if their real lives have no such protection, no guarantee?

Where will our design culture end up if we aren't sometimes reckless?

Look at psychologists like Milgram and Zimbardo, and their experiments that showed how easily we will harass or kill fellow humans if the right uniform tells us to. Look at Jane Elliott, and how she taught her third-graders about discrimination by telling them: «Blue-eyed people are stupid». If she'd asked for permission before trying out her ideas, do you think she would have received it? Would those children, now grown-ups, have anything to remember and thank her for?

As our games are growing up, we need to be more experimental, not less. We need to take more chances with ourselves and others. We need to push harder.

We need to accept danger, embrace it, and let it take us where safety won't. ■



■ Matthijs Holter

This is the **PLAYGROUND**

Welcome, all you people. All you wonderful, wonderful people.

You, right there. The girl from some small European country. The one with the interesting hair, who doesn't know all the jargon, hasn't been to all the events, but knows that things are going on and wants to see the pictures.

And you there. Art boy. Dressed like an individual. Mixing styles. You've made some games, met some interesting people. Maybe you just want to see if we're writing about you.

And you! That woman who just got the magazine pushed on her by an overenthusiastic acquaintance! Who's sort of skeptical to the whole thing. Whatever that thing may be, because you're not really sure yet.

We want you to listen up. Because this is for you.

What this is

Playground is a magazine about roleplaying. It's mainly concerned with social, face-to-face play. One form is live-action roleplaying, or «larp» - the sort of play where you maybe dress up as your character, maybe travel to a specific location, act out everything physically. Another is tabletop or verbal roleplaying, sometimes called «RPGs» - where you're sitting around a table, maybe rolling some dice, telling tall tales that go on for weeks, months, years.

“ The phenomenon we call roleplaying is important, it's beautiful.

We're focusing on things that don't get much attention elsewhere. We want the weird stuff. The interesting stuff. We want to seek out the things not everybody knows about. Games that you've never heard about, because they're in a language you don't speak, or they're not published on the

internet. Or maybe because they're so fucked up that people don't really want to talk about them in public.

We want the unknowns. The up-and coming people. The people on the fringe. We want to give you names that make you go «who's that?», and then we'll tell you why you need to know who they are.

“ We want the weird stuff. The interesting stuff.

And, lastly, maybe most importantly: We are serious. We want to tell you about projects and people with visions, with ambitions. People who aim high. People who kick in doors and break boundaries. People who have no idea what they're doing, and end up surprising us with their brilliance.

Who we are

The people behind Playground are passionate roleplayers. Some of us are, or have been, professional editors. Most of us have been involved in magazine projects in whatever countries we come from. Many of us write and publish our own games. We run roleplaying organizations and clubs, have blogs, participate on fora. What we all have in common, is that we see that this - the phenomenon we call roleplaying - is important, it's beautiful, and we want to tell people how cool it is. We want you to see it through our eyes.

What we want

We want you to tell us about what's going on. Send us your flyers. Tell us your rumours. Write us articles about games we can't visit. By all means, let us know about your own projects! - but more importantly, tell us about other people's stuff. Hype your friends. Maybe your rivals, too. We'd love to hear from you at contact@playgroundmagazine.net. ■

Book The Nordic Larp anthology was released in December, and contains 30 different stories about larps that have been held in the Nordic countries the past 15 years.

«The vision of the book was to package the Nordic Larp tradition in a way that communicates the wonder of our way of larping to someone who has never tried it», says Jaakko Stenros, one of the editors.

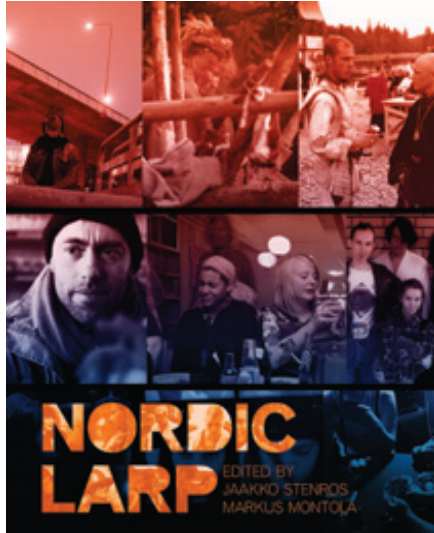
Classics such as *En stilla middag*, *Europa*, *PanoptiCorp*, 1942 and *Mellan himmel och hav* are amongst the games covered.

«We are hoping that in sixty years someone will discover it from the depths of the library of the aesthetics department, and be inspired by it», says Stenros.

The book is 300 pages, has 250 photos, and is printed in full color.

«A central challenge, with any work that tries to capture larp, is that it is ephemeral and subjective. To truly understand it you need to participate - and even then there are as many stories as there are players. We tried to tackle this problem by having numerous voices and points of view in the book», says Stenros.

Check out www.nordiclarp.wordpress.com for more.



Books For this year's Knudepunkt conference in Denmark, there were no less than three books published. One focuses on academic perspectives on larp, one on practical aspects of running a larp, and one is full of rants aimed at generating debate. The books have been made available as free PDFs for download at www.rollepilsakademiet.dk/kpbooks, and may also be purchased in print through Rollepilsakademiet.

Larpwriter Challenge At Grenselandet, the international short larp festival organized by Norwegian Fantasisforbundet and the Larp Factory in Oslo in November, the jury of the Larpwriter Challenge announced the winner of the competition: J. Tuomas Harviainen with the game «The Tribunal», which according to the author is a «A participatory scenario about the mechanics of oppression». Harviainen receives a game developer grant of NOK 4 000 (500 Euros) and the opportunity to go to Belarus on a conference on educational larping to hold the game and a workshop on educational game design. The game will be translated to Russian and/or Belarusian to be used by Belarusian NGOs in their work with young people.



Modern Times The Norwegian «Larp Factory» concept has been spreading. The idea is to organize monthly, short, no-preparation, beginner-friendly and (frequently) high artistic quality larps. There are now Larp Factories in Trondheim, Stockholm and Gothenburg. There are also rumours of monthly larps starting up in Brno (Czech Republic) and active in Trieste (Italy), though not under the Larp Factory banner. See www.laivfabrikken.no/english.html for more.

Female orc corset, tailor made for you The Danish «Martillo Workshop» is in the works, aiming at becoming an online store for handmade larp-gear. The site is planned to launch some time early this spring. The customers will be able to order equipment tailor made to their specifications, and there will also be standardized items for sale.



■ An example of the products that will be on offer, a tailor made female orc corset in leather. Photo: Søren Hammer Sørensen

15 minutes of fame Playground has learnt that three different production companies are considering making documentaries based on the Norwegian larp scene. Will it be good? Will it be bad? Will it be like the Monster Camp clips on YouTube? Only time will tell.

Girls in Armor The Danish feminist larp organization Piger i Panser (Girls in Armor) hosted their first game early this January. C:U:T was the story of a crazy instructor and 14 fanatical actors, who chose to lock themselves inside a church to find divine inspiration. «The scenario might be viewed as a meta commentary on the medium of roleplaying games in itself», the organizers write on their webpage pigeripanser.dk/cut.



■ Girls in Armor started as an all-female group at Krigslive V. Photo: Peter Munthe-Kaas (www.pigeripanser.dk)



The Norwegian virus Since its inception in 2007, the short, free, experimental RPGs from the Norwegian Style blog (norwegianstyle.wordpress.com) have been spreading virally. Translations are available in Spanish, Polish, French, Swedish and Korean (!). The games include gems such as *Zombie Porn* and the concept of role playing poems (15 minute freeform scenarios), which has inspired Marc Majcher's book «24 Game Poems». His book can be purchased at Lulu.com, together with the Norwegian Style anthology.

■ *Zombie Porn* – a game of undead love.
Illustration: norwegianstyle.wordpress.com

Happy feet Ever wanted to play a tragic penguin hero? Watch out for the Danish and English translations of *Ikuisuuden laakso* (The Valley of Eternity) by Juhana Pettersson. The Finnish indie RPG will be published in Danish in early 2011, with the English edition to follow sometime later the same year.

«The Valley of Eternity is set in the eternal cold of the Antarctic continent, and features noble, yet lonely, penguin heroes and their sublime philosophical powers, and savage anti-penguins who become as one with the glacier. In *Ikuisuuden laakso*, the hero will always die alone and unloved.»



New strides for Strider Danish actor Viggo Mortensen has been granted (and has humbly accepted) an honorary membership in Midsjællands Rollespilsforening, rollespil.dk reports. Playground congratulates Mr. Mortensen on his latest achievement.

■ Viggo Mortensen (here seen depicting Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings*) was happy to accept an honorary membership in The Role Playing Society of Midsjælland. Photo: New Line Cinema

Play
The
Game.

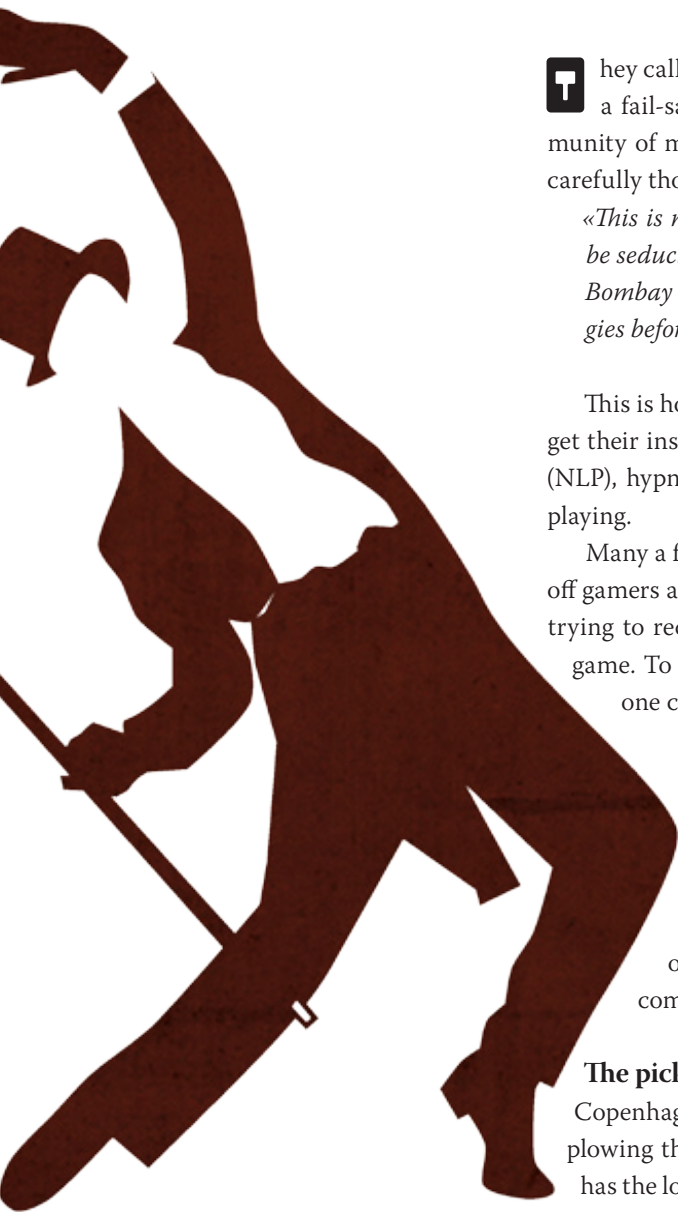
Get
laid.





■ TEXT / Nynne Søs Rasmussen ■ PHOTO / Christina Molbech

Pickup Artists are men with a technical approach to picking up women. They set scenes, rehearse improvisation and act out personas. All in order to create a strong emotional response in their «audience»: The women they are picking up. Is this the dark twin of roleplaying? A strange pervasive play, willing to cut the ethical corners that only the boldest game designers will?



They call themselves *gamers* or *pickup artists* – men who claim to have found a fail-safe way to open every woman’s heart and legs. The Game is a community of men whose main hobby is to seduce women using a systematic and carefully thought-out approach.

«This is not just an Internet phenomenon, but a way of life. There are wannabe seductionists in dozens of cities – from Los Angeles to London to Zagreb to Bombay – who meet weekly in what they call lairs to discuss tactics and strategies before going out en masse to pick up girls»

This is how Neil Strauss initiates his famous book on The Game. The Gamers get their inspiration from such diverse genres as neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), hypnosis, street performers, magicians, performance art and, well, role-playing.

Many a feminist, cultural critic and former «target» of a pickup have written off gamers as sleazy misogynist bastards. The Game can easily be understood as trying to reduce relationships, romance and sexual attraction to nothing but a game. To most role players, however, this thought is not as far from home as one could think.

Larps like the controversial Danish *Delirium* and Swedish *Mellan Himmel och Hav* were about love, relationships and doing something like what the Pickup Artists do – manipulating the social DNA to create a sense of intimacy. When a pickup artist is out roaming the night trying to get women into his bed, is he then really just designing for bleed – the much discussed mix of in- and out-of-game relations and emotions? Do larpers have a lot more in common with these smooth-talking seducers than meets the eye?

The pickup artist

Copenhagen is covered in snow today; the earliest of Christmas shoppers are plowing through the central streets. Boris - the pickup artist - stands still; he has the looks of a normal young man, the kind of guy you wouldn’t mind being chatted up by. He is far from the creepy pig or suited up playboy one would picture, and his friendly smile seems genuine.

«It was the dream of having my very own harem, to be able to walk down the street and pick up the hottest chick I laid my eyes on. That was what got me into The Game», Boris confesses with a smile. «But you get smarter when you get more



It was the dream of having my very own harem, to be able to walk down the street and pick up the hottest chick I laid my eyes on.

into it – the harem just isn't a very realistic thought».

Unlike many Gamers, Boris claims to have a natural approach to the Game. He doesn't use rehearsed one-liners or memorized routines when speaking with women – something that is otherwise encouraged by many pickup gurus.

«I like to work with the sexual tension between men and women; it's all about being happy and extrovert. Relax and see where things are going. For me it's more about using principles from The Game - not the routines».

The Gamers will often get an amazing kick out of picking up the first girl using their new skills and techniques, and after that moment, most of them are hooked. Learning the game has been known to help insecure men gain a little confidence and build self-esteem, Boris says. Or, as the self-entitled master pickup artist Wayne Elise a.k.a Juggler puts it:

«You will have more options and this freedom will help you find inner peace. You will influence others to live happier lives and the world will become a better place. If there were more pickup artists, there would be an end to war. Every man and woman should become a pickup artist»

The mask

When they begin their career as pickup artists, most people will be very self-conscious when going out. In the beginning Boris would feel like he was putting on a mask – a role rather than himself. He explains that most pickup artists sooner or later realize that they just cannot continue that way. The false persona always ends up creating problems for the pickup artist because he fails to learn how to be «himself».

«Someone I know got really depressed when he found out it wasn't him who picked up the girls, but his role. It was actually the person he pretended to be, whom the girls liked. ».

Other Gamers are in danger of turning into what the community calls «social robots»; a pickup artist who will use nothing but routines, which will make him seem very unnatural. The gamer

will be so focused on social psychology, that «normal» social interaction without using The Game will end up being difficult to him.

This is perhaps why most people question the honesty and sincerity of the pickup artists. As the dedication in Neil Strauss' book The Game reads:

«Dedicated to the thousands of people I talked to in bars, clubs, malls, airports, grocery stores, subways, and elevators over the last two years. If you are reading this, I want you to know that I wasn't running game on you. I was being sincere. Really. You were different.»

Role-playing as a tool to pick up girls!

We have entered a café in downtown Copenhagen. Boris opens his jacket, sits down and meticulously loosens his gloves finger by finger.

«Role-playing is a tool to pick up girls, simply because the girls tend to like it. It could be something ridiculous like saying to a girl 'let's run off to Hawaii' or 'let's pretend I'm your boyfriend for a night'. It seems harmless, but at some point the girl will consider if she actually *could* be your girlfriend» he says.

The idea is that if you imagine doing something in the future, you have in some way already done it, psychologically speaking. It should create a bond between pickup artist and target.

«It's actually something most people do when in relationships», Boris says, «You make plans for the future. It creates comfort between the two people planning together, and that's important when you are out on the town; you create this little magic bubble where the girl's friends can't enter and interrupt the two of you.»

There are hundreds of variations of these little scenes, which the Gamers call *future passing*. According to Boris, the key skill is improvisation – something that is often the subject of workshops held around the globe aimed at the pickup artists improving their roleplaying skills.

The Game is always just a game – ethics

The Game has met an equal amount of success and critique. It has been called anything from misogynistic to manipulative and evil. However, men are joining societies and web forums and are buying books by the millions.





