

Příloha 1: Text originálu

Nordic Larp: Theatre, Art and Game

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In order for someone to larp a rock star, others need to play the audience. The troll band Sysikuu plays in the New Weird larp Neonhämärä (Neon Twilight, 2009-). (Diegetic, Sasa Tkalcan)

Nordic larp is designed social experience. It is about visiting different worlds and slipping under foreign skins. It is about discovering what it is like to be someone else, a refugee, a Mafioso, a space pirate – in a coherent, thought-out setting with others who share and strengthen the experience. But is Nordic larp art, theatre or game?

Larps are temporary worlds superimposed on the everyday world. They are framed by their fictionality and the participant is present in the moment of playing as both a player and a character. Though deep character immersion has sometimes been hailed as the ideal way of playing (Pohjola 2000), to many players, games and gaming cultures performance or success in reaching one's goals is more valuable than the subjective experience of feeling your character's feelings.¹ Not even the most dedicated immersionist experiences exactly what her

¹ Probably the most widely used typology of role-players divides players into three groups: dramatists, simulationists and gamists (Kim 2003). At times simulationism is replaced by immersionism (Bøckman 2003).

character might arguably feel in the fictive frame of the game. In fact the friction between the game world and the real world is often a central source of the meaning in a gaming experience (as argued by Pettersson 2006). The experience of playing in a larp contains both the diegetic experience, as mediated through the conduit of the character, and the direct experience of playing. Larp simultaneously simulates and produces experiences.

Though the goal in Nordic larps is often a complete illusion, and losing oneself in a character is often seen as desirable, in practice this only happens momentarily. (After all, complete character immersion would be more akin to psychosis than play). Finnish larp designer Ranja Koverola (1998) has described larp like a pearl necklace. The pearls are perfect moments in the game, when the illusion of the world is complete. Instead of thinking about playing a character, you are the character. Some necklaces have more pearls, some have less. The continuous pearl necklace is unattainable, but striving towards it is part of the aesthetic of Nordic larps.

The very impossibility of this goal provides much of the power of role-playing games, as creating it causes friction between the everyday and the diegetic, the player and the character. This flickering between modes, which attempting to stay in character entails, provides an automatic distancing, a built-in alienation effect like Brecht's *Verfremdung*. The participant will be able to view the events both inside the game and outside it, slipping between the different social frames (see Goffman 1974, Fine 1983, also Pettersson 2006) of the game and of playing. This means that even though a character may be overjoyed, hungry, or bored, the player will not necessarily feel that way. This distance is what makes it possible to use the form to explore experiences beyond enjoyment and fun.

Nordic larps need not be immediately satisfying. Indeed, instead of offering instant gratification they can be boring, infuriating or even painful for stretches of time. Yet the playing is meaningful for the participant, which can ultimately make even an uncomfortable experience a pleasure (Hopeametsä 2008, Montola 2010).

Theatre and Audience

In larps participants play character roles; they improvise freely within parameters established by the game design and the goals, background and personality of the character. Playing styles vary wildly from tradition to tradition and time to time: Sometimes the aim is to feel like the character – to become the character in an emotional sense. But the aim may just as well be to

portray the character believably, with an outward emphasis like that of actors in the theatre. At times the players may strive to simulate a world and one person's place in it – at others to simply win a fair game challenge. Regardless of the style, larping is often performative.



Muovikuppi (Plastic Cup, 2008), a symbolic larp by Juhana Pettersson where a family negotiates about dividing of an inheritance. Ceramic cups were used as the principal means of expressing hidden emotions. (Restaged, Staffan Jonsson)

Improvisation and performance are so central to larp expression that at first it may seem difficult to distinguish the form from theatre. A larp might look suspiciously like boring Commedia dell'Arte (usually without obvious masks), a particularly obscure Theatre Game, untherapeutic psychodrama, a sort of Invisible Theatre, or amateur improvisational theatre. Indeed, from a spectator's point of view the closest relative to larp might very well be a long, uninterrupted impro rehearsal. But this is the key distinction: Larp is not designed to have an audience. Though larps can be witnessed by non-participants and judged as performances, that is not their primary nature.²

