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LOVE IN A TIME OF HIV

WILD STRAWBERRIES

THE PROTAGONIST

Larpers don't like to think

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

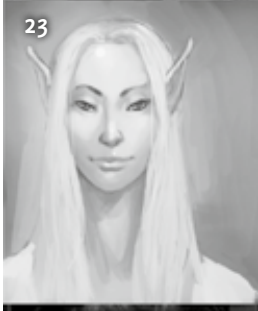
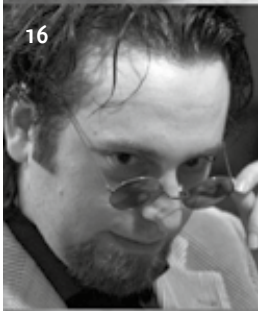
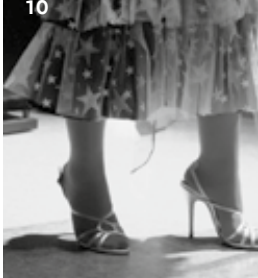
«Yes. Larpers don't like to think.» ■



■ Matthijs Holter

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I want you to play with
a smile inside.

■ «Arm», Acryl on canvas, by Astrid solgaard

Love

In a Time of HIV

It's nearly midnight on the 4th of July.

Text | Martin Nielsen Artwork | Astrid solgaard Photo | Li Xin

I'm sitting on the balcony of a villa with my best friend and my lover, with a joint in my hand, overlooking the beautiful scenery. Soon, I will leave in tears. Very soon, my lover will tell me that she has got the HIV virus. I will realize that she has been infected by my best friend. And the fireworks on the beach will erupt over our heads just as I understand it. Three days earlier, approaching a scout centre outside Oslo, I see leather-clad men laughing, girls wearing pink and purple tracksuits, cowboys and drag queens. Some people are bustling around the place carrying a strapon and a bunch of other sex toys. So, these are the people I will spend the next three days with. My mind goes back to [FAQ](#) on the website, where one of the questions posed were «how gay is this larp?».

«I want you to play with a smile inside», says Hanne Grasmø, one of the organizers of Just a little lovin'. «Even if your character is in tears, I hope you can still play with a smile inside».

We gather at the flag for the first time. I will see the stars and stripes rise here three times in the next 72 hours. Each time, my character will be a year older. Each time, the people around me will have changed a little bit. But more important, every time I see the flag rise, some of my friends will be gone, having succumbed to AIDS.

«When the music starts, think that you're in a movie», says Hanne. «Think that you are the main character. That you see the whole crowd to begin with, before the camera zooms in on you». Jimmy Hendrix takes over, playing the star spangled banner. When he is finished, it is 1982. Everyone is happy, looking forward to this year's 4th of July party. For my own character, Thomasz, it's also his 30th birthday. He's in a good mood, preparing to celebrate his birthday and the 4th of July with his close

«JUST A LITTLE LOVIN'»

The game took place outside Oslo 10th to 11th July 2011, with 60 participants. Organized by Tor Kjetil Edland and Hanne Grasmø, it was billed as a game about «Friendship, desire and the fear of death». The game drew its setting from the New York gay scene in the years when the extent of the AIDS epidemic began to emerge.

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A Painting made as part of the game scenography, by Astrid Solgaard.

friends and his girlfriend Lizzie (whom he doesn't know is infatuated with his best friend Chain).

This year, the annual party «Mr T» is hosting for the gay community has merged with the neighbouring party of the Saratoga survivors, a group of friends from a rehabilitation centre for young cancer patients. This is also the first time Thomasz, one of the few heterosexual characters, sees his best friend Chain in his natural habitat, the gay scene. Being very tolerant, the merge with Mr. T's party is still quite a culture shock for Thomasz, seeing Chain do blow-jobs in broad daylight and hearing the screams of s&m in «the dark room». But in a way, the world is still innocent. Innocent from the plague that carries the nickname «the gay cancer» – an illness most people have heard about but very few really care about.

The Saratoga group begins their rituals, reminding themselves to be loyal to each other and to be survivors. Then it's party time, with magic drinks and drag shows. Thomasz is having a good time. Until his girlfriend Lizzie cheats on him. Fortunately his friend Kim is there to comfort him. But much deeper shadows are soon to be cast over Thomasz.

Just after breakfast, it's time for the lottery. It's like in

a dream, we're still our character but we're not in the real world any more. Tor Kjetil and Hanne enter in character as a doctor or a bureaucrat and asks everyone to put tickets in a hat. One for the least likely to be infected, five for the most likely. Then five tickets are pulled out of a hat. «Chain, please rise», says Eirik Fatland, playing «death». Thomasz can't hold back the tears as he realizes his best friend might die. The five who are drawn leaves for a black box scene to decide who is dying. The rest of us wait outside. The weather is sunny and nice but anxiety is the only thing I can feel, and the only thing I can see on the faces around me. Then we hear the sound of the church bells.

Chain is one of those carrying the dead. Thomasz has a shameful feeling of relief. Then he sees that Wallace is dead. He thinks back to how they were talking about Wallace's problems in a drum circle the day before. Now he's gone. A boy who took part in the drag show the night before is also dead. Thomasz recalls the odd show he performed as the «Black Raven», as if it was an omen of his soon-to-come death. Organizer-Hanne is orchestrating the funeral, still in the character of the doctor. The crowd puts down flowers for the dead. A lot of people are crying. Then we hear



▲ Auntie Sam - photo documentation from the larp.

the strings playing the intro to “Just a little lovin’ and the first act is over.

We spend the day resting and preparing for the next year. Some of it is done through the organizers’ workshop activities, but most of it is player driven. New friendships and relationships are created, others are broken. Thomasz and his girlfriend Lizzie decide to open up their dysfunctional relationship.

The next time the flag is raised, Wallace is no longer there. Chain is looking pale, far away from the self-confident gay-porn icon he was the year before. The illness has taken its toll on him, even though he’s doing his best to keep up appearances. It’s 1983 – the year of paranoia. Everybody knows there’s a dangerous disease out there, but nobody really knows how it works or who is carrying it. Some are afraid of shaking hands or touching other people, even on the shoulder. We can feel that death is close and fear is omnipresent. But the show must go on, and after several drinks the characters even forget that we shouldn’t drink from the same glass.

Lizzie had been hopelessly in love with Chain for several years, but he hasn’t shown much interest back. This night

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We can feel that death is close and fear is omnipresent.

Swedish newspaper Expressens Philip Teir commented negatively on the game’s choice of setting and form as part of a wider critique of heavy-handed use of pathos in contemporary scandinavian theatre, prompting responses both from other commentators and the designers and organizers; the exchange is available online in Swedish at expressen.se. Journalist Johanna Koljonen wrote about the game, and participated.

LOVE ETERNAL
NICK

TODAY'S FUNERAL

1983
1984

IN LOVING MEMORY

ABNER + ELI

POET
BELOVED OF
ELI
"THE FIRST OF US TO GO"

1984
NEVER
DIE
ALONE

NEVER
ST
HUS
CHAI
WHEN
HEAV
TALK

Peggy
Oh beautiful
We'll miss you

IN OUR HEARTS
TREVOR
WE CARRIED YOUR
BODY
YOU CARRIED OUR SOUL

Sim
I'll miss
you bas
you didn't do



Lizzie decides to add some substances to his drink to make him understand what a wonderful lady she really is. I and Karin (playing Thomasz' lover «Kim») are invited to see the meta-scenes when they make out. One very romantic one, the way Lizzie remembers it, and one tragic one, the way it really was. Chain, for his part, doesn't remember anything at all. With I as a player knowing this, it's easy to guide Thomasz into yet another night of tragedy – seeing his best friend being date-raped by his girlfriend. But at least he has Kim to comfort him.

Between 1983 and 1984, awareness of AIDS improved. Thomasz also made some personal improvement and ended his relationship with Lizzie, while becoming closer to Kim. With the increased awareness of AIDS, a test became available. The characters who wanted to could take a test as a scene in the blackbox, orchestrated by Tor Kjetil, playing a cynical doctor. Kim was one of the characters who took the test. I met Karin who was playing her just after the test. «It felt like being punched in the stomach» was the first thing she said. Kim's test was positive.

We used the pause between acts to make a story for Kim's test result. We decided that Thomasz and Kim had agreed not to have sex before they were both tested, because Kim wanted to protect Thomasz, in case he was not infected.

As the flag is raised for the third time, Thomasz is once again joining the party as a very happy man, because he's just got the result of his test, which is negative, meaning he and Kim can start having sex again. He doesn't know about Kim's positive result yet.

The same evening, Kim and Thomasz end up alone in the «pillow room» after the traditional Saratoga massage circle. Kim seems strange tonight. She insists on using a condom, something they have never done before. Thomasz sees his lover getting more and more possessive during the course of the night, talking about moving in together and maybe having kids in the future. Worried by this, he is about to catch a break with his friend Chain to smoke a joint when Kim once again appears and joins them. He feels ashamed of the way he reacted to Kim's expressions of love. Then he understands what news Kim has for him. Just as the fireworks erupt, the fact is starting to sink in. She is a victim of HIV. A deadly disease. And it was his best friend Chain that infected her. Or «killed her» as he expresses it. The sky is filled with colors and smoke and it is just possible to hear the cheers from the beach as he leaves the stairs, alone, as alone as he will ever be. ■



▲ «Backseat», Acryl on canvas, by Astrid solgaard

◀ Photo documentation from «Just a little loving» exhibition.

EXHIBITIONS

The game featured art by Norwegian artist Astrid Solgaard as props; this resulted in an exhibition combining the art by Solgaard and photos from the game by Xin Li and Frida Sofie Jansen. The works will be exhibited at the Oslo Central Station art space for World AIDS day December 1st.

«JUST A LITTLE LOVING» 2012

A second run is planned for 2012, in cooperation with the LajvVerkstad in Västerås, Sweden.



It felt like being punched in the stomach, was the first thing she said.

Sandman is a Lazy



TEXT | LORENZO TRENTI

ILLUSTRATION | THOMAS SØRLIE HANSEN

There's an inn, far away on a wild road up the hills of Como. You drive up this road, and probably at some point you park in the woods, because the road is too steep. You reach the inn by foot. You recognize characters from comics and movies waiting outside. You get past the curtain and you're in the game.

The game is «La locanda alla fine dei mondi» («Worlds' End Inn»), named after the «Sandman» comic book of the same name written by Neil Gaiman and published by Vertigo. Like in the comics, a bunch of strangers from different worlds are gathered together in the inn because of a strange storm. The inn welcomes everyone but demands that you pay for your food by telling a story to the other customers. In the game there are also two innkeepers, Cain and Abel, acting as game masters and larp organizers and, most of all, telling stories just like the other players.

Simone Paci played Cain in the game.

Game Master

DIY WORLDS' END

Simone Paci's tips on how to run a «Worlds' End Inn» game yourself:

It seems you're a big fan of Neil Gaiman and «Sandman». Where did the idea for this larp come from?

You are right, indeed. I'm a big fan of «Sandman» and Neil Gaiman. I really love his passion for storytelling and stories themselves. This larp is obviously deeply inspired by the «Worlds' End» chapter of the «Sandman» comic. The idea was to create for the players and the characters the same atmosphere as in the comic book, in a peculiar situation in which they are out of their regular context. They are forced to stay inside a strange inn in company of funny strangers, with real food to eat and wine to drink, telling each other's stories. That's it. Like many «Sandman» fans, we wanted to explore the question: «what would it be like to actually be in the Worlds' End Inn?» We also wanted to focus on interaction among the characters and having characters with stories that can be interesting for all the players.

The original idea for this larp comes from far away, the hills around the Emilia-Romagna flatland. That's where I first took part in such a larp as a player. It was a year or two after 2000 and a local roleplaying game association named «La Cripta» («The Crypt»), located in the town of Imola, was setting up this event. The larp was played in a wonderful cabin immersed in the woods, and the road to get there was scary, full of turns and mist. It looked like...the world's end.

On that run I personally chose to play a 29 year old Jesus Christ. I'm a little egocentric, I

know... He was lost like the others in a strange tempest and found shelter in the Worlds' End Inn. The immersion in the character was so strong, the interaction with other players so interesting... Imagine the astonishment when one player who was playing Longinus (the Roman soldier who pierced Jesus in his side) had a look at my character. In his context, he just thrust his spear to kill Jesus. That started a very interesting scenario between the two of us and many other players, curious to hear our stories. It was one of the best roleplaying game experiences I've had so far. That's why I decided to organize and spread this type of a larp.

The «character creation» is simple: send us your favorite character and, if we approve it, just show up with a proper costume and role-play that character. Have you ever had any problems with so much freedom on the part of the players?

Not at all, actually, until now at least. We evaluate each player's choice carefully to see if the chosen character could hurt someone else's feelings or beliefs, and if that happens we talk to the player and together we opt for a different solution before the game. With costumes, we contact each player before the event and we explain clearly to them that it's a «1:1 larp» where the way the player looks like in the game is the way the character looks like. Since there is total freedom of choice, if someone wants to come dressed in sport shoes, jeans and T-shirt they can absolutely do it, as long as that look

1. Read the «Sandman» comic book (or at least the Worlds' End Inn part) to understand the mood and feel required to recreate the necessary atmosphere.
2. Find a very nice location, possibly in an old-fashion place far from the city and modernity, and possibly immersed in nature, to enhance the feeling of being in the middle of nowhere.
3. Focus on the characters chosen as innkeepers: they must be high profile characters, possibly some hidden supernatural entity (like a god-avatar or somehow very powerful being) in order to be able to maintain order and balance during the game.
4. Explain clearly that this larp is primarily about telling stories and listening to them: each player should have at least one story to tell during the game, and be willing to listen to the stories of others.
5. This larp is granular: if you have a lot of time and will, encourage the players to send background stories and detailed information about their characters. If you work hard, you can find a reason why each character finds himself at the Inn, and you can link the stories of some of them in order to generate particularly interesting conflicts or interactions.
6. If you can afford to travel to Italy, you may consider a visit when the next «Worlds' End Inn» larp will take place. Como is a charming lakeside town, definitely worth visiting. As always happens, participation is the best way to understand what a game is about!

>>

Organizers: Simone Paci,
Gianluca D'arasma and
Claudia Albonico
Date: 28.5.2011
Location: Como, Italy
No. of players: 19
Web: locanda.gdr.net

fits with the character they have chosen. As the Worlds' End Inn sign reads, it is a free house!

What are the best characters you've seen? Or maybe, which were the best interactions?

That's a tough question. We had dozens of interesting characters visiting the Inn: Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde, Lucifer, Cupido, Tyler Durden, the Archangel Micheal, the Little Prince, the Black Corsair, a «pig woman» coming from a claustrophobic cannibalistic future where all animals are extinct and some human are used as food, some members of the X-Men and other Marvel characters (Rogue, Nightcrawler, Elektra), Philip K. Dick, José Mourinho, a family of three feudal Japanese farmers and many others. One time one player decided just to interpret himself, a regular guy, who happened to be in the Worlds' End Inn.

Regarding the interactions, some of the best occurred when some kind of conflict emerged among two or more characters. When Micheal the Archangel met Lucifer, or when Mr. Hyde tried to morally corrupt any susceptible characters he could find in the Inn.

Having been a player at the last run (May 2011), I can add at least Mourinho trying to explain to the feudal Japanese farmers what a «football championship» is! It was very funny. Apart from the interactions in character, do you think that all the players understand the storytelling element?

This is a crucial point. The game is meant to be playable by anyone who enjoys roleplaying and loves the magic of storytelling, regardless of past experiences in «standard» roleplaying games or larps. Moreover, it is also a game of sharing each other's stories and the different ways of telling them. But what I have noticed is that at times some players do not understand these features, focusing more – if not only – on their «acting» without empathy for the other guests and without embracing the situation and the atmosphere of the Inn.

What usually happens is that such players end on their own, with little or no interaction at all for most of the time and, consequently, with little fun. Even if it is a matter connected to the player's temper, we as the innkeepers try to avoid such a situation, pushing them to talk and listen to the other guests' stories, but sometimes it is not enough. That's why we decided to be even more clear on such points and explain them better to players before the game. We want to try to have help from the most experienced players, seating strategically at the tables to help the novice players.

I think that the great thing about this event is that it doesn't need a lot of pre-planning and it's perfect for lazy larp organizers. Do you agree? And do you have tips for anyone who wants to make a new installment of the game?

I definitively agree, even if I believe it is not always a matter of laziness. I am 30 years old, I have a pretty demanding job, a lot of passions and I am trying to finish my PhD. Spare time is something I have in short supply, as it is for most of the people of my age.