Humans act on their desires. You can only push them in the right direction, but as long as they don't want to - nothing's going to happen.



■ *Creating the magic bubble*

When asked if he believes he is manipulating women into sleeping with him, Boris pauses to think for a second, inhales deeply and answers:

«You need to think about that it takes two to have sex - you can't do a routine on a girl who is not in the mood. I don't believe you can make a person do something they don't want to do. Humans act on their desires. You can only push them in the right direction, but as long as they don't want to - nothing's going to happen.»

However, there may be a fundamental ethical question in treating your everyday life as a game, Boris admits.

*«I like to play computer games like World of Warcraft, and when I found the Game my mind went **yes! this is spot on!** Enthusiastically I went into it and wanted to become the best pickup artist ever, but at some point you realize that it always involves two people interacting. The target has a story to tell as well, and when you start to think in these terms Gaming becomes socially interesting, instead of just running routines.»*

«When you are Gaming, the pickup artist can't avoid emotions. Picking up girls is an emotional game. Maybe a girl becomes too attached to her seducer or gets hurt. But the pickup artists' emotions will sometimes be on the line as well». Boris explains that the pickup artists could get too much into the girl, so he does not know how to behave and will end up losing her. «When you are Gaming you are taking an emotional risk every time,» he concludes.

Bitch or princess?

The Gamers seem to have a paradox in their relation to women. On one hand, women are put up on a pedestal and objectified as princesses. On the other hand, they are seen as deceitful and manipulative bitches. Boris comments:

«Some mindsets among Gamers are women-demeaning; some think that women are all manipulative or lying, and I myself am not innocent on that account. I have a problem trusting women, because of prior experiences. I think it's a defense mechanism.» Boris pauses and underlines that all pickup artist want women in their lives: «It's wonderful to be surrounded by women in general, but it's also about social status, the one who get the most girls is the male with the highest social status. It's the guy we want to be, the talk of the town, the charming guy. But I don't think that is only true within our community.»

As such Boris admits that The Game can be seen as male chauvinist, and that he himself might also be: «I be-

lieve women should be able to cook well, I like to be waited on. I am also the kind of man who would insist on paying, if I was out on a date with a woman. I'll lead the way, decide where we should go and what movie to watch» He then smiles crookedly and adds «But of course ... I'd be open to suggestions»

What's larp got to do with it?

It seems obvious that pickup artist use tools and techniques from roleplaying: they are interacting with bystanders in this strange pervasive game, where they put on roles or personas. They have a set of rules and guidelines set for the social interaction they follow or improvise around. They go with the flow of the game – seizing the emotions and reactions from their co-players. And even more importantly, as Boris says:

«It's about creating something and pushing the limits, that's the essence of it: to create a good experience in interaction with another person»

Just like cutting-edge larps, Gamers are trying to break and explore the borders and boundaries for social interaction and the human psyche. According to Boris, Gamers will go on so-called «border missions» where they will push themselves to do outrageous things; like bathing naked in a fountain in central Copenhagen. «Because - If you can do that, talking to a girl all of sudden doesn't seem so frightening».

As a final note, this interviewer could not help herself telling Boris about larp's experiments with social interaction. Boris' reaction was to conclude that larpers must be insane; «the brain cannot tell the difference between what we play and what we believe to be real», he says. As such - on some obscure level - the pickup artists may know a little something about the buzzword that spawned this issue: bleed.

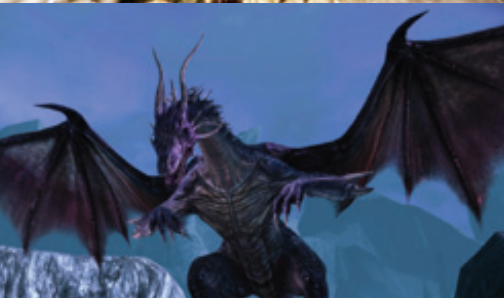
When out-of-game relationships begin and end due to roleplaying, is it then because roleplayers are entering Boris' magic bubble? Are we simply convincing our minds - our social psychological selves - that all the character's emotions and social interaction are real? Are we rewriting our emotional DNA, and in fact playing ourselves? ■





Pixel crush doesn't even begin to explain it

■ TEXT / Annika Waern



In Dragon Age, you can make your character fall in love. As it turns out, players fall in love too.

So, we made it. We've faced countless dangers together, but no battle was worse than facing the nobles in the queen's court. We double-crossed her – that scheming bitch – and you got the throne as the rightful heir.

I'm so happy for you – for us! There are dangers still ahead, but we will continue to face them together, and in the end, we get to be king and queen together!

But why do you look so sad? What is it that you are trying to tell me? You need an heir? You tell me we can't have children... but this is insane! We love each other! How can you put your duties ahead of me? Now you tell me that you are a grey warden and you will never shrink from your duties – neither should I.

I throw the Playstation 3 controller on the table. It's late at night, the kids are asleep, my husband is tapping away at his computer and my Dragon Age lover just broke off with me. I am surprised at the strength of my emotions – he's a cartoon character and not at all my type, a bit childish and sulky. But he truly loves me and I have figured out how to get him into my tent - you have to raise his approval of you to maximum before he will agree to sex. But now it won't happen. I feel frustrated with playing the game poorly, but I also feel – hurt.

Dragon Age: Origins is a single-player roleplaying game. You play a cartoon character, and your actions are limited to battling hordes of enemies and choosing phrases in pre-scripted dialogues. When compared to just about any other form of roleplaying games - multiplayer online games, tabletop, and live-action – the room for actual roleplay is very limited. Whereas other forms of roleplay require careful delimitations to ensure that you keep yourself distinct from your character, single-player computer games establishes that distinction automatically. It is fairly clear that I am sitting in the couch in front of the TV set, and that the character I see on the screen is not me.

It is not surprising that romance turns up in computer games. After all, it turns up in all other forms of roleplay: in multiplayer online games, in tabletop and in live roleplaying. Of all these forms, romance in a computer game must be considered the safest. No one can seriously fall in love with a cartoon character. Still, what I feel is not the empathy you might feel for the protagonist of a film or a movie. I really feel that Alistair has broken off with me. I am experiencing bleed – I am, to some extent, sharing the emotions of my character.

Computer games use a lot of tricks to transport us into a fictional realm, one that we can only access through the window of the screen. The most important is that they offer us a body that we can control in this world – an avatar. As many other computer games, Dragon Age will let you customize this body, and the game also offers you a choice of background story. (I play an elven mage.) Even more important is that you move this body through the world. Our human, physical bodies are what immerse us in the physical world, and hence, it is the control of the avatar that makes us feel like we are moving in the virtual world.

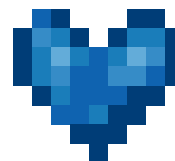
The avatar is also what allows me to interact with the other social beings in the virtual world. Being social is a fundamental human trait. We have basically three different ways to interpret the world around us: as inanimate objects, as tools (that we can use) and as social beings (that we can interact with). Consciously, we tend to view computers as tools, but we have a surprisingly strong tendency to look upon them as social beings. Stanford professors

DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

Heralded as «the spiritual successor to Baldur's Gate», Dragon Age: Origins is a single-player roleplaying game for PC, Playstation 3 and Xbox 360, developed by Bioware. The game lets you play a grey warden, a guardian fighting to save the fantasy realm of Ferelden from a darkspawn invasion.



I am in love
with Alistair...
with a fictional
person in a
made up story
about some-
thing that never
happened...



Byron Reeves and Clifford Nass have shown that we tend to be polite to computers (that is, the actual box on the table), we like them better when they make little jokes, and so on. So when we are given a virtual body and meet with other virtual bodies, and we can converse and joke with them, we are bound to not view them altogether as tools.

So, fundamental psychology offers the first clue as to why bleed is possible in a computer game. The virtual body of the avatar transports us into the virtual world, and our built-in model for interacting with characters in this world is as if they were humans.

I want Alistair back, and Google is my friend. I start to surf game forums and player blogs for clues. It might be possible to go back to an earlier save to correct the problem.

Oh.

'Romance Alistair' yields over a million hits on Google. Obviously, I am not the only one he has dumped. I am absolutely stunned by strengths of emotions that are reported.

«I am in love with Alistair... with a fictional person in a made up story about something that never happened... yes, I feel your pain lol. I regularly dream about him and think about him far too much to be considered healthy. I'm in love with someone that doesn't exist!! pixel crush doesn't even begin to explain it!!! You are not alone...this character is so amazing we're going to need a support group.»

I soon find out that as an elf, Alistair will refuse to marry me no matter how hard I try; the best I can hope to become is his mistress. Looking for options, I figure out that a treacherous elf rouge could have become my lover, but I've killed him already and I never liked him much. I have a brief lesbian fling with Leliana, who falls in love easily and is thoroughly faithful.

The identity we take on in a computer game is not quite that of the scripted character shown on the screen, but nor is it ourselves. In his study of players playing Morrowind and Oblivion, Zach Waggoner identifies the relationship as a 'projected identity' – we play someone that we wish to explore in the context of the game world. Typically, when playing a projected identity, players will adapt his or her actions to gameplay requirements when needed (Waggoner's players had no problems with sneaking into houses to steal), but act according to their personal morals when given a real choice. The elf I'm playing is fairly stern, she knows where her duties lie and seldom jokes. When I experiment with Leliana, it feels precisely like experimentation, triggered by the fact that the game offers the option.

I end up reloading an earlier save and pretending that it didn't happen.

My main reason for breaking off with Leliana is probably – quite frankly – that I don't consider her sexy. The romance experience is most accessible when we adopt a virtual body of your own gender and romance a character aligned with your own sexual preferences. Since the most complex and variable storyline is offered for Alistair, a character that's only romanceable by female characters, it seems likely that the Dragon Age developers believe women to be most interested in playing a complicated romance.

«P Try being a lesbian on this site with all the Alistair fanfiction. Though I can see why all the girls liked him. I wanted to romance Morrigan. Leliana was cool but Morrigan was awesome.»

I play through the game and start a second character. This time I'm determined to explore all possible endings of the Alistair romance (save, reload, replay), including those where my character becomes his queen. This character is less of me; she is the human daughter of a noble, trained as a fighter. The dialogue offers options that depict her as a spoiled, flirtatious brat, so that's how I choose to play her. Alistair falls for her fast and hard. I feel a pang of guilt, as if I am double-crossing my sincere elf who deserves him much more.

The quotes I find on the internet show much of the same thing: feelings of jealousy and guilt pop up for the most unlikely reasons.

«I have to confess myself slept with Zev while with Alistair, I had trouble sleeping that night! Since then it has been Alistair all the way!!! Lol»

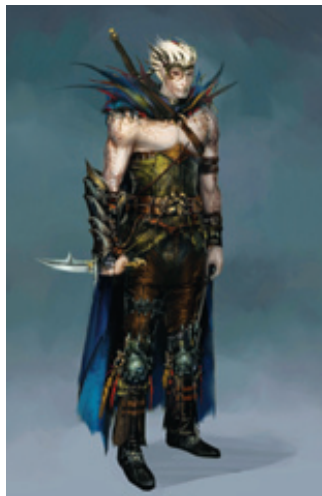
«Whenever a dialogue sequence begins between my new character and Alistair, I feel like I have to be quite careful not to suggest anything inappropriate. It is as if this new character is a friend of my old character and cannot flirt with her friend's boyfriend.»

One way out of these feelings is to create a character that is distinctly different from yourself. Changing gender is one way to avoid identity projection.

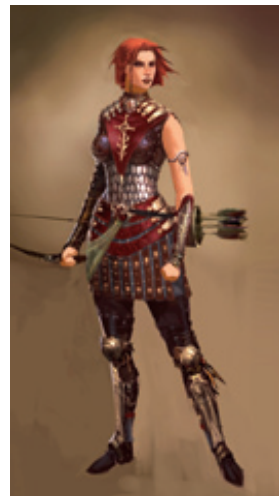
«I had to do a male play-through eventually...because I wanted to romance Zev, but I couldn't bring myself to hurt Alistair's feelings.»

None of the endings really satisfy me, especially not the 'good' one where my character becomes Alistair's

queen. One of the keys to bleed in Dragon Age is that the game offers only partial agency over the storylines. Each and every dialogue offers you a multitude of choices: not only in what you select to say but often also how you say it. But you are only in partial control. The storyline twists out of my grasp, forcing me to either sacrifice my character, or sacrifice



■ *Easy lover: Zevran, elven assassin*



■ *Wine, woman and song: Leliana, Orlesian bard*



■ *First knight: Alistair, grey warden and former templar*

Alistair, or do a very dark deed to allow us both to survive. The last dialogue with Alistair in the 'happy' ending makes me very uneasy. Alistair and I are bound together through a dark secret - and it is already driving us apart. I am reminded of the crime novel 'The postman always calls twice' by James M. Cain, in which a young couple start to mistrust each other after having successfully committed a murder together. The way the storyline constantly eludes the players' control is what truly makes Dragon Age a masterpiece.

«Developing a boyfriend-baffling crush on Alistair is pretty much an integral part of gameplay for a lot of us. So is pitching an even more boyfriend-baffling fit if/when he...

... uh, spoiler alert, I guess...

... dumps you.»

I start my third character, a dwarf commoner with no concern for humans and a very pragmatic view of the world. She's surprisingly easy to play consistently, and as all my characters I allow her to gradually mature from her pragmatic rouge attitudes into some kind of feeling for responsibility. I like her. I let her romance Zevran, the bisexual, unreliable rouge that my first character slighted and killed. Although the sex scenes are lame, I get a distinct feeling that he's the better lover, and the romance develops in a more mature way (first friends, then sex, then love) that makes me feel good about choosing him. I craft an ending that lets everyone I care for survive and be reasonably happy, I circumvent the dark deed, and my dwarf rises to a high position in the dwarf society. This is by far the play-through that I am the most satisfied with – but it



Developing a boyfriend-baffling crush on Alistair is pretty much an integral part of gameplay.

is also the one from which I feel most distanced. I am no longer 'me' in the game.

Here ends my exploration of Dragon Age. Three months later, I spend a bar evening in Helsinki in deep discussion with a fellow female game researcher debating the relative merits of Zevran and Alistair. After a casual comment that 'Alistair is just another noob who needs his virginity popped', a male fellow researcher comments on Facebook that he «is listening to female game researchers talking about romantic relations in Dragon Age, which is about as interesting as hearing them talk about real relations.»

Whom would you romance? ■



■ Scene from the workshop before the game *Delirium*.
Photo by Kristoffer Thuøe

Danger has arrived

■ TEXT / Peter Fallesen

During its first two decades of existence, roleplaying was often labeled as «dangerous». Over the years the criticism died out; yet today we see players coming out of games emotionally as well as physically bruised, unable to shake off their characters. The discussion on «danger» may be more relevant than ever before.

▲ spring evening in 1987, Danish psychologist Werner Regli was interviewed in the evening news. He was there to talk about a threat to the minds of young people in Denmark: A red box with a large dragon on the cover.

D&D had arrived, and here was a serious-looking grownup calling it dangerous. Many a fledgling roleplayer watched the news that evening, and perhaps the «danger» label was all the PR an emerging subculture could ask for. With a serious frown, Regli explained how it was dangerous to act out forbidden actions in your fantasy. He even invoked the term «satanic» to describe the activities taking place in numerous boys' rooms and basements. At the same time the news feature showed a short clip of oddly shaped dice glistening - alluringly like crystals.

If you ask journalist and renowned Danish game designer Lars Andresen, who took up roleplaying after seeing the tv-spot, «dangerous» was a gross overstatement. Lars showed up in the local bookshop the day after and asked for the red box set, which the local sales man quickly ordered home. «We were just killing orcs in our basements», Lars comments. «Trust me - there was nothing dangerous about that.»

As for many others the air of danger did make roleplaying more appealing to Lars: «When you're 16, everything becomes more exciting by being dangerous. And you could see that Regli really meant what he was saying about the dangers of doing prohibited things in your imagination. Hell, you could have put it in a splash on the cover of a roleplaying game as the greatest sales argument ever.»

The danger label was not a pure benefit to the dungeon crawlers twenty years ago. Some parents were nervous about letting their kids play, and in Lars' case, he had to disaster manage several parents after he started a small roleplaying club in his provincial hometown back in the early nineties.

Fat men and emotional trauma

Your late-80's run-of-the-mill D&D scenario may not be that dangerous. But a lot of things have happened since then, and judging from the hyped scenarios these days, maybe the medium is moving towards Regli's satanic forbidden fantasy. Lars Andresen certainly thinks so: «Today some games – primarily specific games at Fastaval – resemble psychological exercises to such an extent that they meddle with the individual's self-perception and other central personal concepts. It seems to me that people are playing psychologist without knowing exactly what they're doing. There is a fair share of people within the community who aren't that mentally strong, and I think it is irresponsible to expose them to psychological experiments at open conventions like Fastaval», he says.

