

PLAYGROUND

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PLAYING WITH YOURSELF

SEX MOVES OF APOCALYPSE WORLD

THE CON MAN



Challenge

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Some games are competitive, some cooperative. Some are structured as tactical fights. Some as social get-togethers or half-scripted plays. But in all the games we play – in fact, in everything we do – there is challenge.

It can be the creative challenge in coming up with a cool event, description or line at the right time. Or the social challenge of portraying a high or low status individual interacting with others. The challenge to your identity that can come from deep immersion or strange play. Mental challenge. Physical challenge.

It's easy to conflate challenge with competition – but competition is only one form; in the end, all challenge is a competition with yourself, an exercise of will and skill to understand and, possibly, improve yourself.

Theorists like Raph Koster, who wrote «A Theory of Fun», or Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who came up with the concept of «flow», will tell you that for each person and each field, there's an ideal range of difficulty that gives the exact right amount of resistance so that what you do feels fun, rewarding – challenging. Not trivial, not impossible.

If you start out with something that's too hard for you, you might never learn anything. Giving a five-year-old a Lovecraft book to read, for instance. Or putting the average family man on a dance floor where others are present. To learn, you want challenges that are right for you, that can grow with you. This is the idea behind computer game tutorials, pre-larp workshops and similar: Just enough challenge for you to master, and move on to the next challenge.

But while a game designer can conceivably make problems that are tailored specifically for each player, the world itself doesn't work that way. We need to find our own challenges, ones that fit us. No matter how small, no matter how big. This exploration of what we can do, what we might do, is one of the things that makes us human: The exercise of curiosity and will. Setting yourself a goal and then seeing if you can reach it.

Comic writer Alan Moore writes of the joy of attempting things which you secretly believe are impossible. When you think «There's no way I'll actually be able to do this... or finish this, or get away with this.» That's when things get really interesting. With impossible challenges.

We wanted to make an international roleplaying magazine. What do you want to do? ■



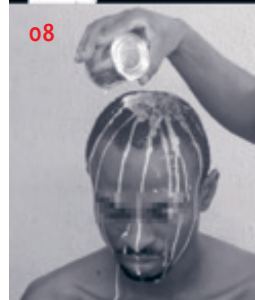
■ Matthijs Holter

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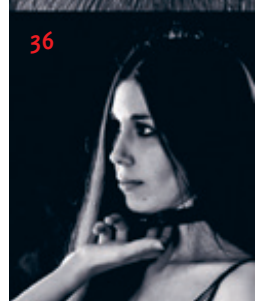
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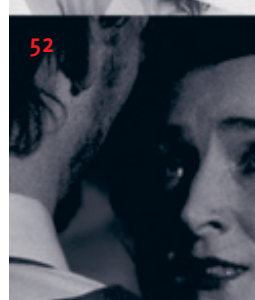
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FUCKERY, ACCORDING TO WIKTIONARY:

—noun

1. (vulgar, slang, countable) a brothel.
2. (vulgar, slang, uncountable) sexual intercourse.
3. (vulgar, slang, uncountable) nonsense.
4. (Caribbean, vulgar, slang, uncountable) unfair or morally wrong action.

FUCKERY, ACCORDING TO THE INTERNET:

Fuckery is the foolishness dat just don't make no sense.

If you wanna be my Lover

Performance meets roleplay in the Finland-based Walkabout Project.

www.walkabout.happeningfish.com
hoyhen@nh.fi

– The goal of the Walkabout Project is to explore what lies between theatre, performance and game. Each project is based on one of the cards of the major arcana of the tarot - just a nice way we found to work thematically. We've so far covered The Fool, The Tower, and The Hermit. The Lovers is next up, says Johanna MacDonald and Aarni Korpela.

They started the project at a theatre in Helsinki (Teatteri Naamio ja Höyhen). The performances could sometimes be described as larp, sometimes as performance, sometimes both or neither.

– It depends a lot on what other people bring to it themselves - if they're expecting to play, they're likely to play; if they're expecting to watch, they're likely to see a performance. What it has in common with larp is participation, often game structures, and being created by the participants, they say.

– We rarely have roles in the same sense as in larp, but we do have identities, points of view et cetera., and sometimes it's closer to 'playing' than game - both in the sense of what children



■ *The Devil (Juha Sääski) reads a bedtime story in Walkabout I. Photos: The Walkabout Project*

do, and in the sense of some players having performative tasks and more responsibility for the others.

For Lovers

The Lovers' Match-Making Agency is the next Walkabout happening in line, to be played in Helsinki from 17. – 21. August. The performance is based on the tarot card «The Lovers» (and its many connotations).

– It's a dating service, Walkabout-style.

The blurb reads:

– For five days in August the Agency will match up people who our match-makers feel might have something to give each other.

During these five days there will be parties, picnics and activities arranged by «the Agency» for people to meet.

– To be in a place of trust where we can feel we can let our guards down, we will all wear what we call «the Lovers' lens» for these five days. (...) The Lovers' lens is in essence the way we tend to see someone we love: with acceptance



■ *The Emperor (Jenni Kokkomäki) holds court in Walkabout I. Photos: The Walkabout Project*

and sympathy. It's not a rose-tinted lens. You don't only see the positive, but you accept the negative.

– There is no expectation of what your encounters will lead to. Mostly nowhere, probably, and it isn't even the point of this. You can expect to share moments, get glimpses into the lives of others. You might find a friend, hell, a soul mate, or just a moment to remember.

Game nights

In addition to the ongoing Walkabout project, there will be a game night at the theatre in Helsinki once a month from April to June and August to December. The games require no preparation, start with a workshop and end with a debriefing. The first three are 16.4. Limbo, 7.5. The Grand Mechanism and 4.6. This Is Your Dream. Usually all the games/performances are accessible to English speakers.

– You can attend the same way you would buy a theatre ticket, either book in advance or buy a ticket at the door. For the game nights and The Lovers you should preferably book in advance to make sure you fit in, the organizers say.



Outside the Box

The Czech larp group Court of Moravia (see Playground #1) have launched a beautiful little book called Outside the Box. It details their projects, spanning from Vampire larps early on to more advanced projects (see image caption).

www.courtofmoravia.com/en/outside-the-box-en

<

Noir is an experimental game for five men. During the game, you will visit stylish places of night Brno, you will meet people from the local underground, and a seductive femme fatale (you can choose her in advance). It will be up to you what direction the story will take.

Photo: Radovanvlk

Sex moves of Apocalypse World



Apocalypse World

A roleplaying game by Vincent Baker
300-page book, \$28.00

www.apocalypse-world.com

In some roleplaying games, characters get perks for killing monsters and taking loot. In *Apocalypse World*, they get special effects for sleeping with each other. TEXT | MATTHIJS HOLTER

A *pocalypse World* is a roleplaying game taking place in a not so distant future. There's been an apocalypse – some undefined, world-spanning disaster. Now all that's left are the ruins of society, and the people that try to survive in them. They fight, they explore, they struggle to survive. And they have sex. As designer Vincent Baker says: «In the post-apocalypse, comfort, closeness, kindness, tenderness – sex and love – are scarce, and they're valuable.»

Now, in most tabletop roleplaying games, sex is left completely up to the players. There are no rules for sleeping with someone. But in *Apocalypse World*, every character has a special sex move. If they sleep with another character, it has mechanical effects. For instance, if you're playing a hocus, a character worshipping mystical powers, having sex with another character means you get a mystical bond with them. You can aid or interfere with each other's actions over a large distance. If you're playing a savvyhead, someone who loves tink-



“

It's preposterous how underrepresented sex is in roleplaying games. Even stupid action movies have romantic subplots. We can too.

The Operator's sex move

Description from the book:

If you and another character have sex, get a new obligation gig: keeping [their name] happy (you keep them happy / you fucking blow it).

What it means in practice:

An obligation gig means a job you have to *keep doing* – you have to roll dice every session to see how it goes. And you have to juggle it with all your other gigs. If you're lucky with the dice, you manage to keep them happy. Otherwise...

The Hardholder's sex move

Description from the book:

If you and another character have sex, you can give the other character gifts worth 1-barter, at no cost to you.

What it means in practice:

1-barter is a week's worth of items, food, medicine. So if you sleep with someone, hey presto, you've basically generated valuable resources out of nowhere! But only if you give them to your partner, as a gift.

The Battlebabe's sex move

Description from the book:

If you and another character have sex, nullify the other character's sex move. Whatever it is, it just doesn't happen.

What it means in practice:

The Battlebabe is the coolest character in Apocalypse World. Nothing moves her; she has complete control. In sex, this means that nobody can mess with her – game-mechanics-wise. However, she isn't open to the benefits that can come from good sex, either.





Some people won't play the game at all because it has sex moves in it. That's fine with me.

ering and can repair just about anything, having sex with someone means you can use your «Things Speak» ability: You understand them and can ask them deep questions – in the same way you ask deep questions of your machinery.

It can be beautiful. In theory, at least. Says Baker:

- All I want is the same stuff in my roleplaying that shows every night of the week on every big screen in every movie theater in the US. Some comedy, some drama, some sex, some violence, some horror, some escape, some silliness, some thoughtfulness. Occasionally something really disturbing, occasionally something really touching.

And it can make for weird relationships.

- A couple of the sex moves can drive a wedge between the characters.

On the Story Games forum, there are many *Apocalypse World* play reports. Here's an account of a brainer – a telepathic, often antisocial character – trying to perform her sex move. Some of the moves involve rolling dice to see if your character gets a positive effect, or a negative one – and here it doesn't work out too well.

- My brainer Brace had sex with the group's savvyhead Gitch. It was the first time she'd been with someone who actually dug her, instead of being repulsed by her leg braces and spooky psychic powers.
- So of course I roll a miss on my «Deep Brain Scan» sex move and end up doing harm to him during sex. Brace loses control and all the pain she'd healed from Gitch earlier flows back into him. She's crying and saying, «I'm sorry, I'm sorry, it's not always like that!»
- Of course he gets to use his «Things Speak» sex move and asks, «What's wrong with this (her), and how might I fix it?»

On message boards discussing the game, there have been discussions on how to handle sexual assault in the game. How do the sex moves relate to rape? The designer's views on this are crystal clear.

- They don't. They're for when characters have sex with one another, coequally, just as «have sex with one another» implies. A rapist and victim don't «have sex with one another.»
- The moves that can relate to rape are «go aggro» (that is, put a gun to someone's head) and «seize by force,» and I hope you can see how ugly they make it. In *Apocalypse World*, rape is violence, it's not sex.

Baker is part of a circle of game designers, including his wife and some of his best (male and female) friends. We wondered if it was sometimes awkward playing out scenes of intimacy in such a close group.

- I get embarrassed pretty easily. I find playing *Apocalypse World*, sex moves and all, less embarrassing to do with my wife and female friends than watching an R-rated sex scene in a movie with them. You should see me blush.

So how explicit are the moves in play? How much detail does Baker, designer of sex moves, go into when *he* plays the game?

- The moves don't require you to *describe* your characters having sex or anything like that. They don't make the game into erotica, there's no bonus for extra-sexy dialogue.
- You can close the door on the camera if you want to. I always do. ■



I hate scammers
and con artists. To
me they're the most
cowardly type of
criminals.

– TheDane



The Con Man

Scammers will try to bait you by flooding your mailbox with unbelievable offers of riches. Scambaiters are people who bait them back. We had a talk with one such scambaiter – who had some surprising things to say.

TEXT | JONAS TRIER-KNUDSEN

In Nigeria a man is waiting to go from Port Hartcourt to Abuja, where he expects to claim a massive donation from an American church. In Denmark a man is waiting to claim a «Safari» badge for getting a scammer to travel over 200 miles on a wild-goose chase.

Scambaiters are people who under aliases answer and interact with scammers who claim to be gold mine owners, royalty or millionaires conveniently needing to pass on insane amounts of money. Through complicated counter-hoaxes they trick scammers into doing meaningless and idiotic things making them spend time and resources on the baiter, instead of unknowing victims.

The scams are called «Advance Fee Frauds» and vary in form with the same recipe. Under the promise of a huge amount of money, the scammer lures the victim into transferring small amounts of money to cover everything from fictional bribes to ditto travel expenses or transfer fees. The victim, naturally, never gets any of the promised money.

The scambaiter known as «TheDane» lights his second cigarette: «Most people don't fall for the scams but sadly there's no law against being stupid». TheDane is his handle at one of the major scambaiting forums – 419eater.com - and he insists on being anonymous: «It's part of the game», he says, «when speaking publicly about

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ADVANCE FEE FRAUD

7.6% of internet crimes reported in the United States are Advance Fee Frauds. Nigeria has the 3rd most internet criminals (which include hacking, fake auctions, phishing etc.). Ghana is 8th, Cameroun 9th. Close to all of the internet crimes in these countries are 419-scams. (Source: FBI)

▲ The baiters have a series of fake receipts to convince their targets that payments are coming

scammers I prefer to keep my identity hidden. After all some scammers are quite hardened criminals.»

TheDane took up scambaiting after one summer night stumbling upon the forum, which takes its name from section 419 of the Nigerian penal code – a law made especially to prevent Advance Fee Fraud. What he found was a community of people dedicated to sabotaging the 419-scammers and keeping their eyes away from potential victims – and having a blast at the same time. «After reading through a three hundred page bait-report, I was hooked. This was doing something good and having a whole lot of fun at the same time.»

The report was made by a veteran baiter – «JoJoBean» - who had kept a bait going over two and a half years, where he under the promise of a great reward had lured a scammer to do a number of outrageous things. A few peaks on the list was the scammer getting six tattoos, having a series of pseudopornographic gay pictures taken and traveling numerous miles cross country. TheDane elaborates:

– I hate scammers and con artists. To me they're the most cowardly type of criminals. Plus, my background as a role-player got tickled – this had to be the ultimate game master's challenge: to get real people to do real things without them knowing that it's all a game.

The baiters create plots and acts out NPCs through alias-emails and phone calls. Complicated storylines meant to

be as frustrating and long drawn as possible. All designed to cost the player – the scammer – maximum amount of time and financial resources. «But as every game master knows», TheDane laughingly admits, «you have to be very ready to adjust your story along the way. Not all players want to do exactly as you please.»

