

# PLAYGROUND

THE NEW WAVE IN ROLEPLAYING • ISSUE #5 • 2012



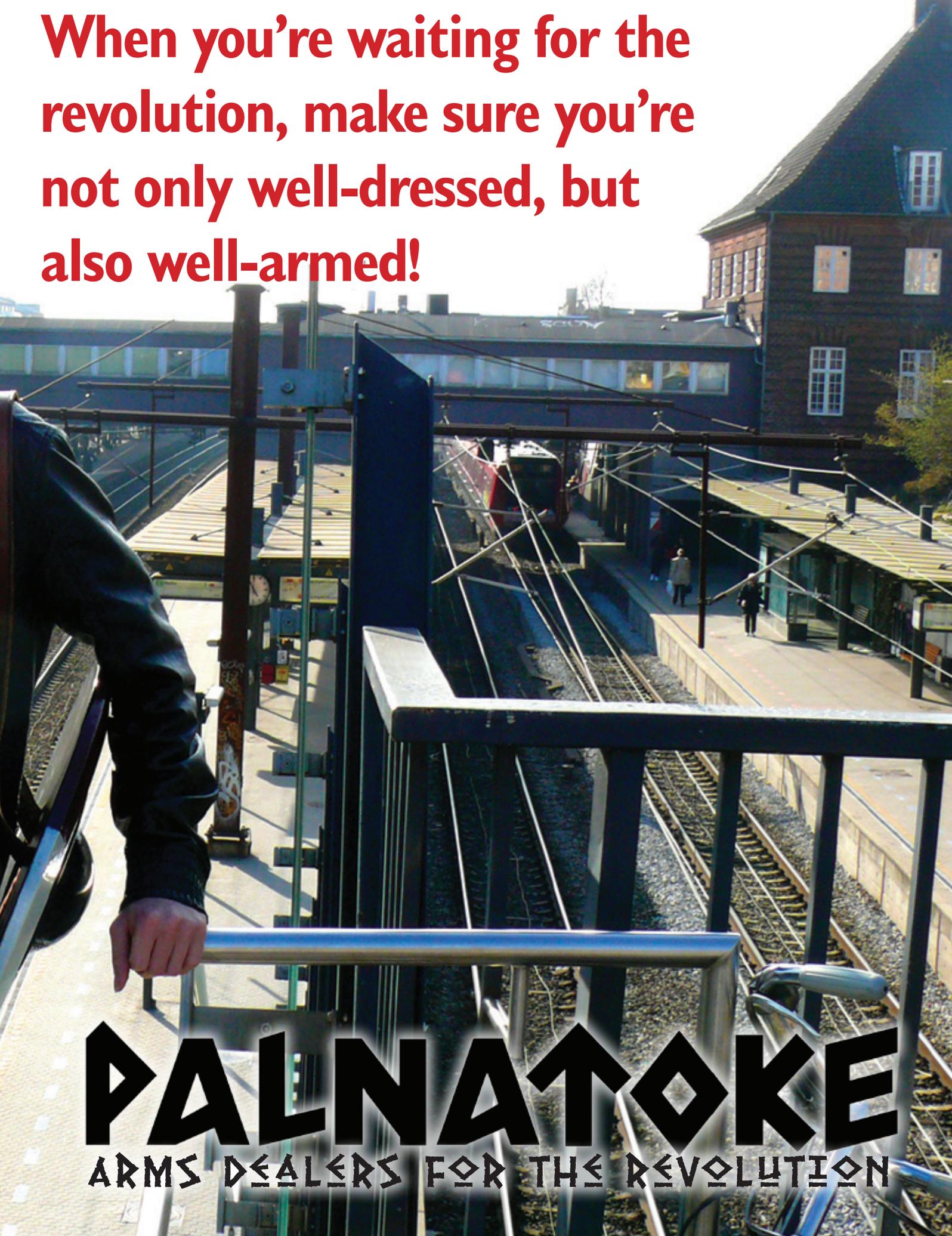
BLACKBOX CPH

WHY LARPERS SHOULDN'T DATE

ALIBIS AND ECSTASY



**When you're waiting for the  
revolution, make sure you're  
not only well-dressed, but  
also well-armed!**



**PALNATOKE**  
ARMS DEALERS FOR THE REVOLUTION

# International larp projects 2012

## Larpwriter summer school

**What?** Five-day summer school where you learn to design and run educational and recreational larps.

**Who?** 15 spots reserved for participants from Belarus and 15 spots open for all applicants. We're looking for larpers, NGO-activists and teachers. Motivation is important, larp-organizing experience is not.

**Where?** Vilnius, Lithuania

**When?** July 10th - 15th, 2012

**Signup deadline:** April 24, 2012.

More information:  
[www.larpschool.org](http://www.larpschool.org)



FANTASI FORBUNDET

## Till death do us part & A Week in Jerusalem

**What?** First ever larp in Palestine, centering around the cultural conflicts in a wedding. Also a three-day programme of excursions and lectures on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

**Who?** The larp is open for 15 international participants. Possible to participate in A Week in Jerusalem also for those not attending the larp.

**Where?** Ramallah, West Bank

**When?** August 3rd - 12th, 2012

**Signup deadline:** April 17th, 2012

More information:  
[www.larpinpalestine.org](http://www.larpinpalestine.org)

## All our Playground are belong to you



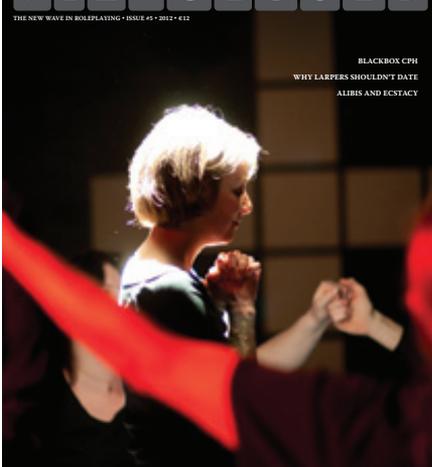
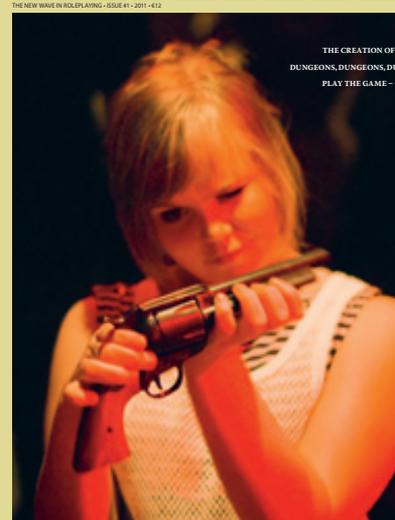
elcome to the 5th issue of Playground Magazine. So nice of you to swing by. As you might have realized by now, there are some new people behind the magazine. And some things will never be the same. Hopefully, however, a lot of things will be, since we really liked the work of the previous team. So naturally, the first thing on our agenda is to praise Matthijs Holter and the team that created all this and kept it going through its first year. We love you! We love your work! We hope we will be able to live up to it. The most important reason for this is, that we believe Playground is needed. And here is why...

When that awkward moment comes, where you are forced to explain to your soon-to-be-parent-in-law how you spend your spare time, what do you do? Hopefully, you will be able to grab an issue of Playground and say: "This is what I do!" And hopefully your future in-laws will be as impressed as you (and we) think they should be. In other words, we need a showroom for some of all the fantastic experiences we create - either in the original sense of the word, or through our participation. What we are trying to say is that we want to create a magazine that makes you feel proud about your hobby (or profession). We really think you should be. We want to lure you into trying out crazy shit. Nothing illegal of course... well... nothing really illegal, but apart from that... We need a window into all the wonderfully weird stuff going on around the world. We need to see what they do not want us to see, whoever they are. That is the only way to move forward.

We want to inspire you into doing something, you didn't think was possible. To see new things, try them out, fail miserably and try again. And we want you to see that other people are doing it too. We're like that.

It can be awfully frustrating to miss a great game just because you did not know the right people. But it is not as annoying as creating a great game and then meeting some grumpy, old geezer at a convention, who then tells you that he did something similar (but better) in 1999. More often than we would like, this is how knowledge is shared in our communities. Furthermore, when we go international, the problem is amplified. If you don't happen to talk to everyone, everywhere, all the time, you will miss that great game or that special piece of divine inspiration. We don't know about you, but we are either too busy, poor or lazy to go to conventions all the time. And we were kind of thinking Playground might be the glue that binds our global community together.

So there you have it. That is our vision. We hope you will be part of it, because we really need your help to make it happen. Playground Magazine is a part of this international community of role-players sometimes labeled "Nordic". It will thrive on your goodwill and feel like a wet abandoned puppy without it. So share your knowledge, contribute and spread the word. Oh... and remember to subscribe to the god damn magazine! Otherwise we will be out of business faster than... well... a print magazine in the digital age.



## Mixing of stories and games

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**I** once designed a larp. Some of the participants told me it was great. Some told me it sucked. A lot of them told me, that they couldn't really make up their minds.

Why did it suck? There's a bunch of reasons of course. To this day I still regret that we had to cut corners. The surprise monster hidden in the pit of blood never came to be. We never got around to mass-producing dead, rotting babies out of gelatin, latex and blood powder either. Such a shame. Too much work. But even though these things could have been awesome it would not have made any difference to the overall experience of the game.

Why not? Because I thought it was about telling a story. I am not saying a larp has nothing to do with stories. But there should be some kind of check-list. A "you-should-write-a-novel-instead-of-creating-a-larp-check-list". (Hint: there is one in this magazine). I could have used it some years ago. There is so much more to role-playing games than story. For starters, you can try to answer this question: Why do we call them games? It is not just because they started out as dice rolling exercises.

Issue #5 of Playground Magazine explores what happens, when we mix story and game. We are not interested in discussing whether role-playing events can be stories or can be games. Most of the time they are a bit of both, and none of the above, which is what makes them so cool. We play the story. We narrate the game. Unfortunately for you, but fortunately for me, I am not here to create order out of chaos. But I hope that this issue can spark your curiosity and creativity. But most importantly, I hope you will be entertained.

And before signing off, I have just one more comment. Don't get caught in seeing role-playing as either story or game. Don't even get caught up seeing it as a combination of both. Not everything in this issue is about story or game either. These are useful ways of thinking about what we do. But at the end of the day, what we do is more than playing a game. It is more than telling or being told a story. It is role-play. It is an all singing, all dancing unique crappy snowflake of the arts. ■



■ Kasper Friis Hansen



■ Claus Raasted

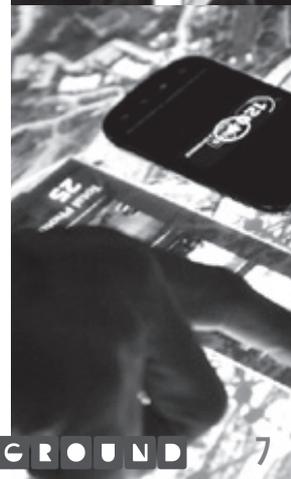


■ Lars Nøhr Andresen

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## Full Metal Jousting!

It sounds like a joke, but it isn't. In 2010 a group of renaissance jousting enthusiasts led by Charlie Andrews, founded the UJC (Ultimate Jousting Championship), which holds World Championships in jousting. On horseback. In plate armour. Apart from the fact that it's always reassuring that there are still people around who dare to call something they do a World Championship (when are we doing the first boffer fighting World Championship, anyway?), it's utterly and postively mind-boggling. And impressive. Real jousting. Who wouldn't want to see that? The jousters have also been featured on the National Geographic channel and of course have their own website, so if you want to know more, there's more to find out.  
[www.knightsofmayhem.com](http://www.knightsofmayhem.com)



## We now have a weapons factory

Danish larp company Rollespilsakademiet (The Roleplaying Academy) has recently thrown in their lot with the weapons manufacturing company Palnatoke, which produces latex weapons and leatherware. The new, enlarged company is now truly broad in scope - or schizophrenic, take your pick - and does both weapons, events, teaching, leather, books, and magazines (among them this one!). World domination has to start somewhere.

[www.rollespilsakademiet.dk](http://www.rollespilsakademiet.dk)

## Free will is over-rated (some say)

Swedish larpers Tova Gerge, Ebba Petrén and Gabriel Widing are some of the people behind a participatory performance where the audience is controlled and instructed through a voice in headphones. The performance was enacted at Turteatern in Stockholm last autumn, and while it certainly uses larp techniques, the question is: Is this larp without improvisation? The piece is called Avatarvaro and will be played again at Inkonst in Malmö May 15-17, so you can go there to find out.

[www.inkonst.com/2012/01/23/avatarvaro-ebba-petren-gabriel-widing-m-fl-se](http://www.inkonst.com/2012/01/23/avatarvaro-ebba-petren-gabriel-widing-m-fl-se)



# Not just run of the mill

The Dynamic Duo, Bjarke Pedersen and Brody Condon, once again take larp to new places. Since doing the Sonsbeek larp for the art festival of the same name in 2008, Pedersen and Condon have done several art larp pieces for a variety of audiences. Their newest project, Connecticut, takes place in the USA and included in the 100€ price are plane tickets for the seven players. It's of course part of a bigger project and the reason it can be done so cheaply is because the larp will be filmed and used for a greater production. It's hush-hush and quite secret, but since the Playground news crew has tentacles the size of Cthulhu, this little tidbit is ours to share. Love and respect to Bjarke and Brody.