In 2009, author Frederik Berg Østergaard published the dreaded and often discussed Fat Man Down, a scenario about social condemnation of obesity. Within an almost gestalt therapeutic situation, players participate by taunting the heaviest person in the room, who plays the fat man.

«In the game, it is the fattest male player who plays the Fat Man - there is no border between the player and the character», Frederik explains: «The veil between the game world and the player world is paper thin - when the



■ «Weight is not an indicator of skill, character or intellectual acuity, but it is being viewed as such by the vox populi. Fat Man Down is about exposing this broken discourse ...», from the game instructions, Fat Man Down.

Fat Man Down is available at www.jeepen.org/games/fatmandown/



We want to make games that are about something. And sometimes, that something will hurt.

– Frederik Berg Østergaard.



The veil between the game world and the player world is paper thin. When the other characters say you're fat, it's true.

– Frederik Berg Østergaard

other characters say you're fat - it's true. The player is fat. By using this actively in the game's design, I can get to the other players, the intended targets of the game. They begin to feel bad about what they're doing.»

However, the other players do not know that the heaviest player in group participates on other terms than they. By moving the Fat Man to the game master's team the scenario tries to make the potentially traumatizing experience as safe as possible. The Fat Man should be regarded as a tool and more of a non-player-character, where he/she along with the game master try to shape the game so that the other players feel the brunt of the emotional fallout.

It is easy to question the motive and ethics behind games like Fat Man Down, and why game designers create games that leave players feeling bad or emotionally shaken. Going beyond the obvious political element of the game, Frederik argues that it is perhaps also an example of a general change of the nature of role playing as a medium over the last 15 years.

«The players have wanted to be taken further. To experience stronger emotions or situations. Also, it's part of the medium; growing up and leaving the battles between orcs and elves, and the harmless fantasy stories. We want to make games that are about something. And sometimes, that something will hurt.»

A game like Fat Man Down is a strong indicator of a movement away from the safe basement of Gygax' D&D, where it was all about fun and games. But perhaps the danger has been there all along, Frederik states. «Players becoming angry when their character dies in a session of

D&D, or scenes in a larp, where someone is hitting a bit too hard in a fist fight are both examples of high level of personal investment in the game - well beyond the level of 'fun and games'.»

Love in the age of participation

Perhaps nothing shows this element of playing beyond fun and games better than Delirium, a game that ran the summer of 2010 in the very same provincial town in which Lars Andresen started his small roleplaying club almost 20 years ago. Delirium is a solid example of how gaming communities are working with formalizing emotional interaction to create new and groundbreaking experiences. The larp used a series of techniques that again closely resembled therapeutic practices to examine relationships, love, and madness. Separated from the real world within a Dogville-like setting, the players were bombarded with a constantly changing audio/visual scenery warping both their sense of self and of reality. The organizers continuously framed scenes questioning gender roles, relations of power, and perception of time and space.

At the end of the game many players were left mentally shaken and tears were more the rule than the exception. One player was even left physically injured after he had leaped off a dark stage unable to see the floor beneath him clearly because his role had 'forced him to.'

While the general consensus after Delirium was that it was a remarkable game, it was also criticized by some participants for being ethically irresponsible since the organizers had played with tools bordering on ones used within the clinical sciences. However, this is perhaps not so much a fault of the organizers, but instead a sign of a shortcoming within the general roleplaying community. Kristoffer Thurøe who co-organized Delirium discloses some of the reflections the game spawned. «After Delirium we can see that there are areas we must develop for future games. It's very important to communicate to the players where the organizers take responsibility and where they expect the players to take care of themselves and others. It is also necessary to supply the players with the right tools to do this.» Organizers are never solely responsible for what happens in a game, but they create the playground that the players fill out. Kristoffer elaborates: «This discussion has two sides: the organizers' responsibilities and the players'. One cannot be mentioned without the other.»

In the end, games like Delirium and Fat Man Down demonstrate the responsibility that both players and designers face today. It is not the medium in itself that is the

problem. «It's not roleplaying that fucks people up. It's people that fuck people up», Kristoffer puts it bluntly. «Therefore it's very important that we engage in this discussion and keep on developing tools for understanding and handling the experience. The organizers are responsible for making a 'safe' game and for communicating the anticipated experience. But the players have an even greater share of the responsibility in that they are to take responsibility for each other.»

Ethics and uncertainty

When asked about ethical considerations of Fat Man Down, Frederik Berg Østergaard insists on the necessity of not avoiding topics and themes just because they seem wrong in an ethical sense. In Scandinavia there has been explorations of sex, violence and the sensory and ethical boundaries of games. In the end, it is always up to the consenting players and the author/gamemaster, Frederik explains. In his opinion, what game designers need is to have a continuous critical assessment of when things have gone too far.

«If you want to play on the razor's, someone will eventually get hurt. It's our responsibility that people are picked up afterwards. We've become aware of the tools of our trade. What is possible to do, how to do it, and also ways of getting out of it again. Awareness and critical reflection prepare us to handle potentially dangerous situations - I mean, leaving a game of Fat Man Down without any debriefing would be a crime», Frederik concludes.

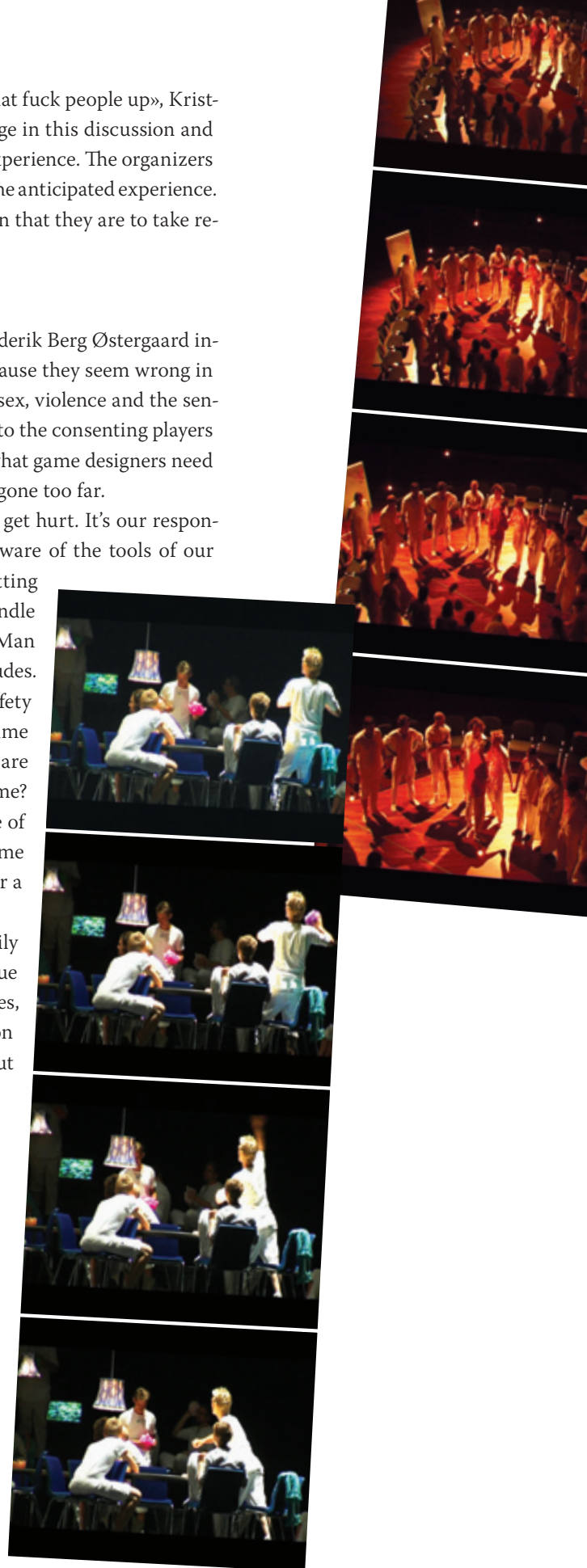
Following Frederik's reasoning, the main focus on player safety and game ethics should perhaps not be towards the actual game situation, but instead on what happens before and after. How are the players briefed, prepared, and conditioned before the game? How are they taken care of after play has ended? An abundance of 'ethical sense' might dull the razor's edge during play, but the same sense needs to be present in absolute abundance before and after a game if we are to keep people from getting hurt (too much).

Perhaps danger reminds us that we are alive and puts our daily lives in context. If larp and roleplaying in general are to continue to grow as a medium for telling stories and creating experiences, perhaps larpers need to push boundaries and keep balancing on the razor's edge. Leaps and growth presuppose risk, for without risk, how does a medium stay on the cutting edge of culture. ■



It's not roleplaying that fucks people up. It's people that fuck people up.

– Kristoffer



Loving the game

■ TEXT / Marie Wolfsberg Oscilowski ■ PHOTO / Peter Munthe-Kaas

In the dream world of the game, it's easy to form an ephemeral relationship. Why is it so hard to leave them behind?



Most roleplayers know someone, know of someone or have themselves tried playing a character that formed a very close personal relation with another character. These emotions and relations are often very intense and can result in what is known as the post-larp effect, where the players experience difficulties leaving their newly created emotions behind. When you simulate the big emotions: anger, hatred or – most importantly – love, what happens to all the feelings when the game is over? Do they just go away? Were they ever really there? Or were they hidden agendas of your own subconscious?

All about chemistry

Ida and Erikard played a couple in the Danish larp *Delirium*, which focused on love and relationships. Today, they are a couple in real life too. Do they think that the game was a factor in their process of falling in love?

«It is the chemistry you have outside of the game that decides if you play well together, and it is the same chemistry that can lead to falling in love. We might as well have met each other somewhere else. Although the preparations with workshops and the encouragement to play close to home really got us bonding and sharing intimate details with one another, that would probably have taken a lot longer to share if we were dating or just friends. In that way *Delirium* kind of pushed us together.»

I ask if they think that there is always a risk of strong feelings developing in game. «Roleplaying in itself doesn't create lasting relationships post-game. If there is really something there, the game can definitely work as a catalyst, but the attraction is probably there already. It's so much easier to create new relationships with people you feel attracted to beforehand. And much more dangerous too. Because it's easier, you go further, and that's when you end up with all these strong emotions afterwards, not knowing what makes sense.»



■ *Ars Amandi*: It's not really sex. It's performed by touching the lower arms and shoulders, thereby representing the act of having sex. It's an abstraction - but then again, so is fetishism.

DELIRIUM

A Danish larp that was run in the summer of 2010. The players signed on as couples, but were forbidden to partner up with an actual boy- or girlfriend. Several of the couples experienced so-called «post larp crushes».



Hard to put feelings behind you

Trying to avoid the complications of constructed relationships doesn't always help though, as Frikard says: «Once I tried playing a game where I had constructed a relationship to another player who I had no romantic chemistry with, whatsoever, in real life, and I still needed a couple of days to remind myself what was real afterwards.» I ask how you can know when it's real and when it's not?

«You need to wait. Sort through everything. Talk about it with the person you were playing with. It can be really hard to put these feelings behind you, maybe especially when they are romantic. After a while you can tell what is real. But you need to be prepared, when you decide to play close to home, that it probably will mess with your emotional life, and that there really isn't a way to predict what is going to happen. These are real emotions we are playing with and we can end up with very loose borders between the feelings of our characters and our own. That's why it's so hard to leave behind, but maybe also why it's so good. We, as players, should take this very seriously.»

So, is it real?

With Frikard and Ida becoming a couple after playing together, I wonder if they have any restrictions now about playing relationships based on love in other games. Would it be fine with them if their partner went off to play in a relationship with someone else? «You could put it like this, if Delirium was to be produced again and Frikard was going to play it with someone else, I would definitely have a problem with it,» Ida says with a smile. ■



If Delirium was to be produced again and Frikard was going to play it with someone else, I would definitely have a problem with it.

– Ida





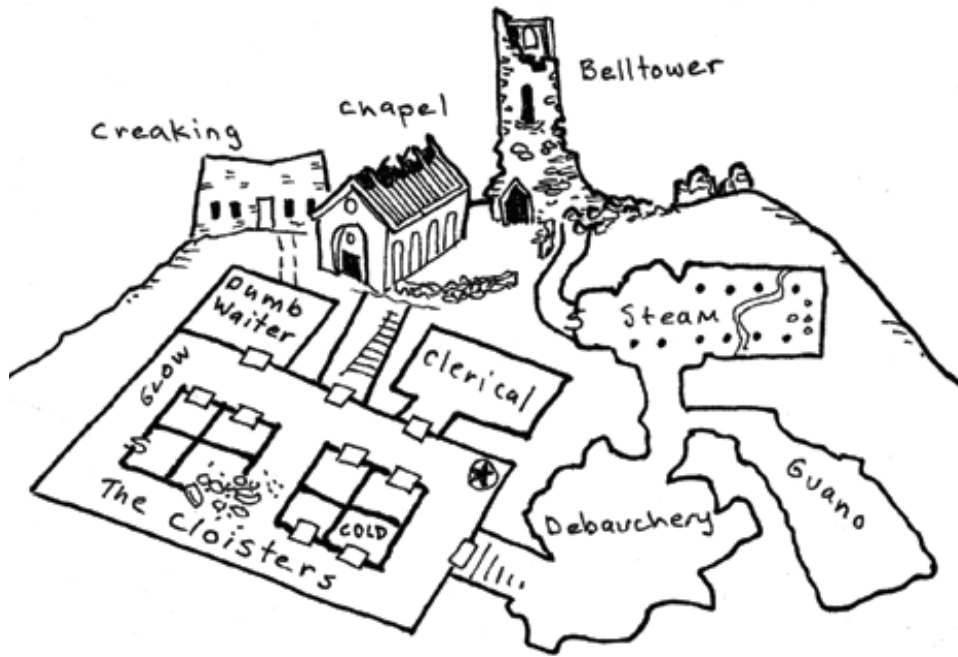
Not your dad's dungeons

■ TEXT & ILLUSTRATION / Tony Dowler

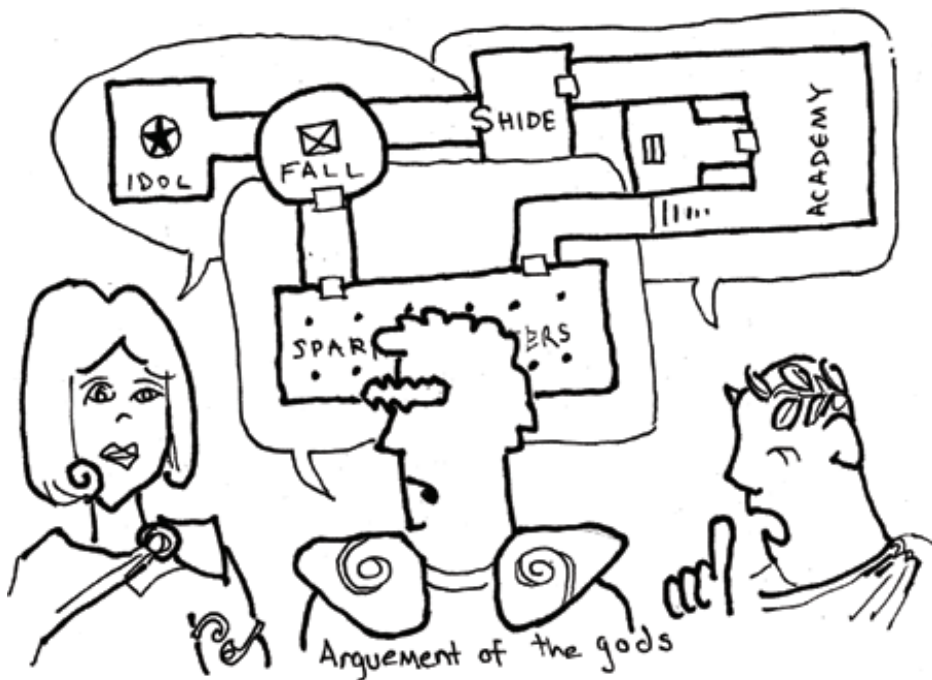
Dungeons are places. But they are also conversations, ideas, feelings, and memories.

If you've ever played a fantasy roleplaying game, chances are that at some point, your character entered a dark stone corridor leading to an underground complex filled with traps, monsters and treasure. Fantasy gamers have a word for these complexes: Dungeons. They're a trope, a highly-loved cliché.