The Big Fish

TheDane is currently baiting a scammer called «Brother Alexander», who got hooked September 2010.

Most baits have a very comical touch to them. Everything from using an abundance of Star Wars references to characters named «Mike Hock» (try saying it fast) or «Pastor Carbonara» are considered in good style in the scambaiter community. One could ask how anyone could believe that Hans Olow or Lance DoCalrissian are actual people, but TheDane stresses that we should never underestimate the cultural barrier between e.g. Nigeria and the Western world. The references to popular culture are all but the same.

Perhaps it is simply as plausible as anyone believing that they are the random target of an even more random Nigerian benefactor?

– The core drive is greed, TheDane explains. – We use their own techniques on them. People believe the scammer's story because they are greedy and want to get rich. It's exactly the same thing with the scammers. You won't believe the ridiculous things I've made scammers do or believe. For instance the Brother Alexander-thing is based on my very own fictional church – lovingly called 'The Hollow Church of Holy Smoke, St. Baytor Chapter'.

It started with TheDane answering an email from a Sarah Hughes – a wealthy white woman with terminal cancer who needed someone to inherit her fortune. TheDane answered her as a priest who looked for someone who could administer a donation for local charity – a job for which a charitable person like her seemed perfect. However, in order to be eligible for the donation Mrs. Hughes needed to be part of the Church of Holy Smoke. Unsurprisingly the cancer-patient quickly forgot about her heritage and accepted the donation.

This is where TheDane set in the first stall-technique:

– Most people from developing countries have an image of the West as a place with a ton of bureaucracy and incredible wealth. That makes it very easy for us to send them

overly long formulas including questions that are a tad out the ordinary. Which I did. Whether she liked United or Arsenal best for instance.

TheDane laughs for a short while, lights another cigarette and continues:

– I asked Mrs. Hughes to send me a filled out application formula plus a 20 page questionnaire and include her picture. In turn I would donate a tad short of a hundred thousand dollars for her to use in her local community.

A common trick with the baiters is to ask their targets to send pictures of themselves holding a sign with a specific text. The excuse is always to verify their identity. Since most of the scammers, who TheDane baits, are African males, «Mrs. Hughes» was not too comfortable sending a picture. At first TheDane received a couple of poorly manipulated photos, clearly taken of the internet with the sign text written in MS Paint. Some emails later, it was the end of Mrs. Hughes who passed the donation contact to her devout-believing «friend» – a Nigerian man – Brother Alexander. TheDane had moved a step closer to the actual scammer.

Upon receiving the meticulously filled out formulas and images, TheDane decided to up the game a bit. In order to fulfill his acceptance into The Hollow Church of Holy Smoke, Brother Alexander had to undergo a certain sacred ritual involving bathing in smoke and being baptized in goat's milk. TheDane held his breath pushing «send». This step is always a breaking point for a baiter. How much ridicule is the scammer willing to accept – something that always comes down to the level of the established trust.

At this point the contact went idle for a while. TheDane first thought that the milk-ritual had blown his cover. But after a couple of weeks and anxious emails he received four pictures of a solemnly looking Brother Alexander holding a bible, engulfed in smoke and covered in canned goat's milk. TheDane had claimed a solid «trophy» – the community term for pictures of scammers.

– As a cherry on top, an important part of the ritual was reading aloud from Ezekiel 25:17 while being baptized. Film buffs will recognize the reference to Samuel L. Jackson's monologue in Pulp Fiction. Apparently, the dear brother didn't, TheDane says.

By the time of this writing the bait is at a stand-by. Through fake Track-and-trace software, Brother Alexander has experi-

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6.) I have had homosexual tendencies (even only once counts).
Strongly Agree Agree Somewhat Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
1 2 3 4 5
Comments: I am straight not homosexual

7.) When required to fill out forms I jump for joy.
Strongly Agree Agree Somewhat Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
1 2 3 4 5
Comments: I agree because it is called to serve God.

8.) Spreading the gospel is number A # 1 on my list.
Strongly Agree Agree Somewhat Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
1 2 3 4 5
Comments: The words of God is our fruit of life.

9.) I never bathe prior to attending church.
Strongly Agree Agree Somewhat Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
1 2 3 4 5
Comments: I always have my bath before going to church

10.) I am satisfied with the questions so far.
Strongly Agree Agree Somewhat Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
1 2 3 4 5
Comments: Agree

11.) I have read and understand the bible.
Strongly Agree Agree Somewhat Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
1 2 3 4 5
Comments: Agree

12.) I would enjoy taking part in distributing money to charities.
Strongly Agree Agree Somewhat Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree
1 2 3 4 5
Comments: Agree if I have enough to give I will give out. Because a giver never lack.

▲ Some questions are plausible. Others aren't.



- ▲ The earlier identity of Brother Alexander.
- Brother Alexander claiming to follow the St. Baytor Chapter of Holy Smoke.
- Another Holy Smoke follower.



Brother Alexander had to undergo a ritual involving bathing in smoke and being baptized in goat's milk.



▲ *Getting scammers to do strange stuff is a friendly competition in the scambaiteer community.*



I like wasting their time and getting them to spend their money.

enced the package containing the donation being accidentally sent to a city some over 200 miles away. This is beyond the magic limit for a scammer. Any travel over 200 miles or cross a national border will earn him the much desired «safari»-badge in his signature on the 419eater-forum.

The greater good

Scambaiting is a classic example of the dilemma of whether the end justifies the means. As the TheDane explains they openly use the very techniques they criticize and scammer or not it is indeed very real lives they work to make miserable. A common argument against scambaiting is that the scammers are probably poor and desperate. According to TheDane, being poor is no excuse to be criminal.

– Let's face it, he says, the typical victims aren't big money who can afford being conned for a couple of thousand. It's usually the socially weaker and poor in the Western world who become victims.

– When you learn how the scammers are working, you realize how extremely cynical most of them are. From time to time, victims find our forum and thank us for what we're doing. Personally I draw the line at getting scammers to hurt themselves. I like wasting their time and getting them to spend the money they've got scamming innocents, but no tattoos or scars. I might someday come to a point where I think it's OK, TheDane explains.

An important part of the ethical code of scambaiters is not to involve what they call ITP's – «Innocent Third Parties». ITP's can be anything from shop owners to government offices that fledgling baiters ask their targets to interact with. In other cases ITPs can simply be people caught in the crossfire and mistakenly assumed to be scammers. The aim of scambaiting is to waste the time and resources of scammers, not everyone else.

TheDane learned his lesson when he had been scambaiting for only a couple of months. He answered an email from a kid named Alex from Togo who was asking for

money and telling a very scam-like sob story about his sick mother.

Alex quickly rose to fame at the 419eater because he proved extremely willing to post pictures of himself holding signs and doing outrageous things. After a while the community lost interest, but TheDane was still on.

– Actually I haven't told this story the community yet, but I figure this is a good occasion. I kept on baiting Alex and after a while I caught him lying. It was something about the condition of his mother. One minute she was terminally ill, the next she was already dead. So I wrote him a very angry email – a slap as we call it.

To prove his innocence, Alex gave TheDane password for his email accounts, and after a couple of nights of systematic reading TheDane realized that most of Alex' stories checked out. Either TheDane had been baiting an innocent person or Alex was an extremely well-coordinated scammer who managed to write fifteen different people and still be able to stick to the same story.

– One of the emails I found was a 'thank you for the money'-mail Alex had written to an elderly man. I decided to write the guy and warn him about the potential scam. As it turns out, the man had contacted SOS Children's Care on his own initiative and Alex' identity checked out. He was exactly who he claimed to be.

After this TheDane wrote Alex and apologized. He didn't tell him about the scambaiter community, but warned him that it wasn't a good idea begging on the internet. You never know who is answering.

– Actually I sent Alex some money myself and now he's kind of my sponsor-child. He still sends me his grades and pictures from time to time, TheDane chuckles, but the important lesson for scambaiters is always to test your targets. You have to be certain that it's a scammer you're dealing with.

Playground Magazine knows the identity of TheDane. ■

Scambaiting 101

Step 1: Find a target

Find email in spambox, create fake email on webmail and answer. Say the magic words: «I'm interested, tell me more». The Scammer will send you the next part of his «script» or «format» as they call it.

Step 2: Get him off-script

Ask the scammer questions so he or she has to improvise.

Step 3: Establish confidence and dangle fictive dollars

Like the scammer is trying to get you to believe he is real, you have to do the same. Spend a couple of cents on a phone call, quickly make a fake webpage for your organization - something that expands your universe beyond emails. The important thing is that the scammer believe that the paycheck is coming.

Step 4: Ask the scammer to do something

Get the scammer to fill out forms and/or take pictures of him- or herself. The important part is to get the scammer to invest time and money in your bait. Remember most web connections are slow and expensive in many parts of the world, so the larger the files involved the better.

Step 5: Take it up a notch

If your scammer has sent you something. A piece of art, a formula, a picture. Complain! Tell them something is fundamentally wrong. The picture should have been in colors, the formula filled out in caps. Anything to justify them doing the same things again.

Step 6: Puppet-mastery

Get them to do even crazier and/or expensive things. Travel cross borders, book and pay for hotels, make long distance calls.

Step 7: The loop

Repeat steps 4 through 6.



SCAMBAITING ONLINE

- ♦ www.419eater.com
- ♦ www.419baiter.com
- ♦ www.419game.net.tc

ROMANCE SCAMS: THE PINK COUSIN OF 419S

Another common type of 419-scams are the so-called romance scams. The reward the victim is promised is here not money but an escape from loneliness and perhaps the love of their life. In all other respects romance scams work as other 419 with the victim having to pay smaller amounts of money over a period of time.

Why Characters?

If you roleplay without a setting – or even a role – what are you really doing? And what can it do to you?

TEXT | TOVA GERGE

ILLUSTRATION | KARINA GRAJ

Consensus reality mind-fucks us 24/7. Playing games is one way to make a symbolic break. But we can fill that break with many different activities.

We can parody our lives, we can reexamine them or we can try to leave them behind completely. This article is about what we usually do during those breaks, what we might be doing in the future and how we could think or act to actively participate in the ongoing development of our subculture. Read it, use it, oppose it, rewrite it, and most of all: keep making games. To ask and answer the question «Why characters?» is one possible way to get inspired.

Where are we now?

The bullied middle-class kids of the 90's have grown up, become artists, game designers or

researchers. What we used to get paid for only in social credibility and shaggability within a limited group might now result in a proper salary and state fundings. As we leave the underground, we start underlining specific aspects of our subculture. We write our own Lady Gaga-saga by collectively staging the roles that we think could reaffirm and stabilize our access to real hard cash power and cultural coolness. And maybe this is a very reasonable thing to do, considering what kind of knowledge we possess. After all, for being antisocial nerds we have some superior skills in social stock marketing and how to front run it. As in any of our games, we manipulate our position in the social sphere, and noone sends the police or the psychiatry after us anymore.

Except in fiction, that is. Because interestingly, we quite often explore our limits in extreme settings, where the social codes really force themselves upon the players: camps, prisons, hospitals, asylums. Compared to these environments, our ordinary work or school can almost seem like a holiday. On some occasions it is still painful to go back to following the rules of reality, but we manage. We learn from this. We get new stories to tell, new social routines to



Why do we still try to fit stories in? Why do we build worlds? Do we really need that to play?

run. We find our catharsis – the point of resolution, the cleansing tears, the necessary adieu – then we move on. Identifying with someone else strengthens our feeling of self, and the overall experience may be more intense than a Hollywood movie, but not so different in emotional content.

This is not very strange. When we play, we engage our bodies and our everyday imagination, and this bodily imagination is permeated by the desire for story and the desire for readable social icons, i.e. characters. A lot of us want the surprises of an old school dramaturgy, the nice costumes and the thrill of the power dynamics in a schematically simplified society. We want love stories, disasters, cowboys riding off into the sunset. The Hollywood dramaturgy is not only everywhere in film, theatre and literature, but it is also a part of our everyday lives, and this is how it perpetually enters also in our alternative lives, our dreamed bodies, our games. Somewhere we learnt to think in straight story lines, we started to look for peak intensities, we took a taste for things that are larger than life, and that's maybe why we became gamers in the first place.

Why is this a problem?

What most of our games set out to do is presenting character, that is, presenting identity in a way that is a lot like how we present identity in our off-game parties, Facebook pages and family dinners. The consequence of this is that we can alter our position in the system (from hip to nerd to high school sweet heart) and we can alter the entire code (from 2011 to funky 50's to post futurism) without altering our basic task within the game: i.e., to show off our knowledge of our position in the system and to show off our knowledge of the code.

Precisely because the basic task of the game is the same as in reality, this way of playing character reaffirms the already existing social hierarchies of the subculture. Despite how much we talk about the difference between the character and the player, we are not truly capable of making a distinction in how we simultaneously distribute power and influence over

both the game and the subculture. Sometimes this is painfully clear in the sense that real and fictive status coincide almost completely. The ones who are the rock stars play the rock stars, and their roles are proportionally more important gamewise than the groupie roles of the groupies. However, if you are an important player – which you might be more likely to become if you are a heterosexual, white male with an upper or middle-class background – it is very likely that your role becomes important for how the game organizes itself and how interaction can happen inside the game, no matter if you are

«WHY CHARACTERS?»

«Why Characters?» was originally a lecture at the convention Knudepunkt 2011. The entire lecture can be seen on Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGF5AKrK4fc>





It must be possible to design games that set up codes in ways that fuck up codes.

originally cast as the groupie. In a character based logic, it does not matter how low on the social scale you let your character sink, because you are still demonstrating your knowledge of the code, you are still a fashion creature. And what fashion adds up to is a winner's game where climbing can only happen at the expense of someone else. In this sense, our way of gaming constantly reaffirms the hierarchical structure of social interaction.

Is change possible?

It is probably impossible not to be a fashion creature at all. We are – and our games are – inscribed in a social world that works according to this logic, and that cannot be changed overnight. This does not automatically mean that game and reality are or do exactly the same thing. It must be possible to design games that set up codes in ways that fuck up codes, games that aim for the impossible and want to

temporarily overthrow social hierarchy rather than to reaffirm it.