Larp is created by the players for the players. This should be taken very literally: Larp is not only performed, but created and experienced firsthand. The participation is not limited to the way any performance needs to adjust to its audience, nor to participants making a few controlled or curated contributions as is often the case in theatre. Instead in larp each participant, each player, has control over his own narrative and a tangible possibility to influence not just her little corner of the story, but often the general direction of the whole piece.³

To truly appreciate a larp without taking part in it is impossible. Aesthetics of action and participation are completely different from the aesthetics of spectating and distance. In the context of larp the whole concept of audience needs to be rethought. According to Daniel Mackay (2001) in larp the audience and performer positions are internalized in the same person: "The participant playing a character is the

² Harviainen (2008) even questions whether performance is that central to larp. Some participants do not so much perform for an external audience, but simply do. At least parts of larps are no more (or less) performative than everyday life. Larp has also been called "interactive drama" (Phillips 2006) and "indrama" (Pohjola 2005).

³ Haggren, Larsson, Nordwall and Widing (2008) discuss larp as part of a wider participation culture.

performer, while the player after the fact, or even during the event within a down-keyed frame, is his spectator.”

Christopher Sandberg (2004) calls this subjective audience the *first person audience*: “The piece is not merely ‘finished’ in the spectators’ mind, it is created by the participants that can only fully meet the piece they help create, by becoming an intricate part of it.” Like games, rituals and even everyday life, larps need to be entered, surrendered to and inhabited in order to be fully experienced. Though the game organizers often provide the setting, the initial set-up and the themes, players bring the larp to life through their own choices and action. The participants are players in two senses of the word, as players of a game and as players on stage, yet they also form the audience. The internal world and emotional turmoil of the character, perhaps hidden from the other players behind a poker face or a bourgeois façade, can become much more interesting than anything that is visible on the surface. The first-person audience requirement makes criticism of role-playing games thorny, since the critic must participate in the imagining and co-creation of the experience and is in that sense himself the artist (Mackay 2001, Ahlroth 2008).



Hamlet inifrån (Hamlet from Within, 2000) was a participatory hybrid of larp and theatre, played inside an inflatable castle. It inspired Hamlet, which has sometimes been called the director’s cut. (Pregame, Portrait, Samantha Bonnevier)



Kuusysi Vuolle, in the troll band Sysikuu, plays guitar in the Neonhämärä larp series. The player learned to play guitar in order to be a rock star for a day. (Diegetic, Sasa Tkalkan)

Larps are, by nature, communal experiences. Each participant's experience is shaped by the actions of their fellow players. Kings need subordinates, prisoners need jailors and rock stars need fans. At the core of these games is *inter-immersion* (Pohjola 2004). It is the positive feedback loop of inhabiting the game world and the character, pretending to believe in the diegetic world of the game and everyone else in it, temporarily accepting it as real – and thus supporting the experience of every other participant. The king becomes a king not simply by acting like one; he is only truly crowned by his subjects who elevate him by responding to his social status.

Viola Spolin (1999) has written that without an audience there is no theatre, and that the actor should no more forget the audience than forget her lines. The fourth wall between the performers and their audience can be shattered: the architectural division between the performers and spectators is broken down, the audience distanced with *Verfremdungseffekt*, subjected to desensitizing sounds, lightning and gestures in Theatre of Cruelty, invited to perform in Forum Theatre or provoked into being unwittingly participating *spect-actors* in an Invisible Theatre. Yet there is still, at the core of theatre, a performance by certain people for some others who do not really participate as equals.

In theatre, the performance happens for an external reason, it happens *for someone* (Kirby 1987), and there is a separation between the spectator and the performance (Schechner 1988). In larps, as in games in general, play is *paratelic* (Apter 1991): it is a goal in itself. Larps can certainly be viewed, but that is not really what they are for, nor can they fully be appreciated that way. This difference is so fundamental that from the point of view of larp most performance art and theatre look like the exact same thing. Both typically stage something in front of a live audience that has only limited input on the resulting performance. But there are strands in the tradition of performance art which do not necessitate the presence of an audience at all:

Allan Kaprow and others, however, do performances without any intention of showing them to an audience. They may be done alone, privately. Other performers may see certain portions. Sometimes there may be accidental spectators. But the performances are intended to be done – to affect the performer – not to be observed. These performances, which may be called “Activities,” are not theatre because they do not have the intent to affect an audience. It is not the mere act of performance that makes something theatre; all theatre is performance, but all performance is not theatre. (Kirby 1987)

Performance art stems from the tradition of visual arts. Some individual game designers excepted, role-playing games, though they have numerous roots, cannot claim to be descended from that tradition. Even so, larp and performance art often take very similar forms.