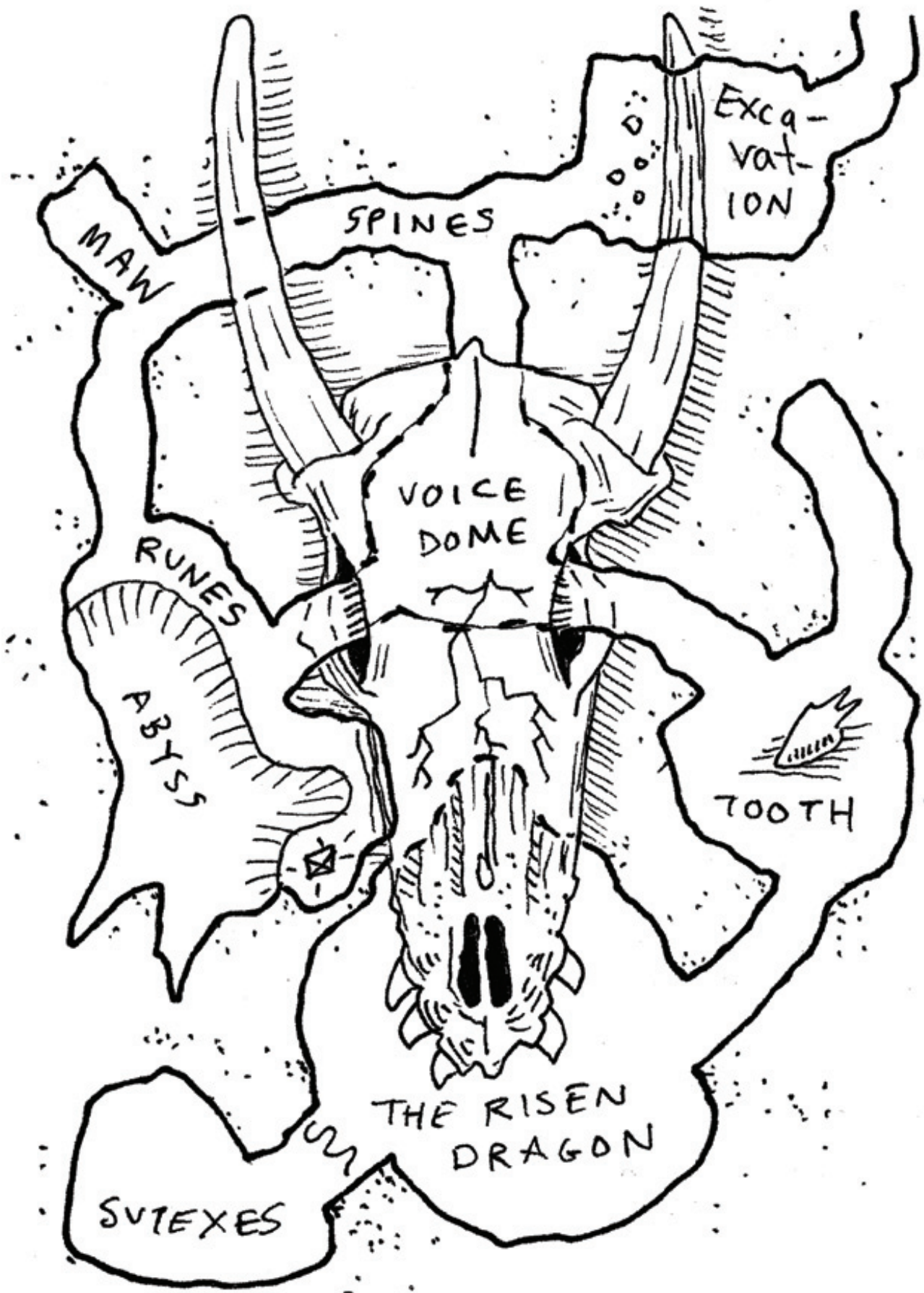
Let's start to think differently about them. I don't mean only to think about new encounters for your characters, or how to provide better play experiences, but also to bring new and different cognitive tools to how we imagine and use the dungeon.



◀ Here's a dungeon. It has elements to inspire interesting play. With multiple entrances it can be approached from different directions. It has concrete locations: The Cloisters. It has potential dangers: Cold and Steam. It has themes that might inspire any number of things: Debauchery. When a game master and some players explore this dungeon, they will create a unique adventure, a story, and a game.



◀ Here are some gods, and they are arguing. Their argument takes the form of a dungeon. Why is this? Perhaps in this world when gods speak, the things they talk about become real. Here, in the shape of a dungeon. Its contentious, difficult form is a reflection of the argument. The gods will not be able to resolve their argument in words. Undoubtedly a hero or two will be required to enter the real maze and explore it to its end. Perhaps the gods see this as a contest. Perhaps their argument is about the best way to challenge or dispose of heroes. Or perhaps the twists and turns of the argument are reflected in the hero's journey.



MAW

SPINES

Excavation

VOICE DOME

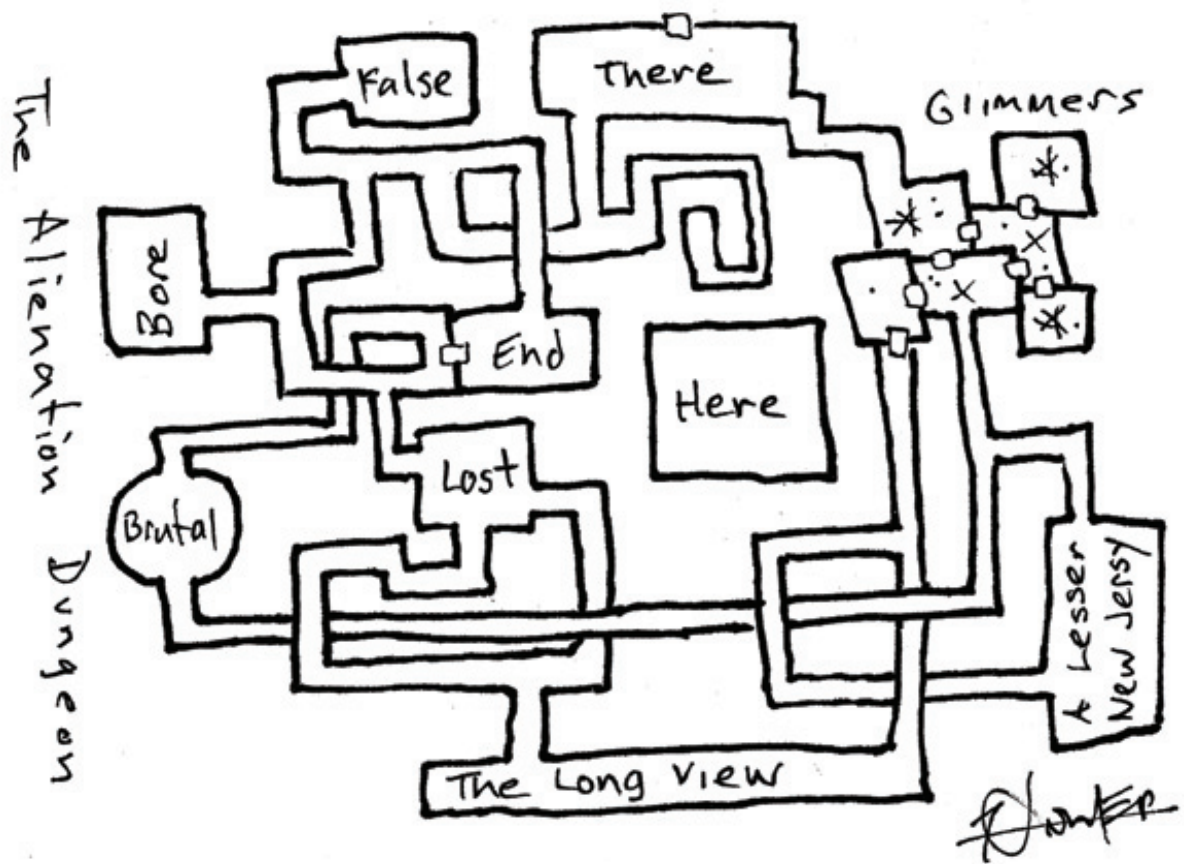
RUNES

ABYSS

TOOTH

THE RISEN DRAGON

SUTEXES



▲ Here a spirit of alienation has built a labyrinth for itself. This is always happening – a memory, a desire, a secret or a wound starts to gather details around itself: like how a pearl forms around a grain of sand in an oyster’s gut. In this case, what has formed is a place. Even now a half-mad wizard is plotting to plunder this place’s secrets and powers.

◀ Something was buried here; better for all if it had stayed buried. But all things buried will find an outlet eventually. In this case, the buried horror has given birth to a dungeon. Soon, someone will have to go down there and destroy the Awful Thing, or else allow it to force its twisted nature upon the kingdom.

Dungeons are like places, of course, but they are also like conversations, ideas, feelings, and memories. Like all these, dungeons can be explored. We can talk about them, imagine them, play them, hang them on a wall and look at them from time to time, create them for mere fun and throw them away, share them with others, recall them in story.

All these dungeons were published through my blog Year of the Dungeon and are free for non-commercial use (www.blog.microdungeons.com). ■

Who were you, Santiago ?

Czech roleplayers explore the anatomy of revolution.

■ TEXT / Eirik Fatland ■ PHOTO / Li Xin



THE COURT OF MORAVIA

A twelve-member larp production team based in Brno, the main city of the Czech region of Moravia. Founded in 2001 in the back yard of Petr «The Badger» Pouchlý. Originally devoted to hosting Vampire : The Masquerade, the Court has since become the foremost proponent of chamber larps in the Czech Republic. As of 2011, the Court's home is a large office and performance space in central Brno, where they work on both volunteer projects and commercial larps.
www.courtformoravia.com

LARPVIKEND

An annual chamber larp festival targeting Brno's large student community, with events held throughout the city. Larpvikend each year attracts 100-200 players of whom up to 50% have never participated in larp before. The 7th larpvikend had several English-language games, and attracted participants from Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Norway.
www.larpvikend.cz



■ *Some of the props distributed to players before the game.*



We stand solemnly around a cold body, displayed on lit-de-parade. Outside (we imagine) the masses are shouting his name: «Santiago! Santiago!» Are they shouting with love or hatred? In protest or celebration of his murder? We do not know - for we no longer belong to the people of the streets. We were his closest: old friends, lovers, collaborators, traitors. Many of us carry a yellow rose, or are garlanded in yellow cloth. Yellow was the colour of Santiago's revolution. Our revolution.

Each of us, in turn, begin our speeches to the deceased. An outpouring of memories and emotion. Not all of us are truly grieving. Not all of us agreed with the direction he took the revolution in this nameless latin american country. Who was Estavan Santiago? Democrat or despot, hero or turncoat? Which forces brought about his untimely end?

The speeches are begun, not concluded. As the last beginning is read, the lights are turned off, music is played, the mourners walk off-stage, and the next scene is prepared. When the mourners re-emerge, Santiago himself stands on the stage, surrounded by many of the funeral speakers. He is no-one special, now, a radical young student amongst other radical young students, all fearful the police might discover their revolutionary pamphlets. During the next three hours, we will follow his path to the pinnacle of power, the sacrifices that brought him there, and the destinies of the people around him.

Between larp and the theatre

«El día de Santiago» is the most recent production of veteran Czech larp-makers Court of Moravia. It premiered at the 7th Brno Larpweekend, the Court's short-larp festival. As with most Moravian productions, it is designed for replayability. During this festival, it is run five times, each time for a new group of players.

Casual observers would be forgiven for thinking they were watching a theatre play. El Dia De Santiago is played in a black box stage, with symbolic and exaggerated costumes, under theatrical lights. The three elevated platforms that constitute its scenography change purpose from moment to moment, the way theatre scenography does: In one scene, they are simply platforms. In the next, the benches of a school. Between scenes, the participants carefully consult their scripts, containing scene-by-scene instructions for where they are to stand and what they must do during the next few minutes.

But this is still, recognizably, larp. There is no audience, except for your correspondent. The «actors» (around 10 young Czechs) are students, not thespians. The instructions they follow are rudimentary: they know only what must be accomplished in a given scene, but the path to that end belongs to them. The joy, for these players, is in exploring the drama of the moment, and following the unfolding story.



■ *As the funeral speeches are held, Santiago sits invisibly on top of his coffin.*

EL DÍA DE SANTIAGO

- Concept and direction by Jana Pouchlá, Petr Pouchlý and Pavel Gotthard.
- Production by the Court of Moravia.
- Santiago played by David Klimeček.
- 4 hours (incl. prebrief and debrief)
- 10 players
- Premiere: November 5th 2010.



■ *Santiago's decisions after assuming the presidency drove many of the conflicts amongst his followers.*

We are all Santiago

And what a story it is! Here is love, anger, betrayal, politics, family, religion; an emotional rollercoaster that seemingly without effort crosses back and forth between the melodramatic and the profound. A comrade in arms emerges from prison after a decade, and proposes to his childhood love, not knowing she has just agreed to marry Santiago. A group of old revolutionaries meet, worrying about the direction their revolution has taken. In the name of that Revolution, a soldier is ordered to execute a woman who is also his daughter, and all players hold their breath as he lifts the gun, crying. From such fragmented scenes, a greater narrative emerges.

Santiago himself is only present in some of the scenes. He is not a main character in a theatrical or cinematic sense - the main characters are the people around him. He embodies their dilemmas, his actions provoke their choices. As Santiago falls from grace, pushed by the necessities of realpolitik, he becomes a metaphor for the tragedy of youthful idealism everywhere. As he is shot, so are we all.

What art looks like

It has been said that larp cannot be considered a mature form of art until the form is used to produce original works of exceptional artistic value. Many of the classics of Nordic larp - from Martin Ericsson's adaptation of «Hamlet» to the Sopranos-inspired «Executive Game» fail this test, being derivative of works in other media. The true Hamlet will always be Shakespeare's script, performed in a theatre, never the larp.

But «El día de Santiago» is the real thing, a complex and unique story, conceived of and executed entirely as live roleplaying. A theatrical adaptation of «El día de Santiago» seems perfectly feasible, and would probably be artistically successful. But the true Santiago would always be the larp, never the theatre play.

We can only hope its creators are willing to make the project available to English-speaking players. If not, there has never been a better reason to learn Czech. ■



■ *Players received instructions detailing their characters goals and starting position for each scene. As a result, El día de Santiago looked theatrical.*

IRL

Rannveig Revhaug's first novel, «IRL» was released in 2010. The young lady, the main character of the book, makes her way through a world and a life feeling like a series of computer games. Here is an excerpt.

Warp Zone

Princess T. said, 6 hours and 14 minutes ago:

Subject: Come rescue me!

Help!

Pacman said, 6 hours and 13 minutes ago:

Re: Come rescue me!

Princess T: Hope somebody else can help. I have to eat supper.

Mustachioed Luigi said, 6 hours and 9 minutes ago:

Subject: Sexual liberation

Perhaps slightly off topic, but anyway: I'm noticing girls are getting more like boys when it comes to casual sex/one night stands. Makes it much easier for us guys to get a sense of who's up for some fun and who still want to be prudes. Way to go, girls! Let's be available to each other.

Lara C said, 6 hours and 5 minutes ago:

Re: Sexual liberation

You're probably a fat, middle-aged geezer who can't get some anyway. One of those ogling girls at the beach until the eyes pop out of your polsihed skull. You're a jerk for calling girls who don't want to sleep with everyone and everything «prudes». It's perfectly possible to have fun without being promiscuous. And some girls actually have morals. You don't seem very insightful, just horny and stupid. Available, my ass.

Sonic (sth) said, 6 hours and 4 minutes ago:

Re: Re: Sexual liberation

Oooh, angry. You probably never had something blue.

Mustachioed Luigi said, 5 hours and 53 minutes ago:

Re: Re: Re: Sexual liberation

That's feminists for you, crashing the debate and not letting others have their fun. I bet you don't allow your boyfriend any fun either. No, of course: You don't have a boyfriend.

Zelda said, 5 hours and 53 minutes ago:

Re: Re: Re: Sexual liberation

It's polished and insightful. Not polsihed and insightfull.

Lara C said, 5 hours and 52 minutes ago:

Re: Re: Re: Re: Sexual liberation

Perhaps it's time to find some other hobby than being a spelling nazi? Would be interesting to hear your views on the war on terror, for example. But I guess you probably have more important things to to. Putting on pearl earrings, doing your nails?

Zelda said, 5 hours and 52 minutes ago:

Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Sexual liberation

Ha, ha. You are making an ass of yourself, Lara C. You're probably mixing me up with Princess T. ... Pearls and manicure are by the way totally compatible with intelligence, just so you know. Unfortunately, no one will bother to rescue you, being so bitchy and «independent».