This fucking up could of course happen (and already happens) in the character- and story-based games that this text questions. Games have the potential of destabilizing the rules of reality, and this makes them both lovable and dangerous. The roleplaying community seems to be increasingly aware of this. The more obsessed we have become with protecting reality from game, the more obsessed we also become with the opposite: the blur between rules and roles, the clashes, everything that is labeled «bleed». Protection systems and bleed ideals thus exist side by side, and not necessarily in opposition.

As bleed is becoming a buzzword, we still apply it mostly when addressing the relation between player and character. But the notion also opens for the possibility to work with the relation between the game and the player. To be able to talk about and maybe even intentionally design this kind of bleed gives the opportunity to rediscover the game-ness of reality without having to pass through the metaphor of a fictive character. If the possibility to take on another character states that life is like a game because we can make playable models of its way of functioning, then the possibility of not taking on another character states that life is a game, because the rules can be changed. Tendencies that point in this direction can already be found in contemporary roleplaying. Dramatic surprises in the storyline are replaced with mind-fucks into the game design. Story and characters are more and more often conceived of as some kind of ticket in and out of the altered reality – a protecting mask or an alibi rather than the main point of the event. We study fake geography less and less. Instead we try to learn the ten different systems for player communication, jumps in chronology or diegetic sexual exchange. It seems as if we are potentially getting more interested in function and interaction than in the symbols that make bodies readable in terms of social status, gender, ethnicity and so on. Instead of playing on what we think we know that a player tries to





We quite often explore our limits in extreme settings: camps, prisons, hospitals, asylums.

tell about their character by putting on a dress, a mustache, a bent back or a funny accent, we go for what we can actually do directly with the bodies and minds of the players.

Now, if this is where we are moving next, the subsequent questions must be: Why characters? Why do we still try to fit stories in? Why do we build worlds? Do we really need that to play? Could we get rid of it? In what ways?

What ever happens can be retold, turned into a story. Who ever plays a game does so from a social position that could in itself be conceived of as a character. How we imagine the place where we are situated – its limits and possibilities – always adds up to a world. In this sense, the total absence of characters, stories and worlds is of course impossible. But when we start to erase the lines between ourselves and our fictions, we have the possibility of radically changing the expressions and the interests of our games. Our tools for interaction could be used, not as a way of carrying and strengthening story, but as a way of telling something else than story.

Where do we go from here?

The main motivation for roleplaying is often an interest for sociality and how it is constructed. The pay-off in such games is some kind of emotional discovery or maybe a political mind-fuck. This interest or outcome does not have to disappear just because we leave our characters behind. We could discover other emotions,

have other political insights, take another kind of break from social hierarchy by moving towards yet unfamiliar ways of relating to body, to language or to matter. We do not need to tell a story about why unfamiliar things happen, we do not need to rationalize it. It could just be there, as it is. It could be something very real without necessarily following the rules of reality. And it could also bleed and overlap who we are when we interact as social beings.

To make games that address the player directly could imply working with physical dynamics, limitations and possibilities rather than with a psychological framework. This could mean creating interaction through movement scores, working with sensual deprivation/distortion (such as chosen blindness or altered audio input) or creating unconventional relations to objects (not only letting a pen symbolize a flower, but instead or simultaneously making the pen into a functioning vehicle).

To work with collective identity and address the players as a group rather than individuals is another way of building around character. Making several people into one organism directs the main interest of the design towards function rather than difference. However, interaction with game dynamics in extreme isolation could also have interesting effects on how we perceive our positions in the social sphere.

Yet another possibility is to take an interest in game structure rather than narrative. Roleplaying gives the possibility of rethinking the notion of game by doing game designs that are strange and unruly, at least from a winning/losing perspective. It is possible to think strange

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If you are an important player it is very likely that your role becomes important for how the game organizes itself.

BLEED

Bleed is when reality and game influence each other strongly, especially in unforeseen and unwanted ways.

games without characters or worlds. And strange can still be clear, negotiated and transparent: mind-fucks are like placebo, they work even if you know that it is a construction.

Strange games could be games where you kind of almost get the rules until they suddenly change. They could be games where the rules do not make sense in the first place and you spend a lot of time trying to figure them out



The Hollywood dramaturgy is not only everywhere in film, theatre and literature, but it is also part of our everyday lives.

until that becomes the very game. They could be games that you can only lose. They could be games that you lose and win at the same time (which is actually often an inherent trait in character-oriented game design, whenever the character and the player have conflicting interests). They could be games that do not demand to know the difference between winners or losers, games that work in the gap between players and characters, games that let characters and players and dreamed bodies coexist within a set of rules that rule out some parts of reality, temporarily or irreversibly.

However, it is important to remember that «Why characters?» is not simply a rhetoric question that aims to criticize the concept of roleplaying that we have worked on for the last 15 years. Rather, it is an honest inquiry that needs as many answers as there are people that choose to work with interactive design. If we can really defend the use, or lack, of characters in every specific scenario that we make, then we also have better means of mediating and achieving what we want, gamewise and as political agents in the world. To ask «Why characters?» is one possible way of mind-fucking consensus reality right back. ■

THINGS

OLE PEDER GIÆVER

Just a little lovin'

www.just-a-little-lovin.blogspot.com

A live action roleplaying game exploring New York's vibrant gay scene in the eighties.

1982. Gay men are migrating to New York and San Francisco to become part of the vibrant and hedonistic scene in Greenwich Village. Unbeknownst to everyone, however, the HIV virus has started spreading in the city. An article in the New York Times this summer described a mysterious «gay cancer», but its cause remains unknown.

— Just a little lovin' is a larp about strong emotions surrounding sex, death and friendship, says organizer Hanne Grasmo.

Grasmo is one of the founders of the annual Nordic Knutepunkt-conference. The other main organizer, Tor Kjetil Edland, was one of the creators of the acclaimed gender-bending larp *Mad About the Boy* (2010). He has worked on several campaigns and projects on HIV-prevention and on HIV/AIDS and human rights, both in Norway and abroad.

— We wish to explore a setting which hasn't been done much in larp so far. The larp is a contemporary drama in the tradition of the

Norwegian Weltschmerz group of organizers (Amerika, Europa), says Grasmø.

In the larp the players will enact a 4th of July party amongst the (male) gay community in upstate New York during the years 1982, -83 and -84. They will explore the gay scene, as well as the terror of the «gay cancer»: AIDS.

— We're not looking to do an 80's pastiche, which has been done many times in Norwegian larp, but are going for hardcore emotional gaming, says Grasmø.

There is also opening for other characters than gay males, as a group of cancer survivors - «hippie types» will also attend the parties.

This group of survivors will be a contrast to the characters which are infected during the years of play, Grasmø says.

The larp will be played in English, with a few characters reserved for women who wish to play men. To be played outside Oslo 10th-13th July 2011. 30-50 participants.



▲ Illustration: Wikimedia Commons



▲ The players in Project System will experience the preparations for, and celebration of, the «Day of Equality» in a fictional totalitarian state. Photo: Court of Moravia.

Totalitarianism for beginners

The Czech larp Project System aims to provide the players with a «weekend in a totalitarian state»: «During almost thirty hours of the game you will experience, along with other players, the story of people living in a state without freedom.» The game weekend in English is scheduled for 23 – 25. September 2011, and takes place by the village Zubří close to Nové Město na Moravě, Czech Republic.

www.projekt-system.cz/en/



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Burning Man Goes Sweden

The Borderland is a new creative hybrid festival starting in the last week of July 2011 in Österlen, southern Sweden. «The Borderland has many of the traditional elements of a festival, only that we replace bands and musicians with the participants, in fact making them and their dreams the very center of the festival.» The festival is inspired by American «Burning Man». The theme this first year is «Emigration».

www.theborderland.se



▲ The characters in Neohämärä are people or trolls (a discriminated minority in Finnish society). Photo: Flickr/suviko

Finnish Troll Punks

Neohämärä is a Finnish pervasive street larp campaign which started in the autumn of 2008. Episodes 10 and 11 are scheduled for March and June 2011.

«It's about regular people getting mixed up in some weird happenings in modern Helsinki. One of the goals is to help players see their own home town in a different light, and also to make players think about themes related to the occult, spiritual growth and different world views», says organizer Simo Järvelä.

Gameplay emphasizes social interaction. There are roughly 25-30 regular players, plus 0-15 supporting cast.

www.neonhamara.kapsi.fi (In Finnish).

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■ *With the girl holding a pencil sharpener, and the boy sporting a pencil, these players hide together and secretly fuck themselves sharp.*



1
From Russia
with smooth,
smooth

love

Would you fuck a pencil sharpener?

TEXT | HANNE GRASMO
PHOTO | JUNE WITZØE



▲ Sometimes game organizers need to be in track of blood lines in their game campaigns, which can run for many years. Virginity can be shown with a white bandage on the leg. Sometimes this is used by chaste male priests, but mostly by young girls. If such a girl loses her virginity, she will most likely be pregnant, which is then symbolized with a balloon under her dress.

«**I**t's human to have sex, so of course we want to have sex in our games as well», the game designer explains – before he runs us through a multitude of ways of modeling sex in Russian medieval fantasy larps. Without taking off any clothes, without moaning and without any actual feelings of hornyness. Safe enough for your kids to play.

In tabletop roleplaying, sex is easy. You just describe what your character does in bed, or behind that bush. But in larp you often have to simulate it more realistically. Some hardcore games demand *real* action if you want to fuck, or at least some semi-realistic theatre acting. The most common solution, though, is a good back rub. Both players keep all their clothes on, and one gives the other a good, strong rubbing. If they want to make it more theatrical, they will moan together, and if it's a rape, it's going to be a rather violent massage.

Many game organizers forbid portraying rape and sexual assault, in order to protect real-life assault victims from bad memories or experiences. But maybe they would allow such scenes if they had known the Russian way of doing it: The aggressor put his or her hand on the victims head, counting down from 50 to zero.

If we can make believe that a latex weapon is deadly sharp, and count life points to know if we're still alive, why not make game rules for sex? This could make it easier to play with sexuality even when you're not close to the other player, or when there's a huge age difference.

We asked our models Stian, Kim Tomas, Helene and Miriam to test out the different kinds of sexual styles in front of June Witzøes camera. Feel free to copy and taste.

■ A real Don Juan or seductress will proudly attach the pins on his or her chest to brag about their conquests.







- ▲ *Simulated sex can be used for gay sex as well. Sex modelling methods are fervently discussed on Russian online forums every winter. And almost every summer, Russian larpers invent another fascinating way of having sex – the larp way.*
- ◀ *The Russians invented body paint to make it possible to act out group sex. It's nice to watch, and a bit sensual too. The one who is going to be fucked provides a part of his or her body to be painted. The shy ones will give you their arm, the hardcore ones show breast or belly.*
- ◀ *Hide a clothespin on your clothes for the other player to find – while (perhaps) cuddling, teasing and taking their time. For someone you don't want to get too close with, put the pin on your sleeve. For a hotter experience: under your skirt, or even on your underwear.*

Conspiracy for Emmy

The nominees for the 2011 International Digital Emmy Awards have been announced, and the pervasive entertainment Company P is yet again amongst the nominees. Company P has previously won the International Interactive Emmy Award for Best Interactive TV-service in April 2008 for «The Truth About Marika».

www.conspiracyforgood.com



A *The Conspiracy for Good, an alternate reality game and pervasive entertainment event held in the streets of London. Photo: conspiracyforgood.com*

Play artsy games on art

The convention Fabricated Realities will take place in a warehouse in Olympia, Washington from June 3rd to 5th, 2011. Story games will be played in installations made by artists especially for the convention. «Each piece of art will hold a table and chairs, and act as a nest for the imaginations of story gamers», say the organizers.

www.fabricatedrealities.com



How do you treat players after a game is over? One answer lies hidden in the BDSM culture.

TEXT | HANNE GRASMO

Taking care

When you have immersed yourself in the role of a sub (submissive, slave, masochist, bottom...) for many hours of BDSM play, bringing on strong emotions and hard physical and psychological pressure, you can drift away into a kind of «subspace». So engrossed in a scene that you start to lose yourself. Sometimes you can feel really shitty, worthless, or as if you just suffered a real trauma.

Reality Crash

On other occasions, you could feel like you are on a high. While in subspace you are high on the body's natural chemicals. Landing in reality can be like a real crash. There, everything was wonderful, seamless and fulfilled dreams. Here, there's just a troublesome and dull reality. Not so far away from a role-player's psychosis?

Margaret Kerr, a BDSM advisor, says in her article *Subspace and aftercare*: «Subspace is like getting drunk or getting high. You forget the pain, the problems; all your cares seem to drift away... It's a state of mind that impairs rational thought and decision making skills».

Of course this state needs to be monitored carefully for all parties involved. But aftercare is not only for traumatized or underdog characters. It might be tough to fall from a throne in Heaven too. Some BDSM lifestylers also speak of Top drop or Dom drop: «Tops go through similarly intense changes in their body chemistry, leading to the potential shock-like emotional and physical crashes», Fetish Diva Midori writes.

And her explanation of how this can happen certainly has a lot of similarities with all kinds of roleplaying: «By creating an artificial arena or envi-



▲ Photo: Flickr/Timothy Wells CC-BY-NC-SA

ronment, the 'forced' introduction of requirements, rules and boundaries you are also constructing the identical requirement, rules and boundaries for yourself. You become trapped within a performance role...» All the participants in a game can experience «a crash» if they interrupt a scene too suddenly: You have been in a most wonderful place, and return to harsh reality too fast.

Endorphin euphoria

A physical explanation of this crash has to do with a multitude of brain chemicals. The most well known is endorphins. A large number of endorphins can be released during all kinds of deep character acting. BDSM experiences can be exhausting as well, and drain the participants of mental, emotional or physical energy.

And when coming out from it, it's time for aftercare: In the context of the practice of BDSM, aftercare is the process of attending to one another after intense feelings of a physical or psychological nature in the session.

One or all participants may require emotional support, comfort, reassurance, and/or physical tenderness. Any light food or drink will do for nourishing yourself after a game. Chocolate might be good help, since it has an energizing chemical, theobromine, which is a mood elevator.