Audience Participation and Performance Art

There is a tendency in contemporary art towards participation and collaboration. This tendency stretches back to at least Richard Wagner (1849), who wanted to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that would be a synthesis of artistic genres and a reflection of not just an artist, but the people (*das Volk*) – a goal he himself arguably failed to reach (Groys 2009). During the 1920s the Futurists and Dadaists staged provocative spectacles that offered roles for spectators and questioned artistic individuality, and even earlier Marcel Duchamp had reduced his art to an instruction of how to create the work – including his signature. Even so, it was not until the late 1950s and 1960s with Situationist International, Happenings and Andy Warhol’s Factory that audience participation, as it is understood in the arts today, really emerged. Yet according to Boris Groys (2009) “[b]e it Wagnerian opera, a futurist scandal, a Fluxus happening, or a Situationist event what unites all of these events, each has the same goal: to unite the artist and the audience at a particular location.”⁴

It is possible to understand larp in terms of constructed situation specific works. Situations and Happenings are perhaps the closest relative of larp in the arts.⁵ Allan Kaprow wrote in 1961 that Happenings are “essentially theatre” and at that time the blurring of the line between audience and performers was limited to the architectural, to inhabiting the same space. Five years later he called for the elimination of the audience: events where everyone would be following the same scenario or score (Kaprow 1966). During the previous decade Guy Debord (1958) had already outlined the goal of breaking down the line between audience and actors:

The situation is thus designed to be lived by its constructors. The role played by a passive or merely bit-part playing ‘public’ must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors, but rather, in a new sense of the term, ‘livers’, must steadily increase.

The spectators were to be moved to action and the idea was to create ephemeral and unique perishable instants, “inseparable from its immediate consumption” (Situationist International 1960). These Situations lacked the anthropomorphic character constructs or *roles* of role-

⁴ For a more in depth look, see Groys (2009), Bishop (2006) and Frieling (2009).

⁵ Both Kaprow (1966) and Debord (1957) explicitly reference games and play in their key texts.

playing games (see Montola 2008). Their purpose as critical wake-up calls and artistic creations also limited their scope in comparison to larp

The most common motivations for including audience participation in art, according to Claire Bishop (2006), are *activation* and *empowerment* of spectators, ceding some of the *authorship* in order to be more democratic or egalitarian, and restoration of social bonds and forming of *community*. Though larps certainly can have such motivation behind them, the form was not built on such lofty ideals. Emerging as they did from tabletop role-playing games larps were always communal and participatory but historically they have more often been branded pastimes and hobbies than art.

The structure of many of the works in the tradition of participatory art is game-like. The artist creates an activity by providing a set of rules that produce an activity when they are adhered to. The experience and the art are in the enacting of the structure. Game events are both *consciously structured* by the game designer and *enacted experiences* that can only be accessed by participating in and contributing to them (Stenros & Waern 2010). Similarly, the psychogeographers' *drift* (strolling around the city in a particular way), or the more formal *Abstract Tours* (Ruggeri 2001), are formalized play, like games are formalized play (Montola et al. 2009). Such participatory works of art are especially close to larps as there are no clear winning conditions and the experiences are often *internally validated* (Dansey et al. 2009), meaning that it is the participant herself who decides when the goals of the activity have been met. The central difference to larp is that there is no story world, no narrative and the participants are present as themselves instead of playing fictitious roles.

Participation challenges the cult of the artist. If the line between on the one hand the creator, the artists, and the auteur and on the other hand the audience, the spectator, and the masses in the other is blurred, then the special cultural position of art is jeopardized. Anthony Howell (2000) has warned against the shattering of the *homeostasis* of an artwork. "To acknowledge the audience destroys the performer, since it dissolves the difference between them." This statement is based on fear, a fear that such an acknowledgement would demystify the performance. "One of the signs of weak theatre is that it is too willing to accommodate its audience – to acknowledge it – and thus for its performers to become 'just like their audience'."