*“A small group of initiates in a sect meets up at a holy place. Their task is clear: To prepare for and execute their first trip as missionaries into people’s homes. – A larp about community, belief and enlightening others.”*



## Finnish roleplaying games in electronic format

In a first for the Finnish roleplaying community, roleplaying games will be made available through a major e-book publisher. The speciality publisher Pohjoismaisen roolipelaamisen seura has entered into an agreement with Elisa, the biggest publisher of e-books in Finland. Elisa will distribute all of PRS's ebooks except for those published for free. The first book to be published under the deal will be Juhana Petterson's roleplaying game Ikuisuuden laakso (The Valley of Eternity). The Norwegian game Itran kaupunki (orig. Itras by) and the anthology of Danish games Unelma Keltaisesta kuninkaasta (A Dream of a King in Yellow) will follow during the spring. All books will be published without any DRM whatsoever. And we like that!

[www.nordicrpg.fi/](http://www.nordicrpg.fi/)



Magazines about larp and roleplaying are few and far between. The Germans have Larpzeit, the Danes have ROLLESPIL and there are a few others out there (Playground amongst them!). But now some Swedes are joining the club too with a magazine called InLajv. Their website states that it'll be about larper, written by larpers for larpers, and will feature news from the Scandinavian larp scene. We're looking forward to hearing more!

[www.inlajv.se](http://www.inlajv.se)

A blurred crowd of people, likely soccer fans, with a soccer helmet in the foreground. The helmet is dark with a white stripe and has the number '21' visible on it. The background shows a crowd of people, some wearing blue and white clothing, suggesting a soccer match or event.

# THIS YEAR, THE END OF THE WORLD IS IN DENMARK

150 PLAYERS SIGNED UP SO FAR  
JULY 24 - 29, 2012

[WWW.CITYOFCITIES.DK](http://WWW.CITYOFCITIES.DK)



  
**ROLLESPILS FABRIKKEN**

## Swedish roleplayers seem to be good writers too

There's an upsurge of fantasy in horror in Sweden. Not only in their politics, but also in their written scene – and that's good news for us fringe people. After a situation that's been described as terrible by insiders, fantasy and horror are slowly gaining some respect from reviewers. Writers from the larp generation are breaking through – some of them roleplayers.

Nene Ormes, old larper and roleplayer, made her breakthrough with urban fantasy novel "Udda Verklighet" in 2010. Then there's Anders Fager, who designs board games, who's had huge success with his short story collections "Svenska Kulter" and "Samlade svenska kulter" (horror). Nordic larp old hand Karin Tidback debuted with short story collection "Vem är Arvid Pekon?" in 2010, and will be releasing a dystopian novel in Swedish in September, followed by a short story collection in English that's released in the U.S. in October. So the rpg geeks are taking it to the masses – bookstyle!



## Respected artist uses larp methodology for photo shoot

English artist John Paul Bichard (who's done some quite impressive stuff!) recently came into contact with the larp scene and found stuff he liked. Amongst other things, this meant that for Bichard's latest piece – a photo piece about the 1940 evacuation of the Channel Islands – he used larp methodology to set up 'dynamic' scenes, where the models were given roles. According to Bichard "The resulting vignettes were shot to capture a more expressionistic treatment of the story". Put that way, it does sound good, doesn't it? And the pictures themselves are amazing.

[vimeo.com/33191056](http://vimeo.com/33191056)



PHOTO: JOHN PAUL BICHARD

## Tech, Trees and Triumphs at Russian larp convention

The Russian larp convention, Comcon 2012 took place March 15-18 near Moscow. Apart from gathering an impressive 550 participants, we find it worth mentioning because of the things discussed there. Technological support of "forest larps", including talks on larp-specific electronics, infrared guns and TV implementation in large games were just some of the topics. And that sounds just freakin' awesome to us, even though the discussions on cyborgs, androids and semi-humans sound just freakin'. The important thing is that not only do people experiment with tech at larps in Russia – they also gather vast numbers of people who'll discuss the fact. And that's impressive. Also, Comcon hosts the annual "Golden cube" awards, where Russian game masters compete for Oscar-like fame in categories such as "Best Rules", "Best Game: 100-200 participants" and the like.

[comcon.su/](http://comcon.su/)

## Foreigner camp at enormous German larp

Even though the Germans have a bad history with putting people in camps, the organisers of the world's largest larp, Conquest of Mythodea which has 10.000+ people there, are putting together a special camp for foreigners. Of course, you won't need to go to the camp just because you're foreign – it's completely voluntary – but for those wanting to "see the giraffe" and experience what has been called "The Las Vegas of Larp", the foreign camp is a great idea. As they say in German. "Wir sehen uns in Mythodea" (See you in Mythodea).



## Finnish RPG released in English after several years of waiting

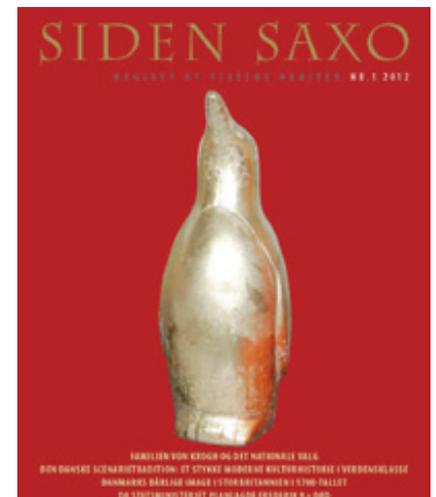
Sometimes local news is International. According to the RPG blog "A handful of dice", the much-awaited Stalker role-playing game is finally out in English. Based on the novel Roadside Picnic by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, it was written by Ville Vuorela and released by Burger Games in 2008. Helsingin Sanomat, the biggest daily newspaper in the country, dubbed it the best Finnish roleplaying game of all time. And that, to our geeky ears, is pure heavenly music.

[nitessine.wordpress.com/2012/03/10/stalker-rpg-released-in-english/](http://nitessine.wordpress.com/2012/03/10/stalker-rpg-released-in-english/)

## Fastaval in historical magazine

Danish tabletop guru Kristoffer Apollo wrote an interesting article about "The Fastawood model" explaining how the Fastaval way of doing tabletop scenarios has done wonders for exploring what can (and can't) be done with tabletop RPG. Now Apollo has gotten an article into the historical magazine "Since Saxo" telling about the Danish tabletop scenario tradition. Other articles in the magazine include "Fighting the plague in 1711" and "The history of Copenhagen Central Station", so we're talking serious history here.

[www.sidensaxo.dk/](http://www.sidensaxo.dk/)



## Danes get big money for larp area development

The Danish roleplaying organisation TroA (The Realm of Adventurers) is not only one of the oldest in Denmark, but also one of those doing the most ambitious projects. Recently, the organisation received promises of 40.000 euro funding for their larp area project, which is headed by enthusiast and outdoorsman Claus Gajhede. The project, which aims at making the area called Yxenskoven into a semi-permanent larp location, is the first in Denmark at this scale. And with a funded budget of 200.000 euro so far, we're impressed. Denmark is a small country, after all.

[www.troa.dk](http://www.troa.dk)

## KAPO: the book

One of the most talked about larps of 2011, KAPO, is back with more. The KAPO crew and Rollespilsakademiet (yes, that's us!) have produced a book documenting the KAPO experience. It's in English, of course, and features thoughts, poems, artwork, provocations and confessions from more than 20 players, organisers, spectators and helpers. It's published by Rollespilsakademiet and if you weren't in KAPO, you can get your copy at the online webshop or simply read it for free as a PDF. [www.rollespilsakademiet.dk/webshop](http://www.rollespilsakademiet.dk/webshop)

## Cultural larp exchange in Bristol

Dumnonni. It sounds weird. It actually isn't. Dumnonni is the name of a Bristol-based (that's in England) larp group that does historically inspired games featuring Celts and Dark Age mythology. But what makes it really interesting is that for some years now, Dutch players have been coming to the Dumnonni events and are now planning one of their own – where the Brits of course will be attending. Because nothing says cultural exchange like Celts and kilts. <http://www.dumnonni.com>

## Netherlands goes Nordic?

Larp in the Netherlands got its first big dose of Nordic artsy-fartsy weirdness when Danish larpwright Bjarke Pedersen and American artist Brody Condon joined forces in 2008 and made the Sonsbeek larp for an art festival. Some local players loved the larp, which featured rituals around other art pieces and others hated it for being strange and boring. Since then, more and more Dutch larpers have been influenced by Nordic ideas, and though larp in the Netherlands hasn't gone completely Delirium yet, larp organiser Tim Bosje feels that "things are being set in motion to evolve gamer culture to a participation culture, with players that enjoy the collaborative art of larp". For a larp culture that's been described as very competition-oriented, this is an interesting step. Of course, probably not all Dutch larpers agree with Tim, but from our viewpoint, any kind of diversity is good!



## Czechs eat, larp and sell all at the same time

The Czech larp production group Court of Moravia are truly an innovative lot. They've been doing a series of different styles of larps for years, organise a larp convention and last year published a book showing off what they'd done. Now they're trying out something they call "Gourmet larps", where people get to combine a great meal with a larp experience. The target audience for this is mostly non-larpers, since the Court of Moravia people try to do everything at once; expand the medium, convert the public and make a living off it - all at the same time. This also means that they've experimented with getting people to "give larp as a gift" to their friends and family - just like you'd give someone a theater visit or a trip to an art exhibition as a present. So far, the gift-giving has been a great success, with more than 50 people "giving away larp" since december. Larp tourism? Not too far off!

[www.courtformoravia.com/en](http://www.courtformoravia.com/en)

## French/German kids larp

The Academy of Endira it's called, but what it really is, is a groundbreaking collaboration between French and German larpers, trying to bring larp to the kids in a border-crossing way. The idea is simple. Bring 150 kids from the ages 8-17 together from August 13th - 20th and let them larp. The organisers are at the moment looking for French-speaking larpers to help them, so if you speak French and want to help push the frontier of the possible, this isn't a bad way to spend a week.  
[www.spielebaukasten.de](http://www.spielebaukasten.de)



## The biggest larp event in the world

Ok, so it's not strictly a larp event, but RPC Germany (Role Playing Convention Germany) is a 40.000+ person event in Köln, that brings together larpers, tabletoppers, boardgamers, reenactors, computer gamers, cosplayers, younameits and wowthatscrazies. It's a place to meet, to buy, to brag and to party and is without a doubt the grandest larp/RPG bazar in the world. So if you're not doing anything else on May 5-6, drop by Köln and experience the craziness. We'll be there, of course, and will be giving out free beer to subscribers. We're that nice.  
[www.rpc-germany.de](http://www.rpc-germany.de)



## You're not pretty enough for my larp

Playground brings you not only the facts, but also the rumors, and one of these is that veteran Norwegian game designers Tor-Kjetil Edland and Hanne Grassmo are planning a larp that will only be for the beautiful. That's right, if our sources are correct, the larp will include casting sessions and won't allow in people who don't live up to the physical standards required. Is that good or bad? We'll let you discuss it with your friends and just say that we think it's worth debating.

## A guide to stories & games

Why storytelling through role-playing games does not work. Except when it does. Confused? Great. Read on!

By Florian Berger



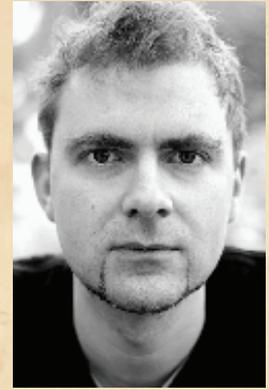
nice feature of role-playing games – the ones that amount to more than rubber sword or dice-rolling battles – is that you can not “win” them. Yet they are fun – and that is because they provide, besides puzzles and challenges, a meaningful dramatic

experience, with you right in the middle of the action. This is why stories in games matter, and why game designers, game masters and critical players should think about them. In this article I’ll deal with the challenges and possibilities that arise when we combine game and story in role-playing games.

The first problem is that the closer we look, the more complicated the matter becomes. What is a story anyway, and, while we are at it, what is a game really? These questions have caused a heated debate both in academia and in RPG and larp scenes alike. Yet no one has come up with a clear and simple answer. We will



The more a game master railroads players with his or her story – an intended sequence of events – the less agency is in there, and the game more and more resembles a staged play.



leave the controversy to the scholars and use two simple definitions for this article: A role-playing game is what comes to life at a larp or pen and paper session. A story is, as larpwright Eirik Fatland puts it, any „meaningful sequence of events.“ Armed with these, the following is about stories and game design.

### Designing Versus Writing

When your average game master sits down to sketch a campaign or adventure, she will more often than not come up with a list of characters or parties, a plot that describes their relations, and a background story that details what happened before. You, dear reader, can admit that you can get caught up in this. It is hard to avoid: this is what TV series, movies and novels have taught us to expect, after all. The problem is that these kind of stories build on a set of main characters and a central story line. RPGs (especially larps) simply do not work that way.