What we believe, as the non-profit gaming association I founded in Como together with my friends Gianluca D'arasma and Claudia Albonico, is that cool roleplaying games do not necessarily need months of preparation. That's what we try to demonstrate by organizing events that are easy to set up, and enjoyable to play. We are able to do that because we carefully choose games that match a few simple criteria: ease of set-up, one-shot, interesting plot/character interactions, somehow challenging for the players and, last but not least, open. «The Worlds' End Inn» larp is one of them, but not the only one. We had a lot of success using the theatrical Italian game «On Stage!» by Luca Giuliano in the «vox populi» version, where the audience can interact with the plot improvised by the players. ■

Memento Mori


Death should be the same as a life – we don't become somebody other just because we die.
– Michel de Montaigne

TEXT | LUDMILA VITKEVICH

ILLUSTRATION | THOMAS SØRLIE HANSEN

PHOTOS | KSENIA KOZLOVSKAYA



 mercenary opened his eyes. He laid in the tall grass on the hill, near the walls of Florence. There was a blue sky over him and nothing more in the whole world. Memory gradually returned. His chest was still in pain – from the Milanese sword. And he was here, alone – so the fight was lost and the condottieri didn't protect their employers.

And it also meant that he was dead now.

The Florentines wear many masks, but the death mask is only one. The condottiero rose, pulled out and put it on – a gray velvet mask. Anyone wearing it is invisible and inaudible to the living. Now only one place in town could shelter him – the studio of the painter Andrea Verrocchio. While the mercenary was alive, he had never been there (and why?). But a dead person in the city of the arts had just no other way.

A workshop. White walls, a wooden table. At the table – a girl, the daughter of Verrocchio, Flora.

«Good day to you, soul», she said.

A good full-color larp implies naturalness of experienced emotions. I'm not talking now about fighting games that allow endless rebirths, and where the characters are not much more than «that fifth archer in the third row» needed to create a certain stylistics of the happening. Concerning deep immersion larps, common in Russia, the identities of the player and its character merge, and there is no «theatrical» play – there is a life, or something very close to a real one.

Fear to be no longer in the space of a larp – is normal. It comes from a real fear to cease living, as well as from a reluctance to lose highly detailed and skilled character. In-game death is one of the most important components of roleplaying and one of its tangible drivers. It can be a goal, cause or consequence of in-game actions, but in any case it's a radical change of a character's condition, which gives the player a very large impact. A good option – death as a logical and a harmonious outcome of life. The death of Achilles completed fulfillment of a prophecy, Roland managed to blow the Olifant – and died in battle, Joan of Arc burned at the stake in the name of faith, Galahad found the Holy Grail... So, death is the highest point of life, which completes the gestalt and turns the fate into a finished piece of art. But even then, it's not easy to accept and experience it.

And what if character's death is untimely? Important words are not spoken, songs are not finished, dreams are not achieved, prayers are not offered, and then death is ugly, destructive and unjust. But we have to put up with it, because there is no other options. A character goes to some another world, and a player remains. And a grief is sometimes very acute.

In order to mitigate the impact and add value to in-

game death Russian larps use a device known as in-game afterlife, land of the dead or «mertvyatnik».

This is a special location. It is a sort of a «game within a game» – a metaphysical layer of existence, parallel reality, another world. There are specific laws and regulations, and the entrance is closed for the living, although there are exceptions. Orpheus had no right to descend to Hades, but he did it.

«Sit down. Wine? And yes, you can take off a mask here.» Flora looked sad. And alienated?

«But I don't understand. I always thought that after the death quite a lot of fire will wait for me.» The former soldier of fortune grinned.

«It became a custom. When the Florentines dies, I meet them here. And I talk to them. You died so early. Tell me, how did you live? For what?»

He told and Flora sometimes wrote something down. A family. A craft. Trattories. Military campaigns. Finally, a death with arms. He wasn't an outstanding mercenary and heard that voice within. And loved good wine more than gold. Does he want to change something in his past life? Yes – it would be worth to learn fencing better... Finally, he paused and was silent for a long time. Flora then rose and beckoned him away into the studio.

There was a hall, a large white room, the actual workshop. Rose petals on the floor. In the corner, on the table – pencils, crayons and brushes and a scattering of bottles with paints. Paintings on the walls, all draped. In the middle of the room – a huge easel and a blank sheet on it.

«This is your life», Flora said.

«What would be its symbol? Draw or write it here. Do not hurry, I'll wait for you...»

The former soldier of fortune smoked, drank wine, wrinkled his brow. Proud mottos and biblical quotations floated and faded in a memory. He scarcely knew any poems. And then – suddenly – he took a brush and drew a shabby sword with a long cross-guard and a golden sun above it, He wrote «Spiritus Sanctus» near. Exhaled and smiled.



Afterlife: there and back again.

The essence of the afterlife depends on the subject and style of the larp. It is consistent to take Heaven and Hell for in-game world which exists in the Christian paradigm, the kingdom of Hades – for ancient Greece, Valhalla – for Pagan Scandinavia and the Mandos for Middle-earth. But options may vary because larps, being a product of postmod-



A Larp «William Shakespeare's Verona» (2008). In-game afterlife – «Globe» theater. The Shakespearean play is modified to reflect the actual in-game events. Perished characters become scriptwriters and actors.



Write your own epitaph.

ernism, attract postmodern solutions: An art workshop at the game on the Italian Renaissance, where the souls of the dead draw significant events of their life. Istanbul Museum of the History of the XV century Constantinople – with tours for the fallen defenders of the city. «Globe» theatre in medieval Verona, where souls of the citizens help Shakespeare to write and stage his plays. These are just a few examples of what may be a posthumous space for roleplaying games. You can use many methods of influencing the psyche of a character/player, from a new shock to the relaxed reflection, but the goal is one – to help a player to experience and accept the death of the character.

In some games, mertvyatnik is just a place where you can drink beer out-of-game around the campfire, rest for a few hours and return to the process by pulling a piece of paper with a new character's description from a well-worn gamemaster's cap. Such mechanisms have little value for the art, but for the sake of accuracy, they are worth mentioning.

More details

Deceased persons, most often, does not immediately depart to another world. Many larps welcome in-game funeral rituals. Funerals are not only enrich the cultural space of the game, but they are kind of initiation for the dead, because the player is aware of the character's transition from the world of the living to the land of the dead. And this is an important step, which is best not to make a comic show for the crowd laughing unhealthy, led by the deceased. The funeral, weeping, vigil near the body, the last words – all contribute to emotional tension and allow friends and relatives of the deceased

really feel the loss, and the lost – to realize his/her importance for the living. In some Russian larps funerals are conducted in a very natural way, laying the deceased character in the coffin (or something like it), and closing the lid (but not nailing it, however). Then the coffin is lowered into the grave, and friends and relatives drop a few handfuls of soil on top.

After the funeral the character temporarily left alone or with a special game-master, who should take him/her to the afterlife. When moving around the dead character in any way indicates that he/she is no longer among the living, to don't confuse other players. Typically, special visual markers are used, often – white: head bandages, ties, umbrellas and so on.

Physically mertvyatnik is a separate location, usually some distance from the main events of the game, so dead don't mingle with the living and don't lead them astray. Visually, the afterlife can be anything, but mostly it is fenced off by walls made of cloth or it's just a single room or two. Aesthetically it can be anything also, but as long as in-game afterlife is a kind of symbolic scene, there are of-

ten different signs and symbols, without a complete reconstruction of the claimed area. In other words, a Gatekeeper, Keys and Libra could be enough for a Paradise – and you do not need to hang the clouds of cotton wool on the trees. It is important that a player getting into mertvyatnik feels its cultural field.

In general, the form and style of the afterlife itself are made in accordance with the general idea of the game, and should work for it. Despite the fact that this is an auxiliary structure, a good land of the dead can complete the gestalt of the role. Also it allows the player to continue playing a role through the dead character, which in some definite way will affect the larp's reality.



Dead, still playing.

▼ Larp «The Black Company» (2005). Symbolic land of the dead.



Flora took off draperies from the paintings. These were the scenes of human life – birth, adolescence, love, friendship, work, war. On the penultimate picture an angel with a beautiful and infinitely sad face hugged with his wings a broken human body.

«Death is certain», Flora said. «But the Lord is merciful. And you can go back to the world of living. Another man, another fate. If you want to.»

He nodded.

The last picture was blank.

«What to draw? Again, a war? Or something else?»

The former mercenary said in unfamiliar voice:

«I just want to be an innkeeper. They, well, give peace and joy to us. It's more important than wearing a sword.»

«Are you sure?»

«Yes.»

«Good. What name will you accept?»

«Paolo», he coughed. «Yes, Paolo.»

In some games a character, remaining dead, may continue to participate in roleplaying by himself: directly, as a ghost, or indirectly – writing letters that reach the living by some mystical way. In long games players often just take another role.

Another way after the death of the character is to remain in the game at the «metaphysical» layer (in the mertvyatnik, for example), or to work on the story as an NPC. This switch is extremely beneficial, because it replaces the reflection on the tragic (or dull) death of the character to constructive, useful, creative activities for the benefit of the entire project.

One of the most popular game-masters' mistakes is the absence of thorough work on land of the dead. It is often left «for later», decided to finish it at the site or even to improvise. With a small game and good players, the risk may be justified. With a big game and high mortality rates – mertvyatnik will fail, and instead completing the role gestalt, it will worsen, causing players' aversion to the process.

One of the large Russian Tolkien's larps had mertvyatnik – Valinor – considered a failure, simply because it did not come to the game. This was a deep immersion larp, full of symbols and meanings. But Valinor was not like that, it was more like a camp of young inexperienced players who had little to do with elves and humans who have died in the great battles of Middle-Earth. Alienation was just too great.

It is difficult to say why mertvyatnik sometimes falls out of sight of the game-masters. Perhaps, indeed, because it is a parallel space? In any case, it is best to rely not only on the wealth of your own imagination and experience, but

also prepare everything in advance. And in addition to the conceptual component (and the walls), there should be special game-masters of the land of the dead, driving the process. They do 90% of its effect.

A good, cohesive group of people who know what to do, and do not let each other down – is the key to success for any part of the game. In the land of the dead it's especially important, because players getting there often be in a somewhat unstable emotional state.

Mertvyatnik should not be like a factory assembly line. But work there is a hard one. Try to take forty confessions a day, for example. It might actually be around the clock, it can be monotonous towards the end of the game, when the number of dead often grows. A very popular question is, do you need a professional psychologist in the in-game afterlife? Yes and no. On the one hand, for a person who has to work with highly excited players, it's a good idea to have a range of competencies. On the other hand, sometimes for a frustrated player it's much more useful to just drink some wine and make a talk in a good company.

Is it a game after all?

There is some hole in between the spaces of roleplaying game and real life, but on the other hand – between one and another role of the same player. We have found that in-game afterlife allows you to make this hole not a failure, but, perhaps, even one of the peaks of gaming experience. In addition, the parallels between death/personal transcendent experiences of the characters and players are inevitable, they are suggestive. Death as an excuse to get out of routine? A rather bitter irony, or perhaps, inspiring.

«And the last thing. You should see the Creator.»

Paolo, amazed, followed Flora to the third room of the studio. Only one painting hung there under a heavy drapery. Flora removed the curtain. Paolo's jaw fell off.

It was a mirror.

«Every man here is his own creator, as created in the image and likeness of God. Look!»

Paolo did. The girl put her hand on his shoulder, she smiled. She seemed alienated no more.

«Look! And – go to the people. Be happy. Pax vobiscum!»

A door showed up in the wall, sunlight and city noise came through it.

«Pax vobiscum!» Paolo answered. He took Flora's hand, kissed it, released it and walked out. Florence seemed busy, people crowded the square and lively gesticulated. The game went on. ■

Table Talk & 8th-Grade-itis

To roleplay in Japan, you need to know your honobono.

text & photos | [Matthew Sanchez](#)



In the back of a musty shop, hidden in the corner of the fourth floor of a building nestled in an alley deep in the electronics district of Nagoya, I find the book I had been looking for. As I pull the book off the shelf, the bizarre imagery on the cover and the title, written in an ancient script, captivates me. Within this tome lies an arcane path to a new world: spells, monsters and magic. I make sure nobody is watching as I pay for the book and crawl back to my study before daring to crack open the dark grimoire, where I pore obsessively over the cryptic language that keeps the information captive.

I'm not hunting for the Necronomicon or the Voynich Manuscript; I'm a collector of Japanese role-playing games.

Japanese role-playing games¹ have their roots in the late 1970s, but didn't explode in popularity until the 80's, when translations of Traveller and Dungeons and Dragons became widely available to the Japanese. A few years later, the advent and explosion of the RPG video game genre on

the Famicom home video game system began to attract new players. As in the West, the hobby has seen its share of troubles, but several long-standing games such as Sword World and Tokyo Nova continue to sell well, and translations of several games such as Dungeons and Dragons and Warhammer Fantasy have been translated several times over the years.

These days, Japanese games one might find in a game store run the same gamut as their western counterparts: plenty of games set in heroic western fantasy realms, darker cyberpunk, and games set in the modern world. As one looks deeper into these games, however, one starts to see the Japanese core. Alshard, a game set in a simple fantasy world, is heavily influenced by console role-playing games such as Final Fantasy.

Another heavily Japanese feature of the hobby is the prevalence of and focus on adolescent characters. The «suspense action» game Doublecross, set in the modern



One starts to see the Japanese core: console role-playing games such as «Final Fantasy».

world where a strange virus has given super powers to mankind, almost seems to assume that players would be creating high school aged characters – at least, according to the art found throughout the game.

This theme, seen on a large number of rule-book covers, is been called Chu-2-byou, which translates to 8th-Grade-itis. Okada Atsuhiko, the designer of the game Ryuutama, described the phenomenon to me. He reminded me about that crucial time in my youth, when I thought I was invincible: When I was 14. That's when puberty hits and the world begins to open up to us, when we start to daydream about having super powers and the ability to do anything we want. Though it's not explored much beyond young adult media in America, nostalgia about the early teens is a powerful theme in Japanese literature, anime, and gaming. In fact, it's hard to find a Japanese game that features older protagonists. It may be this factor that has delegat-ed the sales of Dungeons and Dragons behind Alshard and Sword World – both games sit squarely in the Chu-2-byou camp – despite the high production values of the imported game.

Many recent games, however, are beginning to mirror the innovation found in the independently published game sector of the western gaming sphere. Games such as Shinobigami² push the boundaries of the power held by the Game Master, whereby players themselves determine where, how, and what happens in the scenes that their characters star in. The same game also introduces innovative story-telling techniques such as Secrets: each player is handed a game-changing Secret that is not to be revealed until an enemy player³ has uncovered it.

Of course, from the very start, the systems of Japanese RPGs have been evolving on their own, as the limitations and circumstances of this island country have had their effects on the hobby. In the early days, for example, exotic multi-sided «role-playing style» dice were hard to find, forcing Japanese game designers to



create games that used ubiquitous 6-sided dice (6-sided dice, usually quite small in size and featuring a large, red pip on the «1» side, have been around for hundreds of years) instead of the 12- or 20-sided dice that the more popular western games used. Even today, most Japanese games have continued this tradition.⁴



Necromancers choose to gift fragments of memories to the corpses of young girls, perhaps to build a collection of dolls.

In fact, entirely new genres have bloomed in Japan that have yet to be given much thought in the west. A Japanese genre style called «honobono» has flourished here in media, movies and manga, with games such as Ryuutama and Yuuyake Koyake being the archetypal games of the honobono tradition. In these games, player characters run across people with everyday problems; somebody has >>

1) Known as TRPGs: table-talk role playing games.

2) The Modern Ninja Combat Game

3) Player vs. Player action is another innovation from this game

4) Some games use custom tarot card sets and even Hanafuda, the Japanese traditional set of cards seen at the New Year celebration.



The internet is a huge resource that the rest of the TRPG publishers have avoided.

SWORD WORLD

Publisher: Group SNE
Fantasy RPG. 10 million copies of the related books including rulebooks, novels and replays have been sold. Spin-offs include several manga, three CRPGs and a game for the Nintendo DS.

RYUUTAMA

Publisher: Tabletalk Cafe Daydream
A «Natural Fantasy RPG» that emphasizes travel, exploration, community, friendship, harmony and growth.

YUUYAKE KOYAKE/«SUNSET»

A game in which players take on the roles of shape changing animals that live in the woods just outside of a small town. The focus of the game is short, light-hearted scenarios in which the player characters help the townsfolk with everyday problems.

lost their dog, someone has lost their favorite hairband, someone needs help painting their house. Honobono itself can probably best be translated as «feel-good,» with the best examples of the genre being *My Neighbor Totoro* or *Kiki's Delivery Service*, both by Studio Ghibli.

As an American, I had a hard time understanding the draw of honobono, so I asked Ryo Kamiya, writer of *Yuuyake Koyake*, and Emeth Aikou, also of the Tsugihagi group that brought out the game, what they thought honobono meant to them. Emeth began by explaining that a honobono game, first and foremost, was about solving problems with intelligence and emotion over physical violence. He believes that westerners tend to approach people as a target when speaking, while Japanese approach one another as neighbors, which explains the prevalence of the genre, especially compared to the west. In fact, Kamiya's game *Yuuyake Koyake* almost completely avoids physical violence in its rules, instead focusing on giving players the ability to form and act on emotional bonds. The game has been a great success, and three supplemental books have been released.