Fatlarry said, 5 hours and 50 minutes ago:

Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Sexual liberation

Haha, go Zelda. Lara C: How 'bout rescuing me instead? Hahahhahar.

Lara C said, 5 hours and 50 minutes ago:

Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Sexual liberation

Zelda: the only thing I need rescuing from is lame, domesticated little princesses such as yourself. I feel sorry for you. Fatlarry: I'll pwn you in armwrestling anytime.

Fatlarry said, 5 hours and 49 minutes ago:

Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Sexual liberation

'only one thing i like even better than a good and totally unserious debate:

A real catfight! Hahaha.

Zelda said, 5 hours and 48 minutes ago

Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Sexual liberation





YOU'RE PROBABLY A FAT, MIDDLE-AGED GEEZER WHO CAN'T GET SOME ANYWAY.



Lara C: You probably feel «sorry» for most things. Take a happy pill.

Commanderkeen said, 5 hours and 48 minutes ago:

Subject: I want candy

Happy pills? Tell me more!

Princeofpersia said, 5 hours and 48 minutes ago:

Re: I want candy

Don't take those pills. They make you mellow, and make you run much slower. A strength potion is better.

Commanderkeen said, 5 hours and 45 minutes ago:

Re: Re: I want candy

Princeofpersia: Ok. What kind of potion? Soda?

Zelda said, 5 hours and 44 minutes ago:

Re: Re: Re: I want candy

Commanderkeen: I don't think you're old enough for the «strength potion» he's talking about.

Princeofpersia said, 5 hours and 43 minutes ago:

Re: Re: Re: Re: I want candy

Commanderkeen: The red one. Not the blue.

Zelda said, 5 hours and 42 minutes ago:

Re: Re: Re: Re: I want candy

Princeofpersia: What's in the blue one?

Princeofpersia said, 5 hours and 40 minutes ago:

Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: I want candy

Zelda: Don't know. Just that it's poisonous.

Yoshi said, 5 hours and 36 minutes ago

Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: I want candy

It makes my throat burn.

Princeofpersia said, 5 hours and 35 minutes ago:

Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: I want candy

Yoshi: Yuck.

Zelda said, 5 hours and 34 minutes ago:

Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: I want candy

Yoshi: The red or the blue one?

Yoshi said, 5 hours and 16 minutes ago:

Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: I want candy

Zelda: Both of them.

Princeofpersia: I just gave a factual statement about the side effects of the strength potion. A burning throat is quite unpleasant, so I thought Commanderkeen and others wishing to try it should know about this in advance.

The young lady said, 5 hours and 15 minutes ago:

Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: I want candy

Yoshi: I had a burning throat once. That was quite unpleasant.

Princeofpersia: I don't trust men in white pants. Go find yourself a boyband.

The following post apparently has been deleted by a moderator.

Princeofpersia said, 5 hours and 14 minutes ago:

Subject: Re: Re: Come and rescue me!

Princess T.: Where are you?

Princess T. said, 5 hours and 5 minutes ago:

Re: Re: Re: Come and rescue me!

Princeofpersia: I don't know.

Princeofpersia said, 5 hours and 2 minutes ago:

Re: Re: Re: Re: Come and rescue me!

Princess T.: Ok. But if I find you, you have to marry me.

Princess T. said, 4 hours and 48 minutes ago:

Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Come and rescue me!

Princeofpersia: Ok, I guess. Hurry, then.

Princeofpersia said, 4 hours and 42 minutes ago:

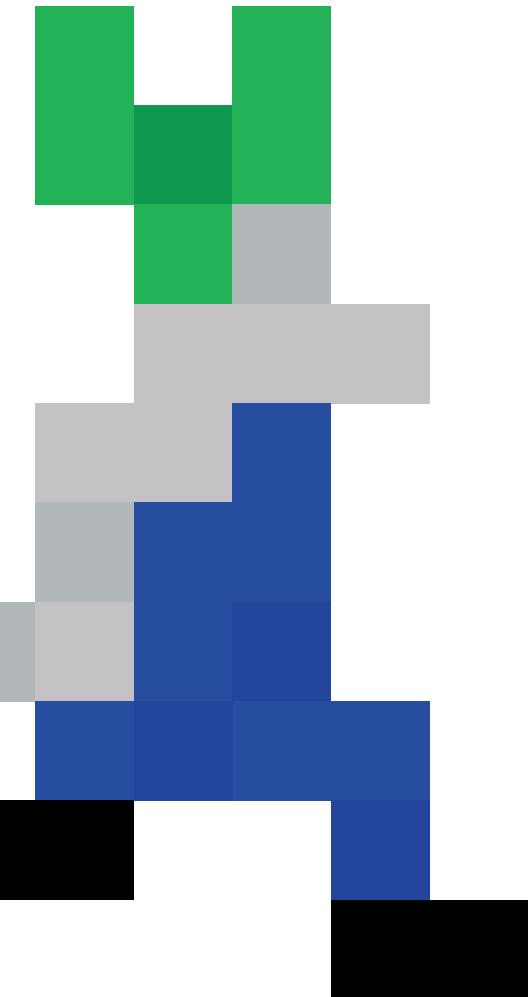
Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Come and rescue me!

Princess T: I'll be there within one hour.





IT'S SURPRIS-
ING, SAD OR
DOESN'T REALLY
MATTER MUCH,
DEPENDING ON
YOUR POINT OF
VIEW.



Ladder game

The young lady walks through a door that slams heavily shut behind her and disappears.

She must have taken a wrong turn. This is a storage room in a basement? The young lady takes a look around. A stairway with three steps, that's it. At the top of the stairs there is a small platform, but no door or anything else. The stairway doesn't lead anywhere. The young lady notices a turtle walking leisurely down from the platform in her direction.

THE YOUNG LADY:

Aah - (Jumps.) Aah - (Jumps.) Aah - (Jumps.)

The young lady jumps on top of the turtle until another young lady appears in mid-air, then another and another. She keeps on jumping as the young ladies keep on multiplying; soon, there is an abundance of them.

One by one they land to her right, until the turtle finally runs out of young ladies.

Without prior notice the shell speeds to the left and smashes into the wall, ricochets back towards the stairway, back to the wall, to the stairs, the wall, the stairs, the wall, the stairs while all the apparently identical young ladies stand to the right of the small platform, watching.

THE YOUNG LADY (CONTINUES):

(Take a step to the right.)

THE APPARENTLY IDENTICAL YOUNG LADIES:

(Take a step to the right.)

THE YOUNG LADY:

(Gapes.)

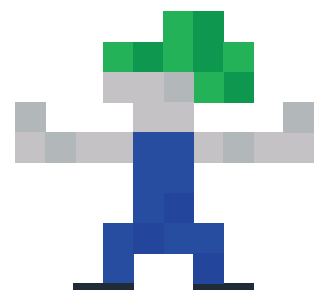
THE APPARENTLY IDENTICAL YOUNG LADIES:

(Gape.)

THE YOUNG LADY:

(Doesn't know whether to laugh or cry. Does neither. Moves as far to the right as she can, a ladder is hanging above her head.) People. You have to lift me up there. Thanks in advance.

Just as she thinks this, she is lifted up on the shoulders of two apparently identical young ladies. This way she is just able to reach the ladder and can climb towards new heights. Behind her, a small army of apparently identical young ladies follow.





Out of this world

The young lady falls out of a hole on the left end of the wall. After her, the flock of apparently identical young ladies. The young lady spots a cliff on the horizon, but none of the apparently identical young ladies look like they intend to stop before they get there. They must build a bridge in order to move on.

THE YOUNG LADY:

Hey, you. In the first row.

AN APPARENTLY IDENTICAL YOUNG LADY:

Me?

THE YOUNG LADY:

Yes. You have to build the bridge.

AN APPARENTLY IDENTICAL YOUNG LADY:

Ok.

THE YOUNG LADY:

(Marks where the bridge must be.) From here and over there.

AN APPARENTLY IDENTICAL YOUNG LADY:

Ok.

The apparently identical young lady starts building the bridge where the young lady wanted it. The young lady considers digging a tunnel instead. She shouldn't have, because just then the rest of the young ladies start digging. Unfortunately, many of the apparently identical young ladies get completely lost building or digging. The young lady loses count of them. They just fall off the cliff or dig themselves out, vanishing without a sound. It's surprising, sad or doesn't really matter much, depending on your point of view.

THE YOUNG LADY:

Hey, you. In the first row.

ANOTHER APPARENTLY IDENTICAL YOUNG LADY:

Me?

THE YOUNG LADY:

Yes. You must block the path until the bridge is ready.

ANOTHER APPARENTLY IDENTICAL YOUNG LADY:

Ok.

THE YOUNG LADY:

(Marks where the path must be blocked.) Here.

AN APPARENTLY IDENTICAL YOUNG LADY:

Ok.

The other apparently identical young lady walks over to the marked spot and blocks the others.

THE YOUNG LADY:

Hey, you. In the first row.

A THIRD APPARENTLY IDENTICAL YOUNG LADY:

Me?

THE YOUNG LADY:

Yes. You must tear down all the other bridges in our way, so we'll get safely across.

A THIRD APPARENTLY IDENTICAL YOUNG LADY:

Ok.

THE YOUNG LADY:

Go ahead.

The third apparently identical young lady starts tearing down all the other bridges. When the indented bridge is ready, the young lady stops the blockade, walks over to the other side and climbs through a needle's eye together with the rest of the apparently identical young ladies.

Only 38 per cent of them make it to the finish. ■



9/11 & Back to the future

■ TEXT & PHOTO / Frederik Berg Østergaard



■ *A typical scene at a Polish male larp den.*

Travelling on an endless tour of Jeepform evangelism, Frederik Berg Østergaard takes you deep into the heart of the terra incognita of Polish larp.

«I'm with the pilots, you know», I said to my plane buddy. «You must be larping», he replied. It made sense. We stopped talking. I was close to Munich, when the hangover, or maybe the fever began to subside.

Wrocław. I knew of the city from an old werewolf-style freeform game I played in for three years. Our game master lost patience with us and killed everybody like rabid dogs. I still feel a little sting when I recall those days. I guess it was a form of proto bleed. We still get into heated arguments over that inglorious finale.

Famed for its many bridges, Wrocław had nothing I could recognize from my memories of that campaign. Larp as a tool for tourism failed me miserably. Or perhaps the city of Wrocław failed to live up to my fictive memories.

The Barteks

Passing through a dilapidated suburban quarter, I could see how recent flooding of the city had damaged many of the buildings. Was Wrocław the St. Louis of Poland?

«No one lives there anymore», Annika said. She was named after a character in *Pippi Longstockings*. «My parents really liked Pippi», she said. «It's not a typical Polish name».

I immediately blurted out: «Swedish is the language of Gods and Heroes». My hosts just looked at me. I tried to compose myself after this surge of national feeling. I'm not even Swedish. Fortunately, I was saved by the arrival of Bartek.

Bartek was evidently a very Polish name. Everyone was called Bartek. We went to his house. He shared it with several other Barteks. I asked one of my hosts to pose for the camera, Polish larp style. He put on a white doctor's jacket and a shotgun and stood in front of a RAMBO poster. This was clearly a male larp den.

I was there on the never-ending Jeepform evangelism tour. I had met a person called Kuba at the Odraz larp convention in the Czech Republic. Kuba was not his real name. There's a peculiar tradition of using

your web handle instead of your real name, very popular in the eastern bloc. Since everyone was called Bartek, it was very practical.

Kuba was the handle for my contact. He told me about a series of larps they did in a public building in Wrocław. Larps open for everybody. You could walk in straight from the street. The larps lasted for a couple of hours. The rules were written on a blackboard. It sounded to me a lot like freeform. Then came the punchline. They play a different game every week for a year.

I asked him for an example of a game. «Shoes», he said. «Shoes?» I was confused.

The word on the blackboard was «shoes». That was the rule of the game. The games started as you entered the room. No character handouts, no workshops, just enter the room and discover both the game and the rules.

I had to see the shoes

A couple of months after meeting Kuba in the Czech Republic, I was in Wrocław in the southern part of Poland. I had to see Polish larp for myself. The main attraction was the convention *Inne Sfery*, where Kuba was the main organiser. It had attracted larpers from all over Poland.

«Almost every week there is a convention somewhere in Poland», one of the Barteks said.

Inne Sfery had everything you would expect from a roleplaying convention. Nerd cred ran high along the halls of the community center. Fantasy and sci-fi books, dice-vendors, re-enactment swordplay, concerts, theatrical plays, science presentations and the occasional astronomer. His workshop concerning Jupiter was a blast.



I asked him for an example of a game. «Shoes», he said.



■ Sometimes you have to know Polish to understand what's going on.



A terrible bird-like monster haunting the world of the boy.

Also, an incredibly well dressed woman running a series of story game introductions. The American take on interactive storytelling had invaded Poland. They demoed more games than I had ever seen. «First time is free, I guess», I said and mentioned my run-in with the story gamer colony of Greenfield, MA. The woman was suitably impressed after I namedropped Emily Care Boss.

Language had not really been a problem before, but I was elated to meet a breaker of horses who happened to speak a perfect King's English. We went to meet the company behind the Polish *Neuroshima* games. Post-apocalyptic classic tabletop roleplaying. Their product range was already quite large, with several supplements and excellent print designs. Had I been more into that scene, I would have loved it. Instead I defeated one of the designers of a board game version, *Neuroshima Hex*. «Beginner's luck», he grunted. I didn't bother hiding my obvious self-satisfaction.

9/11, larp or reality

Late at night I was ushered into a waiting car, which promptly sped up. Bartek said: «Let's go to Spiz. They've got the best beer here in Wrocław.» I didn't protest. I had been there the night before. The beer was good. Really very good. As we were driving, the 9/11-survivor, as I later came to call him, was telling a story about his dad, who picked up a piss-drunk Polish man riding a bike on the highway. The guy passed out in his car, and he drove him 700 km, only to dump him at a beach near Gdańsk.

«Imagine his reaction when he woke up», the 9/11 survivor continued. «Did I bike all the way to Gdańsk?» We all laughed. I realized they were going to wait until I passed out from the beer and drive me to a beach in Gdańsk.

«I survived 9/11», the 9/11 survivor said after we got to Spiz. «I was there when it happened». For a minute I thought he talked about a larp. «Everything was covered in dust», he continued. «We had no idea what had happened. We had gotten really drunk the night before.» He said smiling. «We went outside and everything was covered in dust. I had to ask a passersby what had happened. 'Everything', he said. 'They attacked us.'»

It still sounded like a larp. An impressive larp, even, until the survivor proceeded to take out a worn airplane ticket and placed it on the table. «I have it in my wallet at all times. It reminds me of surviving.» It was true. He had been there.



«I survived 9/11», the 9/11 survivor said.

«Color me impressed», I said. In reality, I would have been more impressed if it had been a larp. For a moment, the game I imagined seemed so cool.

Future asshole

Piotr, the main organiser of the larp-only convention, HardCon, was telling me about a larp - or jeep, as they called a Jeepform inspired larp - where they had gotten access to a real, authentic DeLorean, straight from *Back to the Future*. Apparently some fan had purchased the car in the States, had it dismantled and shipped to Poland, and then re-assembled it.

«I called Kuba and said ‘we have a DeLorean, make a game using it’», Piotr said. The game turned out to be a time traveling larp, where the players would use the car as a way of moving back and forth in time. «I remember one scene, where we would go back to the future, to ask my future self what to do. This guy played my character in the future», Piotr said, pointing at Kuba. «And he just spat at me. So much for the future.»

We laughed. I knew all about the DeLorean, with its gull-wing doors. You had to give kudos to the level of props in that game. It reminded me of my old boss, who said: «Everything becomes better with a helicopter». At the time I wasn't sure I agreed with him. It seemed like an awful lot of fluff for a very low return.

One of the larps they played at the convention was a *Worms* game. Wrapped in tight blue plastic bags the players were squirming on the ground trying to move around. I never understood how they actually played the game. I asked a wrapped up Piotr how they managed conflict resolution. «We use bazookas, super-sheep, Grandmas», he explained.

«Of course», I replied. It reminded me of the popular cat-larps of Norway and Sweden.

I wasn't the first time they played it. «Once one of the players rolled into dog poop», Piotr said. «Nobody want-

ed to play with that player, so he won the game.»

Male crows

I had been told about an interesting political larp, called *Wroniec* which was to be played later that night. The larp was based on a book of the same name, by Jacek Dukaj. The game took place during a time of martial law in communist Poland. The title translated roughly as ‘male crow’, but was also an acronym for the military dictatorship. The larp played out from the perspective of a ten year old boy and had a surreal/fairy tale vibe. I had the impression of a terrible bird-like monster haunting the world of the boy.