One reason is that role-playing games are participatory. Good players want to flesh out characters. Improvise. Drive the game master crazy with detours galore. Another reason is that as soon as the

numbers of players is reasonably high, say ten or more in a larp, the idea of a main plot with main characters becomes ridiculous. Games must be designed, not written. This becomes even more apparent when we take a player's perspective during game play.

### Players: Readers, But No Audience

As human beings, we must make sense of our surroundings to be able to act. Even when playing the most avant-garde art-house larp, players will constantly try to put the figure out what the heck is going on (do not be fooled by unperturbed faces). We perceive experiences that do not make sense as dissatisfactory, if not exactly threatening. Any audience of a David Lynch movie will agree.

In RPGs this means that players will build a story in their minds during the game. That way they find out what the status of their character is and what action to take next. In that sense, players read a game as it unfolds. Scholars call this storification (a term to impress your friends with). But even then, the story that a player actually experiences may differ greatly from the intentions of the game

designer. Plus there are of course as many stories in a game as there are players.

To some extent, this is also true for other media. But role-playing games have a distinctive feature: participants demand and expect agency. That means they want to be able to influence what is happening and change the course of events. Agency is a major source of fun in the game. The more a game master railroads players with his or her story – an intended sequence of events – the less agency is in there, and the game more and more resembles a staged play. If you have played a little, you have seen it. It is not cool.

Digital game researcher David Thue proposed a neat set of questions to check the level of agency. For any event in a running game, ask: who decided that the event would happen; when this decision was made; and why it was made in that particular way. If more often than not the answer is that a game master planned the event beforehand, then this game allows hardly any agency – the infamous railroading. On the contrary, there is a sufficient level of agency if the participants frequently make such decisions at run-time (during the game, ed.)

>>

## Beware of the paradox

But there is another catch that can give game designers a headache. While demanding agency, players still want their own story to be great. In technical terms, this is called the narrative paradox: how to guarantee a satisfying individual story for each player in the highly interactive environment of a game? Game designers have come up with a number of tricks and techniques to tackle this challenge.

## Stories in Games: What Works

In 2004, Erling Rognli came up with the idea to involve players in a plot by assigning a distinct narrative function to each character. According to him, a function can be structure-building, conflict-driving or mood-setting. It is clearly communicated to the player beforehand. This technique has the advantage that it makes participants much more aware of their responsibility for a good playing experience for everyone. The trade-off is that players must be aware of their function in respect to the whole game.

Eirik Fatland's incentives, described in an article in 2005, are a more subtle tool. He proposes to use conflicts, scheduling of events, puzzles and fates bound to certain characters to "encourage specific events to occur" during the game. This is actually a mixture of emergent and authorial approaches. It can provide a narrative frame for the game experience, while still allowing for player agency.

This article's author has proposed another method specifically designed for pen and paper RPGs in his book "Methods of Game Mastering" in 2008. The idea is to first create a web of places and characters of the game world. Then the game master connects these to a pre-defined sequence of events and information as the game is played. To coin a term, this could be called shared agency, as the game master



A desire to get good reviews may tempt you to play it safe and resort to a static linear story in your game. By now we know this is not the way to go.

gets to decide what happens, but the players decide the circumstances of the event. This method is not feasible for larp, since there is no pen/paper GM equivalent.

## The noble art of letting go

As a game designer and game master, you are at the front lines when your game sucks (if you need this in writing, see the "Dogma 99 Programme"). A desire to get good reviews may tempt you to play it safe and resort to a static linear story in your game. By now we know this is not the way to go. The key to a good experience for players – concerning the personal narrative as much as other aspects – is letting go of control. The German author Dominik Wäsch calls this "the Zen of game mastering." You can put a lot of trust into the sense-making capabilities of your players: they will fill plot holes and gaps as the game unfolds, most of the time without even noticing. And there is also one nice consequence of this practice: putting players in control means sharing responsibility. Players are as accountable for the quality, fun, and overall satisfaction of the game as you are. ■

## Read on

**Berger, Florian** (2010): Stories in Larp Revisited – Authoring, Management and Experiences. In Larsson, Elge (ed.): *Playing Reality – Articles on Live-Action Role-Playing* 43-57. Interacting Arts, Stockholm.

**Dogma 99** - a programme for the liberation of LARP. <http://fate.laiv.org/dogme99/en/index.htm>

**Fatland, Eirik** (2005): Incentives as tools of larp dramaturgy. In Bøckman, Petter and Hutchison, Ragnhild (eds.): *Dissecting Larp* 147-180. Oslo.

**Harding, Tobias** (2007): Immersion Revisited: Role-Playing as Interpretation and Narrative. In Donnis, Jesper, Thorup, Line and Gade, Morten (eds.): *Lifelike* 25-34. Copenhagen.

**Heliö, Satu** (2004): Role-Playing: A Narrative Experience and a Mindset. In Montola, Markus and Stenros, Jaakko (eds.): *Beyond Role and Play* 65-74. Finland.

**Rognli, Erling** (2004): Narrative Function. A Larpwright's Tool. In Montola, Markus and Stenros, Jaakko (eds.): *Beyond Role and Play* 149-156. Finland.

**Thue, David, Bulitko, Vadim and Spetch, Marcia** (2008): Making Stories Player-Specific: Delayed Authoring in Interactive Storytelling. In Spierling, Ulrike and Szilas, Nicolas (eds.): *Interactive Storytelling* 230-241. Springer-Verlag, Berlin Heidelberg.

# What's your story?

## The Good Idea

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Stine has been appointed game master of the upcoming pen & paper session. She is determined to deliver a big bag of fun to her players. She heads over to John Ross's "Big List of RPG Plots" (<http://www222.pair.com/sjohn/blueroom/plots.htm>) and picks the plot labeled "I Beg Your Pardon?" where the party all of a sudden is repeatedly threatened and attacked for some reason that they don't know and will have to find out. Deliberately she does not decide who actually has it in for the characters, and why. Instead she prepares some notes on a villain the party has met before, and on an opponent from a character's background story. She figures that if she keeps things mysterious enough, the players will come up with ever more crazy ideas of how it all fits together, and she will just pick one of them as the real one. The players will have total freedom regarding how they tackle the problem. She knows her players' needs and is ready to provide battle, diplomacy or hero moments at appropriate points. The game is on!

## The Bad Idea

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Stine instead spent a weekend watching the complete Season Five of "Xena Warrior Princess" (a severely underrated epos, in her mind). She now has a great idea: making an RPG scenario from her favourite episode! She sketches: the adventure will open with a brawl. Then the characters will meet Elee, a heroic NPC. They will accept him as a friend without further ado, and will be shocked to hear that Sera, an evil wizard, is determined to kill Elee. They will try to help him, and in the course of that witness a messenger from the Council Of The Wise convincing Elee that his death is, as a matter of fact, a necessary sacrifice. Elee will subsequently be killed by Sera, the evil wizard. The characters will try to take revenge and kill Sera, but then learn that Elee's death was, as a matter of fact, a necessary sacrifice. They get to battle some minions, though. The adventure will then end in the tavern. Spot 11 mistakes, if you feel like it.

## The Write-A-Novel-Instead of a scenario Checklist

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- You write the showdown first. And you love your showdown.
- You polish prose passages that you plan to read out to your players.
- You plan in-game events to happen in a fixed order.
- That order makes perfect sense to you.
- You think your players deserve to get stuck when they can not solve your puzzles and riddles.
- You wish there was a linear cut of Pulp Fiction.
- You believe that the more carefully you plan, the less you need to improvise.
- There are virtually immortal NPCs in your scenario.
- Your players frequently ruin your game by taking inappropriate action.
- You did not choke on the phrase "your game" in the previous sentence.

# A peek inside

PHOTO | BJARKE PEDERSEN, PETER MUNTHE-KAAS



# e the box



## Pictorial

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On the following pages are pictures from the Black Box Copenhagen festival that was held March 2nd through 4th. The pictures are from the games Sort Sol (Black Sun) about humans and animals deities, and the Christian sect-game I dine hænder hviler jeg (In your hands I rest).



A stage technician is skillfully balancing on top of a twelve foot ladder. He adjusts a weathered stage light hanging from a ceiling rail. "Give main light a shot" he shouts over his shoulder.

Warm, yellow light pours out the projector, bathing a line of chairs elevated on a small stage in an otherwise naked room. I'm in the corner watching the game Sandhedens Timer (Hours of Truth) being prepared; one of five black box games being set up in Copenhagen this weekend in March.

"You there!" the technician looks at me from his tower of unstable aluminum. "Take a seat; I have to check if your face is covered." Hesitantly I take a seat on the chair in the middle. I am completely blinded and the light jolts a bit.

Somewhere in the back the game's producer is fiddling with what looks like a laptop. The roaring sound of an American style talkshow audience thunders through the room. My ears are pushed to the breaking point as the agonizing decibel comes to a sudden halt. "How's the audio?" the producer asks, obviously not noticing my startled frown. I give her my best squinting face and point towards the floor to suggest it might be toned down just a slight notch.

Some audiovisual adjustments later my career as a stage dummy is complete. A tall blazer-clad man with a clipboard walks into the room. There's a distant mumble. "We're done workshoping in thirty minutes. How are things in here?" he says. "We're good" the producer replies and the technician starts packing his ladder.

The stage is set and the dust of anxiety settles in the black box. For the next couple of hours a metaphysical game will run. Unknowing players will be asked to judge the sins of their characters during a surreal game show.

One of the organizers enters the room, looks at the setup and makes that painful last minute remark. "Won't it be hard for the players to see each other with the chairs all lined up?" Pause. "Half-circle" the producer says and moments later the stage is being redressed.

The technician sighs as the middle chair leaves the light. He unfolds his ladder and starts climbing towards the ceiling, grinning a calm: "Ju-ust like theatre"













# An alibi for religious ecstasy

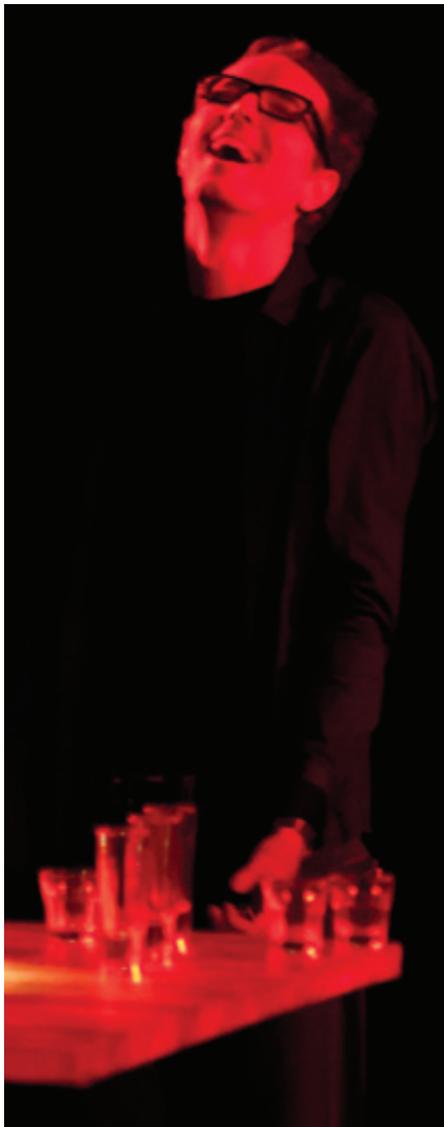
About letting go in larping and creating intensity for yourself and other players with a good alibi

TEXT | LARS NØHR ANDRESEN PHOTO | BJARKE PEDERSEN, FREDERIK BERG ØSTERGAARD

**I**t's early march 2012 and Frederik Berg Østergaard awaits his judgement. He awaits the divine light - or the earthly darkness. Frederik is standing on a stage in downtown Copenhagen. He's playing the scenario "I Dine Hænder Hviler Jeg" (I Rest In Your Hands) by Ida Tjell, Marie Holm-Andersen and Bjarke Pedersen. For Frederik it's a special experience to be part of this larp, for it is in some ways connected to a larp he himself instigated a couple of years ago about the mass suicide at Jonestown which was built on the idea of religious ecstasy and euphoria in a larp - a larp that stayed with him and later combined with the notion of alibi.

## Going in at the deep end

Bjarke Pedersen has been working with the concept of 'alibi' for a couple of years. As the nordic larps over the last couple of years has become more and more intense and 'close to home' Bjarke saw the need for helping players to let go and thereby helping them to really immerse themselves in larps even though they are close to their everyday reality and the border



■ Frederik Berg Østergaard participating in "I Dine Hænder Hviler Jeg" at Blackbox CPH

between game and reality is more easily blurred.

At the same time in a different place Frederik is doing some serious thinking about achieving religious ecstasy in a larp as you would in real religious groups - and these two ideas about alibi and religious ecstasy are taking Frederik and Bjarke in a new and interesting larping direction.

Bjarke Pedersen explains the basic idea behind alibi in larps:

"Personally I could play a deranged bigot in a larp but only if it were a role that was given to me. I wouldn't and couldn't play a bigot if I created the role myself. My alibi for playing a bigot is that I haven't decided or created the role myself," explains Bjarke as the basis for the concept of alibi.