BDSM?

The abbreviation describes a set of practices in sexual roleplay: B&D is «bondage & dominance» or «bondage & discipline». D&S is «dominance & submission». S&M is «sadism & masochism». Some people enjoy placing themselves in a submissive position, giving up control, while others enjoy taking a dominant role - thus the terms «top» and «bottom», «dom» and «sub».

Some practical advice from the Czech larp organizers *The Court of Moravia* can meet the need for aftercare, and be helpful for both hardcore BDSM-games and roleplayers:

- ♦ Counting down together - from being in the game to leaving it.
- ♦ Taking off the costumes, and tidying up the mess together, take away all the game stash.
- ♦ Changing location.
- ♦ Writing a letter from yourself to the character.

Sleep is good too, if possible. But the most important thing is to be there, for each other, and especially be aware in case one of you has a crash when coming «back home».

«Aftercare also may include a review or 'debriefing' of the activities from experiences of both the dominant and the submissive», Paula Whiteside writes in «Self Administered Aftercare». Exactly what most roleplayers do after a hardcore experience.

Common aftercare practices in BDSM may include hugging, kissing, hair-stroking, cuddling, words of praise, or general affirmation of an emotional bond between partners.

Leave me alone

Some participants may wish to be left alone or have other means of processing the experience. While the desire to be left alone could stem from just needing rest, it could also result from no longer feeling safe in the current environment or situation.

The most important thing is, of course, to ask: What do you need? Both before and after the game experience. But be aware that some people may not know what they need - they have immersed too much in their character, in subspace or gamespace, so much that they may not be able to tell you. In that case, just be there. And take care. ■

De-fucking

Roleplaying games can fuck you up. In fact, if you are reading this article, chances are you are already fucked.

TEXT | TOBIAS BINDSLET & PERNILLE SCHULTZ

A change is coming. People have debated the dangers of roleplaying for years, talking mainly about psychological safety. Even so, nothing much has changed this past decade in the ways we deal with the dangers of roleplaying. But something is changing about the way we roleplay. We are no longer kids playing around with make-believe, needing someone to protect us. We are no longer teenagers exploring limits and expressing rebellion. We are grown-ups. We still enjoy the thrills of danger, but we can no longer pretend that it is just a game with no real consequences.

What makes roleplaying dangerous is that we sometimes do things and put ourselves in situations we would never accept in real life. But the things we do are still real.

– Anders Kjær Sloth,
a participant in the Knudepunkt 2011 De-fucking workshop.

Because roleplaying *is* fucking dangerous! It gives us great experiences that can help shape us as human beings, but these experiences can also really fuck us up sometimes. That has never kept us from playing, though. In fact, it is part of what makes roleplaying so exciting – danger is sexy. So we do not want less danger. We want to acknowledge that roleplaying can really fuck people up. And we want to explore ways for people to get de-fucked afterwards.

People suck at handling their problems in real life as well. In roleplaying you just place yourself in situations with more problems because stories need conflict.

– Anders Kjær Sloth

A social extreme sport

Whenever you interact with other people you can get hurt – in that way roleplaying is no more dangerous than leaving your house. But when you roleplay you design social situ-



It all started with our own need for de-fucking. We play to be surprised, we improvise and that often puts us in situations we were never prepared for. As a consequence we have been seriously fucked-up. Talking afterwards, we identified a need for de-fucking. We noticed how this was not just our need, but something that was needed in any constructive player culture. We wanted to start a revolution.

At the Nordic convent Knudepunkt in February 2011, we held two workshops about de-fucking. The workshops were meant to kick start a change in how we as players think and talk about roleplaying. But we were surprised at just how successful we were. Interest was so intense that we decided to do the workshop twice, and yet we still had to turn down half of those interested in participating. This text is the next step in the revolution, meant for those who did not get to participate in our workshops.

ations, intentionally creating intense experiences and conflicts close to home. We raise the stakes. We seek intense emotions and dramatic development. This makes roleplaying a social extreme sport. The need to be able to de-fuck after intense experiences is not unique to roleplaying. It is just more often needed because of the intentional intensity.

Roleplaying always has an element of risk. Whether you are clad in fantasy armor in a forest or sitting naked in a room full of flour, there is always a chance that someone will get hurt or end up feeling fucked up. This risk is not some price we pay for our experiences, it is a necessity if we want play to be meaningful.

Permission to feel fucked

When you are feeling fucked-up you might need to feel understood, or you might need to feel acceptance and be reassured that you have not done anything wrong. This requires that someone breaks the ice and dares to speak openly and honestly about difficult experiences. That someone has the courage to face things head on. That someone gives us permission to be fucked up, before we can talk about how to get de-fucked.

A group of people had decided to honestly talk about what was going on, about their experiences and feelings, and how to cope with them.

– Anders Kjær Sloth

Talking openly about being fucked-up is not always easy. In fact, a number of established discourses among roleplayers make it harder than it needs to be. People claim that roleplaying gives us powerful experiences which help us grow, but at the same time we claim that roleplaying is not really dangerous because we can keep it from affecting reality. If these contradicting discourses have a function we suspect

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it to be one of keeping organizers as well as players free of responsibility. If someone has had a bad experience, they must have done something wrong. By blaming them, we avoid responsibility. So let us examine why these discourses are problematic.

Myths about being fucked up

One discourse is the myth that only those predisposed as particularly vulnerable can be adversely affected by roleplaying. That if you feel bad, something must have been wrong with you to begin with. This discourse began as a defense against claims that roleplaying was harmful and could lead to difficulties with telling fiction from reality. This myth makes it difficult to talk about feeling fucked-up without being labeled as potentially crazy.

A second example is the story about the ideal player as someone who is able to distinguish clearly between emotions in the game and outside of the game. We think of players as competent if they know how to handle any situation which might arise. We value players who are able to keep things safe in this way, by not letting games interfere with everyday social life. But this narrative makes it difficult to talk about feeling fucked-up without seeming incompetent – it is taboo to admit that you were fucked-up by roleplaying. It is taboo to admit that you have gotten

yourself in a place where you actually do not know how to handle the emotional fallout of a situation.

Hype is a third problematic discourse. We sometimes talk about how roleplaying can give us the most powerful experiences of any media. The more fucked up the players – the better the larp. We build up impossible expectations. As a result, after playing, we praise players that show signs of having had these extreme experiences. We idolize players talking about emotional extremes, hard-core physically exhausting play, or exploring the limits of what is safe and acceptable. We rarely mention, though, that this focus on extreme experiences as positive makes it very hard for people to talk about the instances where extreme experiences are less positive for them. Hype makes it socially unacceptable to talk about being fucked up.

A manifesto for de-fucking

We want to change these problematic discourses, in order to change cultures. We want to create a culture where players are more aware of the personal consequences of roleplaying – good and bad. Where we understand social and emotional consequences and talk openly about them. Where we notice signs that someone needs help. We want a culture where risk is taken seriously as a matter of course. A mature culture, where we take responsibility for our actions and for how they affect people around us – not just as individuals, but as a community. We want a culture where de-fucking is easier to initiate.

We need to start making demands on organizers and of our fellow players. Demands that we take this seriously. We want to reflect on our experiences, because that makes it more interesting. We want to take roleplaying seriously, because that enables us to have more fun.

So we need to talk. We need to recognize that it is harder to be open and honest about feeling fucked-up than to cope with it individually. For that to happen we have to challenge the established discourses, be critical of hype, confront stigmas and break taboos. And we need tools, tools for communication and for de-fucking. Already, local roleplaying communities have tools and methods for coping and processing their experiences. Now we need a culture where it is legitimate to discuss de-fucking, so that these methods will spread. That process begins with someone speaking up, so we need to acknowledge and appreciate the people who do this.

Now it is up to you, the player. Because the players need to step up and start taking the initiative. We cannot wait for anyone else to do it for us. We might get fucked up, we might fuck up someone else – and that is what we have to deal with. ■

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN FUCKED UP?

- Ever fallen in love with a character?
- Ever wanted a game to not end, because returning to reality sucked?
- Ever dreamt in character after a game ended?
- Ever felt angry or hurt after a game?
- Ever been unable to deal with another player after a game?
- Ever had an in-game conflict move out of the game?
- Ever missed a romantic relation after a game ended?
- Ever got caught up in the moment and overstepped off-game boundaries?
- Ever had difficulty talking about what happened after a game?
- Ever felt the line blur between in-game and off-game?

...if so, you know what it means to feel fucked-up.

SOMETHING AT STAKE

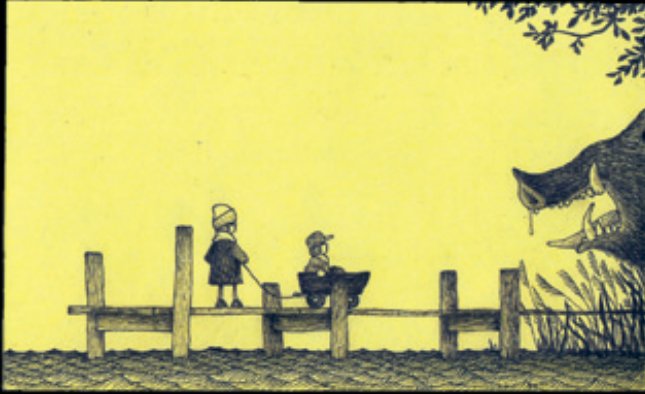
We do not want to make role-playing safe. We want to explicitly acknowledge the dangers and prepare for the possible consequences. Because we do want something to be at stake. That something is our self-images, our emotions and our relations. We do not risk our physical bodies. We risk our social selves.

EXAMPLES OF TOOLS

Why not get a de-fuck buddy?
Pick a person and tell them about the game you are about to participate in. Tell them that you might need someone to talk to afterwards. It can be another player in the game, a roleplayer unrelated to the game or, if you're feeling bold, a non-roleplayer. The point is simply that afterwards it will be easier to talk to the person.

Talk about your hopes & fears
Pick one or more of the people you will be playing with and talk about your expectations for the game. Talk about what you hope will happen in the best possible case, and how they can help make your hopes come true. Talk about what you fear will happen in the worst possible case and how they can help prevent them. And ask them about their hopes and fears - so that after the game, you can talk about whether your hopes and fears did come through.

Write an OK-list
Stay in touch during play without going off-game at the same time, by writing status updates on a piece of paper. Place the paper in an off-game area and make a column for each player. Now, whenever there is a break, you can for instance write an 'OK' under your name if you're ok, write 'Fuck' if you are not ok, or write 'Bring it on!' if you just want more. That way your fellow players will know how you are doing.



Post-it monsters

BY JOHN KENN



ABOUT THE ARTIST

John Kenn was born in Denmark in 1978. He writes and directs television shows for kids. Kenn has a set of twins and not much time for anything, but when he has time he draws monster drawings on post-it notes. It is a little window into a different world, made on office supplies.

“

We're sickos, you're geeks.

– Natasja



Sex, pain & roleplaying

You wouldn't think that geeks and pervs have all that much in common. You would be wrong.

TEXT | SANNE HARDER
PICTURES | LARS WINTHER SCHMIDT

Natasja's a 19-year-old young woman from Aarhus, Denmark. She is going to study English at university after the summer holiday. And she's into roleplaying. The sexual kind.

Natasja has always known she was into BDSM (Bondage, Dominance, Sadism, Masochism). When she was a little girl, she would play with her friends that she was captured by Tengil (from Astrid Lindgren's «The Brothers Lionheart») and put into a cage with Katla, his dragon. She enjoyed playing the victim. When she was 11, she read «Story of O», and from then on, she was completely aware of her own sexual inclination.

Friday night, I meet up with Natasja on the internet. I've had to go through channels to get into contact with her. You see, I'm a plain vanilla girl. I wouldn't have known where to look for someone with her preferences. Luckily, I have some contacts who know that blackmarket.dk is the place to go.

It's not without a certain feeling of trepidation that I sit down in front of my computer. BDSM makes me feel uneasy. Unsophisticated, judgmental and narrow-minded. I start out with my first question:

- ***Does roleplaying always involve s/m for you?***
- It's always s/m, Natasja types at the other end.

For Natasja, roleplaying is always about dominance and submission, and as she explains the details of her sex role-



plays to me, I understand that this is, essentially, what they're all about.

And that makes me wonder. Is my roleplaying also about status? Is it perhaps a «leitmotif» through any social interaction, but just so much more pronounced in BDSM? Maybe roleplaying is, in its essence, a playground for testing status in various social relations.

Geeks and pervs

- ***So, answer me quite honestly, I write. What do you think of roleplayers like me?***

– I envy you (yes, I'm serious). I've always wanted to try roleplaying your way, but for some reason or other, I've always lacked the courage. I've tried it a bit, but I've never really gotten into it. I think you are cool, and I know that you get a lot out of it.

Natasja's answer surprises me. I'm used to being thought of as a geek. I don't meet a lot of outsiders who think that roleplayers are actually cool. In my experience, it can be stigmatizing to play roleplaying games. I've been asked all kinds of insulting questions, like: When are you going to grow up? Or: Aren't you a little old to be playing cowboys and Indians?

I express my surprise to Natasja. But maybe the BDSM community feels just as stigmatized as we roleplayers do?

- I think you're right, Natasja says. We're sickos, you are geeks.

She explains to me that in her experience, people deduct that something must be wrong with you, if you're turned on by pain. «That there must be some sort of psychological trauma somewhere», she says. «I couldn't say if that's true – but if it is, we're certainly a lot of people sharing that psychological condition».

- ***Does it make it less stigmatizing that you're acting it out within the boundaries of the roleplay?***

– Yes, I think so. Well, I have a box, which somehow makes it legitimate. Whereas a person who sits around cutting herself, or who tries to get into fights, is in a completely dif-

«STORY OF O»

An epistolary novel, originally published in 1954. It divulges the experiences of a young, female Parisian fashion photographer, whose lover sends her into the hands of another man with the intention of teaching her complete and absolute submission. She is branded and pierced, and taught always to be available for oral, vaginal, or anal intercourse. However, all of these events happen entirely with her own consent. The book is considered somewhat of a bible within the BDSM society.

ferent box. I don't know if there's a difference between our desire for pain. Maybe I've just found a more constructive way of living it out.