Kamiya's new game *Nechronica*, on the other hand, shows a different side to the writer's psyche. While *Yuuyake Koyake* features shapeshifting forest animals helping humans in everyday life, *Nechronica* presents a world of the rotting dead, where existence is ruled by pain and violence. In the world of *Nechronica*, humans found a way to turn corpses into mindless soldiers, which quickly led to the eradication of human life on the planet. Unlife, however, spread quickly and shows no sign of



abating. Strange creatures called necromancers have the ability to gift certain undead with sentience, returning a small amount of memory to their victims. Necromancers only choose to gift these fragments of memories to the corpses of young girls, perhaps to build a collection of dolls. The players play these dolls, and must fight together to survive and once again rebuild their memories.

Though this game sounds like an American horror flick from the 90s, and it certainly is one of the darker role-playing games in print, it actually has a solid touch of that «honobono feel» built into the game in regards to themes of friendship and memories. This results in a deep and eerily heartwarming play experience. As the players create their characters, bonds between the characters are decided, most of which consist of various levels of friendship and childlike rivalry. During play, acting on these bonds, doing things like working towards friendship and helping your friends, all net you concrete benefits and create a light atmosphere.

The game was a hit at the Japan Game Convention in August. I asked Emeth Aikou about the future of their publishing efforts. He believes that they'll keep pushing the niche and independent market. He hopes that someday they'll be able to publish games of small independent writers online, and pioneer the Japanese PDF online market. The internet is a huge resource that the rest of the TRPG publishers have avoided, and the time will come when someone will take advantage of that fact. Hopefully, when that day comes, it will be easier to bring these games to distant shores. ■

What Do Elves Smell Like?

They smell soapy.
With a hint of wood preservation.



Black Phoenix Alchemy Lab is a small, alternative business that provides perfumes and scented oils. They specialise in supplying goths and other underground people with smells that will challenge your olfactory sense by not being even the slightest bit mainstream. Recently they have launched a new range of products which are designed specifically for roleplayers.

The creator of the smells tells nostalgically about her roleplaying sessions that go back to teenhood:

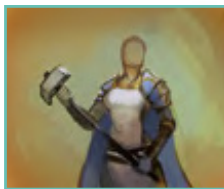
– Our group was somewhat prop-driven in our gaming: we felt that setting a mood was conducive to our style of gameplay. Little things like changes in lighting, minor sound effects, and music made a world of difference, and we found that utilizing miniatures, model railroad scenery, and other tools in order to physically illustrate strategies and provide visual cues was tremendously useful. How much more immersive would it have been if we'd been able to smell the crypt we were crawling through? Or the stench of steel and blood that permeates a warrior's cloak? What do the wizard's spell components smell like? What does winter in the desert smell like? Or spring in a druid's sanctuary?

With the RPG scent series, you can add an extra dimension to your roleplaying, namely that of smell. The scents are designed in such a way that you can design your character's specific perfume by mixing three basic components: Race, class and alignment.

The blind test

Playground wanted to test how convincing the perfumes are. After all, you don't want a soapy smelling orc, or a rancid paladin. We devised a blind test of the perfumes in order to sniff out exactly how well the different scents represent what they stand for.

Helene Willer, our chosen test person, has worn perfumes even longer than she has played roleplaying games. We believe her to be a qualified judge.



The first perfume we present to Helene is the Paladin. Helene's comments are:

– Sweet, a bit flowery, but not really perfumed. I guess it could be worse. I think it's Alignment: Good.

Black Alchemy's description:

Immaculate white musk, sweet frankincense, bourbon vanilla, white leather, and shining armor.



The next perfume, a heady, aromatic mix, is Evil. It immediately makes Helene reel:

– Phew. It's very strong. It smells a bit like dirt, but it's more perfumed than that. But I quite like it, actually. Is it Elf?

Smouldering opium tar, tobacco absolute, green tea, black plum, kush, ambergris accord, ambrette seed, and costus root.



The Ranger is a piney, mossy smell – a bit like air freshener. Helene:

– This is very clean, in a way. Not too strong. That could be a cleric? Or maybe just lawful. I dunno.

Untamed wilderness: buckskin accord with Terebinth pine, Russian birch, black ironwood, elder bark, hay, armoise, juniper, patchouli, galangal root, Spanish moss, and cabreuva.



The Dwarf makes Helene pull back her head immediately. Her comments actually fit quite accurately with how I would imagine Gimli from Lord of the Rings smelling:

– Uh! It's very strong! It smells like really bad male perfume, like something a teenager or a very old man might wear. Maybe evil? But it has something fruity about it, I'm so confused!

Iron filings and chips of stone, Styrian Golding hops, and soot-covered leather.



The Halfling has a nasty smell, like synthetic bubble gum. Helene:

- Eew! This must be the orc. It's very strong and smells really bad, but then there's a bit of fruity cider, smells like walking into a candy shop. Just a hint of popcorn too. Maybe it's the ranger?

Porridge, kukui nuts, and pastry crumbs.



The Chaotic scent is not unpleasant, though it comes across as somewhat synthetic. Helene:

- This has a hint of mint. I think this is the Paladin.

A whirling mélange of multicolored musks with wasabi, rooibos, heliotrope, and mastic.



The Cleric scent bears a strong resemblance to Old Spice. Helene's interpretation is right on the money:

- This also has a hint of old man's perfume, like something you've bought in a supermarket. A man with no wife, living alone, he got it as a present and he doesn't really care how he smells anyhow, so he might as well use it up. It could be the Cleric.

Rose amber, frankincense, myrrh, champaca flower, Peru balsam, cistus, palisander, cananga, hyssop, and narcissus absolute.



The Lawful scent has a fresh, green smell to it. Helene puts it like this:

- This smells like when you get a big bouquet of flowers, and you stick your nose into it, and there are so many smells that it's hard to tell them apart. Grass, or spring flowers. Freshly cut grass. The ranger, or the halfling.

Rigid oak, blue chamomile, rhubarb, and fig leaf.



The Good perfume gets us the best reaction so far from Helene:

- I like this one... Can I smell it again? Maybe – I think this is the Elf? It's sweet, and very subtle. Or maybe it's a female rouge? Well, rouges ought to be subtle.

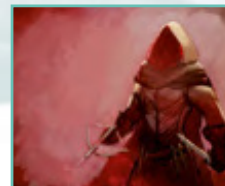
Shimmering celestial musk with vanilla, white honey, acacia, and sugar cane.



Next up is the Elf:

- This smells like wood and moss. And a bit like tangerines. Maybe that's the halfling.

Pale golden musk, honeycomb, amber, parma violet, hawthorne bark, aspen leaf, forest lily, life everlasting, white moss, and a hint of wild berry.



Obviously Helene's understanding of Rouges is not the same as Black Alchemy Lab's. Her next reaction emphasises this, as she wrinkles her nose at the vial:

- Ooooh! This might be the dwarf, or the Orc! Maybe the Dwarf. It's rich and potent in a way. Like a perfume for a man. If it was a colour, it'd be purple.

Soft, well-worn black leather, hemp, and rosin.



The Orc is a peculiar, rather detergent-like smell with a hint of musk. It throws Helene completely off track:

- Paladin, or lawful. It's synthetic, but it's clean. It's not flowery. Maybe just a cheap soap.

Field grey courgette musk, roughly cured leather, and vetiver.

Conclusion

Black Alchemy Lab's series might actually not be bad for roleplaying. However, we would advise strongly against wearing them on a night out! ■

Something From Nothing

In 2011, Finland's roleplaying scene exploded in a frenzy of indie publications.

TEXT | JUHANA PETTERSSON



When Ville Vuorela published his classic fantasy roleplaying game *Praedor* in 2000, he was a lone voice in the wilderness. A lot of Finnish-language roleplaying material was published in the late Eighties and early Nineties, but by 1995 publishing had stopped.

In 2011, we've seen the largest number of Finnish roleplaying game books since they glory days of twenty years ago. Vuorela is publishing an English translation of his masterpiece *Stalker*, but this time he's not alone.

Even I joined in the party, publishing a collection of Danish games translated into Finnish, called «Unelma Keltaisesta kuninkaasta» (The Dream of a King in Yellow, edited by myself, Kristoffer Apollo and Tobias Wrigstad).

Red Sands demonstrates that merely asserting the humanity of certain minorities is a political act in today's Finland.

The With Court borrows its visuals from



Somalia

One of the most interesting new Finnish roleplaying game books has been Wille Ruotsalainen's «Punaiset hiekat» («Red Sand»). It's a book about using Somalia and Somalian folklore as a basis for a roleplaying game.

«'Red Sands' is based on an article I wrote for the Roolipelaaja (The Roleplayer) magazine», Ruotsalainen says. «They asked for big, well-sourced articles about real things, so that's what I did. Unfortunately, it took just enough time for me to do it that the magazine folded. Since I already had the article, it wasn't difficult to expand it into a book.»

Finland is experiencing the same kind of right-wing explosion that has already occurred in Denmark and the Netherlands. There's a lot of anti-Somali racism.

«I don't see this primarily as a political book. But my civics professor explained to me that all public activity has a political dimension, and it's the same with this book», Ruotsalainen explains. «I wanted to explain to Finland's roleplayers something about the background, the stories and the past of our Somali minority. I wanted to make the Somalis look cool while staying true to history and real culture. From this perspective, you can see the book as a statement in favor of an international Finland.»

Grindhouse

The Finnish roleplaying publishing scene is very splintered. Everyone makes games for their own constituency. Arkkikivi publishes Finnish and American Forge-style games, both in Finnish and in English. My own Pohjoismaisen roolipelaamisen seura has a pan-Nordic focus. Ville Vuorela's Burger Games and Miska Fredman and Samuli Ahokas's Ironspine have a more traditional approach.

There's dialogue between various publishers, but little competition. «There's so little money involved, so there's no greed and you don't feel the blood in your mouth. People make games out of love for roleplaying, since there's no fame and riches involved», Ruotsalainen says.

James Edward Raggi IV is an American emigré living in Finland. He's also the only person in Finland who's managed to make a living by designing and publishing roleplaying games in the last twenty years. «It's either do this game publisher thing or put on a red and yellow uniform and clean the metro stations like the other foreigners», Raggi says. «And those things are hideous enough on skinny people, you know?» His scene is the old-school revolution of retro games harkening back to the first editions of Dungeons & Dragons, published in the Seventies.

His latest big publication is the «Grindhouse Edition» of his dark fantasy roleplaying game «Lamentations of the Flame Princess». «The original printing of 'Lamentations of the Flame Princess' was criticized for not being distinctive enough from other games of its type, and I could see why. My style of play and how that's communicated really isn't in mechanics. I really dislike such things being hard-coded in games», Raggi says.

The new version wears its influences on its sleeve, from extreme horror movies to classic metal album covers. «Presentation is content», Raggi says.



There's no fame and riches involved.

FINNISH GAMES PUBLISHED IN 2011

UNELMA KELTAISESTA KUNINKAASTA
(eng. The Dream of a King in Yellow)
Edited: Kristoffer Apollo, Juhana Pettersson & Tobias Wrigstad
Publisher: Pohjoismaisen roolipelaamisen seura, 2011
www.nordicrpg.fi

PUNAISET HIEKAT
(eng. Red Sand)
Designer: Wille Ruotsalainen
Publisher: self-published, 2011

LAMENTATIONS OF THE FLAME PRINCESS:
GRINDHOUSE EDITION
Designer: James Edward Raggi IV
Publisher: Lamentations of the Flame Princess, 2011
www.lotfp.com

GENERIAN LEGENDAT
(eng. Legends of Generia)
Designers: Samuli Ahokas & Miska Fredman
Publisher: Ironspine, 2011
www.ironspine.com

KÄRPÄNEN
(eng. Fly)
Designers: Samuli Ahokas & Miska Fredman
Publisher: Ironswine Games, 2011
ironswine-games.com

BLIARON
Designers: Uoti Huotari, Antti Lax, Julius Kuutti, Tuomas Mikkonen & Oskari Wäänänen
Publisher: Northern Realms, 2011
www.northernrealms.net

PYÖREÄN PÖYDÄN RITARIT
(eng. Knights of the Round Table)
Designer: Sami Koponen
Publisher: self-published, 2011

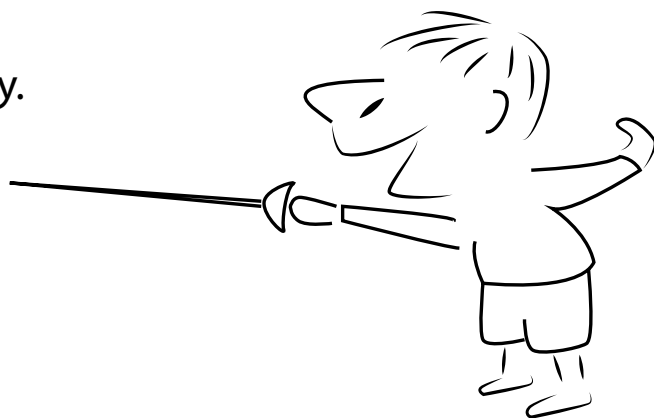
NOITAHOVI
(eng. Witch Court)
Designer: Tuomas Kortelainen
Publisher: self-published, 2011
noitahovi.jimdo.com



Master of puppets

Kids are just like people, but not really.

text | jarosław Kopec



I In Poland we have a yearly tournament for Game Masters called the «Master of Masters Cup». One year I won it, which allowed me to call myself the best Polish GM for a year. Some time later, I met a friend who had won the same trophy in the past. He was working at a summer holiday roleplaying camp for kids.

I was looking for a summer job. Earning some extra money playing RPGs sounded like a perfect deal. I asked him if they had any vacancies, and this is how I got started.

At these camps each educator (who, at the same time, is a game master) runs roleplaying sessions for two groups of 4–5 kids, age 11 and up. There are also other events that require a lot of attention: Larps organised by game masters and kids by themselves, game rooms with boardgames, lectures about roleplaying theory and fencing classes. Still, roleplaying is the main part.

In the beginning I was cool. I knew that I am a good game master. But as the time for camp approached, I grew more and more nervous. I started to be a little unsure about my roleplaying skills. Usually, when I play at home, I play with my friends whom I can trust. I use systems that let them do more than just react to my descriptions: I let them add motifs and direct the action a bit. However, at these camps the kids play traditional games with a traditional game master function, where the game master is expected to run things with absolute authority. And they have eight sessions each, which means that every game master working at a camp runs sixteen sessions in two weeks. And, knowing that these kids' parents pay for their

children's fun, you have to give it all you've got. It's a responsibility.

Our resort was placed right next to a sloping field which is used as a ski-slope when snow covers the lively green grass growing between the small mountain houses and the mid-18th-century stone church. Our group of forty two children and six staff took over two entire buildings, turning it into something like a two-week-long convention.

First the kids were to choose which games they wanted to play. We, the game masters, told them a little about the different systems we could run. I presented the Polish post-apocalyptic game Neuroshima, Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay, and Call of Cthulhu. After the presentation the kids signed up for the systems and we sorted them in groups. I was to run Call of Cthulhu for one team, and Warhammer for another.

GROUP I

Age: 11–14

System: Warhammer 2 ed.

This was a group of boys without even the first sign of moustache on their faces. When we started creating characters,

they all chose warriors – from soldier to troll slayer. We decided that they would be deserters from the Imperial army, still fighting the forces of Chaos in the Eastern Lands. So I said to myself: «Great! I'll give them loads of fighting, a little survival and a chance to redeem themselves in an epic finale. It will be easy». I interpreted their characters as suggestion about the players' expectations towards the game. Which was a mistake.

After every session I asked my players about their opinions. After the first one they were like «Whoaaa! Everything was perfect!». But after the next, they asked me to give them some intrigue. «Intrigue?», I thought to myself. «You created a pack of brutal killers escaping from the army and you want intrigue?»

After a while I understood my mistake. These kids were doing everything they could to make their characters more likely to survive in the dangerous world of Warhammer. They knew that they needed high stats in their fighting skills, strength, stamina and health points. But they did not connect this with their expectations towards sessions.

Normally, if you want to let your game master know that you want crime stories and puzzles, you create a pack of dodgers, and raise your characters' Intelligence and Charisma. You definitely do not choose a Troll Slayer whose whole attitude is about going straight to the point and hacking down anything that stands in his way.

They knew that they could solve an intrigue with only one of them having high intelligence characteristic, so they chose one character to be a medic/smart guy. The rest prepared for

fighting. I think kids who haven't read enough books or seen enough movies can't really see the inappropriateness of a dwarf demon hunter solving Holmesque detective riddles.

I changed my plans a little bit. I added an enemy-within-style crime story, a dose of The Name of the Rose and zombie movie drama. It was going great. The kids took every single idea I tossed them and turned it into a cool story.

And they were learning quickly.