Frederik jumps in: "We've been using alibis ever since we in the mid nineties started roleplaying freeform scenarios where there were more at stake than the number of orcs and gold pieces. Ever since real feelings and emotions were introduced we've been using different form for alibis. It could be as simple as a briefing before the game where it's established that it's ok to bully each other in this game. But it's not something, that



## Ever since real feelings and emotions were introduced we've been using different form for alibis

we've been working with actively until recently," he interjects and looks back to a nodding Bjarke.

"There are many different forms of alibi. For example in the danish scenario "Delirium" from 2010 there were held two workshops prior to the event where the roles were being developed and there was much talk about boundaries in the game, safe words and so on. We came to an agreement about how far we could go

regarding to physical and emotional contact. Could we kiss? What should we do if I got an erection while being close to my partner in the game? The game itself were held in a small town in Jutland far from Copenhagen and Aarhus and the travel to the destination created an alibi in itself. We were removing us from everyday life and our known surroundings. We were on 'a journey'," Bjarke explains and adds, that another alibi in fact was that the en-

trance fee for Delirium was 1.500 dkr. (220 euro) and when something costs a lot of money, it gives you a reason for really go all in.

Together this created a strong alibi for the participants in Delirium to really go all in and give themselves totally to the experience.

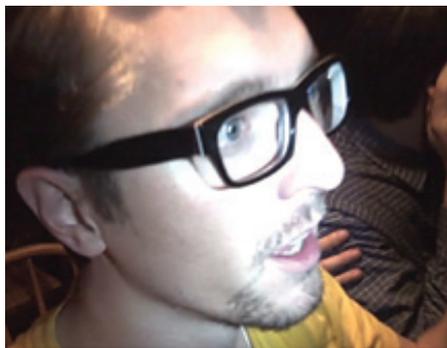
### **The making of a larper**

Alibi were not top of mind when Frederik began contemplating about religious ecstasy. With a degree in religious studies the subject is not a stranger to him and the idea of trying to achieve religious ecstasy in larping had come from seeing real religious people in action.

"If you simulate religious ecstasy will it then become real? I did not want to participate in real religious activities but I >>



■ Stills from the movie from Jeeptown



If you simulate religious ecstasy will it then become real? I cannot participate in real religious activities but I wanted to try it out in form of a larp.

*Frederik Berg Østergaard*



wanted to try it out in form of a larp. At one of the Jeepcons (a small convention for the members of Vi Åker Jeep) Tobias Wrigstadt and I created a very simple game about the mass suicide in Jonestown. There's not much story but the goal is to commit suicide together by drinking the poison under religious ecstasy. And then we just let loose. We go with the flow. We let ourselves seduce by the pretended religion and by the end we drink the poison together and die together singing." When Frederik came home he started thinking about brainwashing and a book called "The Making of a Moonie" (Eileen Barker, 1984), in which it is explained that cultists aren't actually brainwashed.

"The term brainwashing was only used by ex-cultists or relatives. It's an excuse - or a workable explanation - for having spent a part of your life in a cult. The

book states that in reality the cultists are willingly and voluntarily going into the cults. This can be directly transferred to roleplaying. You enter a larp voluntarily knowing that you are going to be fucked with, possibly blindfolded and mistreated as in KAPO - but I willingly do this and open up myself for this experience. If you enter a larp without being open to the mechanisms in the game you do not get the same experience as the cultists does. My point is that the alibi is what enables the players to have as open a mind as possible and by that being able to experience the larp as strong as a cultist experiencing religious ecstasy," Frederik says.

#### **No alibi - no game**

The concept of alibi plays a role in both larps and more traditional table top scenarios (and freeform scenarios). As

an example of alibi in freeform scenarios Frederiks mentions his own "Fat Man Down" - a story of how we bully the obese in modern society. In his own session at the danish convention Fastaval there was a heavily overweight person amongst the only four players and Frederik quickly provided the players with the alibi to bully this overweight person simply by explaining what was going to take place and why. "Had the game been without a game master - had I not been present - I'm pretty sure that the players would have backed out with the prospect to play a game centered on bullying the fattest person in the group with a very overweight person amongst them," he says.

Frederik Berg brings up the scenario "Gang rape" by Tobias Wrigstadt. The players take on the role of a rapist and has to describe the rape in detail while

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looking the raped in the eyes. It's a game without game master and because of that there's no one to give you an alibi. There's no game master to explain what's going to take place. And many players backs out when they read the scenario. There is no alibi in "Gang rape".

Bjarke Pedersen nods in agreement: "I read the scenario, but didn't have enough alibi to actually play it. I could say to myself that I could play it for the bragging rights but that's not enough for me to take on the role of a rapist," he says and continues:

### **I rest in your hands**

Bjarke Pedersen and the other writers behind "I rest in your hands" was influenced by Jeptown. The writers heard the specific song used in Jeptown, and created a scenarie about a rattlesnake cult in America.

"We chose not to use mass suicide but instead the extreme religous rattlesnake cults where cultists are letting themselves get bitten by snakes and if they live or if they die are up to god. We wanted the same euphoria in "I rest in your hands" as I saw in Jeptown," Bjarke explains.

Regarding to alibi Bjarke knew he had roughly two hours of workshop with the players before the sceanrio started and he and the other writers were very clear about what they wanted from the players and what they should expect.

"An alibi we used for "I rest in your hands" for Blackbox CPH was that the first thing i told the players at the workshop was that this game isn't about IF you believe in god - it's about believing. You all believe. Period. No doubt. At all! This

gives the players a clear direction in the game bit it also provides them with an alibi - especially players that normally would take on a critical view on religion being atheists but in this case Bjarke tells me I have to believe so I have no choice," he says.

Also Bjarke - a fairly large and imposing figure - used his natural authority to convince the players that the best for them was to trust him in that he knew how they could achieve the best experience.

"Our job is convince the players before we start that they are in safe hands and that they just should let go of any inhibitions and play along. That's not an easy thing for every player and different alibis work better on different players. Therefore it's a good idea to rely on several methods," Bjarke Pedersen says.

Both he and Frederik Berg are ready to experiment and work with the concept of alibi.

### **The final release**

And so it is that Frederik Berg is standing on a stage waiting for the grace of god. Filled with euphoria, happiness and longing for the final release. A release that never comes - the light does not shine down on Frederik. He is not accepted by god.

"I'm positive that everybody who stood on that podium being engulfed in light experienced a big whooshy rush! Whoa! I had the opposite experience. There was no light. I had to cope with the fact that I was not chosen and that was also an interesting experience in the game. It was very fascinating not to be released!"



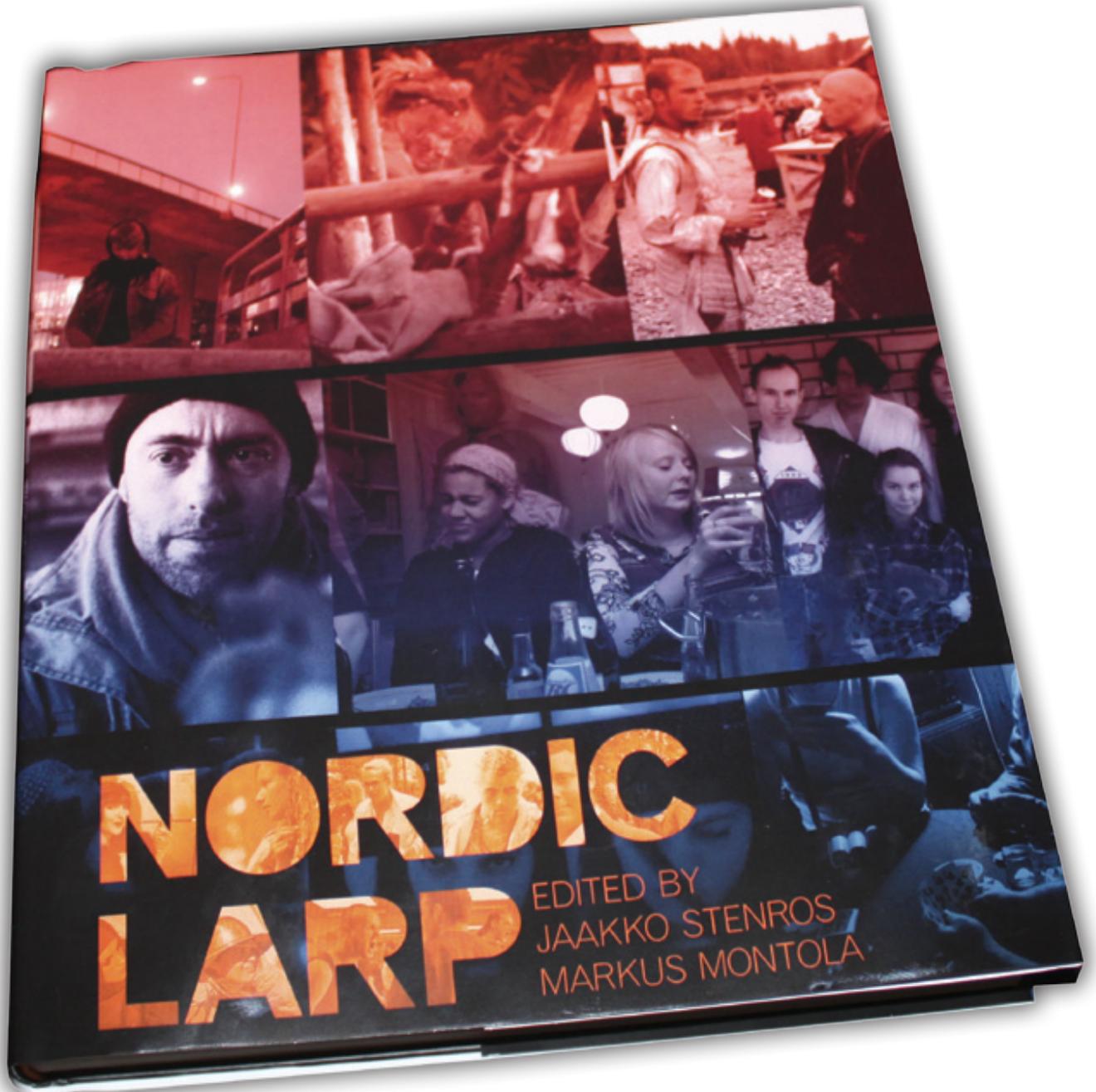
A release that never comes - the light does not shine down on Frederik. He is not accepted by god

### **Alibi, contract and bleed**

"Alibi is different from 'the contract' which has existed as an integrated par of larping in many years and when the idea of bleed started to influence many games it became apparent that the contract wasn't enough anymore - we needed something else - something stronger - to bind the players together," says Bjarke Pedersen.

The contract which Bjarke Pedersen refers to is the agreement which all players in a larp agrees to. No laughing at other players, ridiculing other players and so on. The contract was about creating trust among the players. And the term bleed refers to larps where the larpexperience creates thoughts and feelings that influence the player - and the players own thoughts and feelings influence the role.

If you don't have it, you can still get it!  
(and most of our books exist as free PDFs)



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# The Perfect Alibi

Two of Playground's finest reporters explores what might happen, when new wave role-players do projects, date and flaunt numerous alibi-protected art larps. Read on and shouldn't date – at least not each other.

TEXT | SANNE HARDER & FREDERIK BERG ØSTERGAARD

“I’ve been asked to do a review for Playground”, I told him in an effort to sound original, since flirting was out of the question, and I couldn’t think of anything else to start a conversation about. “There are these perfumes. They’re based on Dungeon and Dragons races, classes, alignment. I have to come up with a good concept for the review”.

*We were somewhere in a hipster coffeeshop in Copenhagen. The place was so hipster that it didn't even have a name. We saw scores of people in ridiculous clothes. Irony is the hallmark of hipsterdom: A wierdo in a blue/yellow Adidas hoodie, a man with a mohawk in a three piece suit (jacket removed), and peeps with next-gen popular tattoos. That tribal look is soo last decade.*

*"Im going for the Beatnik look", she said. "I'm kind of a Big Fan of Kerouac. "Isn't that kind of passé?", I remarked, looking at her black and blue striped slim fitting dress, and pointing out our almost matching All-Stars, giving her my best we're-both-hipsters-and-you-know-it look.*

I met him for first time at the end of the previous century. He invited me to an outrageous party where people were behaving so crazily it put me off him for a while. But after having bonded at several less exorbitant parties, we decided to meet up again.

Also I was recently single. Of course there was an undercurrent – there al-



ways is when a man and a woman try to make friends. Besides, I had been advised not to get involved with roleplayers. The Scandinavian roleplaying scene is too intimate, bordering on incestuous. I’d already been burned, and had no desire to go there again. This made things less complicated: We could skip the unelegant and awkward conversation about whether or not we wanted this to be platonic.

*She was fresh out of a relationship that didn't pan out and so was I. "I might have a chance with this girl" was written in floating bold neon letters over her. In the*



*past I had tried to date her, but I had been too slow. "I'm a quick mover", she said with a smile, "either you're fast or you're out. Also, I stopped dating roleplayers." I felt rejected for the second time.*

*Anyway, I was living up the crazy single life; I mean, the password for my WiFi is 'swingerclub', and I worked hard at having a girl in every harbor. I used to be sailor, so the saying was quite fitting, except I wasn't fit to be the lookout, when I was scouring the seas. Damned eyesight. Also I didn't have a girl in any harbor. Or elsewhere.*

*"I have an imaginary boyfriend", she said. "It's like the perfect combination". She then went on to explain that somehow it reduced the complexity of being single. "It gives me the perfect excuse to say no to men, without having some asshole to spend time with".*

"You know what we should do? he asked. "We should do an experiment. Make you wear the perfume, and go for a night on the town. I'll come with you, take notes. See what kind of guys you round up."