– ***Would you feel it was demeaning if someone else, e.g. your boss, would hit you?***

– Yes, absolutely. That would be unacceptable. And it still damn well hurts!

– Trust is alpha and omega in an s/M relationship of any kind. Also when it comes to pain. When my Master hits me, I'm able to stand it - I have no need to defend myself. It's not just because he's a Master, but he's my Master. He can slap me, and I wouldn't lift a hand.

Escapism

– ***How much are you yourself, and how much are you acting out a character?***

– Well... I guess I'm 100% myself, but only a certain aspect of me. When I'm in that role, I'm not the rambling, cheeky girl who takes up a lot of space. I indulge in a more pliant, submissive version of Natasja.

– ***Could you ever get so involved with the role that you would forget your real identity?***

– I don't know. I know that sometimes I've gotten so far into the role, that I'm afraid of losing the rest of who I am.

– For example: At one point, my Master started restricting my wardrobe. This is always the case, but it was more extreme when I was with him – on weekdays it was usually just something like always wearing a dress and not having tears in my pantyhose. When I was with him, I had to wear stay ups or nothing, I had to wear make-up, and a couple of other things. But then he also forbade me to wear my partisan scarf. This was really difficult for me, because I identify with that scarf, and suddenly it was about who I was and who he wanted me to be. I was afraid I might wind up being his dress up doll – physically and mentally.

– ***You describe yourself as «cheeky». Is there a certain amount of escapism involved – are you trying to escape your cheeky self?***

– Yes, I think there might be some escapism to it. As a slave I can let go completely. I know I have no say, and it gives me some sort of safety that I don't have to try – and that I trust him to be able to take over for me. I get to drop any sort of feminism or inclination to argue and just be there and show him my devotion. It's a fantastic experience.

Actually, I think I know what Natasja means. I don't like pain. And yet, sex can sometimes be painful, and giving in to it can be a release. Just – complete trust.

Outside of bed, I need people to respect me. I need to be seen as an equal. But during the act, I enjoy feeling frail. I enjoy being pinned down, and I relish the fact that my lover is bigger, stronger than I.

– ***What do you think he gets out of it?***

– I think receiving that unconditional devotion gives him something. And maybe it boosts his inner alpha male. Well, he's the big, tough man that I grovel to.

– ***...Which isn't exactly socially accepted in our society, where every self-respecting adult would aim for an equal relationship with the other sex.***

– Exactly. We don't give a damn about gender roles. And he gets to live out his sadistic tendencies. I'm not sure what that is all about, but I'm not complaining. >>



Trust is alpha and omega in an s/M relationship of any kind.

– Natasja



“

I'm 100% myself, but
only a certain aspect
of me.

– Natasja



An issue of trust

– *Do you get anything else than sexual satisfaction out of roleplaying?*

– Yes! I do. Very much. I've already mentioned some of it – an odd feeling of freedom, a huge amount of safety and intimacy. It's pure catharsis for me. Both the mental game and the pain. In fact, I think the sexual part is quite far down on the list of positive benefits.

– *Do you have a stop word?*

– I have a stop word that I can use if it really gets too much. It's our intention never to use it, and he'd never do something that truly pushes my limits without making sure that I'm really with him. He doesn't know all my limits. But I know he's listening. For instance, this summer we had an episode involving nettles. Apparently I have this completely irrational fear of nettles. I got all panicky and wouldn't do anything. In a situation like that, he stops immediately. He's not interested in taking me further than I can handle. And I'm always free to ask him not to do something to me. It doesn't mean he won't, but then he knows to take it easy.

– *Has it always been like that?*

– No. He started out gently, and got to know my reactions.

I think of all the different roleplaying partners I've had. Some of them I've played with again and again over the years, most of them I've only played with once or twice. Only a very few, if any, know me so well that I would trust them to the extent that I'd completely let down my guard. Then again, Natasja knows the general direction her roleplay is taking. My roleplaying could potentially lead me down any imaginable path.

There are definitely a lot of aspects of what Natasja experiences with her BDSM roleplay that can be linked to what roleplayers experience. Short-circuiting social rules and experimenting with your own identity. However, Natasja is completely settled with the fact that the role she is playing is an aspect of her identity, whereas not many roleplayers have this insight.

However, something I lack in her description is a story – that is, a consecutive plot with a beginning, a middle, and an end. >>

< *The biggest difference between BDSM roleplaying and its geeky counterpart is not the amount of pain and sex, but how concretely these two elements are played out. Most of the time, roleplayers are all talk (model photo).*

Like Natasja, Emma has known that she was into BDSM since childhood, and had her first experience with it when she was sixteen. Some years later, she began playing fantasy live action roleplaying, and she is still an avid roleplayer, who is active in the Nordic roleplaying scene. She prefers to remain anonymous for this interview, and has chosen one of the names she uses in her sexual roleplays as her alias.

The kind of sexual roleplays that Emma enjoys are narratively somewhat more elaborate than most BDSM'ers. She attributes this to the fact that she is able to draw inspiration from LARP and tabletop roleplaying:

– Most people would just wear a costume, I build a story for my character, says Emma.

Whereas the real Emma is an adult woman, the character from whom the name is lent is only 13 years old. Emma tells me the background story:

– Now, there's a fucked up case! Emma lives alone with her mother, and doesn't see her dad. Her mother has an old ex-lover and friend from school that she still sees. He's about 40, he's the boss of a successful company and married to a younger woman, who travels a lot.

The 13-year-old Emma-persona has been used several times. My interviewee confesses one of her and her lover's scenarios to me:

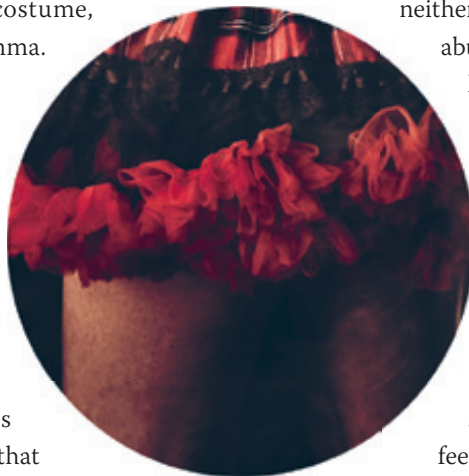
– At one time Emma's mother needed a babysitter. She had met a guy on the internet, and wanted to go on a date for the weekend, so she dropped Emma off with her old friend, who had been her baby-sitter before. However, this time it had been a while since the two of them had seen each other.

– Emma was in a bad mood, as she had just had an argument with her mother about some older boys, that Emma's mother wanted her to stop seeing.

– Emma and her babysitter watched a film, and then went for a pizza. On the way, they talked about Christmas presents and Emma's friends at school. When they got back, they sat on the bed and ate the pizza. At one point Emma leaned across the adult man to grab another slice, and he touched her behind very discreetly – a very light touch, almost lighter than you could feel.

It's roleplaying, it's not paedophilia

At this point in our conversation, I notice that Emma switches from «she» to «me». The story is getting more intense, but she makes a slight break to inform me that neither she nor her lover would ever consider abusing a child. – It's a fantasy, she says, It's not real.



– He sends me out to put on my pyjamas, she continues. The next film we watch has a sexual undercurrent. He starts to make some hints about breasts, and eventually he tries to get his hand up under my shirt. He starts to feel me up, and I get shy, but also flattered by his attention. I feel insecure, but it's also a bit exciting.

Emma switches out of the role again:

– It's abuse, but it's not rape. She's actually relatively positive about what's happening to her. But of course it hurts, and he's not exactly nice to her. In fact, he slaps her around some. But she's a willing student, and very taken in by her uncle.

– They continue next morning, where he takes her in the living room. He sends her home with strict orders not to tell.

We're all sick

Not unlike Natasja's roleplaying, Emma and her lover have found a way to short-circuit society's social rules. They enjoy playing with the thought of paedophilia, yet they also condemn the actual practice. They are at once part of society, and outside society.

The whole paedophile-scenario doesn't really kick it for me. But Emma has another story up her sleeve, in which she is a Jehova's witness – pure and clean – who comes calling. She is invited inside to discuss God and The Watchtower, but winds up being thrown on the bed and raped over and over again.

Rape is nasty. It's demeaning and traumatizing, and nobody wants it to happen to them. However, a lot of people have rape fantasies. I said *fantasies*. The thought is at the same time enticing and repulsive.

The roleplay enables Emma to experience a fantasy, something she would never want for herself in real life. The main difference between her and most women is that her candid and socially unacceptable fantasies are realized in sexual roleplays, whereas most people condemn these thoughts to the darkest corners of our minds.

To be or not to be

I think I understand the attraction of BDSM after having interviewed Natasja and Emma. But my gut tells me it isn't for me. I don't know why I feel this way, but I think it might simply be a matter of preference.

The sadomasochistic element might not appeal to me, however, I'm open to the thought of spicing up my sex life with a bit of roleplaying. But it makes me wonder: Why can't I find anyone who wants to confess to a more «mainstream» sexual roleplay? The «cable guy comes to visit» kind of scenarios. Or maybe even something a bit more sensual.

According to J. Tuomas Harviainen's article from 2011, «Sadomasochist Roleplaying as Live-Action Roleplaying: A Trait-Descriptive Analysis», sexual roleplaying is believed to be quite widespread. However, only BDSM roleplays seem to have attracted attention from researchers, so very little is known about the rest.

As for putting sexual content into roleplaying games, it's already been done – sometimes on purpose, sometimes spontaneously. The trouble is that roleplaying is a very unpredictable entity. You never know where you're going to end up, and throwing sex on top of the equation doesn't make it less complicated.

Maybe I need to realize that BDSM roleplaying is more safe than *my* roleplaying? ■



Most people would just wear a costume, I build a story for my character. – Emma

THE MAGIC CIRCLE

A term used in roleplay to describe the abstract room that players enter when they «put on» their characters. The world that the character inhabits has different rules than the player's world, and thus the character is able to perform actions that would not be acceptable for the player. When the player leaves the fiction, he leaves the character's actions behind too. However, some actions, such as sex and certain kinds of non-voluntary violence, are too significant to be left behind.

MOST COMMON VARIATIONS OF SADOMASOCHIST ROLEPLAYS, ACCORDING TO J. TUOMAS HARVIAINEN:

- ◆ Master/Madame – Slave
- ◆ Uniform scenes
- ◆ Teacher – Student
- ◆ Execution scenes
- ◆ Hospital scenes
- ◆ Rape scenes

Diceless Divine

The Great White Whale of tabletops returns.



◀ *This is the reality behind the dream that is our world. In an endless emptiness there is a single cup of fire. (...) And in that cup, a tree. And from its branches – dangling like fruit – are worlds. illustration: Tang Yuann.*

Remember that big, white beautiful role playing game (RPG) book? The one you couldn't completely comprehend, but which sounded oh so cool? It's been called The Sandman RPG; Nobilis 3rd edition is due to hit the shelves early May.

– Nobilis is a diceless roleplaying game for playing divine beings in an animistic, spirit-haunted cosmos. Each character holds power over a single element of reality — something like Fire, Storms, Cars, Press Releases, or Puppy Love, says creator Jenna Moran.

The Nobilis are beings «supposed to be living among us, or, at least, beside us, in the corners of your vision or down some short cut's twisty path — a little bit real and a little bit legend, anyhow, walking the secret ways between the

mundane and mythic worlds», the webpage reads. Will we «get it» this time around?

– The third edition is a comprehensive ground-up redesign of the Nobilis setting and rules set. The clunkier stuff is gone and a bunch of things that I hope will increase the tactical, emotional, and conceptual depth of the game have replaced it, says Moran.

The game is diceless and actions are resolved by the use of Ranks of 0 - 10 based on Attributes and aided by Miracle Points.

Pundits over at the Story-Games Forums have described the game as «a game about Gnosticism, Platonic ideal concepts embodied in people, and an interesting combination of 'mythic fantasy' (with its melting pot of global cultures) and urban fantasy». Others have been less kind.

Nobilis is published by Eos Press.

www.eos-sama.com/nobilis

Free Danish Fun

The 25th anniversary of the annual Danish role playing Fastaval might be over, but the scenarios are available for free download at alexandria.dk. The scenarios are structured freeform, in the border region between role playing at the table and parlor larps. Check out navpotveksler.wordpress.com for translated scenarios.



Lots of miles from Vietnam

Ropecon (29th July-Sunday 31st July) is Finland's biggest roleplaying convention with more than 3000 visitors each year. Most of the program items are in Finnish, but there are some roleplaying games in English and larps which have characters that can be played in English.

www.ropecon.fi



◀ *Ever wanted to go to Finland? Ropecon gives you an excuse, with tabletop, larp, board games, miniatures, collectible card games or snack lunch in the hall. Photo: Emilia Hjelm*



▲ *The DrachenFest is a competition, a tournament of the Dragons. Photo: Drachenfest.info*

Here be Dragons

Between 2-7000 players will gather near the German city of Diemelstadt and slug it out in the huge fantasy larp Drachenfest. More than 100 referees, experienced roleplayers, professional event specialists and support staff will attend the event. 26 – 31. July 2011.

www.drachenfest.info

Danish KZ

– Kapo is a dystopian near future larp working with the potential consequences of the contemporary politics of fear which we experience both in our everyday life in Denmark and on a global level from the so called «War on Terror», says organizer Peter Munthe-Kaas.

Participants will play dissidents who are imprisoned as they are deemed a potential threat to society. The game is «very much» open to English speakers. October 2011.

www.Kapo.nu

▼ *The experience will be partly by the social dynamics that are established in camps - for a great deal inspired by Primo Levi's accounts from Auschwitz - partly by the meeting with a Kafkaskesque justice system, says organizer Peter Munthe-Kaas. Photo: Kapo.nu*



KAPO
WWW.KAPO.NU

Culture clash

TEXT | NATHAN HOOK

ILLUSTRATIONS | THOMAS SØRLIE HANSEN



I started larping at a student university club in England in 1996, which ran a *Dungeons & Dragons* style high fantasy larp – travelling down a path, fighting «monsters» with foam weapons, then stopping to count hit points. Characters gained an experience point for every hour of play, with some on over a thousand points; events were designed for a particular level of experience. After a few years, I stopped playing. I didn't have the words to properly explain why. I said I wanted more «plot»; what I meant was more social context to fights with orcs.