The importance of good manners

Before the first session I gave them a quick lecture. One of the things I told them was not to kill each other only because «it's what my character would do». I told them about sharing the fun together, creating the story together. Thinking about others' needs. And you know what? They did every single thing I asked them to do exactly as it should be done.

When we were debriefing after the first session, I told them that it's nice to thank all your co-players for the game. From this moment on, after every session, they all stood up and shook hands, saying «thanks» with smiles on their faces. At moments like this I felt like I had taught them something valuable, even if it was just a small thing.

But they weren't all that perfect. Two problems surfaced after a while.

The first problem I got rid of very quickly, in a vigilante way. I noticed that kids this age love jokes about sex, especially about homosexuality. I can't find many things worse than their standard, recurring joke about «coming from behind». After probably the third time I heard it, I told them: «Guys, the fact that some-»

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Neuroshima is a Polish role-playing game first published in 2003 by Portal. The action is set in post-nuclear USA, where Moloch – a giant intelligent machine – occupies the entire North and fights humans defending the wasteland. Neuroshima's franchise includes the well-known boardgame «Neuroshima Hex», two card games and the new miniature war game «Neuroshima Tactics».

Call of Cthulhu is a horror role-playing game first published by Chaosium in 1981. Until now there have been thirteen published editions. The game is set in our world, but with the fruits of H.P. Lovecraft's imagination – horrible monsters and ancient gods - living secretly in human society. The game concentrates on the investigation and supernatural horror elements typical for Lovecraftian writing, with additions of Indiana Jones-like pulp and Sherlock Holmesian crime stories.



In the beginning I was cool. I knew that I am a good game master.



I was thinking about what I can and can't put in my scenarios. What is too much? I wasn't afraid for my high-schoolers: They were grown enough and they had already seen enough in movies. I played with them almost as I would play with adults, using elements of violence and madness. But what about the 11–14s?

On the first session I decided to punish their characters a little bit for their selfishness. The way their characters deserted the army caused a huge fire which helped the armies of Chaos crush the Imperial forces. I told them a bit about it. I showed them just a piece of the fallout of their actions. And it made an impression on them.

Another time I let them describe violence by themselves. The characters were disguised as monks, because they were to escape from a hospital in a secluded temple. But one of the wounded recognized them as deserters. One of players shouted «I hit him», but then shut his mouth and his eyes seemed scared of this declaration. I said «roll for self-control». He failed. So I asked him to describe what his character did to the man. He gave us a detailed, captivating description of his panicked character going on a rampage. It was brilliant and opened an intense, very engaging scene. The violence he described wasn't senseless. These kids perfectly understood that violence just for itself is not interesting at all. That brutality and evil have causes and effects. And I think that if I had avoided this, our sessions would be less touching.

But I totally avoided themes of sex. I think this matter is too fragile and it is too easy to do something bad to a kid, especially when he knows almost nothing about sexual matters.

I noticed that kids this age love jokes about sex, especially about homosexuality.

one practices love differently doesn't entitle us to laugh at them. If you do this again, I am going to kill your characters». When I said that, they were firstly confused, but with another blink of an eye they took it as a rule. I know it was bad – I shouldn't punish them in the game for what they do in reality. But it worked. No more homophobic jokes occurred. I took the vigilante way.

But the second problem was too deep-rooted for me to pull out.

Other game masters had warned me that kids will often avoid the quest they're given. That they shy away from danger and adventure. And my group did this every time things were getting really intense.

As I said, they played deserters. Their characters got to a city which was quickly overrun by zombies. I gave them a very strongly pointed opportunity to save the city and redeem themselves in the army. They were to go through the sewers and get to the citadel on the hill. They were to meet the garrison there and defend the city, waiting for the army to come and relieve them.

When the characters went underground to escape a unit of undead, I carelessly let them choose whether to turn right, to the docks, or left, to the citadel.

They turned right and fled the city, leaving it to the undead. They avoided a huge part of my planned scenario. I had non-player characters prepared, I had loads of ideas for mini-quests they would be able to take before the army would arrive. And they insolently avoided them all.

Later I showed them the results of their escape – a ruined city, where nobody survived.

Luckily, after this situation I found a temporary solution: put them in a closed environment

and make it extremely difficult to get out of it without completing the main task. It worked.

Normally, the strategy I took might be seen as railroading – preventing the players from solving the problems in other ways than I had anticipated. Here, however, it was about making them solve any problems at all – without intervention, they'd escape, escape, and escape, ending up sadly bored in the woods, which I couldn't let happen. I was paid to entertain them, to run their sessions. What would they think if they spent half of the campaign staring at the walls in some secluded hut in the mountains? I am not so sure if they'd understand that they did this to themselves.

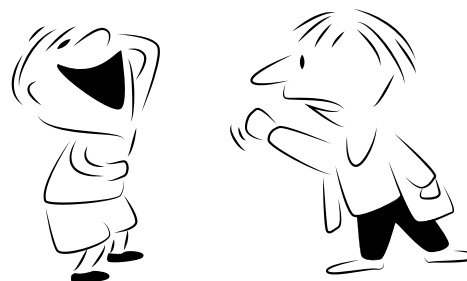
GROUP II

Age: 16–17

System: Call of Cthulhu 6 ed.

I thought that older players were going to be easy to play with. That they were going to be more active, to have more ideas. Well, I was wrong. The younger children in my sessions felt more relaxed. They were not shy at all – they put every single one of their ideas into action. The older ones came with a whole luggage of fear of saying something wrong, which is the greatest disadvantage for a roleplayer.

In the presentation of Call of Cthulhu I told the kids that playing it was going to be a mix



of police-detective story and horror. That their characters were going to be a police squad trying to solve a weird murder case. I thought it was a clear signal saying «you will have to do some investigation».

Unfortunately, they were probably the worst investigators I've ever played with.

While investigating a crime scene, the average player looks for clues about murder. He examines the body, looks for strange blood splashes, tries to find out the killer's motives. He can also talk to other investigators, for example forensic officers, and ask them about their ideas. My kids did not do these things at all. They were totally passive, waiting for me to deliver them information through the mouths of the non-player characters.

It was weird, because when I asked them directly to describe their characters' flats, to tell us something about their families, they were great. They came up with lots of interesting details. The problem was not them having no idea how to speak, how to describe their actions. It was about their shyness (which you cannot surrender to when asked directly to say something) and unfamiliarity with crime stories and television series – things that seemed really basic to me. I might have forgotten that they were almost ten years younger than me. I'd had much more time to gain this common knowledge about expected behavior at a crime scene.

After every session, the GMs met in our secret hideout. When I talked about how I hated these players, a colleague, also running Call of Cthulhu, advised me to give them a survey to ask them what kind of game they'd like to play. So I let them indicate on a scale from 1 to 10 how much they wanted to have action, investigation and exploration/fear in the game. They all put 10 in exploration/fear and 1–2 in the other categories. I was like «damn, why didn't they listen to what I was saying about this game?».

So I switched to entertaining them. Showing off my narrative skills and all the tricks that came to my mind. I used fake blood, I spoke in Arabic to sound mystic. I used a torch, candles, music, flashbacks... everything.

I think they liked it. But I hated it. After fin-

ishing the eight-session campaign I was more tired than I have ever been in whole my career as a GM. These kids reminded me why I hate the «entertain me, Game Master» attitude.

Time to ask the question: Why was the older group more shy, less active, and less rich on ideas than the younger group? I believe that it was because of the setting: Call of Cthulhu. When people say that it's difficult, I say «there can be nothing difficult about an RPG». But there is, especially about detective stories and horror.

It might be that part of the blame was on me. Maybe my riddles were too difficult, maybe I failed to create an atmosphere of comfort for them. Maybe I did not manage to deconstruct my authority in their eyes a bit, which made them even more shy than they'd be normally. But, without faux modesty, I think I did 90% of what I was able to do.

We're not all detectives. Most of us, roleplayers, have never had anything to do with police work. But we've seen lots of movies. We learnt from them – even if not about true police work, we at least learnt how our characters can react in the game. When we hear «crime scene», we remember Monk or Holmes checking particular details about the scenery, reasoning. And we do what books and movies have taught us to do.

These kids were under eighteen. They haven't seen as many movies as I have. They don't have access to the reservoir of what I and my roleplaying friends would call common knowledge. If they'd played Warhammer, they wouldn't need all this. But when playing horror mixed with a detective story, a lack of common know-how can destroy everything.

But now, when I'm at home, correcting what my editor told me to correct, I see a tab beeping in my browser. It's one of my players wanting to chat with me. He is asking what music he should use if he wants to scare his players. He is asking me, because my sessions were, as he says, the best he had ever played.

This makes everything worthwhile. ■



We were preparing a larp which was to be played in a fort from the XVIII century, which was closed especially for us. 42 kids, six game masters, three levels of the fortress: The courtyard, the dungeons and the grassy top. And the difficult setting of Changeling: the Lost. The world of Changeling is inhabited by people, Fae (dream-lords), hobgoblins (guardians of the border between the world of humans and the one of Faes), and other creatures. The difficulty comes from the complex relations between Fae and humans. The first ones arrive as lords, while humans, kidnapped from their world to world of dreams, serve as their slaves. Such a structure requires distance and empathy from the players so as not to escalate every conflict right away.

I was scared. How were we going to set it up and run? A few minutes before the game started I went to my more experienced colleague and asked him about the gaps we left in the plot and in the character descriptions. And he said a thing which set my thinking about roleplaying on a new track.

«They will fill the gaps. Be cool».

And they did. Where anything lacked, they made it up, thinking that we left it untold on purpose. When one of the characters lacked a connection to the others except the one we'd thought up, he came up with his own ideas. He chose the faction he wanted to join in the conflict. Or he thought about how he could monetize his feats by helping other characters finalize their quests. They believed in us so hard, they couldn't imagine we did anything wrong.

TALES OF A TORTURER

Text | Peter Fallesen
Pictures | Peter Munthe-Kaas



Rough interrogations, sleep deprivation and cold water hosing. Kapo was a game that stripped players of their civil rights.

EDITOR'S NOTE

In the first issue of *Playground*, sociologist and larper Peter Fallesen wrote about the new wave of dangerous games. They are games that experiment with our moral and ethical boundaries, games that, very intentionally, leave players with a sensation of doing something fundamentally wrong. This fall he participated in Danish prison camp-larp «Kapo». Peter was a prison guard; a non-character who had the task of roughing up the participants. This article started out as Peter's debriefing of himself. Despite not having an actual character, the game pushed Peter to a place where he had a hard time separating him creating experiences for the players, from him participating as an interrogator and a torturer.

— JTK

I know he's broken the moment he walks out of the cage. His eyes look empty. There's snot in his beard. He puts his arms forward like a sleepwalker. I tie his wrists with cable straps. In the back of my mind I remember an inmate who hours earlier told me I was good at it. What a strange thing to be good at.

I push him against the wall, hands over his head. There is wet paint on the back of his shirt. My instincts tell me it is time to kick him. I'm so fucking tired of getting wet paint on my underarm every time I retrieve a chalker from the cage. Instead I pull the hood over his head. Also something I'm getting better at. The earmuffs follow. I grab the bottom of his shirt, pull it up to the back of his neck and haul him out of the camp.

I drag him over to the timetable, remove one of the earmuffs and get him to tell me his number. We check it while I ask for a pair of scissors. Only then do I realize that I know him. He's a friend. I didn't recognize his face behind the paint and the dead eyes. I cut o his shirt. Part of me still wants to kick him. Instead I write three straight lines on his hand and enclose them with a circle.

I close my fingers around the back of his neck and push him down the hallway. My fingertips hurt like hell. Pulling inmates around by their clothes for 40 hours will do that to your hands. I didn't know that. I really didn't need to know that. Another unwanted lesson learned. Something in me breaks. I don't notice.

Reading Primo Levi's testimony of survival is a dark experience – I don't want to hear his stories from Auschwitz. Reading Giorgio Agamben's musings on the relationship



I push him against the wall, hands over his head. There is wet paint on the back of his shirt. My instincts tell me it is time to kick him.

«Kapo»

«Kapo» was a 12-48 hour role-playing game about life in a surreal Danish prison camp for dissidents and unwanted. It focused on how you in the end have to renounce your humanity in order to survive. It took place 30/9-2/10, 2011. 120 players participated as prisoners. Besides them a crew of around 40 organizers, light- and sound technicians and guards were present to run the game. The guards used techniques bordering on the Geneva Convention (such as sense deprivation, hose-downs in cold water, mild physical abuse, etc.) to enhance the players feeling of losing their humanity. The players had chosen a comfort-level before hand and could at any point opt out of the game or break off a scene if it was too uncomfortable. Very few did. The author participated as a guard. He's a sociologist in real life. The guards were not playing roles. To learn more about the game visit www.kapo.nu

between the sovereign and the subjects in the camps are much worse – his thoughts on dehumanization paint the victims in vivid colors. Hannah Arendt breaks my heart – she makes the monsters of Holocaust all too human and mundane. I'd read it quite a bit - sometimes for work, sometimes for leisure. All of it left marks. Some of it left cracks.

When Danish larpwright Peter Munthe-Kaas pitched me his idea for «Kapo» - at that time called Camp 104 - I thought it would be right down my alley. We were standing at the bar at Fastaval. I was doing theoretical work on asylum policies and how the social topology of Danish asylum camps changed the inmates' notions of self. I loved Peter's idea. He wanted to create dehumanization. He wanted to build a camp. He wanted to destroy the human spirit. I was scared shitless of it. I didn't know if I wanted to be a larp-organizer. I didn't know if I wanted to be part of building something I knew to be so horrible.

When push came to shove I didn't have the time or felt enough for the game to be part of the organizing group. The research project that was very much alive when Peter gave the pitch now lied dormant. Work swamped me. Other things filled the calendar. Life was going fast. Stress





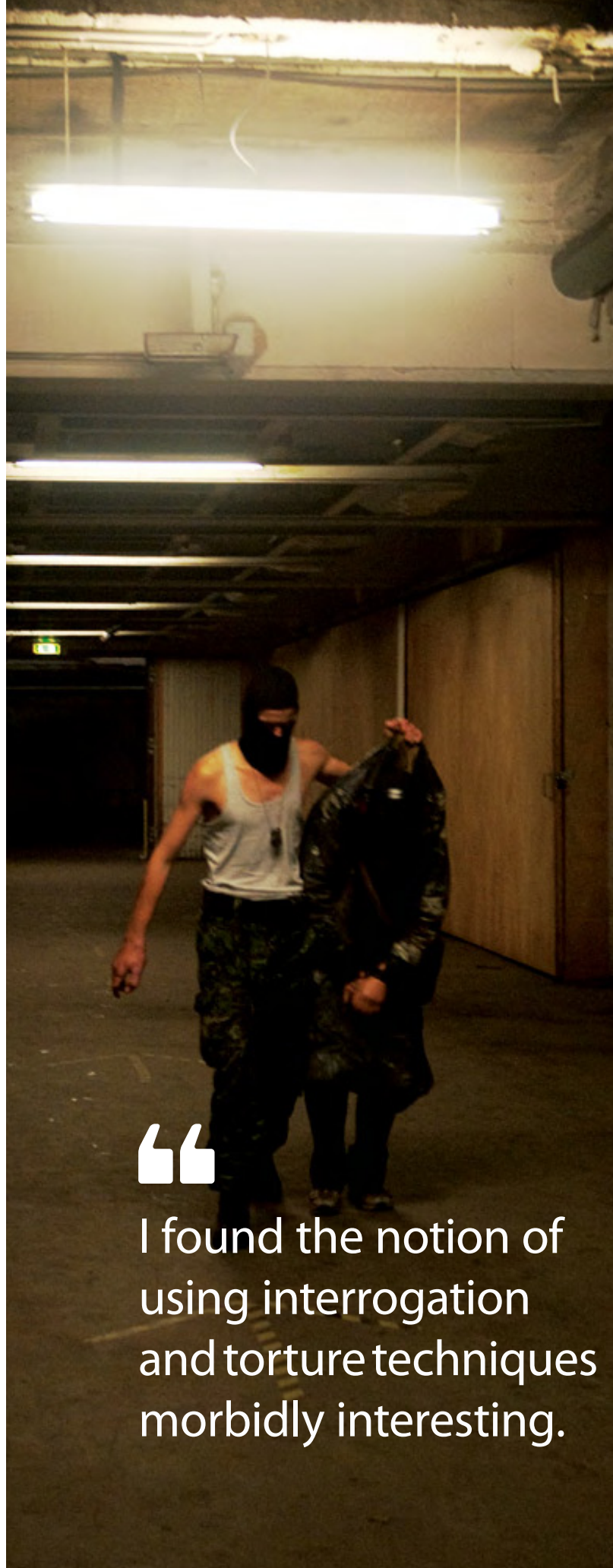
I've broken him. I keep hitting him. I'm not a human being. I don't know him. Something in me breaks. I don't notice.

had stopped being something that only happened to other people. I wasn't getting enough sleep.