"Oh yeah", I said. "wicked".

It's a thing I do. I always say "yes". It's like a pavlovian response, and I definitely should break the habit. It gets me into just as much trouble as you might imagine (and I take it you have a vivid imagination like me).

Actually his idea was pretty crappy. It was really more of an excuse for a night out. Also, going out with a guy I wasn't trying to pull, while he observed me being hit on by other men, was more than a bit strange. I didn't even get the concept: Did he actually expect me to pull small guys if I wore the dwarven fragrance?

As the summer wore on, I found that I was reluctant to put the plan into effect. I met up with him a couple of times, but somehow managed to "forget" the fragrances.

" T h a t ' s

It wasn't entirely deliberate, but still. Meanwhile, my editor was starting to get annoyed with me.

*The day before we had been in her car, on our way to some open-air tango lessons, "I'm off my meds", she said calmly. "I stopped taking my anti-depressants". I grew more concerned of her driving, but somehow we arrived at the harbor, where the dancing took place, only with a couple of close calls. I texted my dating wingman asking for advice. "Tango is like dating. Yr good 2 go. Did you make those hamburgers?", he replied. I felt confident. "I might have a chance with this girl", I remember thinking, already having consumed hamburgers with her was like consummating our pre-marital date.*

"So how about that article?" he said when we were halfway through our coffees, and there still hadn't been any talk about what a Chaotic Evil Hobbit should smell like.

*I had smelled some of the perfumes at an earlier visit to her place, but couldn't really tell them apart. "How does Evil smell?"*

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*I imagined a mix between dead dog, dried up cum and soot. "Incense", she replied. It didn't really live up to my expectation, but then again, who wants to smell of cum? Of course she hadn't brought them, so a past fantasy of smearing her with hobbitjuice disappeared in a whiff.*

However, what we talked about were alibis. He had just come back from Just a Little Lovin' - last year's larp equivalent of an independent underground movie production - and he told me anecdotes from the scenario. Apparently a guy was deep throating a cucumber when it broke, and he had to cough the other half up. It sounded like he might have been in danger of suffocating.



Just a Little Lovin' was a scenario about how AIDS hit the homosexual social circles in The Village during the eighties. The themes were primarily sex and death. We talked mainly about the sex bit. "What about yourself", I asked. "Were you sexually aroused?"

*My character, Harvey, had been a rather conflicted bi-curious man living in a poly-fidelity house with four women and another man. "When I finally stepped into the dark room, it was like entering another world", I continued. A woman playing a man was masturbating a strap-on in front of another man kneeling and also masturbating in front of him/her, and at the back a huge man was receiving a blowjob from another man. This was pretty gay. The whole scenery was bathed in a red light while the organiser was DJ'ing some dark 80's music. "Can I blow you off?", a woman playing a man asked me.*

"It happened to Harvey", he said, referring to his character. "At no point was I, the real person, turned on", he ensured me, looking to the left.

He did that a lot. I once bought a book about NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programming). It said that people always look to the left when accessing their imagination. It's also a handy way of telling if people are lying.

Alibi is the new rave. Bleed was so yesteryear. Supposedly alibi is what the hipster larpwrights previously called the magic circle.

"Bah. The magic circle is just academic masturbation", he frowned. "Alibi is more than that. It's that fine line be-

tween your character and yourself. Like a mask. You put it on to be able to handle playing your character".

What a charade, I thought. I think it's about time we start realising that there is no fine line - there really is no character. It's just a social construction that legitimises experiments.

*Now it was her turn. "Ever been in love with someone you didn't like?" she asked. At first I laughed it off.*

*"I think I might have been mindfucked. What the hell happened?" she continued.*

*I began relating stories of my heyday at tabletop conventions. Always making out with that one girl in the group after the game. The gamemaster's prerogative.*

I once fell in love inside a roleplaying scenario, and afterwards couldn't tell if it was bleed or actual, real feelings. "A total mindfuck", I told him and winced.

*"Yeah. It happened to me too", I said. "Turned out that the girl I was attracted to was not at all the same person as the character she was playing". So somehow I experienced her character and not her as herself. Her experiment was what I fell for. "It's not just playing around with your own identity, you're playing around with other people's perception of you as a person".*

We never did finish the review. My editor kept asking for it, and in the end I had to come up with something else to fill the pages.

What was it he and I had touched upon? Why was it too dangerous to go back to? The article was floating around in a limbo between the blatantly honest and just plain bullshit. But maybe sometimes we need a bit of bullshit to be truly honest?

At Bifrost, the national organisation of Danish roleplayers, we are strong believers in International cooperation and are always on the look-out for new friends in different countries. This is the reason we're throwing money after Solmukohta 2012 even though it's in Finland, not Denmark, and this is why we want to hear from you.

No-one knows what the future will bring for the New Wave of Roleplaying - but we know that we not only want to be part of it, we want to help shape it. And we want to do it together with you.

Contact us and we'll see what's possible. Maybe an international conference. Maybe an exchange trip. Maybe something else.

If you want to play with us, we want to play with you!

- Anders Berner, Bifrost Chairman  
[info@landsforeningenbifrost.dk](mailto:info@landsforeningenbifrost.dk)



**BIFROST**

LANDSFORENINGEN FOR KREATIV UDVIKLING AF BØRN OG UNGE

# SPACETOYS, SOCKPUPPETS AND NEW MEDIA EXPERIENCES PART 1 - LANCE WEILER



Lance Weilers Pandemic was played at Sundance Festival

Exciting stuff is happening in the world of new media. Playground has spoken to a couple of New York based guys. About the story and game paradox, data-driven stories, why toys are the new black, sock puppet roleplaying, labeling the wierd shit they do, and the world of larp as seen through the eyes of Jim Babb and Lance Weiler. These poor guys are facing a lot of problems similar to those of the roleplaying scene.

TEXT | KASPER FRIIS-HANSEN

**D**o you consider your works to be games as such?

Sure... what's interesting is that I feel like I'm always at odds between story and game. I feel like I'm always battling those two things and trying to get the right balance between them. I came out of a story background – writer, director. I've made a number of films, and television. I started playing around with something like alternate reality games in the late 90's, weaving fiction elements into the real world. That



## Lance Weiler

Lance Weiler is becoming a popular guy. BusinessWeek named him “One of the 18 who changed Hollywood”. It must be nice to be on the same shortlist as Walt Disney, Steve Jobs and George Lucas. He even has a quite lengthy wikipedia entry, but these days who hasn’t? In 1998 he made *The Last Broadcast*. In this case “made” means co-directed, co-wrote, co-produced, and co-starred. The film has been called “the original Blair Witch Project” because of its cheap production methods and the play on fact and fiction amongs other things. Since then, Lance has entered the playground of transmedia storytelling and now calls himself a Story Architect. But he hates the term transmedia storytelling. Guess why...

created some interesting, very simple mechanics – primarily ARG-based, clues, puzzles. Then I started collaborating with my writing partner Chuck Wendig, who has done a lot of role-playing games and written for MMOs. He has done a lot of work for White Wolf and a number of other parties. That was in 2007. We worked on something called *Collapsus*, which was something like a combination of a game, a documentary and some fiction. But I think I’m always striving to find that perfect balance between the two and I don’t think I’ve found it yet. To me it’s about experimentation. I want my stories to be more social so I want to give them an element of play. Plus with the kind of things I’m interested in, the infrastructure is fragmented. There are so many devices and touch-points that you can interact with, and they are expanding. I’m not going to create something that is solely on a console. I’m interested in the bridges between those experiments, and in my experience they work best when theres a social element, that element being predicated by story or game.

### Give me an example of where you wanted story and game to work together...

We did it with *Pandemic* a year ago at Sundance (Film Festival, ed.). In *Pandemic 1.0* participants at the festival had 120 hours to stop a fictional pandemic and

they did so by finding things that were scattered around the real world. Golden objects and bottles of water which they had to bring back to mission control space that was very much like Center for Disease Control. During those 120 hours people on the ground were lead by people online, who were remixing media which unlocked geolocations in Park City and phone numbers for phones we had circulated. You could then call the phone and lead a complete stranger to the object you



I want my stories to be more social so I want to give them an element of play

had found. In addition to that, we modelled the different movie theatres over cities, so one would be New York, another one Paris and so on. When people signed in to a location at the festival it would spread the infection and when someone

tweeted with #pandemic, that would save a life. Then we made this really amazing storytelling engine that would measure all these activities and edit the pace of the story based on all this interaction. So that is where I think I came closest to combining story and game for real.

We are still experimenting more with the engine since another thing I’m interested in is replayability. I could for instance speed pandemic up so it would last a couple of hours, or stretch it out to last a month. So a lot of what I’ve been looking at is how data comes in and how it can be used to not only personalize the experience, but also bridge that gap between story and game.

### How big a part does technology play in your work? And how much is about experimenting with storytelling and gameplay?

I think we are at a point where democratization of tools is taking place, creating an emerging group of creative people who are cross-diciplined and come from all walks of life. And you also start to see more services, more ways to do things. What is interesting with this in regard to game and story, is that I feel like a lot of the answers lie within participatory culture. What games have always done is get people active, get them engaged, but stories kind of get people emotionally connected and





■ Lance Weilers Pandemic was played at Sundance Festival

that is how they drive themselves. What I have done in a lot of the storyworlds that I have created is predicating it on discovery. I found that the more I let discovery drive the story and the gameplay forward, which is kind of a shift, the better it works. Before, when I used to do stories, I really controlled the various elements. I was not letting people in to it. You work in some cases for years, crafting that perfect balance of conflict, resolution, characters, emotional thrust and all those things. I guess what I'm trying to say is that we are at a point of transition that starts with democratization, then commodification and now we are starting to see all these really interesting things emerging.

The concept of the internet of things interests me. Normal tactile objects can be-

come connected and in some cases, they already are. They can be really interesting story delivery devices.

**What are you working on at the moment?**

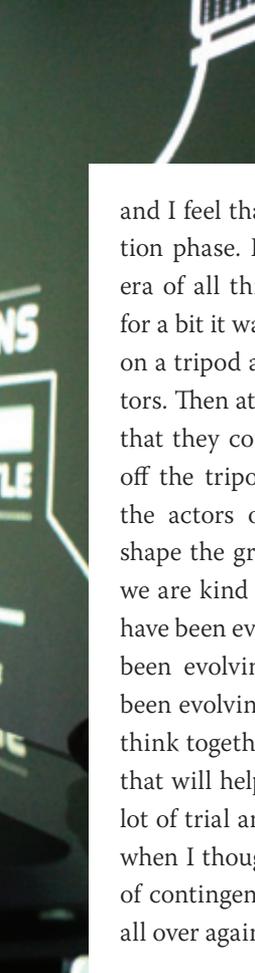
I started a participatory story-telling trilogy last fall. What we did in the first part called Robot Heart Stories was creating a connected plush toy. I had experimented with toys before at Pandemic with good results. We worked with two schools, one in Montreal and one in Los Angeles. The toy was a robot that had crash landed in Montreal and needed to get to LA in order to get back home. So the kids collaborated using math, science, creative writing and so on to move the robot. And they told the story. If they said they wanted to have the toy go to Mount Rushmore and

have tea with Unicorns, we would have a team of photographers standing by, who would make these imaginations come to life. In the next installment the robot will circumvent the globe and will actually end up being shot into space by NASA.

**You mentioned using discovery to drive the game or story. But what is your angle on creating participation?**

What has been interesting to us when using data is, that we have been able to see where people get stuck or where they excel. We are always building different layers of interactivity. Someone might be totally passive or very engaged, and that is where the replayability becomes really challenging since it is not just playing a game. It has story elements in it, and not just in the sense of the cut scenes of console games. The replayability is also important because it helps with spreadability. So that is a way to experiment with mechanics in game, story and the social

“ Normal tactile objects can become connected and in some cases, they already are. They can be really interesting story delivery devices.



and I feel that we are in an experimentation phase. I feel we're in the silent film era of all this. When silent film started, for a bit it was someone putting a camera on a tripod and shooting a stage with actors. Then at a certain point they realized that they could actually pop the camera off the tripod and take the camera and the actors outside and they started to shape the grammar of cinema. I feel like we are kind of at the same point. Games have been evolving for a while. Films have been evolving for a while. Stories have been evolving for a very long time. And I think together it is that experimentation, that will help define the right way. It is a lot of trial and error man. There are times when I thought we had the right amount of contingency plans but we had to do it all over again.

**What just did not work? What has been the most difficult thing for you?**

One of the most challenging things is working across different audience or player types. Another is interactive storytelling. For a long time, when people would think of interactive storytelling, they would think 'choose your own adventure'. Shooting all those paths is just crazy, and it doesn't get very exciting. So one is this thing that your article is about, balancing story and game, and the other is about audience types. To find a way to deliver something that is emotionally powerful and is going to work with various degrees of interactivity – especially if you want to make it replayable. So that is where a lot of my work is situated.