Most UK larps are campaigns – ongoing «systems» that run for years with the same characters gaining power over time (unless killed). These mechanics encourage players to «win» to protect their investment, and older characters to outshine newer ones.

The games were somewhat abstract. Combat would be resolved by hitting each other with foam weapons and verbally calling damage. If you wanted to pick a lock, your

character would need the right level in the lock-picking skill for you to succeed. There were also «freeforms» which were rules-light games with pre-written characters. However, these were mostly one-off games, played at conventions.

The settings were often very loosely defined fantasy. When I played a priest in the larp *Maelstrom*, and another player character asked for a divorce, the organisers couldn't tell me whether the concept of divorce existed or what the orthodox position of the fantasy church was. It's hard to feel immersed in an undefined fantasy world.

Nordic adventures

Looking back, what I wanted was stronger emotional play, within a consistent setting. Had this carried on I probably would have quit larp, but something else happened – *Dragonbane*. This was an international larp that took place in Sweden in 2006. It had huge production values, focused

I SAID I WANTED MORE «PLOT»;
WHAT I MEANT WAS MORE SOCIAL
CONTEXT TO FIGHTS WITH ORCS.



on personal experience. I got involved as an organiser, coaching a number of the players in developing their characters, writing big chunks of the cultural briefings, and developing the metaphysics. I had a whole range of experiences that almost ten years of UK larp hadn't offered me. I stood at the dragon shrine and looked out to see forest as far as the eye can see – for real. I walked in the ashes of the dragon's fire and cuddled in bed with my in-game lover – for real. I stood before an angry mob of a hundred people and swayed them with my words – for real.

This was a far cry from goal-oriented play. There were no 'damage calls' in *Dragonbane*, and no hiding behind your character's 'skills'. As a one-off event the focus was purely on the experience. Afterwards it was even harder for UK larp to hold my interest. I started looking for other events in 'Nordicland,' and I found the international roleplaying festival *Knudepunkt*.

2007 was my first year at *Knudepunkt*, in Denmark. *Knudepunkt* is a highly charged atmosphere, filled with highly educated and crea-

ative people where high brow theory exists alongside emotionally hardcore larp play and a strong party culture. Some of the content I didn't understand, since I lacked the context from previous years, but I did find a community that shared my interests. I dived in rashly, writing my own larp manifesto in the book that year. It presented the line of thought I had been developing but unable to express before: Players should immerse in their characters, organisers should create a consistent setting for the characters, and the narrative story should arise organically as an emergent property. I do recommend writing a manifesto (but perhaps not publishing it) to anyone serious about larp. Having to codify what you believe larp is (or could be) and what you want from it is a powerful act of self-reflection.

One of my early experiences at *Knudepunkt* was playing J. Tuomas Harviainen's *Serpent of Ash*. I'd read and tried UK «freeform» before, but this was different. Rather than set goals to aim for, the minimalist briefing sheets simply said who the character was. Do not do, simply be.

Bringing back the gift

One UK convention I did attend after the KP experience was *Grand Tribunal*, a shoestring budget convention in 2007 about the *Ars Magica* tabletop RPG, set in a mythic version of 13th century Europe. I wrote a small freeform scenario called *Not to Yield*. My writing style had changed massively already, copying the minimalist style. The scenario was based around characters trapped within a faerie realm where their emotional conflicts rise to the fore; I wrote a larp to express my feelings of entering Nordic larp culture. The first run was played by authors for the *Ars Magica* line, and I later saw references to it appearing in their source books.

In 2007 I visited *Ropecon* in Finland and played my first jeepform game, *The Upgrade*. I didn't fully 'get it' at the time, but jeepform would later be an influence on my design.

Late in 2008 I visited a small dark fantasy larp in the very north of Sweden run as part

DRAGONBANE

Dragonbane was an unusually large LARP project which took place from July 27th to August 4th, 2006 in Älvdalen in Sweden, close to the border of Norway.

There were 325 players from several different countries.

The game's budget approached 1 million euros. An entire village was built for the game, as was a large electromechanical dragon.

The *passion of*
St. Petersburg



The game is *Coitus, Sanguis et Fati Necessitas*. The style is Mancunian neo-punk. Read on, ladies and gentlemen.

There are a lot of larps organized in Russia each year, and many different regional styles. The games organized in St. Petersburg are perhaps closest to the style of larp played in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland. The games are small, deep and artistic. Players are good, and the organizers like to experiment. This is the story of one such game.

Not quite Renaissance

The Revenger's Tragedy is a Thomas Middleton play, first published in 1607. It vividly and violently tells a story of lust, ambition and revenge at the court of an Italian dukedom. The play was considered the fruit of a cynical, embittered mind. Like *Hamlet*, it is a classic story of revenge, and also a black comedy. It has experienced a resurgence of popularity in the twentieth century. In 2002, the film director Alex Cox moved the action into modern Manchester, updating the style into glam-punk.

Six years later, two game designers from St. Petersburg decided to create a larp based on the play and the movie. Naturally, the game was postmodern. The organizers wrote: «The whole game is glued together from quotations, from the Renaissance to our time ... Our characters think as heroes of Shakespeare, Boccaccio, Turner... But the action itself takes place in the Manchester of the 21st century.» Because of this, the characters act in a contemporary way. «Othello wears dreadlocks and a Bob Marley T-shirt (seems to me that Desdemona could not bring her husband his favorite record), and Mercutio was likely shot by Tybalt, or perhaps beaten with a baseball bat».

So, it's glam-punk or neo-punk, as you pre-

fer, the costumes are eclectic and artsy, the characters' actions are free. From the narrative point of view it was a sandbox scenario. Only the characters and their backgrounds (including the skeletons in their closets) are given beforehand. From the beginning of the game all characters may act as they like. Players are just expected to comply with the requirements of the genre. After all, it's a tragedy. Supported by a fair amount of English farce.

Flashy murder

The most important rule in the game was the rule of increasing drama. The idea was that every game action, especially in a conflict, should be directed at increasing the overall pathos and drama of the moment. For example, if you intend to murder someone, you should do a monologue explaining why you kill, allow the victim a spiteful monologue of his own, then stage a flashy murder, and finally allow the victim some dying remarks.

My own character died unexpectedly, accidentally drinking a cup of poisoned wine, taken from my brother's hands. I had to be more careful. It was in the church and there was a warning on the wall: «Divine interventions may occur at random in this area». I concluded my dying monologue about cruel fate by spilling the wine on the warning. There was a tragic monologue by my sister over my dead body, and a monologue by my brother (not so tragic).

Another important rule was that all characters were to talk in a Shakespearean *vers libre* at all times. It was easier than I expected. It's a very powerful tool to create an atmosphere in a larp, one of the most powerful that I know. It's

COITUS, SANGUIS ET FATI NECESSITAS

Game masters:
Lisey (mailto:lisey.ru)
Tannku (tannku@gmail.com)
When: September 12-14, 2008
Where: Lembolovo
(near St. Petersburg)
Players: 50
Participation fee: 18 €

Thou
sallow
remnant
of my
poisoned
love...

>>

Oh
do not
jest thy
doom!



Angela



Tannku



The Duke of Manchester



The Duke's son

Age hot is like a monster to be seen; my hairs are white, but yet my sins are green.

like finding yourself in a foreign country with a slightly different language – but a lovely one and easy to learn. The real problem was to stop talking it after the game. It's an awkward experience, to suddenly start spouting poetry at work. Imagine Mercutio at a tax office.

A boiled cancer

There were only a few rules in the game, and all of them were designed to maximize drama. Each player had an item, appropriate to her role and to the character's favorite sexual addiction or perversion. A plush camel, a nail file, a portrait of Queen Elizabeth rolled in a tube, a boiled cancer. The mechanism for playing sex scenes was a process of combining these items. Players decided for themselves how it looked, and how they commented it (in *vers libre*, and usually very dramatically). It looked grotesque in itself (for example, try to portray sex with a neckerchief and a belt) and perhaps more symbolic than sexual. But the characters' comments were anything but shy. And there were a lot of kisses in the game, and some couples have gone further.

The fighting ability of a character was measured on a ten-point scale. Before the start of the game the organizers gave each player a card with his number. Fighters showed their cards to each other before the bout. Usually, the outcome of the fight was settled at this point, but naturally the players would play out with all suitable emotion all the insults, blows, injuries and death. And they did it, with great skill and incredible sarcasm.

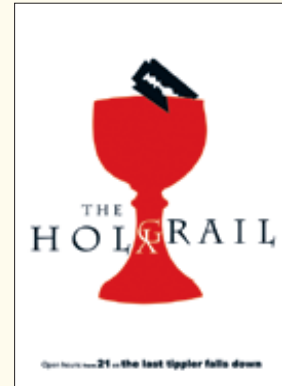
Finally, masks and clothes were important. A character who had put on a mask and a dif-

ferent outfit was considered unrecognizable. Visually, the game looked a lot like theatre, but it was not a theatre larp. The characters were not actors, they were real people. Just a little strange. Just enough to burn the world. The whole thing was not about search for Meaning of Life, and not about Punishment of Evil. The dice were thrown and the curtain was raised. And we had fun.

Depraved Duke

The plot was constructed from the individual stories of the characters. They had connections to the main opposition of the houses/soccer teams/fans: depraved Duke of Manchester Lussurioso vs. goody Lord Ipocrito. Enfants terribles of both Lords entertained themselves according to their inclinations. Lots of other characters accompanied them, for example Arturo, the vicar of Manchester Cathedral (aka bartender of Holy Grail Club), loan shark and philanthropist Shylock and his lovely daughter, and, of course, the Revenger, who did not appear until the finale. The end was good: almost everyone died. After the larp the organizers explained ins and outs of all the characters. The tangle of plots was much tighter than we thought. Some players got a lot of tragedy and some got a lot of farce.

A cocktail of *vers libre*, vice and tragedy has a spicy flavor. The game took off and became one of the best in Russia, perhaps, of all time. Although it is little-known in Russia and its ideas were not widely distributed. It's a hidden gem of a kind. Later I learned that there was a legendary Nordic larp called *Hamlet*, made with a similar spirit. ■



■ A poster for the Holy Grail club, featured in the game.

I came
from
Court,
I must be
bold with
you...

The love of the dance

Street hustlers, lowlifes and urban dreamers meet in Fair Verona... to tango and despair.

TEXT | MIKKEL BÆKGAARD
PHOTOS | PETER MUNTHE-KAAS

Little Verona Street, New York City. A long time ago, maybe in the nineteen twenties. We're in the ghetto together with shop owners, street hustlers, sinful priests and hopeful newcomers. It's a melting pot with people from all backgrounds and with all kinds of dreams and hopes. Here they love, here they hate and here they live out their passions.

And here they all dance. Slow, slow, quick, quick, slow. Some with their eyes linked together and in flirtatious conversation. Other with fight-like steps and great aggression. From love to hatred and sometimes back again. And here tango is the language just as much as words.

In Fair Verona

In Fair Verona is the first ever Nordic tango larp. It explores dramatic love, and it uses dancing as natural part of the game. Not as a naturalistic reenactment of actual dancing in past New York, but as a way of expressing character emotions and creating physical intensity between the players. During the game the players use three dramatic acts to first end a destructive relationship, then find a possible new love, and finally to see if this new love is a lasting one. And it's all set through a number of dances with a few minutes' time span between each one.

– The Main theme of *In Fair Verona* is love, or more precisely «The struggle of failed lovers». Every player has to construct characters with hopes for love, but also something to fear. The characters have to find their own way of finding love. The players are tasked with telling the most emotional story they can. And then let the characters story end in despair, loneliness, love, passionate hate or something else which suites the theme, says Tue Beck Olling, one of the two organizers of the game.

Just let go

From the organizers' point of view dancing is a great medium to explore universal themes of love and hatred. Through dance and verbal conversation between the players the story unfolds and relationships develop and die. The dancing intensifies the story and the emotions, and at the same time the actual moment becomes the most important part of the game.

– Dancing is primarily motion and exists in the actual moment. The great dancing moments occur when the dancer lets go and just exists in the dance. And on a more basic level the combination of dancing and larping is the combination of narration and physical interaction. It's a great mix, Tue Beck Olling says.



... the combination of dancing and larping is the combination of narration and physical interaction. It's a great mix.

IN FAIR VERONA – DANISH DANCE ROLEPLAY

Organizers: Tue Beck Olling & Jesper Bruun, DanceAffair
www.danceaffair.org

DANCEAFFAIR

DanceAffair designs games about dancing, where the dance is the game, not just a part of the game. Stories are told through the dancing.

Mikkel Brunberg was one of the participants in the first run of *In Fair Verona*. For him it was quite eye opening to express explicit feelings without saying a word and still keep a straight face – just by dancing:

– It made the game theatrical in a way I haven't experienced before. The fact that it was a story and a setting based on dancing made it legal to play out all of your characters wants and needs, and at the same time keeping the facade you were expected to without forcing anything or making it over the top, he says.

Basically a walk

Both organizers of *In Fair Verona* have a lot of experience in larp designing – but they also have a great passion for dance. In the game they wanted to combine these two passions and media. And they realized that tango was the best and easiest dance to connect with storytelling and role-playing.

– We agreed on tango because it's more emotional – and we also both have experience with tango, Tue Beck Olling Says.

Jesper Bruun, the other organizer fills in:

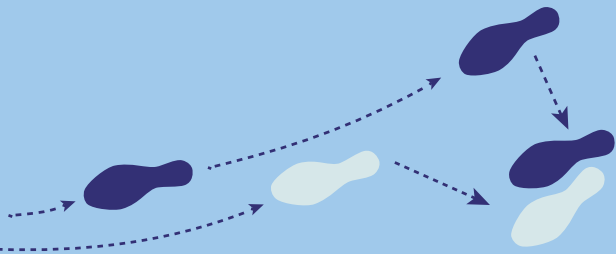
– Of the dances I know, Argentine tango is unique because it is essentially a walk. Basically, two people embrace each other in a hug and walk. Of course, when tango dancers become more experienced, they can do all sorts of fancy stuff. Salsa, waltz, and swing have basic structures, and you need to follow the rhythm for them to work. In Argentine tango, you need to follow each other, but our experience is that rhythm is actually less important. At least for the simple moves, we work within the game.