Due to language deficiency on my part, I had no clue as to what was really going on or what was the significance of an empty picture frame which was moved back and forth. It certainly looked like art, but also a long shot from 360 degrees style larping. The ‘costumes’ were such that maybe a little helicopter or a DeLorean would have improved the game.

I retreated to the local sports bar. There was no alcohol sold at the convention, and my usual convention style suffered as a result. The sports bar was a very popular place to chase the dragon. I hadn't brought my boffer sword or my dice, so I just chased a couple of beers.

A group of attractive female larpers from Gdańsk joined us at the bar. One of them had a sword tattooed on her back. «Fight to win», she explained the tattoo. «I always get what I want.»

I looked at her. «...maybe I can see it?», I tried.

«Perhaps some day», she replied.

I went to bed alone, with a fever.



■ So much cooler if it had been a larp prop.



Piotr 'Kula' Milewski



There was a stir when the idea of a Jeepform game about the Smoleńsk plane crash was born.

Age, sex, location?

33, male, Gdynia, one of the three great cities growing together along the Baltic coast. We call the place TriCity. Perfect place to open your mind, miles of empty shore designed for staring at the sea.

When I was being hired by the company where I do work right now (as the «Cards and Card Games Specialist» in a R&D division), I had to do a portfolio. I counted over 20 games as writer or cowriter, organizer or co-organizer of larp-only conventions like Hardkon 2007, 2008, 2010 and Puckon 2007, 2009 and 2010. Between 2004 and 2006 I was also the coordinator of all the works on the Flamberg convention's main game setting.

Is there a geographical hot-spot for Polish larping?

Larp happens pretty much everywhere. Traditionally, big cities with universities and students (Warsaw, Kraków, Wrocław, Poznań, Szczecin, Lublin, TriCity and some more), but from time to time a group writing great games arises in the middle of nowhere.

Geographical hot-spot... There used to be one. The place was called Mirów. There were two medieval castles, abandoned, approximately 2,5 km from each other. Rocks, wild forests, moorland in between. The first big games to take place over there were back in the early 90's. Absolutely magical place. Strong feeling of being cast away. Strange beauty.

Now, the whole land is private and the owner wants to build a golf court. Go capitalism, go.

Are there any topics that are avoided in Polish larp?

Haven't noticed. There was a stir, when the idea of a Jeepform game about the Smoleńsk plane crash was born. It led to a situation where at least three games are being written about the subject. Rumors indicate that a few will be pre-

sented at the Golden Mask competition (Golden Gate and Golden Mask are larp competitions in Poland).

What do you dislike about the Scandinavian style of playing?

You guys are checking new directions. In my opinion, sometimes you go wrong and beg for disaster. Some of your games are not games but plain mindfuckers – and you know it. You're playing not with fire, but with the minds of others. Games are better tools and worse weapons than most people think. You know it too. And you're still playing. Naughty, naughty. You turned your eyes to this piece of horizon where the kingdom of strong emotions and all its treasures seems to be. Some of you took a seat on larp games and headed there for a crusade. I see it and all I can do is to take my handkerchief out of my pocket and wave goodbye.

Still, I do have a lot of respect and truly admire your courage.

The thing is, I think we go more into comedy. The absurd, wacky and crazy games. To many people, life brings more sadness than they need. A stupid boss. Broken car. Jealous boyfriend. Slutty girlfriend. Mom with depression, dad with debts, sister pregnant with an asshole, and best friend stuck in a venomous relationship for the seventh year. And then some guy who scratched your car on in the parking lot, just to make your day complete.

Give your players a break. Larp should be a relief. A journey to strange and bizarre worlds, and endless search for excitement, mystery, and crazy coincidences. As an author, I don't want to repair or spoil anyone's lives. I want to be a guide. The one who discovered the doors, a path, a whole damn highway the player's haven't seen until they signed up for my game.

Jakub 'Kuba' Tabisz



Age, sex, location?

30, male, born and living in Wrocław. I'm working as a journalist and also write at polter.pl, writing about larp in my country and abroad. I've made a lot of larps and jeepform games at different conventions and in different places. I experiment a lot with form, and my projects are well known and widely commented. And I'm one of a few people who made contact with foreign larpers.

Tell me about the demographics of the polish larp scene.

I would estimate that there are about 10.000 larpers in Poland. The typical larper is 20 to 30 years old, in terrain larps you see them even younger. Gender is very dependent on the type of larp. It used to be a problem, but now it's different. The games are scaled around 10, 20, 50, 200 players depending on the game. Average tabletop based larp gathers 20 players. Experimental ones go from 6 to 30 players. Terrain games from 40 to 350 players. There are many conventions every week. Poland is quite a big country.

As a post iron curtain country you share some history with the Czech and Slovakian larpers. Can one talk about a post-curtain Central European larp style?

I think our larp scene is quite immature. Very often Polish, Slovakian and Czech scenarios are copies of American ones. If you make a game about a dying vampire prince it's always the same, no matter whether it is in America or in Poland. I think we are good at making low budget games, and in creating costumes and tools on our own. But I don't think there is a Central European larp style yet.

One of your larps, which you co-wrote with Ada Biela, 'Wroniec', resembles what I would call a political larp.

It's a political and a social game. It takes place during the period of «Martial Law» in Poland in 1981. It was a very grim time. The government arrested many people. It's a



Players experience some funny, absurd and stupid moments, like staying all day in queues for meat – but in the end nothing is really funny.

grotesque game with a very serious finale. The majority of players didn't know this time period. The main goal was to show young people what it was like then. To remember. It's like a warning – players experience some funny, absurd and stupid moments, like standing in queues for meat all day – but in the end nothing is really funny. Many characters are evil, trying to use the system to improve their own financial condition and send their neighbors to prison. The players were moved by working intentionally with the contrasts in the game. Essentially it was about surviving in a strange environment. Characters had goals to realize, but in the end every player understood that he was only a tiny element of a very unfriendly system, and that the system was more important than the people living in it. ■

Bumping into walls

■ TEXT / Gabriel Widing

■ PHOTO / Emdot

When performance and roleplaying mix, the role of the audience is challenged. Should roleplayers lean back and enjoy the piece, or try to respond to the situation as participants? Gabriel Widing takes a critical look at a participatory performance.

▼ isiting the duo Heine Avdal & Yukiko Shinozaki's latest piece «*Field Works – Office*» at the Gothenburg dance and theater festival was a pleasure. During the festival several performances approached participatory aesthetics that resembled live roleplaying. The invitation to the piece evoked a scenario set in a corporate world of generic office architecture. Only two spectators were admitted at a time, and the program folder offered «an intimate performance where every spectator will have a different experience».

The performance takes place in the business district close to the Gothenburg train station. An elevator takes us to a «virtual office» maintained by Regus, a facility where companies can rent a fancy address or rent offices on a short term lease. The company is happy to admit that they have similar locations all over the world which makes it possible to «Think differently about your workplace.» With Regus, you can surf the waves of the volatile global market, set up business anywhere in the world, but still feel comfortable in a workspace which is always the same.

The setting reminds me of a 2003 larp in Drammen, Norway, where Norwegian larpwrights Eirik Fatland and Irene Tanke invited us to play PR-agents in «*Panoptincorp*» – «a post-geographical networked corporation». But this

time, the corporate line is real. Panoptincorp turned out to have anticipated the evolution of a business culture where demands for flexibility and teamwork place people employed in the «creative industries» in a precarious position.

We are welcomed by a receptionist, and after some time in the lobby she takes us to an office room, where we are seated. The program states that «Every location generates a certain kind of expectation and preconception of how we act in that specific space.» This is a situation where two different preconceptions meet. The first one is the context of a performance art piece, where we are expected to stay seated and silent most of the time. The second one is the office, with its inherent social implications.

As roleplayers, we are trained to relate to, adapt to and affirm a social setting, which predisposes us to interact.

The room is empty. An electric kettle is boiling water and «*ding!*» it has finished. I approach the kettle and find two notes in two empty cups next to it. I give one note to my audience friend and take the other one for myself. There are illustrations of the room on the papers. «Ah, this is how it starts», I think to myself.

There are four desks and windows in three directions. The phone is ringing. I pick it up, but it keeps ringing and no one answers. At this point I feel a little bit uncertain. Maybe



I should just sit down and wait. A woman in a suit enters the room. I ask her if she works here. She does not respond, closing her eyes, thinking. I realize too late that I have overstepped my bounds. «Yes», she says. She gives me a form to fill in.

During the performance I see so many calls for action and possibilities for interaction going to waste. The performers are struggling. They want to invite us to participate and fully experience the strange world of the office, but they don't have the tools to do that, because their piece is composed as a dance with phrases and cues, not as a larp, where we use characters, roles, scenarios, and explicit interaction patterns.

The illustrated notes were left in the cups by chance, and I was not expected to say anything to the people working in the office. But the signals remained mixed throughout the performance - why could I speak freely to the receptionist, but not to the suit? Although I never intended to transgress the structure of their piece in any way, I kept bumping into its walls.

In a world of precarious immaterial workers, where artists try to merge art with life - artists spending most of the time in offices these days - the art world could make good use of roleplaying consultants who know how to handle participatory situations. ■

- Gabriel Widing is a game designer and cultural theorist based in Stockholm

- Avdal/Yukiko
www.deepblue.be/

- Göteborgs Dans och Teater Festival
www.festival.goteborg.se/



During the performance I see so many calls for action and possibilities for interaction going to waste.

The creation of a killer

■ TEXT / Sanne Harder. ■ PHOTO / Stine Marie Jacobsen

One day, Stine Marie Jacobsen asked her neighbour to kill her.

One Sunday morning, I opened my newspaper and saw Stine Marie Jacobsen staring blankly at me. I immediately knew that «my» medium had been high-jacked by an outsider.

Stine Marie Jacobsen had heard of roleplayers before I e-mailed her my questions for this article. «I have a friend who has organized quite a few roleplaying events, and I know a little through her and a bit of reading. But I've never participated».

Whether Stine has participated in roleplaying or not depends on how you define it. The borders of the medium are getting blurry these days. Roleplaying used to be a bunch of guys playing Dungeons and Dragons, but nowadays some roleplaying games are only one step removed from drama, storytelling, or performance art. As for Stine, she might not have taken part in any of the games or larps that roleplayers have arranged, but she is someone who puts the notion of identity to the test by placing herself physically in the middle of a narration – a scenario.

Has roleplaying made the transition from underground phenomenon to the established art scene – but without the roleplayers? Roleplaying has always had great potential as an artistic medium. Maybe it takes an artist, not a roleplayer to put it to good use.

The kill

In 2009, Stine was living in Los Angeles, next to a perfectly normal guy.

«I first noticed my neighbour during a weekend, when I was arriving at my house in L.A.», Stine tells me. «He was fixing his car outside of his house, and I thought he reminded me of the actor Richard Dreyfuss.»

The neighbour's name was Kirk, not Richard. Nevertheless, the resemblance made Stine think of movies, and that inspired her to ask Kirk if he would star in her film.

In the film, Stine gets killed by Kirk. Her neck is sliced open. She is sitting in the driver's seat of a car. Her eyes are empty, and a smear of blood spreads across her neck. In the back of the car, Kirk grins evilly while clutching a bloodied knife.

But somehow Kirk's performance is not convincing. You would expect a killer to look lecherous, callous, or superior. Kirk is neither. He winds up looking a little like a young boy with a toy knife. This only makes the picture more menacing. It does not feel like fiction, though it is obviously not a press photo either. In fact, it winds up somewhere between the real and the fictive, in the strange gap which is usually mainly occupied by reality shows.

«I grew up watching movies», Stine says. «A lot of them.

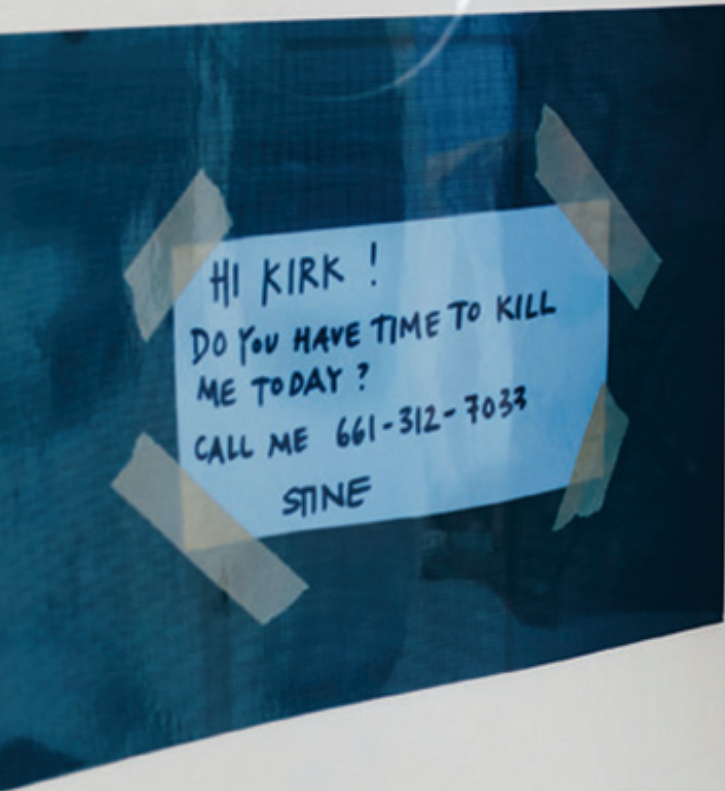


STINE MARIE JACOBSEN

- Born in Sønderborg, Denmark in 1977
- BFA from CalArts (Los Angeles) 2007
- MFA from The Royal Danish Art Academy 2009
- Currently lives in Berlin
- Works with video, performance, curating, writing, drawing
- Especially interested in narrative biographies



Kirk seemed to grow overly zealous about getting the right take.



■ The project «Do you have time to kill me now?» was Stine Marie Jacobsen's exit exhibition when she graduated from The Royal Danish Art Academy in 2009.



In my projects I seek a discourse field and renegotiation of notions of fiction and reality.

– Stina Marie Jacobsen

SCENARIO

According to Webster's dictionary, the word 'scenario' can mean several things. It can, for instance, be a sequence of imagined events - an account of a possible course of action. However, in other instances, it refers to a screenplay or script for a film. In roleplay, both of these definitions appear relevant. Roleplaying scenarios are scripts, but they are also imagined events, wherein the players try out courses of action.



■ *Putting a knife in the hands of a stranger and asking him to fake your own murder is an act of faith, even if you try to believe it's not for real.*

And especially horror movies. To me reality sometimes unfolds itself like a movie. I see similarities from movies in reality, and vice versa».

In many ways Stine and Kirk in the car is a very typical movie scene. The killer and his victim. Only, there is a major difference. The clue is in the title: «Do you have time to kill me today?» Stine has asked Kirk to do this – as a favour.

Who is in charge?

Over a period of a few months, Stine regularly put notes on Kirk's front door, asking if he had time to kill her. It was Stine who initiated the project, and they both felt that this put her in a position of power. At least this was the case in the beginning, but later on Kirk became so committed to the project, that Stine started having doubts: Was she still in charge?

The subtle shift in status between them was impossible to address, because addressing it would seem like a preposterous accusation.

Stine did not regain the feeling of being in control of the situation until the filming was done. What had happened seems almost like an inverted Stockholm syndrome: Instead of placing Kirk in the victim's role, she made him play the perpetrator. After a while, separating reality from fiction became more difficult for her. Maybe Kirk did start to develop some murderous traits, or maybe it was just Stine who found it difficult not to project some of the role's characteristics onto Kirk. Kirk might just as



■ *This is the photo that was used for the «Hjemmet» illustration, where Stine's experiences with Kirk were turned into fiction.*

well have tried to kill her when he was just a stranger living next door, but maybe it was enacting the murder scene that planted the thought in both of their minds? The fact remains that the fictitious relationship influenced Stine's and Kirk's real-life relation.

Fiction becomes real

Stine's intention with the project was to find a way of short-circuiting the stereotypes – victim and killer – that we know so well from thriller and horror movies.

«The notion of death and violence in my works are de-funct of their effect because it is fiction, and I take away the natural need for empathy, help or reactions from the audience», Stine says.

She makes no attempt to hide the fact that the whole set-up is fiction. In fact, she intentionally cast Kirk because he was not a professional actor:

«I have always been more interested in amateurs, as they do not have the same tools as actors, and so bring with them a natural link to reality. Kirk, with his untrained acting, breaks the illusion». For Stine, breaking the illusion is precisely the point. This is not a film. This is Stine toying with the idea that if this had been a film, her neighbour might try to murder her.