**What has been the most important lesson looking at the data? Where do people get stuck or excel?**

It depends on the person. Often it is a device gap or technology gap. But we also experience preferences. People are bro-

ken into segments and some prefer their games or stories in a certain way.

**The funny thing about the larp scene is that we have been doing participatory stuff before everybody was talking about participatory culture. But there are a lot of things we can't do. We lack money and maybe credibility. But we are really watching the world closely, since it kind of feels like the world is catching on...**

Yeah... You guys have huge communities. When I see some of the stuff you do, for example that postapocalyptic thing Company P did – you guys are so dedicated and I love it. I think it could be a great way to develop stories, prototype gameplay or develop media properties. There is a lot that can come out of the larp community. One of the things I am constantly thinking about is how I can scale things. How can I make something work both in a hyperlocal sense, but then connect it globally. And the larps are based on being there and experiencing the interactions.

**But how do you scale it?**

I think the participatory aspect of larp

is really interesting. I am always trying to get people into that headspace where they are willing to participate and role-play. But it is based on the amount of work that an audience has to go through to do something and there is a pyramid of participation. Right now, you are lucky if the top five percent will actually create content with you, 20 percent in the middle, who might touch into a light play and then 75 percent who are passive. That is how it stacks right now for story-driven stuff. But as we adapt, I think the pyramid will change. I think the audience is already out there. It is just that the language is being developed.

**So basically we're not good enough yet?**

Yeah, basically. I'm going to look back at some of my own stuff in some years and think 'Oh my God! That was so unnecessary.' There just was not a simple tested way to deliver that.

**So is calling what you do "transmedia storytelling" not a bit biased since people are actually exploring and playing?**

I hate the term...



# SPACETOYS, SOCKPUPPETS AND NEW MEDIA EXPERIENCES

## PART 2 - JIM BABB



**What is Socks Incorporated? How would you explain it?**

That is a good question since people working in this area have a hard time describing what we do in general. A larp, an alternate reality game, transmedia, anything that is not a video game. When I tell people I make games, they think video games. A lot of the time I don't correct them. It gets too complicated to describe the kind of interaction that goes on, and I think it is for several reasons. These games, while they are not new, are beginning to become more popular. There is just a learning curve as people stumble upon this type of play. Anyway, Socks Incorporated is in essence a family friendly game that is played online through a sock puppet avatar. You and your family make sock puppets and take pictures and make videos of them in order to move through the online storyworld to solve mysteries and create a character.

**How much of a game? Can you win?**

Well there are these series of missions where your sock is sent off to complete bits of storytelling by taking some pictures and videos. If you upload a video of your puppet not doing that, technically you fail. We are pretty lenient though. One mission is about taking a picture of your sock playing its favorite sports and as you can imagine, some of our players are not that athletic. They will do stuff like play boardgames and we let that

slide. It is more about creativity and imagination. So as long as it is within that magic circle, as long as you act like your sock puppet character and do what it would do, you win.

**What did people actually have to do during game-play?**

The main storyline follows Gary on his first day on the job at this factory. He has always wanted to work there, but he then discovers this mystery about socks disappearing. (who said fictional stories couldn't address real world problems?, ed.) And it is your job to help Gary through this and help uncover where the socks are going. So you need to be hired by Socks Incorporated as well, so you submit your video resume telling Mr. Barnsworth, the CEO of the factory, why you want to work there. But that is just the main storyline and at the same time, there are all these other departments in the factory that you can explore, because different player types respond to different things.

**So how is the roleplaying coming along? Is it difficult for people to roleplay their sock puppets?**

I think it is actually people's favorite part. They want more of it. This is something we really want to do for the next iteration. We found that people want to roleplay with each other. My sock puppet wants to talk to your sock puppet. But due to COPPA compliance (Childrens Online Privacy Protection, ed.), we just could not do that. In general it is pretty moderated. When something is uploaded, we make sure it fits

### Jim Babb

Jim is not as famous as Lance. Let's call him up'n'coming. He is a game designer slash transmedia storyteller at Awkward Hug. The name Awkward Hug comes from "the awkward space between our real and digital lives." He has a shady past in avant-garde film and alternate reality games and has spoken at prestigious events such as Power to the Pixel and Indiecade. He loves robots, sockpuppets and getting caught up in the game. He also has a real job as a strategist at Undercurrent where he advises the corporate giants on digital mechanics. Lucky bastard...



our content guidelines. But people want to explore this storyworld and when making this kind of roleplaying game, we have to balance rules and structure with this kind of free imagination and play. It is a constant struggle when you move online, because in tabletop roleplaying you can bend the rules so easily since it's all just imaginary. When you have to code it there is a lot less freedom there, and sometimes that dictates how play happens.

**Have you implemented any of that characterbuilding stuff in the game?**

It is something we want to do. There needs to be a way of getting players comfortable with their character before they have ex-

pressed it. They need to flesh it out a bit in their mind, in their hand and their sock before they have to put it down on a piece of paper. Once you take a picture, that is your sock puppet. So for the next iteration, apart from technology stuff, we also want to do more of that.

**In one of your presentations, you talk about what you wanted to do was casual ARGing. Why is it more of a casual gaming experience when people have avatars?**

That was to an ARG community and I would not explain this to a larp crowd in the same way. We are starting to cross-breed a lot of these ideas of larping, tabletop, videogames and ARGs. I come out of the ARG community. To me the three big barriers of entry in ARGs are: You have to play as yourself, which can be pretty intimidating. You have to play in real time, which is a big commitment. The last one is replayability. In casual games you want to play it through several times. You want different character experiences. Maybe one time as a good guy and one time as a bad guy. Socks Inc. was designed to take some of these lessons and apply them to the real-world gaming of ARGs. But still I would say Socks Inc. is closer to larping than traditional ARGs.

**I'm curious. What do you understand by larping?**

I know larping is different all over the world. I know that the Europeans and especially the Scandinavians take it much more seriously than we do in the states. Here people most commonly associate it with dressing up in medieval costumes, hitting each other with sticks and shouting numbers at each other. As I understand it, Scandinavians have taken a deeper look at it, understanding it as performance art and the impact of living as another character and how that can affect your life in a profound way. What I think makes Socks Inc. closer to that is that it lets you live in a kid's story. Even for adults I think it is like this.

You are a sock. It is not something on your hand anymore. All the content created – there are no people in it. It is something weird that I feel like I am just beginning to scratch the surface of. I want to explore it more – bringing this avatar into the real world. I think one of the most fascinating things that we have seen when people play, especially when they play live in front of you, is watching their face and how it mimics the puppet. First of all you can't avoid smiling when you have a puppet on your arm. When your puppet is posing for photos, you see that people's faces mimic the puppet and it is because of this connection you have to this mental character. I think that is the power of larping and of puppetry as well.

**It sounds like it is working, but what are your thoughts on teaching people who are not really used to roleplaying?**

I think it is actually really easy. I think it is a great introduction to roleplay. It is like in ARGs. It is hard to break out of your skin and break into the super computer to save the world as Jim Babb. Or me being a roleplayer all of the sudden, pretending to be a vampire – that feels wierd too. But when you put that puppet on your hand, you already want to talk in a different voice. It is like a gateway drug for roleplaying.

**Fantastic quote! But what is it with all this toy stuff? Lance Weiler rants about toys too.**

I think what Lance and I are interested in about toys is not only the connection between the physical and the digital which toys offer because they can be this very friendly exterior but digitally connected either inside in Robot Heart Stories or on the outside in the case of Socks Inc. It is something really friendly and soft, and yet it can become digital. But it is also this playful attitude. If you look at roleplaying and transmedia, they lend themselves very well to these cults, murder mysteries and serial killers – very adult things. I think toys are a

way to make them more childlike and playful – sort of to remind us where a lot of this behaviour originally comes from.

**You are in your own words "dancing between being a game designer and a storyteller". How is that working out for you?**

(Jim sighs...) I think it is hard for all of us who works with this kind of stuff to define ourselves. You try to wear a lot of different hats and mix media. I think it is hard for us to find our communities, and the funds for our projects. Like I said, Socks Inc. is not really an ARG but I presented it at an ARG festival because I know that is a community that supports me. There are people who want to do this stuff. They are out there. It is just hard for them to find it. If I am into roleplaying, how do I even know that Socks Inc. exists? I think this is the biggest problem. We are not able to easily define what we do anymore.

**So what would be your label if you had to explain it to a complete stranger?**

That is a little dynamic depending on who I describe myself to. But generally I call myself a game designer, a digital strategist and a storyteller. Those are kind of the three buckets I put myself in, but I am interested in the intersection between all three.

**What about game and story? What strikes you as problems when you are combining them?**

Well, obviously the right balance between structure and freedom, but also making people feel safe. I think everyone roleplays in their minds. What I mean by that is that we all fantasize about our future selves or asking that special girl out. And sometimes we take those fantasies and apply them to our lives. But we do not allow ourselves... well... when we get older, we feel silly if we fantasize too wildly. I can't be an astronaut so I better stop fantasizing about it. We should give ourselves the opportunity to feel silly. We take ourselves way too seriously.

# Play it again, Sam



Larp reruns are tough. The workload of recreating the set and finding a new cast of players often holds organizers from picking up the task. However, it's becoming popular and there are several unseen advantages over creating new games. Playground asked veteran larpwright Eirik Fatland why and how to recreate success. TEXT | JONAS TRIER-KNUDSEN PHOTO LI XIN



n a perfect world larps would be set up over and over again. All the best experiences could be enjoyed by many players, regardless of country and age.

When you heard about that awesome ten player-game, you would simply catch the next show the following month.

Sadly the cocktail of pro bono work and heavy logistics often makes this a pipe dream. Compared to its freeform and tabletop siblings, larps seem to be born with a one-shot mentality.

Over the last couple of years, organizers have started change that. Larger games are being set up for the second, third or even fourth time. Perhaps the scene is moving to bridge the logistical gap and starting to repeat its greatest hits.

This summer for instance, Norwegian larp Just a Little Lovin' will be set up in Sweden. It will be the second run of the already iconic larp about the New York gay scene in the early 80ies. Another example is the new classic Marcellos Kjeller. That game you maybe have heard about. It is set in the fictional universe that spawns the lyrics of Norwegian band Kaisers Orchestra. The Kjeller has already taken players through the gas mask wearing dystopia of an anachronistic Christiania on four separate occasions.

### Hidden advantages

Eirik Fatland, one of the designers behind Marcellos Kjeller, has been involved in creating a total of four rerunnable larps.

# Re-running, lets the larp build a reputation over time so that it can reach more players. This is an advantage with eclectic and unusual larps

According to him, re-runs comes with some often overlooked advantages. It allows us to improve the design over time and build up some reputation for the niche games.

“I see an advantage in being able to refine the design after seeing it played. A lot of conventional wisdom on larp design is based on reviews by players, and a lot of those ascribe their positive or negative experiences to the character. Hence, a lot of conventional wisdom on larp design is clearly wrong.”

Fatland continues:

“Secondly, re-running, lets the larp build a reputation over time so that it can reach more players. This is an advantage with eclectic and unusual larps, that otherwise lack a natural audience”, he says.

Re-running games can show how a larp plays out with different casts of players. To a theorist like Fatland it can give a view to some of the finer social mechanisms at work in a larp. Fundamentally,

Fatland explains, different players act more or less alike to the same stimuli:

“With Marcellos Kjeller, however, I've seen players shine in characters that other players find boring. When a character is well-received three times, and poorly the fourth, the problem is obviously not with the character. I'm not saying that it's with the player or the casting, though. For example there's one group at Marcellos Kjeller where group coherence seems to be especially important - if the players play well together, the group dominates the larp. If they fragment, the characters seem second-rate.”

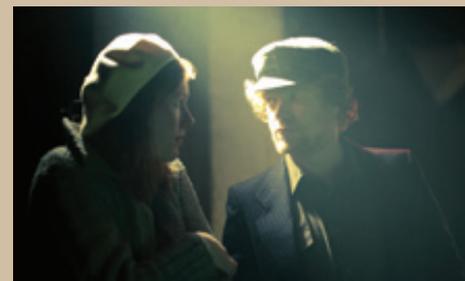
From a designer's point of view one could ask how to do it in practice. Should one simply find the best couple of games and set them up again?