People end up happy

Because Argentine tango is quite easy to get a basic hold on, it is possible to participate in the game without any preparation or pre-existing tango skills. The game experience lasts for two days with dance workshop and character development the first day and game preparations and the actual game the second day.

– Our experience is that some people are anxious when we start teaching tango at the beginning of the pre-game workshop. But as soon as we get to the part where we actually use dance as a part of roleplaying, they always end up happy. And they play! That's really the amazing part – people actually play with the moves, invent their own and





basically use what we've wanted them to learn in their role-playing, Jesper Bruun says.

Mikkel Brunberg, the participant, agrees:

– I was very surprised that it was possible to take us through the hoops in learning tango to such a degree, that I just did it without thinking too much about it. The dancing was not so much about dancing, but more like an extra layer to my communication.

Releases creativity in tango

Both organizers think that dancing and roleplaying can learn a lot from each other. Therefore they also believe that the game is not for experienced larpers only. Tango dancers with no roleplaying experience would also have a splendid time with *In Fair Verona*.

– I believe that adding a roleplaying element to dancing can release creativity in the tango dancers. Many dancers focus on getting the steps right, leading the correct way, and so on, while the fun part of tango is actually to improvise, tell a story and play. If tango dancers can learn to use roleplay to tell stories and play, I believe they will experience that the moves they are able to perform become more meaningful, Jesper Bruun says.

Swing is the next

In Fair Verona is the organizers first attempt to mix dancing and roleplaying and they have been experimenting a lot to get the concept right and well working. But the organizers has finally got a hold on it and they already think of creating more roleplaying-dance-mashups.

– We are talking about different ideas but I think the next dance affair scenario probably will be with swing. It will be some time before we can actually present a swing game, though, Tue Beck Olling concludes. ■

THINGS

In ur hobby, studying ur dynamicz

Professor Sarah Lynne Bowman released *The Functions of Roleplaying Games* in 2010, an analytical approach to roleplaying games. Bowman's current research includes «Social Conflict and Bleed in RPGs», a topic she presented as a lecture and workshop at Knudepunkt 2011. She plans to present a paper applying Jungian theory to the practice of roleplaying in an upcoming panel on Immersion at the *North-east Modern Language Association* conference in April 2011.



The Game that can last a Thousand Years

You can win 1000 USD in *The Thousand-Year Game Design Challenge*. The game can be of any theme or genre you desire, but there is one restriction: You're creating a «new classic», like Chess, Tag or card games. Entries must be submitted before midnight July 31st, 2011, and the winner will be announced and awarded January 1, 2012.

www.danielsolisblog.blogspot.com/2010/12/thousand-year-game-design-challenge.html

The Green Book

«All of the scenarios are designed to tackle strong emotional content, and focus on exploration of internal mental states», says author of *The Green Book - Psychodramatic Roleplay Scenarios*, Nathan Hook.

One of the three scenarios, Black Dog, «uses concepts of multiple working identities to allow the players to experience a descent into depression, as different elements of self-identity are undermined».

The Green Book contains three larp-style scenarios and is available to order online at www.lulu.com.



▲ Bringing together meta-technique design with psychological concepts, *The Green Book* presents three standalone scenarios. All of them are designed to be playable by a few players in a single room.

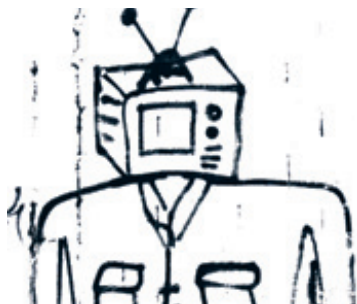
Play it live!

Larp documentary Play it Live! is scheduled for DVD release in September, with footage and interviews from larp communities all over the world.

www.intl.dragonfluff.net

Fucking with passive art

The New Company P-production *The Artists* aims to fuse roleplaying, TV and the intertubes.



▲ *Kunsthau Tacheles in Berlin has been one of the visual inspirations for the project – The Artists*
Photo: Flickr/Boklm

◀ *Photo: Flickr/Daskerst*

Emmy Award winning *The Company P* is at it again with a new production combining role playing elements with other media.

– *The Artists* is a cross-European TV-show, a live action roleplaying game (LARP) - we call it Living Drama - and a participation-driven online mystery. It's all about young artists rebelling against the commercial art-world and an artwork that takes on a life of its own, *Company P* Senior Designer, Martin Ericsson, says.

Radical arts

Company P has previously won an International Emmy Award for the interactive TV production *The Truth About Marika*, and was nominated for the 2011 International Digital Emmy for last year's *Conspiracy for Good* (see Playground #1).

The TV series will be set during the police-siege of a radical arts-squat in Copenhagen, with 50-70 players wanted as artists and (maybe) members of the SWAT unit and other

police officers. Shooting begins with the Living Drama in September / October 2011.

– This kicks off the participatory side of *The Artists*. The show and mainstream web-content will be out about a year or so later, Ericsson says.

– The game is basically the first half of the first episode, but the whole show is larp-informed. The end event and climax to the broadcast are very larpish as well, and we hope players will want to stage their own Living Drama events as the show is broadcast. In addition the production will utilize online games, live events and other interactive elements to draw the audience in.

Money, money, money

The project is financed by public broadcasters from five collaborating countries, one commercial broadcaster from Denmark, as well as some media funding programs. The show has currently been confirmed to air in Sweden, Finland, Belgium, Denmark and Norway.

All writers, designers, actors and so on are on wages. The casted players get the game for free, plus pay as extras for the shooting days.

– They also get central parts in the online drama, or have to work for free during the broadcast period depending on your point of view, Ericsson says.

Interested players may write to theartists@thecompanyp.com, with «The Artists Casting» in the subject field.

– We need daring larpers who are up for playing side-by-side with big-name actors, have a personal interest and skill in mainly image-based art and who are ready to play their characters online when the show airs in about a year, Ericsson says.

www.thecompanyp.com

The Ronnies



RPG Guru Ron Edwards has been running a series of indie game creation challenges over at the Forge. The games must be written in 24 hours.

– Then I judge who receives a Ronny and provide detailed feedback for every entry. A Ronny consists of \$50 and willingness to assist and discuss the game as much as you want, says Edwards.

The entries are available at the 24-Hour RPG

website (1km1kt.net). Many previous entries have become published games.

– The topics of this year's games are daring, fascinating, and occasionally shocking. People are using their experiences with innovative mechanics to break new ground into innovative subjects. At least one game has prompted horrified outcries of protest, says Edwards.

www.indie-rpgs.com/forge/index.php?board=77.0

Be especially sure to thank the space when you are done, for you were a trespasser upon it.

-Teen Witch

You need a secret place. It needs to be a place where no one can see you, and no one can hear you as long as you only whisper.

-Teen Witch

Screw you people, I can have fun on my own.

Playing with yourself

TEXT | MATTHIJS HOLTER

In those days, people told strange tales of Halfflight, a town avoided and feared. People who visited, they said, came back ostensibly safe, but changed. What was the symptom of that change?

-Halfflight

There is an important truth about the world that must be understood and trusted if this game is to work. That something is a fiction doesn't make it any less real.

-Teen Witch

The maps lay spread in front of you. As you stared, you perceived patterns, which began to make mystical sense to you.

Draw those patterns.

-Halfflight

As you slept, you dreamed of your childhood.

- Halfflight

Sit in your secret place. Be still. When you are ready, light your candle.

-Teen Witch

In order to play this game, you must be a teenage girl who is a witch. If you are not these things already, you must become them before playing.
– Teen Witch

When it feels real, and you are ready,
begin your spell.

– Teen Witch

Comfort and warmth grew inside you.
It was unnatural and scared you. It
reminded you of another time you
feared becoming comfortable.

– Halflight

P laying a roleplaying game means sitting down with other people and creating a story together. Or just rolling dice together and pretending to kill things. But whatever you do, it's always with someone.

Or is it, always? Some of the earliest fantasy games were solo games. The *Choose Your Own Adventure* book series was a huge success, selling over 250 million copies in the 20 years it existed. Still, these hokey single-player books were never meant as anything more than fun, immersive entertainment.

In the recent *Solitaire Challenge* competition at the Story Games forum, a whole different set of solo games appeared. «In the tradition of online game design contests like Iron Game Chef and the 24 Hour RPG challenge, we had a contest for people to write role playing games for just one person to play,» says contest organizer Emily Care Boss.

The contest was surprisingly popular. «I was prepared for up to a dozen entries. We had thirty-three», says Boss. «Solo play is over-

looked as a way to play role playing games for a variety of reasons. Because it is hard to come up with a story on your own, because it feels silly to talk to yourself, or because doing so just doesn't sound like the same activity to most folks.»

Or even a sane activity? When we ask her if playing by yourself isn't a little... well, pathetic, she answers: «Only as pathetic as sitting down to watch a movie on your own or reading a good book. I'd even go so far as to say that role playing on your own is as pathetic as writing a book. Something that we miss in our hyper-mediated culture today is time alone with our own imagination, memory and emotions. Playing alone gives you some serious time on your own to reflect.»

Challenges

«The Judges offered specific Challenges,», says Boss – «parameters that a game might meet to give some ideas to the contestants and also to create some criteria for judging. We wanted to



A *Choose Your Own Adventure* books exist in a huge variety of genres – some fairly unconventional, like *Easter Bunny Time Travel*.

STORY GAMES

A web forum about roleplaying games, often with a focus on story above character, and often linked to indie publishing www.story-games.com/forums



▲ *Cthulhu Madness* by Chris Engle, a storytelling board game of meeting ancient horrors and going mad.

RPG SOLITAIRE CHALLENGE

- ♦ A ten-day contest to create one-player role playing games
- ♦ Lasted from Jan 1, 2011 to Jan 11, 2011
- ♦ Organized by Emily Boss
- ♦ 33 entries in 9 different categories
- ♦ Winner: *Storyleaves*, by Jamie Fristrom
- ♦ www.rpgsolitairechallenge.blogspot.com

help give ideas that would help the designs diverge from computer games – to capture what makes a role playing game unique».

The challenges were wildly varied. Of course there was the «Build a better Choose-Your-Own-Adventure» – designers must acknowledge their roots, after all. And «Living in the future», using contemporary media. But there were also more surprising ones like «The Stuff in your Domicile», which required designers to use common household items as part of the game (we have no idea if battery-driven plastic toys were involved), and «Pencil and Paper», where all that should be required to play is, you guessed it, a pencil and a piece of paper.

Possibly the most poetic challenge was «Scheherazade», in which the story should grow with each session so the player would find

him- or herself «deliciously compelled» to return session after session. And the most post-modern? «ARG! RPGS! Or, the Andy Kaufman Challenge» – design a game which produces a product of play in the voice of the character being played.

A Challengeless Challenge was also added at the end, for games that defied categorization. The winning entry, *Storyleaves* by Jamie Fristrom, lets you create a story and interact with it, making it twist and turn in unexpected ways. It was originally intended as a writer's block tool. However, it wasn't fun, and took too long, according to the designer – so he retooled it for «fun first». Moral: Writers' block isn't fun, apparently.

We've received permission to print a complete game from the contest: *Map of house* by Jackson Tegu. «*Map of house* uses your childhood home as a symbolic setting for you to reflect on obstacles you experience in younger years, and see how you might overcome and learn from them», says Boss. «These are not typical areas roleplaying goes!» ■

The first thing I must tell you is a story. How would you like it to begin? Will you read a letter (2), hear a tale (3) or simply arrive (4)?

–Halfflight

The first thing I must tell you is a story.
How would you like it to begin?
–Halfflight

Map of house

TEXT | JACKSON TEGU

Dedicated to our old houses.

This is a short game to be played by yourself. It can be intense, if you give it that power. It's best to allow for some introspection afterwards, perhaps you could find somewhere nice to take a walk.

With pencil and paper, draw a map of the most important of the houses you lived in while a child. Important, as in 'important to you'. Each part of the house can appear as it was when most relevant, or you can present the house in its entirety as it was on a particular day. Note each room, the doors, stairs, windows perhaps. Every part of the house that was important to you, that you let your mind go into, can be considered to be 'a room' for this purpose.

In each room, write the name of or illustrate a difficulty that you will seek to overcome in the next phase of play. The difficulties can be related to your young life, or your present life, or not related to either. They could be weighty conversations, or physical barriers, or distractions, or metaphors. Make sure each room has a difficulty that matters to you.

Now you begin imagining this: you are outside the house. You look as you do now: older than you were then, different. You enter the house, enter the first room. Stand in it. See the difficulty there, bring it into focus. Let the situation unfold around you as the difficulty presents itself.

In your pocket is something that you brought with you, which will help you overcome this difficulty.

If you can figure out how to do so, you overcome the difficulty by using the thing from your pocket. Maybe use it as a tool, as a representation, as a reminder. Watch yourself do that and feel it happening.

In the room you find another specific, definite object; one that you can pick up and bring with you. Touch it. Say what you find. Whatever it is, it will help you overcome future difficulties. It too can be both physical and metaphorical.

Move through the entire house like this, if you can. Enter a room. Meet a difficulty. See it, face it, choose one thing from among those you're carrying and use that to overcome the difficulty. Feel yourself overcoming it. Find another object there to bring along. Carry all of these things with you or leave some of them behind.

If you can't figure out how to overcome a difficulty with what you've found, you can take a break, start again later. Maybe you can overcome that difficulty with what you have inside of you.

Please, the goal is to experience what occurs to you while visualizing the house. You may feel it useful to deviate from these guidelines in service to this goal.

If you lose it, stop. If it ceases being powerful or relevant, stop. You've fallen off the edge of it, you'll have to come back to it later. Maybe never, maybe it's not for you. Maybe you missed it already back there somewhere.