I still liked the idea, though. And I found the notion of using interrogation and torture techniques morbidly interesting. This was at a time when waterboarding still was discussed as part of the game design. I didn't want to waterboard players. I wouldn't mind interrogating them. I wouldn't mind hitting them. I knew what torture did to the victims. I didn't know enough about what it did to the torturer. The pictures from Abu Ghraib hunted me. I was thinking a lot about Adolf Eichmann. Was *Endlösung* just the world largest resource management boardgame in the head of Eichmann? Could one stress the banality of evil that far? Probably not, but I still nurtured the idea. I told Peter I would run the interrogations if he wanted me to. I had nightmares that night.

She's been standing against the wall for three minutes now. Unlike me, she's not wearing earmuffs. Unlike me, she's wearing a black hood. Her entire body shakes. I'm bored. The white noise isn't so bad as long as you got earmuffs and a watch on your arm. I think about pulling her down onto the floor. I remind myself that I'm not here for my own amusement. But I'm still bored, so I put her on the floor anyway. Her skin feels soft and feverish against my hands. I know her. She's a friend. Something in me breaks. I don't notice.

12 people ended up helping out as guards, all of them hand-picked by my foreman and I. We couldn't allow mistakes. I was scared shitless. We looked at each other when it finally was time to go to work. All of us dressed in boots, fatigues, black t-shirts and ski masks. My tactical vest felt too warm.



I found the notion of using interrogation and torture techniques morbidly interesting.

The bundle of cable straps secured to it scratched my arm. Tension filled the air. We looked at each other and nodded. «Here we go.» It was time.

I walked across the old brewery hall. The old army booths made heavy sounds against the concrete. I tried to remember how I walked when I was in the military. I couldn't. It had been in another life. I had no idea how to get through the next 48 hours and I wasn't even a player.

A prisoner stood in the cage. A portly man I knew very well in real life. In here he was just a number. I secured his hands, hooded him and dragged him out. Minutes later he was sitting on his knees in the noise-room. He had chosen the mildest treatment. It was an easy start. I quite liked that. I felt that I needed to be eased into the mindset. I was slapping his face ten minutes later.

Thirty hours into the game a woman much older than I sat across from me in an interrogation cell. Her hands secured with cable straps and wire to the table that separated us. I had taken of her earmuffs. I had taken of her hood. I still wore my ski mask. She shook and mumbled. I stared at her with cold eyes. A war raged insight me. I was running on the 18th hour straight, and had no way of knowing whether she still was playing or if the game had broken her. I had to believe the first. I had to believe she would have opted out if the game had gotten too hard. No matter. There was no reason to yell at her anyway. There was no reason to pressure her more physically. Instead I just looked at her, lifted my mask up over my mouth, and slowly started to eat a pizza slice in front of her. I chewed with my mouth open. My cold eyes never leaving her face. Her mouth followed my mouth's movement. Her eyes followed the slice.

I ask him why he is here. I shout it at him, not really caring about the answer. He tells me that he used to hit people. «DOES A HUMAN BEING DO THAT?» I shout. My throat is sore, my voice hoarse. Crying he tells me no. I start to hit him. Constantly I ask him whether a human being would hit others. He's still crying, repeating over and over that he's not a human being. I've broken him. I keep hitting him. I'm not a human being. I don't know him. Something in me breaks. I don't notice.

The interrogators sat down together to discuss and debrief when the game was over. The last 48 hours had been straining. We had facilitated almost 100 interrogations with moderate physical pressure. The logistical aspect had been enormous but my foreman had handled it like a pro. We congratulated ourselves on fulfilling our function in a respectful and responsible way. We hadn't gotten very much sleep. We had walked up and down the old brewery halls dragging prisoners. We agreed to stop using the jargon we

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had used during the game. We called them players. We talked about what we had done.

At some point I recalled an incident. I'd opened the door into the noise-room and seen two other guards dancing around arm in arm while four hooded players stood against walls. It had made me laugh. We talked about all the jokes we had made. We had needed to joke in order to cope. But that didn't make it alright in my mind, only necessary. My hands started trembling when we touched upon the fact that the interrogations very quickly became everyday-like. It became something we could do effectively. We had shared techniques and insights like any other colleagues would do. We had bragged. We had given each other high fives. It had not degenerated into another Stanford prison experiment. We had not gone Milgram on the players. Instead, we had reenacted Abu Ghraib.

I started feeling nauseous. I stopped participating in the debriefing. My eyes burned. I noticed all the broken bits inside me. I couldn't breathe. Someone asked me if I was ok. I told them no, but that I was going to be. I honestly didn't know if it was true. Not at that point.

The players talk around me. It's more than 4 hours since the game ended. I've been within 300 feet of them the entire weekend and physically touched every one of them at some point. I've no idea what they have experienced. The pressure inside my head is extreme. The tears keep pressing on, but I don't allow them to flow. A fucking game is not going to break me. I drink more beer. Talk to players. Talk to organizers. Talk to other interrogators. It doesn't help. I feel like I've eaten glass. I want to be alone. I want people around me.

Hours later I'm outside. A redheaded girl talks to me. We talk about her interrogation. We laugh. She kisses me before I leave. Something in me mends. I notice. ■



Was Endlösung just the world largest resource management boardgame in the head of Eichmann?







Moon River (and below)

Texts and ideas | Ole Peder Giæver, Martin Bull Gudmundsen, Håken Lid, Magnus Jakobsson, Kaare Berg, Matthijs Holter
Illustrations | Thore Hansen

Introducing the surreal Norwegian tabletop role playing game «Itra's City».

«ITRA'S CITY»

A Surreal Role Playing Game
By Ole Peder Giæver & Martin Bull Gudmundsen

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«**I**tra's City» is a Norwegian tabletop role playing game, first published as »Itras by» (Kolofon 2008), later translated into the Finnish as Itran kaupunki (The Society for Nordic Roleplaying, 2009). An English translation is currently in the works.

The game's setting is a city reminiscent of Europe during the interwar period from the 1920's to 30's, especially

as we know it through fiction. There are zeppelins, flapper girls, hard boiled detectives in trench coats and the relatively recent invention of the automobile. Trams roll and train whistles blow, but you will still observe horse-drawn carriages in the street.

But under this seemingly normal atmosphere, strangeness lurks. In the middle of the city the Moon Tower looms, and from here the Spider Goddess Nindra regards the city lights with her manifold eyes. In a park in one of the fancier neighbourhoods you might come across speaking apes. Itra's City has terrorists strapped with jet packs, crazed scientists and dreams-become-life lurking behind the next street corner. This is the city which Itra forgot. Be welcome, be aware.

The game utilizes an intuitive, card-based system. It draws inspiration from both improvisational theatre and larps. Please see itrascity.wordpress.com and norwegianstyle.wordpress.com for further information.



■ The authors: Martin Bull Gudmundsen (left) Ole Peder Giæver (always right)

“ Boulderbeast

Boulderbeast is spinning backwards in the drawing-room. The women squeal with delight, the chandelier jingles. It swivels from side to side. The men applaud politely at the incident. The man with the head of a musk ox excuses himself. «I have a cold», he explains. If it wasn't for the fact that his face is covered in fur, we could see him blushing. He hastily retreats to the kitchen, his tuxedo fluttering behind him. The women giggle, the men pull their mustaches and mumble. "Well, well. It probably isn't too easy keeping your temper in check with the head of a musk ox. They whinny, and return to the game of cards and the crystal glasses with brandy.



The Chain Clouds “

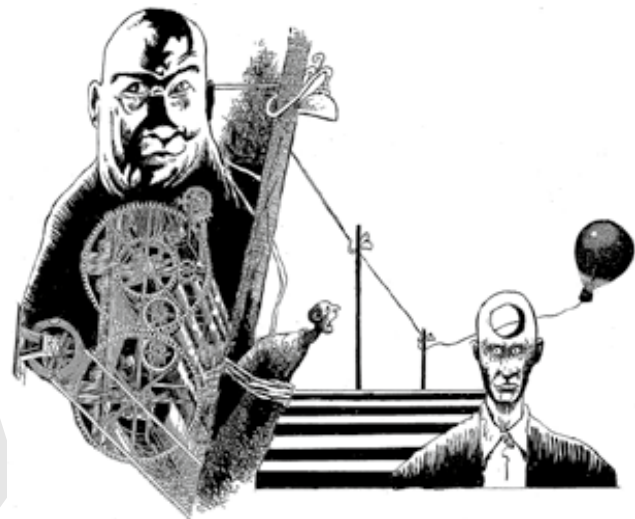
In the Fringe Zones you can see them on the horizon. They drift slowly forwards, carried by winds which cannot be felt on the ground. Huge, iron grey clouds floating high above the mountains. Long, heavy chains hang from them and drag across the ground. They look like jellyfish. The sound they make is squeaking, rattling, slowly rumbling, while burdening the landscape with metal.

The Machine God “

In a fortress under the ground the plans for a new city are being drawn. A city which is rational, efficient and mechanized. A city where people's lives have direction, and are controllable and meaningful. The Machine God is a visionary, and his vision is to see Itra's City pulverized and rebuilt in his image.

In Itra's days The Machine God was a golden, beloved being, but he was badly injured during the battles that followed the disappearance of the goddess.


(...) When the Machine God woke up, his creative power was gone. This is his big weakness. He depends on plagiarizing the ideas of others, sucking their creative abilities from them. This happens in a literal sense. Around the city his followers have rigged some very peculiar lamp posts. Unknowing victims who pass these are irradiated with a green, flickering light which sucks their creativity out, and leaves them as hollow personalities without imagination.



Once Upon a Time in

text & photos | Kasper Friis

Terror strikes as our reporter moves unto the Hollywood larping scene.

 My armpits are fountains of sweat in the Hollywood heatwave. Head boiling. Limbs shaking. I'm in the middle of what is either the most avantgarde game I have ever seen or the manifestation of the dreams of a 12 year old on too much acid. And the thought stuck in my brain? The only thing I can think of: «Holy shit – there's a furry at my larp!»

I'm the King's herold, clad in green leather and linen. I'm obviously not the only one feeling a bit overheated as Furry removes his gorilla mask to reveal a chubby and hairless, perhaps Samoan, face drenched in sweat. He's talking to Fairy Godmother II (yes, there were two) about what just happened, sipping punch while being in-play although his face is lying on the table. And I'm just wondering what the fuck I'm doing.

How did I end up like this? Let's rewind to four days earlier. Back when I get in touch with Aaron Vanek. I had been told he was the man to talk to about larp on the US west coast. As it turned out he was putting out a fanta-

sy larp in a Hollywood mansion built like a castle. It was called... well, «Once upon a castle» and sounded like too much fun to miss.

Four days later I grabbed my camera, a pen and some paper. I turned the ignition of my crappy rented Hyndai, cranked the air conditioning (and Nick Cave) to max and drove to Hollywood Hills feeling like the least gonzo cat in town.

As I see the Castle for the first time my nostrils widen and I start hyperventilating as my jaw loses the battle with gravity. The place is – hands down – awesome. It is everything you're taught as a Nordic larper to hate about the States. And as I enter, it gets better. And weirder.

In one room alone I find the biggest TV I have ever seen, a decorative suit of armor (go fairy tale castle!) and the owner's platinum album awarded for a Wu Tang Clan album! As the clan would say: This place is bangin'!

The game – for which this hyperreal piece of American culture is the setting – is populated by characters such as Wings and Trenchcoat Guy, Chubby Samoan Nerf Gun



HOLLYWOOD

Guy, Fairy Godmother I + II, Albert Einstein Lookalike Guy (who speaks in an authentic american-nazi accent) and of course Furry just to name a few.

I'm standing next to Furry, Fairy Godmother II and Blue Wig Girl as an assembly is called. The King (who is wearing a crown, that I would stake my firstborn is from Toys R' Us), would like to welcome everyone to the castle, his kingdom and The Enchanted Forest in general (I'm not kidding, that is the name of the playworld. Ironic considering that the view from the rooftop balcony is the Hollywood Freeway). Anyway, The King is standing there mumbling the last bits of his welcome speech when a loud voice splits the air. The plot is shouting at us and baby, it sounds hostile.

An uphill avalanche of bodies run up the winding tower stairs to the rooftop, swords and Nerf guns drawn and ready. And there by the ramparts is the guy we've all been waiting for. A horny (as in: he has horns) demonish gentleman, who really needs to trim his fingernails. And he is holding the royal baby who in this particular acid trip is

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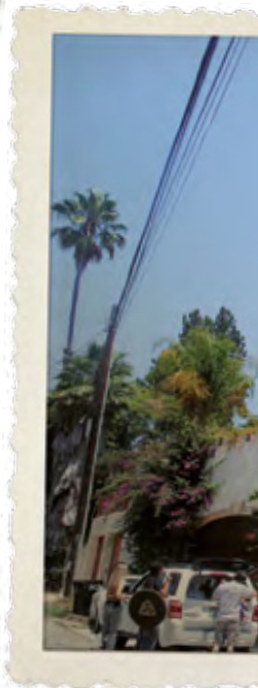


My jaw loses the battle with gravity. The place is – hands down – awesome.

▼ Among movie posters and modern day furniture, knights and fairy godmothers alike assemble.



▲ True what they say. It is a melting pot.



played beautifully by an asian Baby Born doll wrapped in a scarlet scarf! Draw foam lads – shit is oozing out the ac!

Horns has a ninjais bodyguard, complete with scale-mail armor and some weird thing covering the lower half of his face, making him look a lot like Shredder from Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

Anyway – Demon Guy, played wonderfully by Aaron, sets things straight: The king owes him his firstborn, so the royal baby is rightfully his. But if the guests complete three trials or guesses his name, they will get the baby back (Rumpelstiltskin, anyone?). Plot delivered, and with a loud «teleport!», Demon guy is gone. And by gone I mean he's leaving the stage, hand on head. Along with Shredder and the scarf clad Baby Born.

We have yet to receive our missions and I'm a bit disappointed. Some of the players start searching through a bunch of scrolls for Demon Guy's name, as I contemplate the fact that these sort of mansions usually come with a well equipped bar.

Some time later my quest for booze is coming out less than fertile and I'm falling victim to ye olde «I'm-not-doing-anything-until-the-plot-shows-up-trap» Fortunately the plot says «teleport!» yet again and shows up in the backyard, ready with

the first trial. (Why is it btw that the Open Office dictionary doesn't contain the word «teleport»? The whole program is made by people who speak better Klingon than French!)

This time the royal baby has a striking resemblance to a battery-driven iPod docking station wrapped in the same scarlet scarf. Houston, we have crying baby sound-effects! The trial itself consists of following a piece of string around the castle without being allowed to let go. The stalwart heroes barely manage.

Trial two was a classic. An old school duel between two of my favorite archetypes – Pirateguy and Knightguy. It takes more than a while, so I sneak away for a cigarette only to be the innocent bystander to something I haven't seen since I was 16. A genuine backstab.

I'm in awe. Not only is it an actual back-stab, with the actual word «backstab» spoken out loud as the stabbing is taking place, but the victim and perpetrator, Fedora Hat and Armor Guy and Princess Girl, stops for a moment to discuss the rules concerning backstab damage and character assassination before the victim throws himself to the floor with a death rattle. This shit is old-school, baby!

Somewhere in the background the epic battle to the death on the Hollywood balcony continues; the usual stuff

▼ The epic castle which, among armors and platinum records from the Wu Tang Clan, was the scene of our larp.



▲ Fifty percent of the fairy godmothers present this day

of legends it takes to rescue iPod docks from horny demons. At some point, the sheer massiveness of the ditto awesomeness becomes too much to handle. I mean, I could go on. At great length. Magic items and money in the shape of business cards. On that note, I still have 4 gold pieces and the Guitar of El Kaboing, which once a day allows you to jump as if flying stuffed in my wallet.

And I know what you're thinking by now. I'm that guy laughing my ass off about those geeky Californian larpers.

Well, I was. But fuck you! And fuck me! I got blown away. Blown away by the weirdness, the oldschool attitude towards set ingameness and perfect illusions. Blown away by the crappy view of the Hollywood freeway, the awesome castle, the crazy costumes and characters. Blown away by the sheer possibility to have a smoke at the balcony with fedora and armor-guy, sipping my non-alcoholic punch and pondering the fact that I'm in a place where a Fairy Godmother threesome is a technical possibility.

I've never seen a purple fur tail on a character at a Nordic larp. And you know what? If you think it's great fun (or insanely sexy) to walk around dressed as a gorilla and sweating like a pig in a kindergarten – do so! Make no mistake. They take larp seriously. But these people have actual-

ly kept the «this is fun and geeky» and «everything goes» attitude towards larp that I had forgotten even existed. And I worship them for reminding me that it's out there. Keep rocking the Enchanted Forest! ■

“

And I know what you're thinking by now. I'm that guy laughing my ass off about those geeky Californian larpers.


I'LL BET ON RED

The biggest and most controversial campaign in Russian larping history

text | Konstantin Vetlugin, Ludmila Vitkevich, Anastasia Sarkisyan
Photos | Elena Palm illustration | Li Xin



Harry Potter and the alchemical transformation of the self.