«In my projects I seek a discourse field and renegotiation of notions of fiction and reality», Stine says. «In our culture, we attempt to depict reality through literature, film and theatre. By doing so, fiction might in fact affect reality itself».



HJEMMET

Hjemmet (The Home) is a weekly Danish magazine which targets female readers who conform to a traditional gender role. It usually contains romantic short-stories of the more trivial kind, along with recipes, knitting instructions, and a variety of tips for efficient home making.

Stine chose Hjemmet specifically because of its stereotypical gender roles.

It is sort of a feedback process. We believe in the fiction, and so a part of it becomes real, because we perpetuate our beliefs.

Part of Stine's work is about toying with the concept that identity is not something fixed that we are born with, but part of a narrative that we construct. In this way, creating stories is intimately tied to creating our biographical identity.

The inevitable question is if Stine became a co-creator of Kirk's identity, and whether that identity was tied to being a killer. Or maybe just an amateur actor.

The ethical issue

To Stine, her relationship to Kirk was all about trust. How she trusted Kirk when she placed herself in the victim's place, and how Kirk has trusted her by letting her present him as a killer.

The video with Stine in the car and Kirk as the bumbling killer is only part of Stine's project. In June 2009, writer Dorthe Rohlte wrote a short story for the Danish magazine Hjemmet about Stine and Kirk. It was titled «Change of roles». The story fictionalized Stine's experience with Kirk. In part it was based on her real feelings of doubt, as the project progressed, and Kirk seemed to grow overly zealous about «getting the right take». However, it also introduced a fictional criminal, a drug addict who sneaks into Stine's home while she is taking a shower. The short story is in Danish, so Kirk has never read it, but Stine has kept him updated.

«The more fiction became entangled with reality and vice versa, the more I had to explain to Kirk», Stine says. «It seemed to confuse him that after the video was made, a crime story was written and published in a magazine. How and why, was the project continuing with him in all these different forms? I know he is proud to be the centre of this project, but the growing scale of it made Kirk question how people would see him».

Stine explains that she was warned by one of her teachers that using Kirk, a layman, in her project was unethical, and that she should refrain from involving strangers in her projects in the future. Kirk was a tool for creating Stine's scenario – not unlike what happens to strangers when role-players do in-crowd roleplaying, one might argue. Stine had his consent, and she kept him informed about the developments. But did Kirk understand the scope of what he consented to? He was worried about what other people might think of him, so on some level or other he must have been aware that the project might have consequences for him.

Next project

Stine Marie Jacobsen is currently working on a new project with Hjemmet. In weeks 3, 4 and 5 in January 2011, a crime story called «Øen I Havet» (The Island in the Sea) will be published by Hjemmet, with images made by Hjemmet's own illustrator. The main character of the story is drawn based on photos of Stine. Once again the idea is to infiltrate Stine, a real person, into the fiction of a Hjemmet short story. ■

Understanding Gang Rape



Gang Rape is a game designed to inflict a terrible experience on the participants. What's it like?

■ TEXT / Markus Montola

■ ILLUSTRATION / Tommi Kovala

« KIDNAP AND GANGRAPE SOME BITCH – CALL IT LARP» was the line introducing T. Wrigstad's roleplaying scenario *Gang Rape* to 4chan, the spiritual internet home of the movement Anonymous. Outrage, confusion and misunderstanding has dogged on the heels of the game ever since it premiered at the Danish roleplaying event Fastaval in 2008.

Gang Rape is a roleplaying game in the style of the Swedish *Vi åker jeep* design collective. The jeep style of roleplaying game design combines tabletop roleplaying games and larp, and is very strong on narrative and experiences designed with minute attention to detail.

Such nuances were lost when the troll-infested mob at 4chan got their hands on the game. Life and game got confused, and the difference between simulated experiences and actual experiences eradicated.

The 4chan discussion has set the precedent for a lot of the debate surrounding the game. Since its premiere, *Gang Rape* has offended a great number of people by its mere existence. It is said to abuse female players, toy with serious issues and damage the mental health of the participants.

At the same time, the small group of players – about thirty people – who have actually played it consider it a meaningful and important game. It has received accolades from both those whom played the rapists and who who played the victim.

In the shadow of the controversy is an actual game, played by actual players. Let's see what's it like.

Getting Started

Structurally speaking, *Gang Rape* is a relatively simple freeform scenario. It consists of three scenes, which are played out in different ways. The first scene takes the story to the gang rape, the second portrays the brutal act itself, and the final scene is an epilogue.

The first scene is usually played in the style of freeform larp. It's about how it all turns into a rape: A sports team los-

ing control when teased by a woman in mini-skirt or a girl suggesting sex but backing out at the last moment. The players decide the details, in the genre of naturalistic realism.

The second scene portrays the rape. There is no touching, no acting out, just speaking, as the rapists take turns narrating what they do to the victim. The rapist in charge has the control of the entire physical world; he even controls the biological responses of the victim's body during the act. However, after a rapist narrates for two minutes, the victim responds for one minute. She is in control of all thoughts and feelings, describing what happens both in the mind of her character and in the mind of the rapist.

The third scene is an aftermath. The players get to sort out the details, but it is suggested that the victim narrates what happens after the rape. Maybe she keeps dating her boyfriend who instigated the whole thing, or blankly just gathers her clothes and walks out after she's been used and tossed away. She also narrates the reactions of the rapists in the aftermath.

A game takes upwards of two hours, much of which is spent talking about the game before and after. The game explicitly requires all participants to read the whole instruction booklet and to discuss the game in advance. Importantly, the game concludes with one or more debriefs.

The Devil is in the Details

Played by serious-minded people, who respect each other and try to provide each other with the strongest possible experience, *Gang Rape* can be a profound, powerful experience. The clever design ensures that few people leave the rough subject matter without being touched by the game.

• **Familiarity** – All players must be able to relate to the fiction in the context of their own lives, to make the game feel more personal. No prison rapes unless everyone has been in jail.

• **Paper-Thin Characters** – As the characters remain very superficial, the players cannot use them as an alibi for

their activities. The rapist resembles you, not Conan the Barbarian.

- **Eye Contact** – During the narrated rape, the rapist and the victim must maintain a steady eye contact. No turning away, not even when the tears start flowing.

- **Steady Narration** – The rapists must also narrate their actions at an even pace. There must be no repetition or hesitation. It's challenging to produce two minutes worth of rape narration on the go, making it difficult to detach oneself from the situation.

- **Downward Spiral** – Since every rapist is in control during his own turn, there is a pressure to overdo the previous perpetrators, and a need to deal with the consequences of their actions. Maybe your turn comes right after the previous guy broke her jaw with a loud crack?

- **Performance Anxiety** – Using a metaphor of sexual potency, Gang Rape puts pressure on the rapists. When you narrate the cruelty of your character, the other rapists are standing around you as an audience. You must not falter or pull back.

- **Victim Power** – After every two minutes of rapist narration, the victim narrates emotional content. Maybe she tells you about how she resembles your little sister?

All these mechanics are framed in the broader context of the game. The discussion before the game, where all players must read the instructions and agree to play, is usually enough to ensure the intensity of the situation. The moment you express a wish to play *Gang Rape*, you are already outing yourself in some sense – especially as the game has achieved certain notoriety in conventions such as Fastaval and Knudepunkt.

After making the decision to play, it's all downhill, from a lover's quarrel or a bachelor party into a gang rape, to describing the gruesome act in pornographic detail.

Playing the Game

I interviewed ten *Gang Rape* players and five players of the less controversial bleed game *The Journey* for my research on roleplaying games, trying to figure out why people want to play the game, and how it makes them feel. I talked with both men and women, both rapist and victim players, publishing the first paper at the Nordic DiGRA 2010 conference.

Interviewing *Gang Rape* players was a delight, as many of them had put a great deal of thought into analyzing their experiences. As one rapist player described it:

Not only was I disgusted with what I came up with, I also felt a very strong sense of inadequacy and impotence about not being able to come up with more shit, and not

being able to perform – because what I did a lot of the time was just repeating the same shit. And since this is about intercourse, and across from me is a rather beautiful girl, whom I'm looking straight into the eyes, of course there's also a sense of arousal. So there's arousal, there's impotence, and there's disgust, at the same time. So you can see why that leaves you rather brainfucked. And that's the powerful mechanism of that game, the simple mechanisms are able to create all three reactions. And the most hardcore players I have met who have played have always been completely shaken after the experience.

The initial striking discovery was the vivid descriptions of physical stress from almost everyone I talked with. Many roleplayers are familiar with this phenomenon: everyone who has played a decent tabletop roleplaying game has experienced accelerated heartbeat, sweating, dry mouth and other physical reactions as part of the game. But only after everyone kept repeating lists of stress symptoms ranging from nausea to shakes and from restlessness to light-headedness, the big picture about the importance of physiological stress responses started to become visible. This of course is relevant for all gameplay from *Super Mario* to *Illuminati*.

It's kind to be cruel. Many players talked about helping other players get intense experiences, when they described doing cruel things to each other on purpose. This includes the rapists, when they were talking about why they did bad stuff to the victim, but also the victims, who could repay the favor by using their emotional control to torment the rapists. Taking playful revenge was mentioned only once or twice in the interviews, the emphasis was clearly on *helping* each other.

Some people react with disbelief when I tell them that the players tend to form strong emotional connections with their fellow players. Both rapists and victims felt the need for closeness with their group afterwards, and indeed, many debriefs take the form of tear-filled, long group hugs. Clearly, it's all about consensual cruelty. Rarely, though, a reverse had happened; once or twice a player was perceived as investing less in the game or being in the game with a «creepy» attitude, causing an inverse reaction.

The female players tend to *want to* play victims, while male players choose rapists. It actually makes sense: If you set out to play *Gang Rape*, you are seeking the most powerful roleplaying experience you can find. And for both sexes, rape is most personal and terrifying experienced on your «own» side. Importantly, while the women expressed their fear of being raped, many men expressed their fear of becoming rapists.

Playing with Fire

Can bleed play cause long-term damage to mental health? No one really knows. After discussing bleed games with dozens of people, I'm still not aware of any cases of someone having a genuinely negative experience with *Gang Rape*. Some players had high expectations but were underwhelmed by the game, but no one reported being hurt by it. The requirement to read the scenario through and the fact that people approach the game very seriously filter out most of the people who shouldn't play the game.

The stories of psychologically painful experiences in bleed games remain anecdotal and scattered, but the potential seems to exist. One person refused an interview request, saying that his experience of *Fat Man Down* was too unpleasant for him to revisit it in detail. One player described *The Journey* as a painful and forced experience, telling me that the only reason to not walk out of the game was the unwillingness to ruin the game for the other players.

Surprisingly, a phenomenon similar to victim-blaming can happen with *Gang Rape*. The game was once played in a roleplaying convention, where the victim player was afterwards victimized by outsiders who have never played the game. The shocked reactions varied from blaming her for making it possible for other people to play such an abusive game to treating her like a victim of a social or mental rape, telling that she should only blame herself for what happened. The story makes little sense, though, since she found herself completely fine and unharmed by the game, but quite offended by the patronizing attitudes from people who should have understood the difference between roleplay and real life.

Ars Ludorum

After conducting the interviews, during and after writing the first paper, I gave two presentations on my research to academic audiences. Having seen the game ignite flame wars in hobby communities, I was careful to establish the fact that I was conducting serious research with legitimate research questions. I didn't mention the name *Gang Rape* at all during the first half of the presentation in order to be able to present my disclaimers before the audience would be offended. When I talked about findings, I let the interview quotations do the talking.

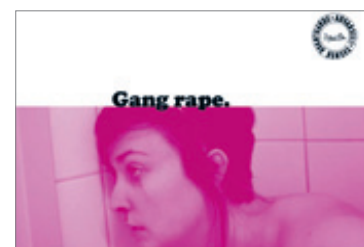
What happened, both times, reminded me of 4chan. While most people found it fascinating, interesting and valuable, some were offended by the topic, both publicly and privately. Offended people launch wide spectrum attacks, questioning everything from research ethics to the ethics of creating the game. The arguments range from a somewhat sensible claim that the game might be harmful to some players – even though that argument has little to do with researching it – to wild claims, for example that studying *Gang Rape* is unethical since the research draws more attention to the game, making more players play it.

After all these debates, I've come to think that *Gang Rape* is about as ethical as a game about gang raping can be. It is serious and mature, it does not trivialize rape or turn it into a laughing matter. The game does not claim to be safe or pleasant, but it also avoids the unhealthy rhetoric of being a cool thing for hard-core guys to do. It is aimed at a narrow target audience, and the rules are designed to ensure that all participants know what they are getting into. And the players agree: None of the interviewees considered it unfair, unethical or offensive.

It's the usual story. The mainstream audience still harbors suspicions about games as expressive media. One good reason for doing games like *Gang Rape* is the struggle to liberate the *ars ludorum* from such prejudice. I vividly recall Richard Dansky explaining how non-Jewish people took offense when he wrote the Holocaust supplement for *Wrath: The Oblivion*. He even earned himself the label of an Anti-Semite with *The Charnel Houses of Europe* – of course, until he told his critics that he is Jewish himself. ■



The female players tend to *want* to play victims, while male players choose rapists.



■ *Gang rape*: Promotional material for the roleplaying game.

ON THE WEB

Vi åker Jeep is a Swedish role-playing collective dedicated to a distinctive style of freeform role-playing. More information at www.jeepen.org/

Gang Rape is available through www.jeepen.org/games/gr

The full research paper on *Gang Rape* and *The Journey* is available at www.digra.org/dl/db/10343.56524.pdf

The god in the game

J. Tuomas Harviainen was supposed to become a priest. Instead, he became the father of Finnish sadomasochist larp.

■ TEXT / Juhana Pettersson
■ PHOTO / Pauliina Männistö

J. TUOMAS HARVIAINEN

- Born in 1972.
- «An academically encouraging family background.»
- Currently a full-time game researcher.
- Major works are *Bratislavan syntiset yöt* (*The Sin-filled Nights of Bratislava*), *Tuhkakäärme* (*Serpent of Ash*) and *Rukouksia posliinialttarilla* (*Prayers on a Porcelain Altar*).
- On the web:
www.pommesgabel.com/prayers
www.jeepen.org/games/ditchd
www.jeepen.org/games/aftertaste

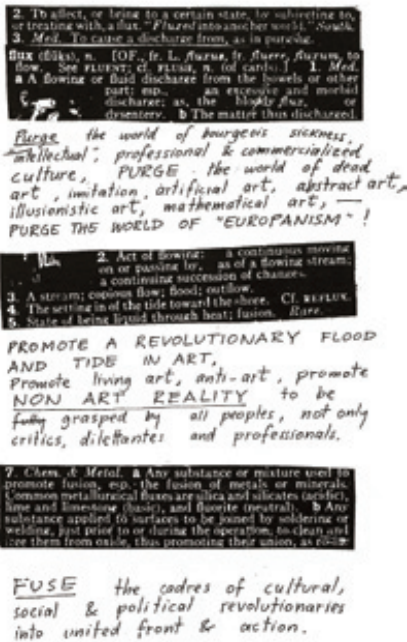
In an age of roleplaying manifestos, design philosophies and schools of thought, the games of J. Tuomas Harviainen have always retained their distinctive style. Seemingly apart from any school of roleplaying, they have maintained a separate identity all the more striking because of their collaborative style. Harviainen embraces the participatory nature of larp, eschewing the role of the game master as the sole source of vision.

Harviainen refuses to offer an official interpretation of his games. There may be a mood or an experience he's looking to create, but the meaning is left to the player. Harviainen says that's «a result of my religious background. Körtti (eng. Awakening, a Finnish Lutheran sect) are not big on preaching, and I don't like it either.»

This attitude shows in a lot of the things Harviainen does. «I followed the example of Swedish larpers when I made the effort to learn



Manifesto:



Like almost all contemporary roleplaying artists, J. Tuomas Harviainen lists as his influences a mix of high and low culture.

- *The Fluxus Manifesto* by George Maciunas, from 1963.
- The cover of the popular 'red box' edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, from 1983.

to market my stuff. Before, I thought that we're just making these little games. Then I saw Emma Wieslander talk about the genius of her own work and realized that this is how ideas are promoted. Humble is not always beautiful.»

Harviainen has a degree in theology. «I was planning on having a career as a priest. I never made it. My worldview changed while I was at it.» Although he abandoned the idea of becoming a priest during his studies, Harviainen got his degree. He says that later, the broad understanding of rituals gained through his studies became useful in larp design.