End notes

This is called the PG edition, completed 5th of March, 2011. 2% Chance of a further edition if play suggests that such is necessary.

Thanks to Emily, Ross, Arielle, Grace, Ariel, David, Terri, and Megann. Thanks also to Matthijs, and to Tony for his drawings.

Jackson Tegú plays and writes games and music in the Pacific Northwest region of North America. He also lives there.

Outside the Comfort Zone: Doing Educational Larp in Belarus

Running games about the right to an individual opinion and doing the right thing in a country without freedom of speech? Meeting the most enthusiastic larpers in the world, without understanding nearly anything they say? Welcome to Belarus.

TEXT | J. TUOMAS HARVIAINEN

PHOTOS | RITVA SAVONSAARI

I won a competition called The Larpwriter Challenge in 2010 with my game *The Tribunal*. As the prize, I was invited to Minsk, the capital of Belarus, to see my game being run there.

For the locals, the game was offered as a part of a conference on educational larp. The Belarusian larp scene is quite fragmented, and for me this was a wonderful opportunity to witness larpers from different areas come together and create connections. It felt like a new phenomenon, something the locals had been waiting for. It was beautiful to see even if I didn't understand the language.

Change the world

The Larpwriter Challenge itself was jointly produced by two parties, the Norwegian Fantasiforbundet and the Belarusian Education Center POST, which also organized the conference in Minsk together.

The event was a significant milestone in a shared project on educational larp in Belarus. The project began with the

discussion «how larps can change the world» at the role-playing conference Knudepunkt in Denmark in 2007. The goal of the conference in Minsk was to bring together not only local larpers and foreigners, but also have Belarusian larpers meet each other. Curious beginners had also been encouraged to attend, to see what larp is and can be about.

POST has been developing their edu-larps since 2007. They're a relative newcomer (and so far quite an independent one) to the local larp community. It was therefore also important for them to make contacts with the various Belarusian larp scenes. Both the sides had something to offer: The attendees, their long experience in making good larps, and POST, their educational background and skill in designing effective mini-larps.

The city, the event, the participants

Getting to Minsk was an experience in itself. As a Schengen-area citizen, I am not accustomed to either visas or the bureaucracy involved in entering a more tightly regulated



■ *A war monument in grand style in Brest, Belarus.*

THE LARPWRIER CHALLENGE

The Larpwriter Challenge is a collaboration project between several different organizations to spread larp as an educational tool and to strengthen civil society in Belarus. In 2010, the Challenge organized an international competition for short scenarios as well as a conference in Oslo, Norway.

www.larpwriter.org

country. It was worth it, though. Minsk is a lovely city, in a rough kind of way. The center is loaded with pseudo-Corinthian, Stalin-era buildings. They're very low, yet massive. All of them are in an excellent state of repair, and illuminated at night.

Newer buildings are dominated by glass surfaces (including the heavily debated National Library, which looks like a huge, gleaming twenty-sided die on a big pedestal). Amidst the structures run wide streets and big parks, making it an alien, yet impressive sight even to someone familiar with Soviet architecture and city planning.

It seemed strange to present something minimalistic – a short larp for twelve players, with no props – in this environment. It was stranger still to give a lecture on educational game design to the local audience. The language barrier meant that when I or one of the Norwegians who also attended made a short statement, our translator sometimes transformed it into a long speech, wanting to give context to what I said. The audience was mixed, with dozens of people with different backgrounds attending. Some were first-timers with no idea about what larp is. Others were involved in making the very first larps in Belarus, decades ago. How do you communicate to such a diverse group?



An individually developed tradition, rightfully proud of its heritage.

I did my best by talking about the «education» aspect, to provide people with something new. A certain humility is important: Never mind how advanced we Nordic larpers consider ourselves, we are not that special. The Belarusians introduced me to their history of games and to documentation on what they have done so far, and I found it to be just as artistic and just as innovative as what we have done, just a bit different as far as themes go.

The Belarusian scene reminded me of what I've seen and heard of larp in the Czech Republic: An individually developed tradition, rightfully proud of its heritage, with solid documentation. Very interested in contact with outsiders, as long as they meet as equals.

Educational larp was not an easy subject, since it contains a wide variety of phenomena, from using larp to teach kids in school to the Nordic favorite of larp as a tool of social change. I specialize in the latter, even if I don't like preaching my views. People in the audience, however, were more teachers than activists, so the situation called for a balancing act.

This basically describes the larp situation in Belarus in general. Most people play for fun, but there are those who are interested in the potential educational aspects of the hobby. Larps (although not called such) were already used for teaching in the Soviet Union in the late 1970's, even in fields such as mathematics. Research papers documenting these games exist. So there is a tradition to build upon. At the same time, larp designed to expand political horizons is seen as risky. Belarus is often described by foreigners as «the last dictatorship in Europe». Inside the country, any



critique of the current regime is strictly prohibited. Therefore any game that even remotely resembles debate or statements on political issues creates tension.

In every country there are larpers who resent it when somebody puts a stamp on their hobby (be it «lightning bolt & elf ears», or «artsy-and-not-fun»). In a country like Belarus, that feeling is emphasized, particularly amongst larpers who fear that their fun will be labeled as activism. This is especially true with people who rely on good ties with the government in order to secure sites and props for their games.

This political reality was very visible in the reception to my own mini-larp, *The Tribunal*. It is an *Animal Farm* -inspired, debate-style game based on Stalin's military purges. It is not a political larp. It's a game about the way selfishness and fear drive people to not do what is right and honest, but it was obvious that some players considered it a political statement.

That people hold very different views about what a larp is about was never as obvious to me as when my game was run thrice in Minsk. The same was true of the two runs of The Larpwriter Challenge's runner-up game, *The Road Not Taken*, by Mike Young and Aaron Vanek.

And the way they play and design

Tension or not, the Belarusian larpers were truly awesome. No words really do justice to the way they committed themselves to the larps I witnessed, even if I did not understand any of them. (Luckily enough, they also seemed to tolerate the low murmur of my brilliant translator telling me the highlights while they played.)

In my 15 years of designing larps, I have never seen such enthusiasm for trying out new game concepts. This was true of first-timers as well as veterans. Most of the players were not really used to playing mini-larps, let alone ones with no props of any kind, but they adapted at once. They also gave me expert feedback on how to possibly alter and improve my design, much of which has already been included in the next iteration of *The Tribunal*.

The same thing carried over to the lectures, with lots of people taking notes and offering great commentary. Their profound interest and skill were most obvious when it was time for the workshop exercises. We divided the people into groups, and gave them 15 minutes for designing the template for an educational larp of any kind. Some wrote things for very small kids, some for schools, some on larger issues. One group even managed to develop three fully viable and detailed concepts in their allotted time.

While all 14 ideas were definitely worth making happen someday, I did find a favorite: A one-room larp about the crew of an irreparably damaged spaceship, hoping that mysterious aliens would rescue them. The inscrutable aliens are somehow testing them on whether they deserve to be saved or not, without ever telling them their criteria for that salvation.

At the start of the game, the crew would be given loads of tasty snacks to eat while they talk, all wrapped in plastic, with no place to put the trash except on the floor. Destroying the environment while debating the best way to obtain a miracle cure – the message might have been heavy-handed, but it was effective.

Belarusian larp theory seemed to be very design-oriented. The idea of documenting games and exchanging ideas outside one's own game group was a rather new phenomenon. Yet the roots of fruitful discourse were already there, and I expect their ties to tighten strongly in the next few years, both between local scenes and with the Russians. The Belarusians share a language with the Russians, and it's easier for them to travel to Russia than to the West.

There is also printed larp research underway, in Russian. Now that the lines of communication are open, I believe we will also be seeing more of their work influencing ours. Plans are already in the works for translating and importing small Belarusian larps to Nordic game conventions. Having seen pictures of what their *Alice in Wonderland* looked like, I am very enthusiastic about also playing their local games one day.

Something to take home

The one thing I learned about making new connections is that at some point, you have to remember to play. I ran a game and led two workshops. Because of that, I made many new connections, and had interesting discussions from which I got a lot of new ideas.

The new friends we made, however, came courtesy of my girlfriend, who actually played with them in the English-language runs of *The Tribunal* and the Swedish game *The Family Andersson*, by Åke Nolemo and Johan Rökländer.

When you're making connections across cultural barriers, it's sometimes best to just play the game. ■

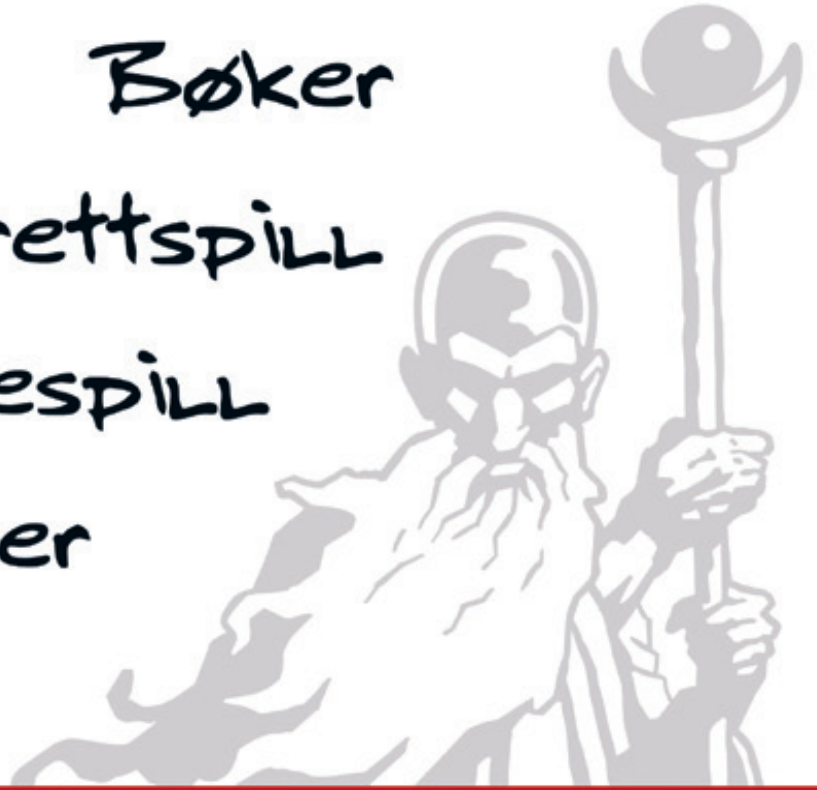
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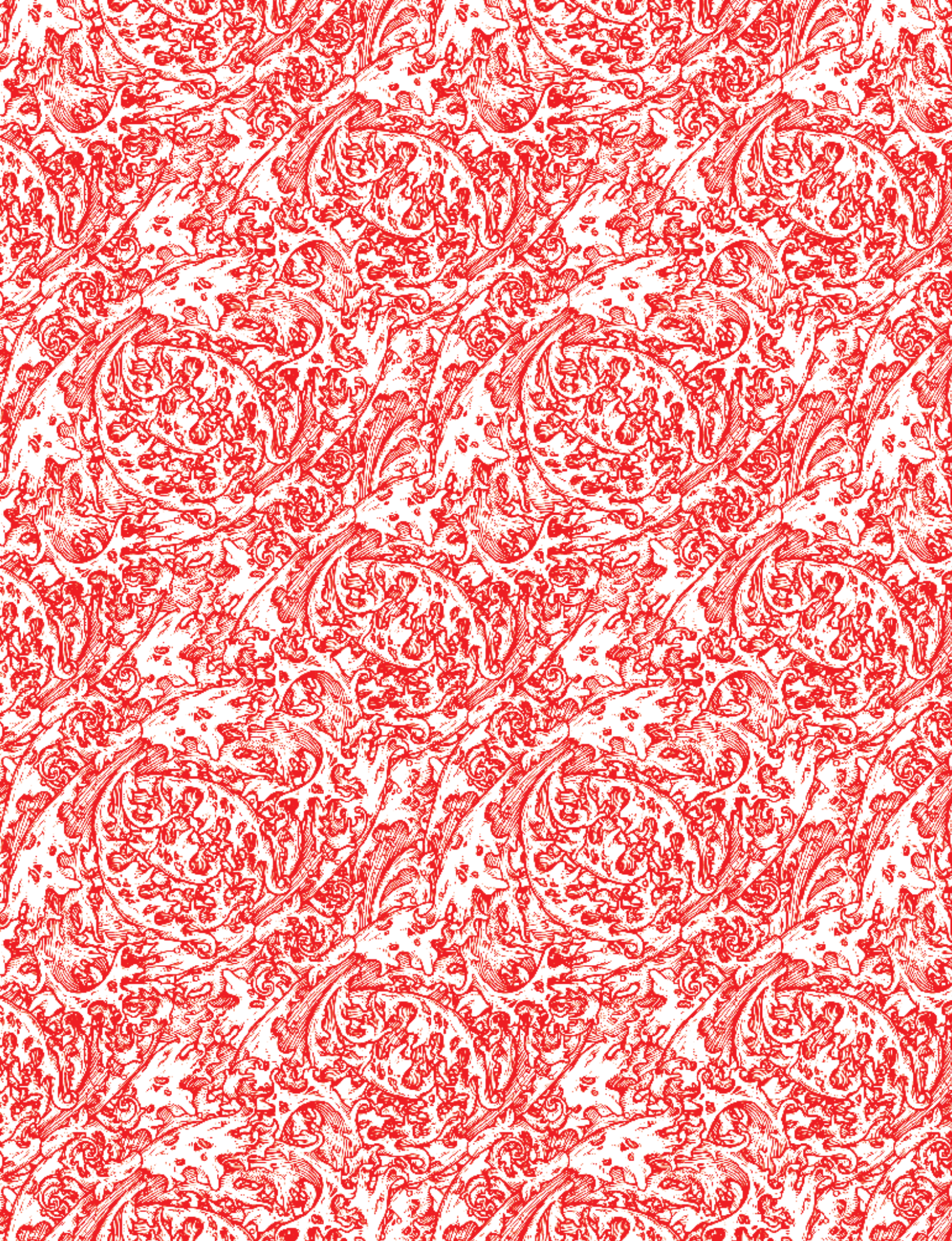
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