 Soviet-era youth hostel. Inspiration drawn from the esoteric arts of European tradition and Christian theology. Welcome to the world of Harry Potter. Russian style.

Hogwarts Seasons (2004–2011) lays claim to being the “longest, most intense and most controversial” series of games during the past twenty years of Russian larping.

The larps were born at the junction between JK Rowling’s Harry Potter-books, fan fiction culture and the Ural school of larps, one of the most influential in Russia.

The setting resembled Rowling’s books, but with quite idiosyncratic twists and turns.

In Rowling’s novels, direct reference to existing religions is carefully avoided. The Russian version of her universe was radically different.

The whole world of the Seasons was built around Christian allusions, and on top of this had a post-modern mixture of European mythology. These elements were kept as consistent with the spirit of Rowling’s world as possible.

The established world of Harry Potter was supplemented by stories about the Founders of Hogwarts, dark sorcerers of antiquity and their sinister rituals, Arthurian and Celtic legends and references to classical English literature.

Symbols, ideas and archetypes of European mysticism, hermetical thought and Kabbalah shone through. The students were taught about the Tree of the Sephirot, the subtle bodies, astrology and the alchemical phases of individual transformation.

There was a worry amongst the Christian organizers of the larp that such elements might attract Satanists or fascists to the larp, but this was carefully avoided.

The chief game master wrote:

To reduce Rowling’s novels to the flights on broomsticks and school hooliganism is shallow. Rowling’s novels are a God-given chance to talk about very serious and profound things – our true self, our shadow, our acquired intellect and our bodies - using nontrivial game means.

Harry Potter and contemporary Russia

A designed-in degree of freedom was great, and this means the game was closely linked to the contemporary state of Russian society.

Many attendants who played students of Hogwarts looked for a kind and refined school, of a sort which they’d never experienced off-game. Others explored personal issues

HOGWARTS SEASONS

The first larp in the series, *Someone’s Death*, was held in the Moscow region, and started with the final scene in the fifth Harry Potter-book, *Order of the Phoenix*. The next game, *Harry Potter and the Magical Chess* took place in the Urals in the spring of 2005. Then followed larps in St. Petersburg, where the campaign settled in Lembolovo, a shabby - but cheap – Soviet era hostel.

The games ran twice a year, in spring and autumn. There were usually between 100-150 players. The game was on continuously 5–7 days in a row, and the players were in character the whole time. From 2007 there were also shorter games in the winter season. These served as prequels or interludes between the main events.

After seven years, the series ended with *Harry Potter and Salazar’s Justice* in the spring of 2011. In total 19 larps were held, with dozens of smaller events besides.

Hundreds of players from Moscow, St. Petersburg, Ekaterinburg, other European Russian cities, the Ural region, Siberia and neighbouring Belarus participated over the course of the campaign. People came from as far away as Norway and Sakhalin (Russia’s largest island, just off the east coast) to take part.

Two of the main organizers were Lora Bocharova and Ivan Perepelkin.

through their characters (very few people in Russia have ever been to a psychologist). The religious subject matter of the Seasons existed on a backdrop of a weak Russian Church.

Russian society as a whole can today be described more as a society of estates than as a democratic one. Some even use words like “medieval” and “feudal”. A kind of Ancien Régime. Many themes central in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance’s God and Man, Dignity of Man and his path of Transformation, Aristocracy, Evil, Suffering and their roots - became central themes of Hogwarts Seasons. However there were no tokens of Democracy, Totalitarianism or Plutocracy in the game.

The Bleed

The players sculpted their characters from themselves, and many grew much attached to them as the campaign progressed.

Some continued to stay in the emotional world of Magical Great Britain even between games. They sent in-game

>>



■ Auror and the goblins (Winter session: 1975).

POTTEROLOGY

Auror: An Auror is an employee of the Ministry of Magic, whose mission is to pursue and apprehend dark wizards.

Dark Lord Voldemort: the main antagonist of the Harry Potter series.

Department of Mysteries: a department in the Ministry of Magic which studies particular enigmas (death, time, space, thought, and love) and stores copies of prophecies.

Forbidden Forest: A large, dark forest on the boundaries of the school grounds. It is strictly forbidden to all students, except during Care of Magical Creatures lessons and, on rare occasions, detentions.

Gryffindor: A House of Hogwarts, valuing courage, bravery, loyalty, nerve and chivalry.

Hermione Granger: One of Potter's best friends.

Hogsmeade: the only settlement in Britain inhabited solely by magical beings.

Hogwarts: Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is a boarding school of magic for witches and wizards between the ages of eleven and seventeen.

Hogwarts Express: The Hogwarts Express is a magical train that carries students non-stop from Platform 9 3/4 at King's Cross station in London to Hogsmeade Station, near Hogwarts.

Houses: Hogwarts is divided into four houses, each bearing the last name of its founder: Godric Gryffindor, Salazar Slytherin, Rowena Ravenclaw and Helga Hufflepuff.

Ministry of Magic: the government of the fictional Magical community of Britain.

Muggle: a person who lacks any sort of magical ability and was not born into the magical world.

Pure-blood: A witch or wizard with all magical heritage is called a pure-blood.

Death Eaters: a group of wizards and witches, led by the dark wizard Lord Voldemort, who seek to purify the community of wizards by eliminating the Muggle-borns (wizards or witches born to non-magical parents).

Quidditch: an extremely rough, but very popular, semi-contact sport, played by wizards and witches around the world. (The Quidditch of the Seasons has been called «the first sport of larps» in Russia, and separate championships have been held for several years.)

correspondence via the internet and arranged numerous small larps and social events like “the birthday of Hermione Granger” and “ritual of the Dark Lord”.

Strong common experiences created new friendships. In-character love affairs culminated with the happy weddings of players.

Starting around the third year of the project, some negative trends began to emerge.

1. The world became too large, and it was increasingly difficult to reconcile player initiative with the established history of the setting. Dissatisfaction amongst the players led to online campaigns against the project. By the end of the series the rules and main supplements covered hundreds of pages, and the total amount of game reports, letters and notes was ten times larger.
2. The world became too dark, and the evil characters/non-player characters too powerful. The initial theme of the game – man's transformation of himself – was supplanted in the minds of many players and characters by an infinite dismal war, distrust and resentment.
3. Dead characters kept on returning at the insistence of the players. In-game death became devalued and meaningless.

Still the game world seemed addictive to many. The number of character's in-game online diaries grew to the dozens; some participants played via the Internet and in smaller larps the whole year round – sometimes to the detriment of real life. They jokingly became known as “addicts” and “sectarians”.

However, the atmosphere of mistrust in and around the project worsened. Few people believed that the core game masters and players would be able to detach themselves from the Seasons. But the amount of hard feelings and spoiled friendships grew.

In the spring of 2011 a last game was held. An expected catharsis did not materialize, but the story still got an ending, however clumsy.

Good triumphed in the end.

The beautiful dirt is gone

All criticism aside, to us the Seasons was a thing of beauty. Deep, vibrant and diverse larps gave players thousands of moments of pure delight.

Maybe it really did transform people?

A profusion of wonderful stories, poems, fan art, music videos, costumes, wands and other props were created. Dozens of Russian Harry Potter larps have been inspired by



Even if I lose, I'll bet on red.

Because black is Darkness. It's a secret of death. When I die – some very different games will begin. But even there, I'll bet on red – on the fire, which tells me that I'm immortal. Fire of the heart's heat, colour of joy, colour of blood which has not been spilled in vain, colour of the Phoenix's feathers.

– Gryffindor manifesto

the Seasons during these past seven years. In 2011 alone, four new such larps have been announced.

In 2008, at the peak of the game, the Department of Mysteries conducted a census of Magical Great Britain. Forms were filled out by the residents – with questions about how they perceived their own ideals, desires and potentials.

The chief game master concluded:

I thought the response would be dull and depressing – but the complete opposite is the case!

Conservatism has been transformed into idealism and indifference into mercy. Abstract magic has been transformed into love of others and reconciliation with oneself.

These are not the ideal heroes of novels, but living characters of a real and active world.

There's a feeling that under a dark and scandalous guise, which is fashionable to wear today, everyone works for a new sunrise, and here it already shines.

(But this is a private matter, and is still a big secret).

The main obstacle for the vast majority is cowardice. This is great, as I thought it would be impotence. But cowardice is known to be checked and dispersed in battle.

We are engaged in a deeply moral, even traditionalistic project. The age-old virtues are sound and protected: loyalty, courage, close-knit family, peaceful life, humanism, mercy, love, freedom, integrity, honesty and hope.

The idea of beautiful dirt is gone long ago.

The difference between the thoughts of the people who played for 1–2 sessions, and the people who played for 2–3 years – is enormous. Like between a chrysalis and a butterfly.

This does not mean that there are no violent instincts, no bitterness or cynicism. But the percentage is negligible. And

it does not mean that people are so similar in their ideals or goals that they all can agree, or unite and make a miraculous transformation of our entire contradictory world.

But the transformation could be done – on their own or with the help of unnamed forces. No game master can impose it or spur them into some brotherly heap. This should be the hope of a milieu itself. The miracle is somewhere in this area.

...Because if people have laid the bridges to each other – the age will not escape. It will yield.

Scaffolding

Each game was structured in more or less the same way. Applicants to Hogwarts, the school of magic, would get into character on the train ride to the site of the game, on “the Hogwarts Express”. From the train station they would be led through the Forbidden Forest, where the adventures of the magical world began. There were initiation ceremonies in the different Houses of the school, lectures and of course the requisite amount of rivalries, romance and melodrama. At the end each semester were the inevitable exams, shaped by the quirks of each teacher.

The cast would typically include the students, professors and staff of Hogwarts, guests of Hogsmeade, representatives of the Ministry of Magic, Aurors, dark wizards and witches, members of secret societies, clubs and Orders, house elves and an abundance of magical creatures and entities.

The rules governing spells and potions were extensive. There were some 50 spells in total, each with their own gestures and formulas. The character's age limited which spells they could learn, and the magical arts were taught as part of the classes. ■

The Larp Culture Café

Text | Geir Tore Brenne

We have seen the end of the world.
It is in Russia, and it has cosplay.



«We are making a café for roleplayers!», Vadim wrote on email. »Come to help us build it when you come!» he continued, replying to my message on what plans he had for the summer. And now I was on my way.

Meeting me, Vadim takes me to the building, which is somewhat hard to spot. Outside it is covered, construction people are working on the façade, there is constant noise coming from the construction machines. Vadim proudly comments: «Don't worry, in September they will be gone – and the outside will look great!» We enter the first floor of the building, coming into a large room. It is nearly empty of furniture, the air is dusty, and construction equipment and material is lying on the floor. «It used to be a Chinese restaurant,» Vadim tells me, «but the Chinese left, and now we got the place!»

I first met the St. Petersburg roleplayers in 2007, when I came to Russia in order to make contact with Russian roleplayers. Knowing absolutely nothing about it when I came, I was astounded to find out that Russia had a highly developed culture of live roleplaying, with roots going back to the early 1990s. Later in December 2007 I visited «Blinkom»,

St. Petersburg's yearly larp convention, that gathered over 1000 participants. In 2007 and 2008 I also got the chance to take part in and observe several play events both in St. Petersburg and Moscow. I have maintained contact with the communities since.

Inside the restaurant, Vadim takes me for an excursion around the locale, showing all the different rooms. I notice that the café is quite large: More than 100 square metres. I ask how much they pay for the locale. «We pay about 5000 euro a month, in rent. But we will be open every day, from 10 in the morning to 11 in the evening. And we will not only cater to live roleplayers. We will be open to a larger group of people,» Vadim explains. He shows me how he wants the café to be in the style of steampunk combined with Jules Verne-style travel fiction from the early 20th century – hence the name «Kraj Sveta», «The End of the World». It is inspired by a similar café project emerging from the roleplaying community in Moscow, which opened last year and have been a success.

In Russia, the term roleplaying is usually used to refer to live action roleplaying. Tabletop roleplaying exist, but it is marginal compared to larp. Asking for estimates about how many active roleplayers there are, I have heard estimates from 50,000 to 150,000 in the whole Russian Federation. The culture of roleplayers in Russia is different from that in Scandinavia in a number of ways. Its sheer size contributes to creating a much broader variety in type of events and genres used.

Unlike in the Scandinavian communities, Russian larp culture also includes a variety of related activities that are



The Chinese left, and
now we got the place!





The Russian larp movement is a hub for amateur do-it-yourself creative culture.

not larp but somehow connected: Historical dance, amateur photography and video making, various crafts, cosplay and sword fencing are among the most important of these. This has made the movement a hub for amateur do-it-yourself creative culture. It also means that a substantial number of people are likely interested in a café like this.

«This is our cultural director», Vadim says as he leads me to Masha Oelun who is sitting by the table. She smiles. «We have not planned everything», she explains, «but we plan on having concerts by local bands. Also, roleplayers will be able to use our space for free for smaller larp games (chamber games) after opening hours.» Vadim lights up when he explains: «People can come here at 11 in the evening, play the whole night, and take the metro when the trains start running at 6 in the morning! It will be great!». To non-russians, this is perhaps a somewhat odd timeslot – but it is perfectly normal in the Russian scene. «We have a smaller space that can be sealed off from the rest of the locale, in case some groups want to meet in connection with a play event», they explain. «And we will have a direct transmission to our partners in Moscow, with continuous live video streaming.»

Going around the rooms, the restaurant is clearly still a renovation site, and there is still much to be done. Before I leave, I ask Vadim: «Will you really make it in time?» Vadim replies: «Yes, we will be open, for sure! We welcome you back then!». ■

ADDRESS:

Moscow club-café «Gartsusjij drednout»
Bolshaja spasskaja 8, by metro stop Prospekt Mira
Open between 1100 to midnight every day.
www.dnout.ru

St. Petersburg club-café «Kraj sveta»
Nekrasova street 58 / Fontanaja street 3
Open between 1100 to 2300
www.worldsendpub.ru
www.worlds-end-pub.livejournal.com

Russia has both small, experimental larps and large, epic ones attracting 1000-2000 players. In the summer weekends, the calendar for Moscow commonly lists 20-30 events – in addition, there are numerous smaller events not listed.






Wild Strawberries

A roleplaying game

Text | Giulia Barbano and Luca Ricci

 Wild Strawberries is a role-playing game, for two to five players, freely inspired by the Bergman movie by the same title. The game aims at recreating the story of a man detached from society and his voyage to rediscover himself, his relationships and his life.

One of the players will be the Protagonist, controlling this lonely, miserable person; the other players will move the world around him, trying to make the Protagonist understand why he became who he is today. In this game, when we talk about the Protagonist with a capital P, we mean the player that controls the protagonist of the story (the name of the character, on the other hand, is written in lower case). On the other hand, when we talk about all the people that are not the Protagonist, we call them Players. The players (lower case) are all the people who take part in the game.

To play you'll need some small, writable pieces of paper (e.g. index cards), tokens, or beads of any kind. These tokens take different names in the game. When they're placed in front of the Protagonist (or on an Element card, as described in Scene rules), they're called truth tokens; when they're placed in front of the Players, they're called lie tokens.

Before starting the game, all players should decide who takes the role of the Protagonist. Everyone else at the table, the Players, will decide together the Problem of the protagonist, i.e. how he keeps people away from him (one sentence is enough information).

e.g.: Luca, Alessandro, and Giulia decide to play «Wild Strawberries». They gather some index cards, tokens and pencils. Together they decide that Alessandro will be the Protagonist, and Luca and Giulia will be the Players. They decide that the protagonist's Problem is that he's cynical and selfish.

Now all the players together decide how the story starts: the protagonist has to travel, and they have to decide why.

e.g.: the players decide that the Protagonist is a university professor, Isak Borg, famous for his research on bacteria. He is awarded with the Doctor Jubilaris honorary degree, which he has to accept at the LuN University tomorrow.

The players can add details in this phase, but it's neither necessary nor encouraged, as these details will not be claimable.

From now on the game will have reality and Dream scenes. Reality scene are from the protagonist's trip, when

he will meet people, situations and things that will remind him of his past and his problems. The Dream scenes are the protagonist's actual dreams, in which he will live through his memories again, and his convictions and his Problem will be tested.

In these scenes, the players have to roleplay the people in the scene, describe what they see or feel, say what is happening and much more. The only rule to always remember is that the Protagonist must always and only roleplay the protagonist character.

e.g.: In a scene set in the professor's house there are the professor, his housekeeper, and his daughter-in-law. Even if all the players can describe details of the house and Luca and Giulia can decide how to play the housekeeper and the daughter-in-law, Alessandro must play the professor until the end of the game (unless he's not in the scene).

Every time a player decides what scene will be played next (as described in Game sequence, in the next page) they will also Frame the scene: this means that they will decide which characters are in the scene, the location, the time, and what the characters are doing in the first five seconds when the scene opens. This framing creates the starting point, the structure that the players need to play the scene.

e.g.: Luca frames the scene, saying that professor Isak, his daughter-in-law Marianne and three young men are sitting at the table of an inn that looks on a lake. They just finished their lunch and are making small talk.