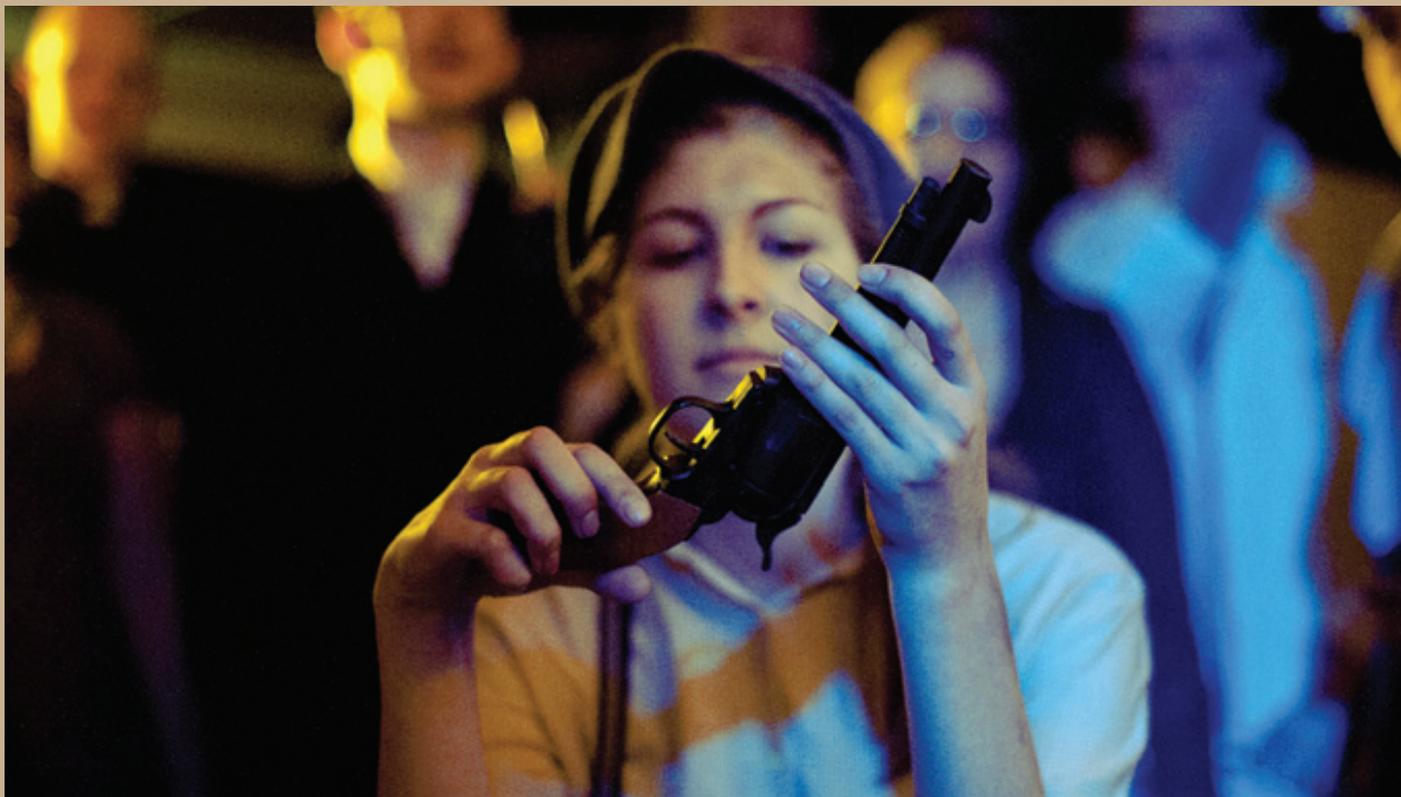
“I think successful larps should be re-run, whether they were planned to be rerunnable or not, but planning for re-runability from the onset has its advantages. I've previously designed with characters that were age and gender-neutral, so it

### Pics from Marcellos Kjeller

“Marcellos Kjeller” was an improvised musical, inspired by the songs and lyrics of Norwegian band Kaisers Orchestra, designed and organized by volunteers from Laivfabrikken - the Oslo larp factory.

All those depicted were participants in the event, and role-played members of “Resistansen”. part mafia part resistance fighters with a passion for Russian Roulette.





could be played with a variable amount of players of varying gender ratios. Marcellos Kjeller had quite a lot of gendered characters, and then some characters that were originally planned as gender-neutral but were written as gendered because we knew who would play the character. That became a problem down the road”, Fatland says.

**Scaling down and staying true**

Advantages or not, there is no denying that rerunning larp takes extra work and can put a toll on the organizers. Keeping the organizers motivated over time may very well be the major challenge in making reruns. As Fatland says about Marcellos Kjeller:

“The production involved in running the larp is rewarding insofar as watching the larp being played is rewarding. After a few reruns, that decreases. This is especially challenging for Marcellos Kjeller, which is very production-heavy. We’ll probably close the door on that one long

before it has exhausted its recruitment potential.”

The obvious solution would be to downscale the production side. Cutting props, costumes and set could make the show much more mobile. This however, does not ring well with Fatland:

“If you want a larp that isn’t affected whether it is played in a classroom or a nightclub, you shouldn’t design a larp. You should design a freeform. Even though it is an inferior form of roleplaying to me, freeform turns the lack of costume and scenography into an advantage: The room - and the people in it - can be anywhere, anytime, at any point in the game. Larp, though, is about the bodily and sensory experience.”

**No way in a fucking classroom**

According to Fatland this does not mean that larpers should always go for the heaviest of productions. To him it makes sense, designing something simple, that is

easy to set up again. As he explains about his game Lanzarote which is a farce about a group of neighbours barbecuing after their eventful trip to the South:

“It has been played realistically in a park, and abstractedly in a black box. Both worked well. But I’d never allow it to be played in a fucking classroom.”

When designing with future reruns in mind Fatland suggests “you plan for flexibility”. It is indeed possible to design larps that caters well to reruns without ignoring too much of what makes larps special. Actually it can make designers up their game.

“Reruns force a tighter design. Especially if you’re running the larp in a different location, you can’t lazily rely on your knowledge of the players and the community and the chance to explain yourself verbally to the players. You need to think your design choices carefully through – and put them in writing. This is doubly the case if the larp is meant to be run by others.”

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# 10 ways to manipulate your players

Are you tired of those pesky players ruining your vision of the perfect larp? Are those troublesome participatory game elements standing in the way of your story? Playground Magazine wants to help, so we asked Peter Munthe-Kaas to give a few insider tips to manipulating your players.

TEXT | PETER MUNTHE-KAAS



## **B**efore the larp

### **Make larps that matter**

Create your design around something controversial or personal. Even though the setting of the larp is not close to home for the players, you can work with the specific emotions, relations or themes in the game that makes it matter for them.

### **Make the players want it**

If you are able to communicate the experience of the larp clearly to the players, you can make them do all of the work. You cannot create a larp where you suppress the rebellion, but you can create a larp where none of the players wants the rebellion. It is a hopeless task to try to enforce anything on the players after the larp has begun. Ensure that you communicate the purpose and experience of the larp very clearly to all players before the larp begins.

### **The safe workshop**

Use mandatory workshops to allow all your players to meet, talk and have fun together. When the players have behaved stupidly in front of each other, have been through trust exercises and have spent a few full days together, they will be much more willing to explore boundaries during the larp. Also, by using the players as co-designers at the workshop, you will get much more dedication than if they are merely consumers of your product.

### **Ritualize**

Create rituals during workshops or preparation, that the players can share. Having common cultural markers that only they know about will make them into a happy little larp cult. Just mention “mango” to Totem (a 2007 larp, ed.) players and see what happens.

### **”Cut” and ”Brake”**

Many like the stop words used by many organizers to be tools for psychological safety, as they enable the players to end scenes without braking character. However, a much more devious aspect of the stop words are, that they give players a false sense of safety. This allows them to go further that they would usually want to do.

## **D**uring the larp

### **Control the environment**

Use closed indoor physical surroundings and control light and sound to impose the atmosphere you want on the players. If you control the circadian rhythm you have a powerful tool in your hands, and if you apply a soundscape you have the option to influence the intensity of play.

### **Adjust relations**

Build fictive relations, with strong emotional impact, giving players emotional experiences outside of their everyday range. Watch them as the love relations they created for the larp bleeds into the everyday reality afterwards.

### **Theme song**

Use a specific theme song for your larp if you want your players remember your larp. Use a specific song repeatedly in central scenes during the larp if you want your players to remember it forever. Just watch the players from Delirium or Just a Little Lovin’ (2010 & 2011, ed.) when the respective theme songs are played if you are in doubt.

## **A**fter the larp

### **Ending**

Do not allow the players to recuperate after the larp experience. Just after the larp has ended you have the opportunity to impose the theme of your larp upon them. Have a structured speech, a good long talk or show a movie that mirrors the experience they have had in the larp. System Danmarc (2005, ed) is a good example as the organizers ended the larp with a documentary working with the main issues of the game.

### **Merchandise**

Sell a limited amount of merchandice to the players to allow them to remember and flash their participation in the larp. It will reinforce the feeling of connection between the players and allow you to brand your larp for future generations.

# Ways to

# Hack a

# Larp

Participants in an interactive event like larp normally would expect some means to achieve an equal and democratic playing space. If they feel their possibilities or freedom is limited beyond the bounds that is reasonable to expect, hacking the event might be the way out of the chains that blocks initiative. To do a constructive hack, you need to hit your fellow players weakspot of what they find entertaining and cool. If you end up making a destructive hack you will take a lot of attention away from the main story and other fellow players, hoarding attention for yourself, which in the end blocks other peoples games.

TEXT | ERLEND EIDSEM HANSEN

# 1

## **The Meeting that Changed Society**

Announce a large meeting. Invite allied characters with authority from every group of players positive to your character. During the meeting you announce that you are making a new government. Elect leaders or fight out challenges. Start governing the society in a new way. Who says revolutions have to be violent anyway?

# 2

## **Bring a Bomb**

Bring playdough and some wires. Pretend that your character has a bomb of plastic explosives. In historic games the playdough can be exchange with clay. Decorate the clay with gems of colored glass. Tell it is magical or extremely valuable. A character that controls a bomb, control her surroundings.

# 4

## **The Cult of The Chosen Ones**

Bring 20 identical objects to the game. Like 20 fake silver chalices. In the first part of the game give talismans to co-players. Explain to them you have had a dream where you were seeing that person meeting other chosen people. Now you just have to tell them what they were chosen to do.



# 6

## **Play the Victim**

Stage atrocities against yourself. Bang your head in a tree, bring fake blood, white underwear, pieces of rope or other appropriate tools. Torture, mutilation and especially rape are all events that will ensure your character a lot of attention and game time. Start accusing several characters in the story of being the perpetrators. For longer games, becoming pregnant is a variant of this. Easily combined with leaving your original playgroup and joining somebody else's, that seem to have more going on than your own group.

# 7

## **Make a Portal**

Bring a boomblaster with eerie music. Preferably also flashlights, coloured light or candles. Stage a portal, a spiritual seance, or a teleporter or a timemachine. Improvise together with the people you involve what happened and what kind of effect it will have on your characters, the universe or objects. Anything can come out of a portal.

# 3

## **The Ritual that Changes the world**

Announce a large ceremony. Invite allied character with some authority from every fraction of players positive to your character. During the ritual you announce what will happen to the world after the ritual is done. Stage the ritual as professionally as the organisers would have produced the event, your co-players will believe it is sanctioned by the organisers, or if it is cool enough, your co-players will go with the flow.

# 5

## **Become a Ghost**

Stage your own death, and start haunting your co-players. An extra ghostversion costume of your character and some white makeup might come in handy. Bring smokebombs or appropriate pyrotechnics. Haunt your co-players using the appropriate gamerules or metatechniques like using a flashlight if that is a signal for fear, or do physical handsigns if you are using metatechniques.

# 8

## **The Hidden Treasure Quest**

Bring a chest, dig down a treasure or hide it somewhere close. Make a map, make a letter, give out clues. You might play it like hunt the thimble. This hack can also be combined with hack number one – The Bomb. Treasures often hold a curse right?



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# The **Theme** is Change

**C**hange is such a great fluffy word. It allows us both to look back and to the future. It allows us to feel old and grumpy or fresh as the morning dew. The next issue of Playground Magazine will be devoted to change. We do not want to be piggybacking on Obama's catchphrase (we do, actually), but we think it is about time to take a look at how and why our scene changes. When did we start to write scenarios about gender, what did a trendy larp look like in 2000 and what will it look like in 2020? Oh, and why the hell aren't we writing manifestos anymore? So we are already looking forward to issue #6 of Playground, and now, we hope you are too. Also, if you have got some kind of great idea, do not be shy. Share it with us. We have even made up some missions for you.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it...

We are providing you with three missions. You can pretend that you are a secret agent or an investigative reporter if you like. You can even be anonymous and choose a cool alias. The important thing is that we need your help, and we were kind of hoping you could have a bit of serious fun helping us.

'Missions' is a concept we will be using in the future to tap into the collective knowledge of our readers. At least as long as you people bother to share your infinite wisdom (and intelligence) with us. Or maybe just have some fun. So please – share what you know. The revolution will not be televised, but it will be printed. And one day, when we get a forum on our website, we can hopefully have some wonderful debates on these topics, while we are waiting for the next issue to come out.

## RESPOND:

If you choose to accept one of these missions, the way to complete it, is to send us an email at [tips@playgroundmagazine.net](mailto:tips@playgroundmagazine.net)

# 1

## Oh, where are the snows of yesteryear!

Not all change is progress. Our first mission lets you indulge in nostalgia. Is there something in the world of role-playing that you really miss? Something that we just stopped doing for no apparent reason. Here is your chance to complain. We know you want to. Send us your complaints and we will gather, edit and print. We will not promise to print it. Maybe it is too boring. Maybe we are too narrow minded. But we promise to give it serious consideration. So if you often ask yourself: "Where is the horse and the rider?", be a sport and let us know why.



## The die is cast

Have you ever attended or organized a larp, freeform, or any other kind of role-playing game that did not contain a story? If so we want to know about it. This issue is about stories and games and we are curious if (and to what degree) the story element is a prerequisite for role-playing. So if you know of a role-playing game that did not contain a story, where not about the narrative from the designers perspective or in some other way rejected story, we want to know about it. So get in touch.