His games have dealt with a wide variety of difficult issues, from sexual frustration to cult behavior and poisonous breakups. Despite all this, he started like a lot of other young Finnish boys: playing *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Vampire and the Beatles

Harviainen started to play roleplaying games in 1985. At that time, larp had yet to be born in Finland. «I was thirteen. A classmate told me about these cool new games, and I was curious about them.»

His experience was typical of many Finnish roleplaying geeks of that time. «After a while we graduated from *D&D* to *Rolemaster*. It got to the point where we didn't need the books because everyone knew the rules by heart.»

It didn't take long for Harviainen to decide that roleplaying was his thing. «I have never faltered. There's been one year in my life when I didn't play a single tabletop game. We were living in a small unemployment suburb fifteen kilometers from the center of Pori.» Even there, he eventually managed to find a few friends to play with.

Larp came to Finland in the late Eighties, but it took until 1995 for Harviainen to participate in his first game, in the *Vampire* campaign *Helsingin kronikka* (*Helsinki Chronicle*).

It didn't take long for Harviainen to switch from playing in larps to making larps. First, he helped to organize the *Vampire* game, and then he started making games of his own. The first of these was in 1997, and it was called *Luostarin tie* (*Abbey Road*). Inspired by the Beatles, it was a free game of 20 players. It was not an auspicious beginning. «Of our 25 players, only eight showed up. The dynamics were completely skewed. We were calling people, asking them to come. It was a bitter experience.»

Success would have to wait until Harviainen hit on the idea of combining larp and sadomasochism.

Slaves in a swimming pool

«If there's one person who has influenced me the most, it's Timo Multamäki», Harviainen says. Multamäki is the man behind some of the biggest larps ever made in Finland, and also the producer of *Dragonbane*. His games are the polar opposite of what Harviainen does.

«I played in the Multamäki game *Wanderer 2*», Harviainen explains. *Wanderer 2* is a well known Finnish cyberpunk game. «I had a cool experience, but it had nothing to do with the game. Afterwards, I decided that I want to make games that are everything *Wanderer 2* was not.»



... he found playing sex without actual physical contact to be incredibly frustrating

The first really successful game Harviainen did was the launch of the *Pehmoydin* (*SoftCore*) series, in 1998. More than any others, the *SoftCore* games are responsible for Finland's reputation as the country of BDSM (Bondage, Domination, Sadism, Masochism) larp. The first four games appeared annually. Harviainen's collaborator with the series was Nina Hämäläinen.

The idea for the first *SoftCore* game came to Harviainen while he was playing in *Wanderer 2*. «We were having a discussion late in the game, and nobody bothered to stay in character anymore.» Spurred by in-game events, the talk turned to the idea of playing characters at a prison camp. Someone said that nobody would want to play such a game because games are supposed to be fun. Harviainen figured that surely you could make an appealing prison camp game.

«I started thinking about a game in which ten half-naked men work in a gravel pit, and they're whipped by ten half-naked female prison guards. If there's a prison revolt, they change places. The men whip the women, but otherwise everything stays the same. I was sure I'd be able to get players for this game in no time.»

The part that actually made it to the finished game was using BDSM in a larp. The *SoftCore* series had relatively humble beginnings. The first game was a simple murder mystery, and the venue was a rented sauna / party space. «There was an empty swimming pool. It was great for a slave auction.»

Harviainen describes the game as «innocent naughtiness». The story concerns a murder at a private SM club. «We had a problem

with players who didn't have any particular inclination towards sadomasochism. For them, the play experience was too thin.»

The best-known game in the series is *Bratislavan syntiset yöt* (*The Sin-filled Nights of Bratislava*), based on the book *120 Days of Sodom* by Marquis de Sade. «It was hard to continue after *Bratislava*, because suddenly the expectations were so much greater.» Harviainen considers *Bratislava* to be his magnum opus.

Forbidden zones

The SM larps found their inspiration from Harviainen's personal experiences. He has been active in the SM scene, writing columns for fetish magazines and doing BDSM-related research work.

«I'm proud of the fact that these were real, proper roleplaying games, despite the fact that we had some pretty sophisticated sadomasochism scenes in them.» The only things forbidden outright were penetration and messy acts such as bloodsports. Hence the name *SoftCore*.



The combination of larp and eroticism was not always frictionless.

Harviainen describes the first game was «pretty much pure SM». The second, *Pastellitemppeli* (*A Temple of Pastel Colours*), was more erotic in character. The combination of larp and eroticism was not always frictionless. «One player complained that the game intruded on his experience. He'd been licking chocolate from the inner thighs of a beautiful woman, and didn't appreciate being taken to an interrogation.»

In the fifth and last game, *Sielun/Messu* (*Requiem*), all physical contact with the erogenous zones was forbidden. «I got the idea from Martin Ericsson.» Ericsson is a well-known Swedish larp designer. «We were on the bus, coming back from the larp *Moira*, and he said that he found playing sex

without actual physical contact to be incredibly frustrating. We immediately decided to use this idea, because we wanted the players to be frustrated.»

The game rules stated that every character was horny all the time, but there was no way to release this energy, and they had to seek out physical contact with each other at all times. «You couldn't take things to the finish.»

Considering the subject matter of his games, you would expect Harviainen to be pretty strict with psychological safety rules. The «safe word» system used in many larps originated in the fetish community, and one might imagine that it would be doubly necessary in a BDSM larp.



There's no way to be absolutely safe.

«You have to accept a certain level of psychological risk when you make these kinds of games», Harviainen says. «There's no way to be absolutely safe.» He tries to avoid problems by typecasting and using players he knows to be able to handle the game.

«Well, I have the professional training of a priest. I guess you could say it's a perversion of my education as a spiritual caretaker when I use it to make sure the players are comfortable in a BDSM game.»

Physically sick from worry

The sadomasochist games Harviainen made around the turn of the millennium could be described as his «early phase», before he moved to the internationally successful minigames he's making now. However, sex was not his only subject during that time. One of his more controversial games was *Valokaari (Arclight)*. A psychological military game set in future Finland, the game evoked the nationalistic history of Finland's wars.

During the game, Harviainen assumed that his game was a catastrophic failure. «We interrupted the game because it looked as if the players were bored out of their skulls. It was only afterwards that we learned the game had been a success.»

«My lesson was that I need to communicate what I

want to the players very clearly.» In *Arclight*, the problem was the tone of the game, not necessarily the conclusions the players were drawing.

In general terms, the player is free to do what he wants. The American artist «Allan Kaprow writes about art that changes and is affected by outside forces, and after the work has been exhibited, the result is treated as if this had been the plan all along. In reality, it's chance, but we treat it as if it was scripted. That's the ideal for larp, in a way.»

Harviainen describes his ideal as a «communal experience», as opposed to a «collective experience». A collective experience is created when all participants have a shared, unified experience of a certain situation. Their interpretation of what happened is the same, because the feeling was the same. In larp, this is achieved with a strong, central storyline and a clear message.

In contrast, in a communal experience all the participants draw from the same pool, but their interpretations of what happened might be wildly different, almost as if they had played in different games. In larp, this is achieved with diffuse plotting and by letting the players construct their own meanings.

For example, watching a movie is a collective experience. Everyone sees the same events, and has a common frame of reference. Going to a party is a communal experience. While the location and the people might be the same, the experiences people have may be wildly different. One person is pestering the DJ about the music while another is having sex in the bathroom.

Not everybody likes the communal approach. «Norway has traditionally been the most difficult country for my games. In Sweden, no problem, but Norway has been a tough nut to crack. My games usually involve ten people in a room, talking. There's no fixed plot. When plot appears, it appears courtesy of emergence. That kind of stuff doesn't appeal to all players. »

Big in Italy

Recent years have marked a clear shift in the way Harviainen makes his games. Nowadays, they are often published, repeatable and small, and created in conjunction with Harviainen's work as a game researcher.

«Some years ago I was asked to make a larp for Ropecon, because they didn't have enough games.» Ropecon is the biggest annual roleplaying events in Finland, with well over 3000 visitors. «It went well, so I decided that I could do

more of these kinds of games. I've made one or two games a year since then.» A big part of this has been Harviainen's long-running project to make games according to design ideals proposed in various Nordic manifestos. His work with these games has been documented in a series of articles for the Knutpunkt books.

The game *Tuhkakäärme* (*Serpent of Ash*) was a turning point for Harviainen, because the first run of the game was so successful. «I decided to translate it into English, and ran it at Knudepunkt in Denmark in 2007.» After the game, Israeli and Italian players asked for the script of the game, and Harviainen polished it so it could be published. «I started giving it out to people, and people ran their own versions of the game. After a while, the players of those runs started to ask me for the game.»

The same happened with another game translated into English, *Rukouksia posliinialttarilla* (*Prayers on a Porcelain Altar*). Inspired by the available-for-free model of the Jeepform community, Harviainen started to publish his games on the net.

Internationally, the best-known Finnish roleplaying game designer is probably Mike Pohjola (*inside/outside*, among other games). Thanks to his popular PDF release *Mobsters*, the most played tabletop designer is probably Ville Vuorela.

But the most widely played larp designer is undoubtedly J. Tuomas Harviainen. *Prayers on a Porcelain Altar* has had 20 documented runs in seven different countries. Harviainen's games have been translated into five languages. *Serpent of Ash* has had 22 runs, and has been played at universities and art festivals. «It's nice when someone says that I took your game and ran it.»

Harviainen places a lot of the credit for his breakthrough on the Italians, especially Andrea Castellani. Castellani has done a lot to popularize experimental games in Italy, in addition to designing his own larps. «I call him the godfather of European mini larp. He's a key figure. When Andrea picks a game and runs it at an event, it gets an audience. After the godfather gives his blessing, things start to happen.»

One of the strange things about *Prayers on a Porcelain Altar* has been that people play it multiple times. «It's very rare. Usually you play a larp once, and you're done with it. Apparently, there's something in *Prayers* that makes people want to experience it again, maybe with a different character.»

Another recent success has been the game *A Bitter Aftertaste*. «There was a run at a queer festival. It's a fun venue for a game about relationships.» The game is based on Harviainen's past relationship issues, and he describes it as a «therapy project». «It was such a personal project, I didn't expect it to have wings».

Make Games, Get Rich

Many of the games Harviainen makes are personal in nature. «*Serpent of Ash* is a larp about religion, and of course it springs from my background and from my complex relationship with religion.»

Many of his relationship games are based on his own life, or the lives of his friends. «They're about how things can go wrong.»

For Harviainen, larp is his artform, the one he found playing *D&D* as a kid. «I make games because I have an idea and I have to express it. It's the same reason I do game research. Not for career, although there's a career aspect to it. I have an inner need to do it.»

Larp probably won't make you rich, but it's not quite the ghetto activity it used to be. Harviainen says that in the last few years, people have started to approach him about making games for money. «There's a demand for educational larps, in certain circles.»

Roleplaying culture is becoming better understood. «Larp is penetrating mainstream culture, I think in all the Nordic countries. We're making more experimental games, and there are bigger audiences for those games.»

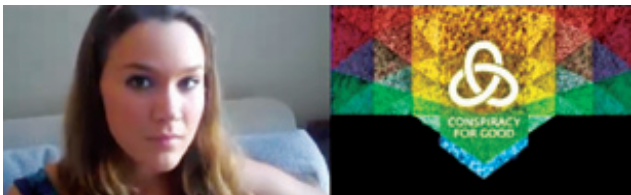
Harviainen is not entirely unfamiliar with the way stories about his BDSM games circulate in the Nordic community. «I've been in a situation where we're sitting around a table and someone starts describing one of my games. At some point, I had to mention that I made that game.» ■

THINGS

Conspiracies «*Conspiracy for Good* can best be described as an amalgamation of an alternate reality game, a street theater show, and a social movement», Wired Magazine writes. In this Alternate Reality Game, the players were charged with bringing down Blackwell Briggs, an evil global security firm. The game was financed by Nokia (an evil global cell phone manufacturer), and free to the players.



«We achieved four newbie but pretty hard-core larp-like street-events using prototype image recognition tech, telling a contemporary cyberpunk story about activism, surveillance and corporate greed. The players helped major NGO's (Doctors of the World, Room to Read, KidsCO and Thames 21) as well as local charities while playing», says Martin Ericsson, CEO of Swedish The Company P, one of the organizers of the events.



Creator of the television series *Heroes*, Tim Kring, created a lot of the background story and scripts. The online ARG lasted for three months. In addition, there were four one day events in London.

«Think of a cell phone based rail roaded larp with SWAT teams in city cruisers, boat chases, and weird corporate expos. At one point in the game, there were even 100 Bollywood dancers», says Ericsson. The next Company P-project might be a European TV-production.

«We're planning to create a documented larp in a contemporary environment», Ericsson says.

■ Ole Peder Gjaever

A festus for the rest of us The festival season is here again. Chances are good you might be reading this at the pan-Nordic larp-festival Knudepunkt, held in Denmark this February. Germany's annual larp conference Mittelpunkt took place in January. Some other conventions to look out for include: The Danish free-form festival Fastaval is celebrating its 25th anniversary, 20/4-24/4. 4/3-6/3, there is Intercon K near Boston in the U.S, a larping convention with long traditions. The Swedish larp convention Prolog is held between 1/4-3/4. Czech Odraz is a touring conference about Czech larp and foreign influence on it, 15/4-17/4. In Italy, there's InterNosCon between 29/4-1/3, held in the ancient medieval town Bertinoro. This year's theme is Bacchanalia. Sounds like fun.

RavenDeath The second Italian indie – RavenDeath – was released in November, with an English language edition due in March. The game is about *vendetta*, revenge, and to our knowledge features no penguins.



RavenDeath is inspired by *The Crow*, and lets the players play a story of revenge. Illustration: Silvia Pelissero.

Will larp for money Education Larpers' in Sweden (ELIS) is a network of people and organizations utilizing larp for educational purposes. One of the network's members, LajvVerkstaden, is a commercial organization working with larp as a cultural form and a pedagogical tool. They organize everything from serious roleplaying games about democracy and oppression to playful larps in fantasy settings.

«We've worked with thousands of kids and youths where we together have created strong stories, unique to every group and in which everyone has been a co-author», says Miriam Lundqvist of LajvVerkstaden.

LajvVerkstaden has done projects for schools, businesses, organizations and groups.

By making the education come alive, we give a context for the knowledge and let the students experience physically and emotionally the things they are supposed to learn. This makes the education more efficient, Lundqvist says.

Partially we visit schools and work as pedagogues in the classroom. We also bring students and teachers out of the school building, to visit other worlds.

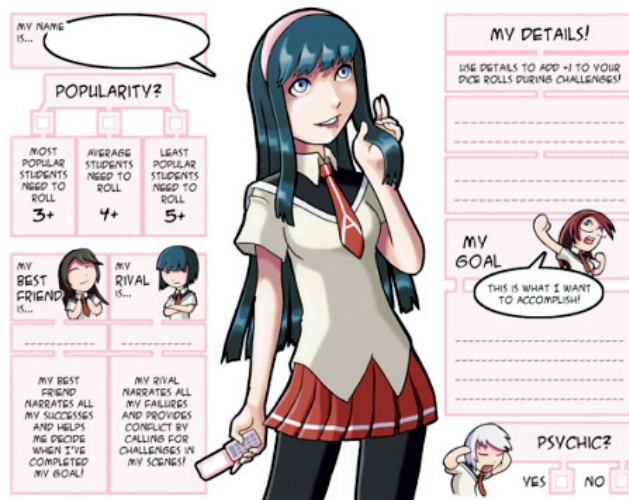
For businesses LajvVerkstaden offers team building seminars. The project started in 2007.



■ Swedish LajvVerkstaden utilizes larp as a cultural form and pedagogical tool. Photos: www.lajvverkstaden.se

Panties! A new edition of the U.S. indie RPG «Panty Explosion» is due in January. The anime-inspired game is a «Psychic Japanese Schoolgirl Adventure Game.» Previous editions have received favorable reviews over at RPG.net.

«Panty Explosion Perfect is a refined version of the original game, designed to be easier to learn and faster to play», says author Jake Richmond.



■ *Panty Explosion Perfect* is in the works over at Atarashi Games. Illustration: Jake Richmond.

U.S. funds doomsday scenario The U.S. embassy in Oslo has funded the Norwegian larp *A doomsday Eve* with 30.000 NOK (5000 USD). The larp took place between 11.-13. February, in a fictional 1983 where the threat of nuclear war loomed.

The embassy funds U.S.-related projects. The organizers were invited to a meeting at the embassy to discuss the project. The money will be used, among other things, to make a short movie from the larp (to be shown at Knudepunkt 2011), and to organize a debate about the cold war in Oslo. The embassy felt that the funding should help give the subject a greater audience, in addition to the 75 participants of the larp.

Got Things? Please let us know at tips@playgroundmagazine.net

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