Once everything is ready, the game begins.

Game sequence

To play out the story of the protagonist, the players will have to call a series of scenes: the first two are predefined, the ending will depend on some parameters, but the plot of the events is chosen by the players. The scene is chosen by the player with the least number of Elements, who can decide the kind of scene and frame it. In case of a tie, the Protagonist decides who frames the scene. If the scene is predefined (e.g., the 2nd scene), they can still frame it. >>



Scene rules

When the scene play starts, every player can add minor or major details to it. These details are called elements, and can be freely added by the players to the story. The Players have only one limit: they cannot add an Element that is connected in any way to the action or the thoughts of the protagonist — it might be, at most, connected to his perception of the outer world (real or imagined). In other words, the Players cannot describe actions of the protagonist, nor put thoughts in his head; only the Protagonist can express its feelings and have him act freely.

e.g.: Alessandro describes the professor, wandering around the empty, lifeless city. Giulia chimes in, saying that he meets a man, his back turned; when the man turns around, we see that he's a doll. Luca wants to add that the professor reaches for his pocket watch without hands, but Alessandro reminds him that he can't make the protagonist act to insert an Element. Luca rephrases his contribution and says that the protagonist sees a huge, eerie public clock without hands.

What is an Element? It's any object, person or place described by one of the players that is important in the story. It's something that's worth describing, something on which the camera would linger, but most importantly, something that players want to see in a subsequent scene and that can be somehow connected to the protagonist. Every thing that is considered irrelevant and just descriptive is called **Color** and has no mechanical effect, besides giving depth and feel to the scene.

e.g.: the house Isak grew up in, the car they almost crashed, or cousin Sara are all Elements; the forest on the edge of the road, the wine that Isak ordered at the inn, or toast for breakfast are all just Color.

During the scene, each player can Claim one and only one Element from the scene. To do so, they must say «i Claim the element», take an index card, write the description of the Element and the kind of scene it was claimed in (Dream or Reality, or D or R), and put it in front of them. When a player claims an Element, it means they want it to appear in a following scene; once an Element has been claimed, it can be recalled by the other players (see below).



A player can never have a number of Elements over 7 minus the number of players (in a 3-player game, for example, nobody can have more than 4 Elements). To make some space, they have to wait for another player's claim (see below).

e.g.: Giulia claims an Element during the Ominous dream: «I claim the Clock without hands». She takes a card, writes «Clock without hands (D)» on it and puts it in front of her; from now on, the «Clock without hands» can be used in a following scene.

Additionally, during a scene the Players can call a Lie: this happens when one of the Players think that the protagonist has lied to himself, and declares it with the ritual phrase «you know this is not true». Every Player now proposes to the Protagonist a revised version of his statement, and the Protagonist can choose one. If they choose a revision, they immediately take a Truth token and put it in front of them. The accepted revision must then be added to the scene by the Player that proposed it, maybe pronounced by one of the other characters, or maybe as an admission of the protagonist himself.

If the Protagonist doesn't want to accept any of the proposed versions, the Players immediately gain a Lie token, and the scene continues undisturbed. The protagonist, though, has lied to himself, and this will complicate his travel towards change.

Only one Lie can be called per scene; we actually suggest to call always one per scene, but try not to waste it on futilities — wait for the right time.

e.g.: During the first part of the trip, Marianne asks Isak if he remembers what he said when she arrived to his house. The professor answers with a gentle remark, but Giulia calls a Lie, suggesting her version. Luca then offers his alternative, and Alessandro eventually accepts Giulia's version: he takes a Truth token, and lets Marianne say how, actually, the professor had been quite rude, and declared he wouldn't want to meddle in their relationship issues.

When all players think that the scene has run out of potential, that everything important has been said or described, it's time for a close. The scenes are closed like in movie editing; the game continues immediately with the selection of a new scene, always following the above rules.

The game continues along this path until the sum of the Truth or Lie tokens reaches 4. From now on, the claimed Elements can be freed. To do so, any player that does not

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✧ List of scenes ✧

1st scene: Ominous dream [DREAM]

Purpose: | An ominous dream, foreshadowing death or disaster, which indicates how the time of the Protagonist is running out, and his loneliness.

Terms: | Mandatory [1st]

Note: | The Protagonist frames this scene

2nd scene: Departure [REALITY]

Purpose: | The Protagonist leaves with slow means, such as a car, or a train.

Terms: | Mandatory [1st]

New travel mates [REALITY]

Purpose: | Purpose: people will join the travel.

Terms: | Terms: Always [1st]

1 Truth [2nd]

3 Lies or 1 Truths [3rd]

Childhood memories [REALITY]

Purpose: | The protagonist will find something that reminds him of his childhood.

Terms: | Always [1st]

2 Truths [2nd]

4 Truths [3rd]

«There's something i have to tell you...» [REALITY]

Purpose: | Someone has to say or confess something to the protagonist.

Terms: | 1 Truth [1st]

3 Truths or 2 Lies [2nd]

5 Truths or 3 Lies [3rd]

«I hadn't seen you in years» [REALITY]

Purpose: | By will or chance, the protagonist meets a person from his past.

Terms: | 1 Truth [1st]

3 Truths [2nd]

4 Truths [3rd]

An unexpected event [REALITY]

Purpose: | Purpose: something unpredictable happens during the trip.

Terms: | Terms: Always (1st);

3 Truths or 1 Lie (2nd);

6 Truths or 2 Lies (3rd)

It was a long time ago [DREAM]

Purpose: | A childhood memory, lived through again.

Terms: | Terms: Always [1st]

2 Truth [2nd]

5 Truths or 1 Lie [3rd]

Dream or nightmare? [DREAM]

Purpose: | Purpose: a surreal dream, that can turn into a nightmare.

Terms: | Always [1st]

1 Truth or 1 Lie [2nd]

3 Truths or 2 Lies [3rd]

A lifetime's work [DREAM]

Purpose: | The protagonist's personal achievements seem vain when compared to his current condition.

Terms: | 2 Truths [1st];

4 Truths [2nd];

6 Truths or 3 Lies [3rd]

I never wanted this [DREAM]

Purpose: | A painful memory, something to be ashamed of, no matter when it happened.

Terms: | 1 Lie [1st]

4 Truths or 2 Lies [2nd]

6 Truths or 3 Lies [3rd]

Travel's end [REALITY]

Purpose: | The travel ends.

Terms: | 8 Truths, of which 4 have been placed, or 4 Lies [1st]

The end - the mask falls [DREAM]

Purpose: | The protagonist finds solace.

Terms: | Less than 4 Lies

Note: | Must choose between this scene and the one below after «Travel's end».

The end - Die alone [DREAM]

Purpose: | There's no more time to repent or change... or is there?

Terms: | 4 Lies

Note: | Must choose between this scene and the one above after «Travel's end».



own that Element can introduce it in a scene that takes place after the one it was claimed, possible in a scene of a different kind (e.g. Dream if it had been claimed in Reality and vice versa); when they do this, they take the Element from the player and put it in the middle of the table. When this is done, the Element can now be freely faced by the protagonist as a changing element.

e.g.: professor Isak visits his elderly mother; Luca decides to reintroduce the Element «Clock without hands (D)». The mother draws from a trunk several objects from his childhood, showing him his father's old pocket watch, now without hands; Luca takes the card from Giulia, and puts it at the center of the table.

If, by the end of a scene, the Protagonist believes that his character has faced his problem with the help of a free Element on the table, and they have at least one Truth token, they can put the Truth token on the card, and explain how it helped the protagonist understand himself. If you wish, add a brief note to the card. An Element with a Truth token is now blocked and cannot be used anymore — it can still be added to the story if you wish to, but it won't have any benefit.

e.g.: Alessandro, at the end of the scene, tells the other players that seeing the watch without hands has reminded the professor that his time is running out, and that he should reconnect with his loved ones before his time comes. He has a Truth token, which he immediately places on the card.

The game is over when The end scene closes. In the final scene, the Protagonist, after all that happened, decides if his character can find a new self and solve his Problem.

Choosing a scene

After the first and second scene have been played, the player with the least number of Elements can choose the next scene from the following list. Every scene has a Purpose that must be carried out when it's played. To choose a scene, the player must first check if they can meet the terms of the scene they want. The terms are always related to the Truth and Lie tokens on the table (remember that a Truth token placed on a card counts as normal). Every scene has one or more terms, which identify how often the scene can be chosen and played. If the scene's terms are

met and it's chosen for play, you must immediately strike the met terms' number. Then, if you want to play that kind of scene, you must check the second set of terms and meet them. When all terms have been stroked out, that kind of scene cannot be played anymore.

As a rule of thumb, we suggest to choose no more than two Reality or Dream scenes in a row. In the unfortunate event that there is no scene whose terms can be met, give a Truth token and a Lie token to the Players and the Protagonist respectively, then check the terms again.

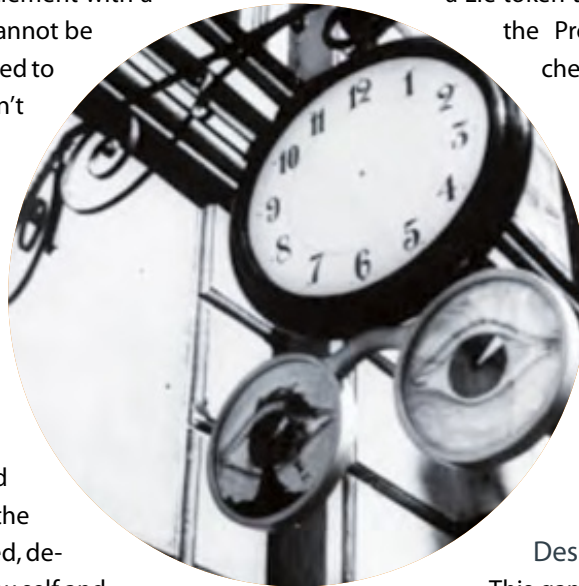
e.g.: The first set of terms for «New travel mates» is Always, which means it can be played at any time. In that case, strike the terms and play the scene. If someone wants to play «New travel mates» again, they will have to check the second set of terms, i.e. 1 Truth: this means that if there is at least 1 Truth token on the table, the scene can be chosen. If the «I never wanted this» scene has been played once, to play it again there must be at least 4 Truth or 2 Lie tokens on the table.

Design notes

This game was designed for the 5x2 contest run on GenteCheGioca (<http://www.gentechegioca.it/>) in July 2010. The challenge was to design a game that would fit on two pages and inspired by a list of words: war, melanCholy, fruit, flashbaCk, and hoPe.

From those words resulted our humble homage to Ingmar Bergman, with a respectful nod to Nathan D. Paoletta's Annalise and Paul Tevis' A Penny for My Thoughts, from which we've taken a handful.

A year from the design, we felt it was time to translate it, give it a more readable layout and put it out there. We hope you enjoy our game. ■





The Larp Factory Roundup

Text | Anders Nygaard & Petter Karlsson illustration | Li Xin

Bringing out the unusual suspects.

The larp factories started with the Oslo factory in the summer of 2009, and quickly became a popular format for organizing short games in several Scandinavian cities. By getting together a core group, called «the glue» which gathers organizers to a pitch meeting every six months, the format made it possible to have one game every month. There are now larp factories and game nights in Stockholm, Göteborg, Helsinki, Umeå and Trondheim. We have spoken to some of the organizers.



What was your first roleplaying game?

Drakar och Demoner, kinda like «Dungeons & Dragons» but not, at the tender age of 13.

How did your involvement with the larp factory start?

I went to a larp factory gathering and we played a game, since then I've been an active member of the non-organization.

What makes a good organizer, in your opinion?

One who has the answers to the questions never asked.

Who's your best helper when doing a game?

My girlfriend isn't afraid to criticize my ideas and come up with stuff that I've never even thought of, which is both good and sometimes frustrating. But of course very necessary. Also the other experienced larp organizers at the larp factory are very helpful.

Your worst and best gaming moments?

Worst was at a game called «The city of our dreams» («våra drömmars stad»), because the organizers kept all the good intrigues for just a handful of people while we got stuck being the extras. It didn't help that it was cold.

Best is always hard, but the best recent one was at the Danish larp called Kapo, set in a prison camp in the near future. I think that one of my most intense gaming experiences was when I was forced to say good bye to the people I loved and cried all the way until the game ended, in fact, I cried so hard that I had a sore stomach for about a week afterwards. Even though this sounds weird I think that some of the best experiences are the once that get under your skin. However, a lot of the larp factory games do just that, they get under your skin a lot quicker than the other



*Elli Åhlvik,
Larp Factory Stockholm,
Age 29.*

Organized:
in several semi official but loose role playing and larp groups.

games because there is virtually no real preparation for the players, which means your focus is all about the game itself.

Plans and dreams for future games?

I want to set up a game I organized again with all the modifications it needs. I also wish to develop a new idea that is just about to take form, and help out with a few cool larps. For my own gaming experiences, I'm still waiting for the next big larp and am so looking forward to the next larp factory game, «The key to freedom» («Nyckel till frihet»), which is a game based on the movie «Saw». I'm preparing to get nauseous and scared. Very scared. >>



If you get the players to get your vision, they can do anything.

*Kristoffer Lindh,
Larp Factory Stockholm
Age 31.*

Bio:

A primary school teacher, lives in Stockholm. Is a Larper, but mainly a boardgame geek.

Organized:

I'm a member of several SVEROK-organizations, but am not an active member in any.

What was your first roleplaying game?

Drakar och Demoner in the late 80's, the rules were way too complicated for me when I was 8 or 9, but the pictures were awesome.

How did your involvement with the larp factory start?

I was invited to the first meeting of LARP-factory: Stockholm and ended up organizing their first LARP together with Martin Brodén, the game was «The Kick inside».

What makes a good organizer, in your opinion?

A good organizer is exploring subjects she or he finds interesting and is not too sensitive to trends and the wishes of the players. I find there are too many games nowadays about anxiety and depression, a game doesn't need to be sad to be good. A good organizer also chooses storytelling techniques that suits the story. A good organizer also takes full responsibility for the outcome of the game and tries to make the players feel they are awesome.

Who's your best helper when doing a game?

The players are. If you get the players to get your vision, they can do anything.

Your worst and best gaming moments?

My worst was a Larp a few years ago, it was very hyped but I had a terrible experience, but after the LARP everybody but me seemed to love it, it was a weird feeling of loneliness. My best moment must have been at the LARP Ringblomman about a hippie-collective in the late seventies. We really managed to capture that era I think and there were some awesome scenes in the LARP

Plans and dreams for future games?

My next game will be about coping with feelings you are ashamed of. I hope I'll manage to get the players to play lovable and relatable characters who feel pathetic feelings.

Bio:

What do you want to know? :)

Organized:

Åka hiss (Riding the elevator) a jeepstyle game in cramped quarters that's all conflicts all the way, Natthimmel (Night sky, helped out as co-writer, game tester and game master) based on the book with the same name about a teenage girl's first steps in to the larp culture, Various Vampire, Fantasy and Neotech larps.

What was your first roleplaying game?

Drakar & demoner or Mutant, can't remember which was first of the two.

How did your involvement with the larp factory start?

A friend of a friend started the Larpfactory in Gothenburg and I was just so blown away by the concept that I poured myself into it!

What makes a good organizer, in your opinion?

First and foremost humility, but you have to be good at working with others and listen to feedback. However, when a project needs it a good organizer has to be able to point with the whole hand to get things done. Also learn to kill your darlings. Don't be afraid to share your ideas, they will only get better every time you force yourself to articulate them. Learn that if someone steals your idea be proud instead of angry.

Who's your best helper when doing a game?

Anyone that will listen to my ramblings about a new scenario, post-its, google docs

Your worst and best gaming moments?

Worst: In Kapo when I hadn't been able to sleep well for over 35 hours I found out in the dark that someone had stolen my blanket and pillow, hit my head when I tried to find them but wasn't able to. Went to the off-game room but that was light, had only a hard floor left and people was talking all night. The designated extra sleeping area was full. Got 50 meters of Molton but wasn't able to fold it properly so there where so many lumps and shit so that I couldn't sleep. That was the closest I have ever been to quit a game.

Best: When all the players in one session of my game «Åka Hiss» shouted at each other for 4 hours straight and then when the game was over spontaneously hugged me and said that was the best scenario they have ever played. :)

Plans and dreams for future games?

At the moment I'm writing a freeform game about the clinical trial of a drug that erases memories. The scientist get corrupt with their power over the testsubjects and the entire game is played from the last scene to the first as a technique to play on memory loss. It's gonna be really dark and abusive.

Dreams for future games: sg-1 at a ren fair? Downton Abbey! WWII with good airsoft gear and parachutes? A devastated future in which today's science evolves into a religion after hundreds of years of strife and lack of school, infrastructure or proper understanding of the subject. >>

Learn that if someone steals your idea be proud instead of angry.