# 2

## Change begins with a whisper

The last mission is pretty basic. Remember to tip! And in this case, it is not about your hard earned cash. We want to know about all the crazy stuff you are doing. We do not have an army of researchers. We have our spare time – and you. So if you learn about something interesting send us an email. We will love you for it.



# LEAVING MUNDANIA

TEXT | CLAUS RAASTED



*"It turned out that the rumors had some truth to them. After spending some time reading up on the Nordic scene I concluded that to high-art larpers, my Cthulhu Live game might be considered. If my game were a fluffy bunny, arty Nordic larp would be the secret policeman executing your firstborn – but for artistic reasons."*

Lizzie Stark, *Leaving Mundania*

Reading those words made me proud. Not of myself, but of the community I'm part of. Of you. Of all of us. The words come from American journalist Lizzie Stark's new book 'Leaving Mundania', which takes a close and thoughtful look at larp and larp communities. For me as a Nordic larper and part of the growing "Nordic Larp" movement, Stark's

book was a wonderful read. And not only because it portrayed us (the Nordic larpers, whoever they may be) as secret policemen killing babies. No, 'Leaving Mundania' is interesting for several reasons. Since Stark is American, her focus is naturally on the American larp scene(s), and she gives us a thorough tour-de-force of various American larp



There's a policeman who lives in fear that his colleagues will discover what he does for fun and a black guy whose attempts at "coming out of the larp closet" were met with disdain and disbelief.

The level of detail in the descriptions is high enough to give readers a very definite idea of how things are done in the US of A, and many different perspectives are discussed. This means that while there are chapters on nerd culture, passages on gender roles and thoughts on escapism and community, there are also detailed explanations of game rules and war stories from larpers of all ages. The American larp community that Stark portrays is more or less like the one we've been told about for years – freaks, geeks and die-hards, but tightly bound by their love of the game and their shared passion for something very few outsiders understand. They may do stuff most of us wouldn't dream of doing anymore (if we've done it at all), but they feel like part of the tribe anyway. These are our people. Just Americanized.

### Like 1995 all over again

Stark is brilliant at getting under the skin of the larpers she interviews, and the tales they tell are heart-warming, interesting... and frustrating. There's a policeman who lives in fear that his colleagues will discover what he does for fun and a black guy whose attempts at "coming out of the larp closet" were met with disdain and disbelief. There's even the following quote, which – though I don't doubt to its validity – is hard to reconcile with the way things are where I have my toothbrush.

*"In fact, larp is so geeky a hobby that other geeks – comic book lovers, reenactors, trek-kies and Dungeons & Dragons enthusiasts – often pooh-poo it as a lower form of nerdery."*

Of course, saying "We're much higher on the geek hierarchy scale over here!" has an ugly ring to it, but the bland fact is that the days when you had to be afraid to tell your

colleagues that you larped are over here for most of us. Sure, there are still some who feel it might damage their career, but I can't think of a single person I know who keeps her larping hobby secret from friends and family. And when I started back in '93, there were plenty who weren't exactly "out of the closet". Thankfully.

### Adding to the pool of knowledge

There used to be a time when it was possible to have read everything that there was to read about larp. Luckily, that's not true anymore for any but the most Finnish of games researchers, but the collective pool of written wisdom is still quite small. Lizzie Stark's book brings new water to that pool, and before I drown myself in too much metaphor, I'll tip my imaginary hat to her for explaining to me that Queen Elizabeth I actually enjoying larping. Yeah, yeah, she didn't call it that, but from Stark's descriptions, it was damn close to what we're doing. Add to that a brilliant chapter describing a father/son tale of geek family and gaming, interesting texts on how the journey into the larp community can feel and I'm quite content already. There's even a very thought-provoking chapter on war, larp and professional soldiering that give me a lot of new insight, and which will def-

initely give rise to some alcohol-induced debates.

Most of all, 'Leaving Mundania' gives me a little of a lot of things. I discovered that there's an American larper who's built a successful business using larp as a training tool, and that some of the stuff from one of his games was used when the Swine Flu hit the US a few years ago. I learned stuff I didn't need to know about the game mechanics of an American larp campaign. I got a play-by-play account of Stark's visit to four convention larps that all seemed to go on for too long, but gave me an idea that convention larps in the US really mean "anything goes". And I read the extremely detailed story of the Cthulhu game where Stark lost her organizer virginity – and survived it. Though I sometimes lost interest during my reading, the fact that all chapters are more-or-less stand alone in nature made for an excellent read. It also means that it's not necessary to read the book from end to end, which is quite an advantage in this day and age.

### Another one joins the new wave

At the beginning of the review I said I was proud. And I still am. Because the two final chapters of 'Leaving Mundania' deal >>

with Lizzie Stark's experiences at Knudepunkt 2011 and at the prelude to KP called "A Week in Denmark" before that. And oh, does it paint us in a light we like!

*"Discovering the Nordic scene felt like reading James Joyce or Gertrude Stein after spending a lifetime on fairy tales"*

Does this make most of the artsy-fartsy community that we belong to feel good? Hell, I know it made me feel ten feet tall, and I'm by no means the most artsy amongst the rabble that we usually label "the Nordic larp crowd". But reading the words of an outsider who writes like she'd followed the white rabbit into the hole hit me right where it counted. And it'll hit you, too, because it's reactions like Starks that make it clear that what we do makes a difference. And there's nothing that'll bring a smile to someone's face like being described in loving, humorous detail by a new admirer.

*"The crowd dropped words like indexical and ludology into casual conversation while referencing Star Trek episodes and wore non-ironic elf ears with 1940s swing dress to costume parties."*

**We're used to the outrageous**

One of the things that 'Leaving Mundania' did for me and that I think it'll do for a lot of Nordic larpers is that it showcased some of the things we're so used to that we're almost blasé about them.

*"Within minutes of our meeting, we were discussing a game Juhana had helped write and run called Portaikko (2010) which means "staircase", in which players experience the loneliness of an obscure sexual fetishist."*

After reading that and smiling (Juhana's a friend and I could easily picture him

standing tall and bald and explaining this in quiet, monotonous voice to this small slip of an American woman) I realised that I didn't even have the slightest feeling of "Shit, that's just crazy!" when reading it. Sure, I think Portaikko sounds like a weird larp, but if I heard about it, I'd take it at completely face value that it was run, and that an 80 year old woman had played it and enjoyed it (which happened). But I can also easily understand that to "outsiders", it sounds totally surreal and whack. But to us, it doesn't. Not anymore.

**And now... the masturbation part**

There's really only way to describe how reading 'Leaving Mundania' made me feel. Satisfied. Of course it evoked other feelings too, but reading her words on how her trip to Knudepunkt in Denmark changed her life just makes me want to jerk off and yell "Oh, yeah!". Ok, maybe not yell Oh, Yeah. Maybe "Welcome to the revolution!" or something like that. Just cooler. And more sexy.

*"... I feel forever changed by my experience there. The Nordic scene is proof that larp can be more than escapist entertainment; as a medium it has high-art potential. If I went to Denmark unsure of whether I'd ever game again, I returned as an aspiring larp evangelist..."*

*"I felt as though I had peeked over the precipice of human existence, and in that one moment I was terrifyingly, truly alive."*

You did this. You are the ones responsible. Celebrate it. And thank Lizzie Stark for reminding us that we what do makes a difference.

And to you, Lizzie (since you'll be reading this too). Thank you for the words.. Welcome to the revolution.



**Lizzie Stark**

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Lizzie Stark is the founder and editor-in-chief of the online literary journal Fringe, which is dedicated to political and experimental literature. [elizabethstark.com](http://elizabethstark.com)

Leaving Mundania, 2012  
Chicago Review Press  
272 pages  
10 dollars at Amazon.com



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# THE ELECTION GAME

TEXT | GEIR-TORE BRENNE

Russia had its presidential election on the 4th of March. To help counter fraud, Moscow larpers participated in the training of election observers through a game designed for the occasion.

The first challenge is to be accepted as a registered observer. The election workers have lists of those registered in advance. One observer approaching the table of the election workers is at first rejected. Where is his name? If it is not there, he cannot be an election observer. He needs to insist, to argue – it is really there. Check one more time!

It is a Tuesday evening in Moscow. The presidential election takes place the following Sunday. A group of people is

gathering in an office building to play a game designed for the occasion – an election game. The participants gathering are noticeably different from those that usually attend larps – here are people of all ages and social backgrounds. The aim of the game is to simulate the work that take place in a polling station on election day. The participants are all people who have volunteered as election observers on Sunday. The Russian parliament elections in early December were troubled with extensive fraud that largely benefited Vladimir Putin's party United Russia. In order to prevent something like this from happening again during the Presidential election, various groups set out to recruit

common citizens and train them as election observers.

Numerous challenges await the observers during play. Corrupt election workers will try to cast more votes for Mr. Black in numerous ways. The observers must pay careful attention to what they do, and when they see someone cheating or doing something suspicious ensure there's evidence by photographing or filming, and call for assistance from the police.

## Observers and cheaters

The pre-game briefing begins and the participants are told how things are done in a polling station. The organizers have been observers in the previous election and ex-





plain the challenges that can face anyone who works as an election observer.

The participants are then divided into two teams. One will play election workers, the officials who do the actual registering and counting of votes during the election day. Among those will be several trying to cheat. The other team plays the observers, who will try to stop any cheating from taking place. Participants from the group of election workers receive individual character sheets. They are divided in three smaller groups. One group of them is intentionally corrupt – they will try to cheat. A second group does not necessarily want to cheat, however, they feel forced to take part. A third are honest, and will not cheat. There are two presidential candidates – Mr. Black and Mr. White. All the forged votes go to Mr. Black. The honest votes will be for Mr. White. At the end of the session, the number of votes counted for Mr. Black indicate how well the election observers do their job.

In addition to the two teams, there is a

group of NPCs – voters and police. They are mostly experienced larpers with a background in the roleplaying community. The police are neutral. They want to follow the law, and can be friendly towards the election observers if the observers manage to claim that the law is on their side.

### **Komkon game convention**

Many of the organizers and NPCs have backgrounds from the scene around the Komkon game convention. Komkon is an annual event that takes place in the vicinity of Moscow in March. Minyaylo, the projects leader, is one of them. He also works creating educational games for companies. Each game event is unique, however, designed according to the learning needs of the client.

“We have made a variety of scenarios. We use them as base, and then adapt it to what is appropriate”.

When asked whether he would come to Scandinavia and organize the game there,

he looks puzzled.

“There would be no point. You don’t have this problem! We have many other games that would be more interesting to you”, he replies.

Observers who see suspicious activity try to film it and photograph it. They are immediately stopped by election workers.

“Stop photographing, you are not allowed!”. Police can be called upon. The election observers are in their full right to take pictures. Detecting cheaters can be tricky – corrupt election workers get help from “karusels” - voters who go from place to place and vote multiple times. By a known password, the “karusel” greets the election workers and they can cooperate to forge more ballots.

“If we didn’t have election observers, there would be no limits to forgery in the real elections”, Minyaylo explains.

The situations modeled in the game resemble what the real observers encountered in the December parliamentary elections. Fortunately Minyaylo admits





The game was held multiple times with about 700 participants in total. 390 of the participants came from “Citizen observer”, a civic organization set up in the beginning of 2011.

that the percentage of corrupt election workers are higher in the game than in real life.

After the counting of votes, the result is announced. In this round, Mr. Black got one third of the votes.

Vladimir Putin has a base of support among the working classes and people in the regions. The opposition is strong among those with higher education. As the larpers usually have higher education and to a large extent reside in Moscow, it is no surprise that many of them support the opposition. However, there are also supporters of Putin among them.

“I vote for Putin and I want him to win”, one commented, “but I want it to happen in a fair and just election”.

“Those of you who want, can leave us some money – but if you cannot, it’s perfectly fine”.

In Russia, where you get your money from is of utmost importance. Both supporters and opponents of Putin accuse each other of being bought. The only way of remaining independent is not to accept money from anyone. Before the participants leave, a donation is encouraged.

“Most of the participants come and give the organizers a small amount. The cost

of organizing this is not that high, Minyaylo explains.

“We only need to rent the place. And we manage to cover most of the cost through donations. The rest we cover ourselves.

The game was held multiple times with about 700 participants in total. 390 of the participants came from “Citizen observer”, a civic organization set up in the beginning of 2011. “We hope to cooperate with Citizen Observer for the next election, and make it a mandatory part of the training for all their observers – if there is a next election”, Minyaylo says smilingly.

#### Facts about the election scenario

The election scenario was called “Observers versus falsifiers”, but usually referred to as “Game for observers”.

Aleksey Minyaylo was the project leader, and also came up with the idea of the game. Dmitry Zemtsov and Victor Dyomin were chief designer and writer. Ilya Mishchenko from Citizen Observer was a consultant on the project.

The organizing team made 9 runs of the game. 700 observers participated. More than 100 different volunteers assisted the organizers – about 5-15 people per game.

The game was financed with a combination of personal funds from organizers and donations from participants.

I'M FILTHY RICH AND  
LONELY AND I NEVER  
BOUGHT AN AD THIS  
CHEAP!!



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