*Tore Olbert,
Larp Factory Gothenburg
Age 29.*

*As soon as I find myself bored
I get busy and creative.*



*Aarni Korpela,
Walkabout Game Nights, Helsinki.
Age 34.*

Bio:

A youth spent like it was a first novel, searching for, well, something. Now a mild-mannered illustrator and cartoonist by day, performer and all around theatre person and game organizer by night. 8 years at Teatteri Naamio ja Höyhen – so I've entered the game scene from a theatre background, although I've also played roleplaying games and run around in a cape in the forest as a teen. A single father of a rascal.

Organized:

Involved in organizing all of the game nights save one so far. Also Walkabout projects Walkabout I, Hermiitti and The Lovers' Matchmaking Agency (with Johanna MacDonald).

What was your first roleplaying game?

A second cousin had D&D in English when I was maybe 9 and we played it with my siblings and cousins. Pretty soon we designed our own storytelling-type game, which I would say was the first because we didn't actually speak that much English and weren't macho enough to play D&D.

How did your involvement with the larp factory start?

We (Johanna and I) heard about Laivfabrikken at Knutpunkt (or was it Knudepunkt?) and loved the idea and wanted to do our own version of it. The theatre came along and decided to produce it.

What makes a good organizer, in your opinion?

Working in an organized way. Co-operating with other people so that ideas can be thrown around, criticized and evolve. Passion for what you're organizing. Producing skills (we could use more).

Who's your best helper when doing a game?

Johanna MacDonald is my close working partner, and we're so startlingly different that if I can explain my idea to her so that she likes it, it should be clear and appealing to anyone! The best non-human muse is boredom. As soon as I find myself bored I get busy and creative.

Your worst and best gaming moments?

I don't think I have a really bad moment. Emotionally bad, yes, but I was always delighted when it happened. My worst moments are probably as an organizer, being beyond exhausted. The best may be seeing how the participants of The Lovers' Matchmaking Agency took the idea and made it their own and created a genuine atmosphere of love, intimacy and openness. Amazing that you can create that!

Plans and dreams for future games?

Maybe taking The Lovers' Matchmaking Agency on Scandinavian tour. Continuing creating Walkabout projects – we're going through the Major Arcana of Tarot, and we have 18 still to go. The next one might be Death or the Moon, but even with the deck still quite high there are more ideas than we can ever actualize. My own dream is to keep working as close to «reality» as possible and blurring the line.



*Linus Råde,
Larp Factory Umeå
Age 30.*

Bio:

Roleplayed since -92

What was your first roleplaying game?

Drakar och Demoner.

How did your involvement with the larp factory start?

I organized the first pitch-meet in Umeå.

What makes a good organizer, in your opinion?

Delegating and the ability to see who you should delegate to.

Who's your best helper when doing a game?

The awesome people who I worked with at Sista Slaget in 2009. People who just gets things done despite 20 hour days and can hold a 7000 strong crowd in order with just 10 people.

Your worst and best gaming moments?

'Hamlet inifrån' in Umeå was great fun.

Re-enacting the misery of russian soldiering in the early 1800s on a frost cold night...

Plans and dreams for future games?

Getting the local larp factory running again and organize something with the kids at our local rpg-convention, Sävcon. ■

The protagonist



A Setting that's open for players will sometimes attract authors.

text | Even Tømte

«**F**antasy is often underestimated or written off as escapism, but it has much greater potential than that. It's like science fiction», Asbjørn Rydland argues, «but while science fiction is often used as a device for framing social questions, fantasy is perhaps more about the actions of individuals».

«Drakeguten» («The dragon boy») has all the classic trappings of an adventure: There is a boy, working in the stables, dreaming of an exciting life beyond the confines

of his village. There is the alluring promise of treasure and glory, but also of danger, and of hard choices having to be made. While clearly a fantasy story – as the title suggests, there are dragons – the tone is down-to-earth and prosaic, with both the protagonists and antagonists being all too human. No flashy sorcery or cosmic struggles of good versus evil here.

When I sit down with the author, he has just finished the sequel, «Med ild i hjartet» («With fire in the heart»). By



Larp as a medium is not suitable for all kinds of stories, the author says.

the time you are reading this interview, it might be available in the bookstore. «I am building on the events on the previous book, particularly when it comes to the personal development of the main character. But there will also be action and excitement», Rydland says.

While the influence of tabletop role-playing games is evident in several fantasy writers, neither the author nor Playground's journalist know of other fiction writers inspired by larps (if you do, don't hesitate to send us an e-mail). After sixteen years of making games and thinking about the fantasy world he and others have created, Rydland has many stories to tell. Not all of them are easily told in the form of a game. «Larp as a medium is not suitable for all kinds of stories», the author says. «There are constraints, both in the types of stories you can tell and the size of your special effects budget.»

It all began back in 1996, with the larp «Løgnens rike» («Kingdom of lies»). This was pretty standard high-fantasy fare, Rydland recalls, with «gods and demons crawling all over the place» and «a classical »save-the-world plot».

«There was a big cataclysmic event», the author says. «The world capsized. Gods and demons disappeared, magic died. Only the humans remained. This was the beginning of the Crossroads setting.»

The organizers' idea was to mark the beginning of the age of humankind. By pulling the plug on magic, human interaction and conflict would be firmly established as the force driving in the world forward, as opposed to the grand clashes of cosmic forces that dominated the fantasy larp scene of the day. «You could say it's post-apocalyptic fantasy», Rydland argues.

The human-centered approach is part of the philosophy behind the larps themselves. The people behind Crossroads pride themselves on creating an open and player-driven setting, in which anyone is welcome to develop the world further by creating new larps and throwing new ideas into the stew. Whether or not this ambition has succeeded is a point of contention. Unscientific enquiries suggest that the

closer you are to the author and his pals, the higher the probability that you find the Crossroads setting to be open and inclusive. Any fantasy world having hosted «perhaps 30 or 40» larps comes with a certain kind of baggage, and the 763-article world wiki can be daunting for even the nerdiest of us outsiders. Rydland, however, insists that «player input has been the driving force all the way».

«The Crossroads world is to a very large extent shaped by people bringing their own ideas. It's a collective project. We are probably more dependent on new players than other larp settings are», he says, noting to his satisfaction that about half of the players having signed up for this summer's game have never been to a Crossroads larp before.

Writing a novel, on the other hand, calls for quite a different approach. As any author will testify, it's tedious and lonely work. As opposed to the collective effort going into a larp, the author is king and reigns supreme (though the editor might be a god, who again answers to the Lords of the Olympus in the marketing department – but that's another story).

«The story is set in an area of the game world which has not been the setting of a larp, which makes me a little freer», Rydland says. Writing a story like «Lord of the Rings» as a Crossroads novel would pose some challenges, he admits: «It would not be fair to those who would like to continue larping in this world.»

But to this author, writing in a larp setting is mainly a source of inspiration rather than a constraint. «I have been there. I have walked in that world, which makes it all very real to me. It makes for stronger and better depictions. The experiences and impressions from the larps in which I have participated is colouring my writing.» >>



Excerpt from «The dragon boy»

Chapter. 13

After a long day's fruitless search, they camped in one of the hidden glens along the river, and after supper Koll and Eran started on their regular training session. Koll had had a lot on his mind throughout the day, and had been looking forward to letting it all go to focus on something else. Unfortunately, the session didn't turn out to be quite the diversion he'd wanted.

Right from the start, the fight was just as hard as before, and as far as Koll could see, Eran made no mistakes. Every time he thought he had an opening, Eran's stick blocked the way at the last moment, and Koll barely managed to get out of the way and avoid getting bruised. Over and over he tried, but he was getting nowhere and got more and more impatient.

The whole thing was pointless. How was dodging and jumping around all the time supposed to teach him anything? Time and again the shield was so close he could almost touch it, and every time he missed it, it pissed him off more. Finally, he'd had enough.

Eran had just sent him flying headlong into the heather after Koll almost managed to grab the shield between his feet, and as he got up to try again, he boiled over. Burn this whole damn game, he thought. I've had it.

He charged Eran head on. The blow came diagonally from above, and he easily leaned out of the way like he'd done hundreds of times before. The next attack was a thrust to his belly, and Koll spun left towards Eran's side. The stick came whooshing after him almost immediately, but this time Koll was ready. He turned on his heel, gritted his teeth and walked straight into the blow.

It hit his side and almost knocked the air from his lungs, but he grabbed the weapon in both hands and pulled. The

stick twisted in Eran's grip as Koll wheeled and threw a kick to the back of his knee. The big man buckled and staggered backwards for balance. Koll let go of the stick and lunged for the shield. As his fingers gripped the edge he rolled over, just in time for the next strike. The stick slammed into the shield so hard his hands shook, but his grip held. Before

Eran could strike again he threw himself out of reach, the shield in his hands and a triumphant smile on his lips.

«Almost,» Eran said.

«I've got the shield, don't I?»

«And tomorrow you've got a bruise the size of your head. If this was a real sword, you'd be dead.»

«But it's not. It's a stick.»

«Would you have dealt with a sharp blade the same way?»

«No, but I wouldn't be jumping around here like an idiot, either, trying to do something impossible.»

«It's not impossible. You just have to use your head.»

Koll glanced down at the shield. «And what do you call this? Didn't see that coming, did you?»

«The rule was to get away without being hit. You failed.»

«Burn the rules,» Koll said.

«Maybe I'll have a bruise tomorrow. That's fine. The point is, I got the shield, and you couldn't stop me.»

Eran looked at him for a long time, not saying a word. His sword hand hung relaxed by his side, the tip of the stick brushing the forest floor, but his legs and upper body were tense.

«Buckle on.»

«Huh?»

«Are you deaf?» Eran's tone was strict. «Put the shield on. We're not done yet.»

«Er...» Koll glanced down at the shield again.

«Left hand on the handle, and tighten the strap around



your arm. The strap's only there for training purposes. Once you get the hang of it it'll only be in the way, but for now it's best if you don't drop your shield all the time.»

Koll closed his fingers around the handle. The whole shield was metal, but the handle was wrapped in leather to improve the grip. A strap was attached close to the edge, and he tightened it around his arm midway between hand and elbow.

«Ready?» Eran asked.

Koll raised his shield arm and set one foot in front of the other. His pulse started beating faster, drumming a smile onto his lips.

«Bring it on...»

«Careful what you wish for.»

Without another word, Eran attacked. The stick swiped from side to side in front of him, and before Koll knew it the assault was over him. The cut came down and across, and Koll instinctively sidestepped and leaned out of the way. But then Eran surprised him. Without warning he brought the stick back the other way, aiming straight for Koll's head!

He raised his arm as fast as he could, and the impact made the shield ring in his ears.

«Good!» Eran called out. «Carry on, and we'll get some real speed up here.»

«You almost beat my skull in!»

«Good thing you've got a shield, then,» Eran remarked before coming at him again.

It didn't take Koll long to realize his teacher had held back so far in their training. Now the blows hailed down on him in rapid succession, twice as fast as before. He ducked and blocked, threw himself out of the way, tripped, caught himself and blocked again. He was forced backwards step by step, all the time doing his damndest to keep Eran and his stick away. Over and over he pounded against the shield so Koll's fingers started going numb, and all the time the attacks came from new angles, in a different order than before.

At first Koll was worried that Eran was angry with him, that he'd keep beating on him until Koll wouldn't be able to hold him off any more, but after a while he saw Eran smile as he came at him. There were no breaks, and he didn't pull any punches, but for every difficult sequence Koll blocked or avoided, Eran's grin grew wider.

Koll had no thought for anything but the fight. The only things that mattered were Eran's eyes, and the stick and shield between the two of them. The longer they kept going, the more he focused solely on his opponent. His legs and arms grew heavier, and every time he raised the shield to defend himself his muscles ached a little more. But he refused to give in. He had to be ready for anything, and being tired was no excuse.

Time disappeared as Eran's onslaught continued, his blows and strikes becoming a blur until Koll lost all sense of how long they'd been at it. In the end he could barely keep his arms and legs moving. Gritting his teeth he stopped a blow to his head, stumbled out of the way of a cut to his belly, and hooked his heel on a root. He almost fell on his back, but managed to twist in the fall and get his feet under him, ready to dodge the attack he knew was coming.

But it didn't.

Eran had stopped, and stood watching him. Sweat ran down his weathered face, and he was breathing so hard he could hardly speak.

«I think. That'll. Do.»

Koll nodded his head and sunk to the ground, arms and legs trembling. He was dizzy, and his heart pounded in his chest as he fumbled with the shield strap. His fingers pulsed so he could hardly get a grip, until Eran sat down beside him and took over.

«Burn me, Koll... You're

fast, I'll give you that!»

«Huh...?» he replied. Fast? He'd barely managed to keep up!

Eran laid his hand on Koll's shoulder and turned him around so they both faced the fire, and Mirimani who sat there staring wide eyed at them. A cold gust went through him as the north wind caressed his sweaty forehead.

«Just breathe,» Eran whispered, and Koll closed his eyes and let the wind fill his lungs.

It wasn't until his breath was steady and his heart calmed down that Koll stopped to think about the fact that he wasn't the only one worn out. Eran got to his feet stifling a groan, before picking up the shield and stick and heading back to the fire. Koll got up and followed. His arms and legs were sore, but at least he didn't have any problems moving.

Mirimani had put the kettle on, and now she was pull-



Burn this whole damn game, he thought. I've had it.



«Dummies? Training with real people is much better.»

ing out mugs and tea from her chest while Koll and Eran joined her.

«I'm not sure which one of you looks the most beat up, really.» She smiled and offered Eran a mug. «Here. You look like you need it.»

«Thanks a lot,» he replied. «You saying I lost, then?»

«I didn't say that, but it did look like you got more of a fight than you expected.»

«Heh.» Eran gave Koll a sideways glance across the fire. «You can say that again. Well done, lad.»

«Thanks...» Koll rubbed the tender muscles of his shield arm. «I'm knackered. Feels like a cart ran over my arm...»

«You'll be fine. And you bloody well better be feeling it, or I wouldn't have much to teach you at all!»

«What do you mean?»

«I pushed you as hard and fast as I could, Koll. In a life and death battle it would be different, or if we both had swords and shields. But things being as they were now, I hit you with everything I've got, and you held me off. Not many have done that before you.»

«I don't know...»

«It's true, Koll,» Mirimani said. «None of the militiamen in Kervad train that fast. Not one.»

«How would you know?» Koll asked. Mirimani had never been much interested in weapons or fighting.

«Harko wanted me to make a training dummy that could strike back against its attacker, so I had to see what kind of punishment it would have to take, didn't I!»

Eran chuckled and shook his head. «Dummies? Training with real people is much better.»

«I'm sure it is. But it would be an interesting challenge all the same.» She grinned and looked from one to the other. «And a dummy doesn't get tired.»

«True enough. I think we both got a pretty good workout there. Right, Koll?»

«I guess, but I don't know if I really learned much... I was just trying to get away, and didn't really have any idea what I should be doing.»

«You know more than you think. You may not be able to plan ahead to future attacks and defences yet, but you react fast and position yourself really well. You've got good instincts, but lack experience. Simple as that.»

Eran leaned forwards and pointed a finger at Koll to underline his words. «But like I told you: Those instincts are what matter now. Think about how this felt, and remember that feeling. That's the key.»

«The key to what?»

«To bring out the strength in you, and let the North Wind in and to the fore. That's what you just did, Koll. No untrained boy defends himself as well as you did. Not without help.»

Koll gave it some thought. He hadn't felt much different than usual, really, but it was hard to say with everything happening so fast. He hadn't had time to think, or feel how he moved, like Eran was always telling him to. He'd been pretty pleased with himself for finally getting hold of the shield, but when Eran started acting the sore loser he was annoyed. The only thing that had really been in his mind when the fight started again was a growing anger and a need to prove that he'd earned the shield.

Koll glanced up, at the flames mirrored in Eran's dark eyes on the other side of the fire. There was something different there now, something challenging and dangerous. His eyes were almost glowing, like the forge when Vallis worked the bellows at full strength.

Suddenly the fire flared up between them. In a flash one of the logs caught, and the flames rose around the teapot. No one said a word. Eran gave Koll an approving smile and held his gaze while the flames danced between them, and in his eyes. The woods were silent around them now, and Koll couldn't look away. There was something mesmerizing about those flames, something he couldn't escape. He didn't even blink when a tongue of fire flicked out and almost burned his hair, simply took a deep breath and felt a tremor run through his body as the North Wind answered.

A roar filled his ears, and his heart beat like a war drum. In a flash he saw himself from across the fire. Leaning forward, staring straight ahead with the fire playing in his eyes, higher and stronger with every gust of wind.

I've got my own fire...

The thought put a hungry, confident smile on his face. He cocked his head and studied Eran again.

I wonder whose is stronger...?

Eyes shining, he met his mentor's gaze and held it.

«That's it...» Eran whispered. «There. That's your key.»



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