But even works that require participation or co-creation are initiated by someone, who may also curate the piece or design the activity. In larps the game masters, the organizers, the designer and the initiators of the game are at times treated as auteurs and creators in a manner analogous

to artists, directors and authors; and naturally there are movements to storm even that castle, as the collective larp design method used for example in *Enhetsfront* showcases. Different larps have different levels of co-creation and participation and these can be compared to the different levels of organizing structure in participatory pieces such as John Cage's 4'33'', the nude crowd photographs of Spencer Tunick, *The AIDS Memorial Quilt* and zombie walks. In *Open Work* (1962), Umberto Eco wrote:

the author offers the interpreter, the performer, the addressee, a work to be completed. He does not know the exact fashion in which his work will be concluded, but he is aware that once completed the work in question will still be his own. It will not be a different work, and, at the end of the interpretive dialogue, a form which is his form will have been organized, even though it may have been assembled by an outside party in a particular way that he could not have foreseen.

Eco was writing on modern music, but his description also happens to capture the way game designers see their work today. They create the rules, goals, setting and story-worlds, and though each play session is different, it is still the same game – created by the designer:

As a game designer, you are tackling a second-order design problem. The goal of successful game design is meaningful play, but play is something that emerges from the functioning of the rules. As a game designer, you can never directly design play. You can only design the rules that give rise to it. Game designers create experience, but only indirectly. (Salen & Zimmerman 2004)

Game design is always second-order design, as any truly participatory art or activity design must be. The designer does not create an activity, but the rules and structures that foster it. The participants always bring in their contributions. Indeed, the challenge of co-creation is the very starting point for game design. Unfortunately there has so far been very little dialogue between games and art in this area.

Games, Art and Tradition

Historically games have not been considered worthy of the status of art, yet canonized art has mined games for inspiration for centuries. Though games are generally not seen as a form of art, it seems that it is possible for art to adapt the form of a game (Montola et al 2009). The move from being a subject of arts to being art perhaps started when Duchamp abandoned art to pursue playing chess.

As art evolved towards being more conceptual, games became a handy reference and a building block. Many of the well-known works created in connection to Fluxus are both playful and interactive. *Fluxboxes* contained instructions for the spectator-player to follow and directly

referenced games – yet they were often left purposefully open-ended allowing for different sorts of enactments (Frieling 2009).

There is a tradition of games presented as art in the context of museums and galleries. But these *art gallery games*, a genre of their own, are a narrow tradition. They tend to be objects, artefacts to look at and to ponder, rather than platforms for actual play. When these games are described, the description will list what the piece looks like and what the rules are – not how it is played or what kind of activity it creates. Art gallery games are rarely designed to be good *as games*, as the very point of these pieces is often in their lousy functionality. They are subversive in the way they alter the implicit rules of all games. This is interesting, but often renders the games themselves unplayable.

Yoko Ono's *Play it by Trust*, aka *White Chess Set* (1966), is a prime example of an art gallery game. The work is a completely white chess set with the instruction: "Play it for as long as you can remember who is your opponent and who is your own self." Though the game can be played, at least for some time, it is not necessary for the viewer to play it in order to understand what the artist might be trying to say with it.⁶ The fact that many games staged in an art gallery have been unplayable or relatively amateurish from a game design point-of-view has probably contributed towards giving art a bad name in the context of games.

There are also games presented as art that are about playing, experiencing, and the activity they produce instead of simply being objects one contemplates. These kinds of works seem to be rarer, and they often pervade the city and only use the gallery as a point of entry. The British art collective Blast Theory has staged numerous game-like interactive installations in and around galleries around the world (see Adams 2009). The closest one to larp is probably *Kidnap*, a transmedia spectacle where two people won the prize of being kidnapped and held hostage for 48 hours by the artists. Perhaps participant activities, as they are designed indirectly through the medium of the game, are less likely to be recognized as being created by an artist.

Recently, Nordic larps have also been invited to galleries. For example *inside:outside* was commissioned by Kunstnernes Hus in Oslo, and *LevelFive* (2010) was played at both Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and at the Zero1 Biennial in San Jose. Larps are sporadically invited to join art festivals, but it is rare that larps not created with an institutionalized art world in mind

⁶ In some critical games the act of not playing is the only way to win. These games tend to criticise either violence and war or representations of violence and war in games. For example in *September 12th* (2003) every time the player bombs a terrorist, it creates new terrorists. *lose/lose* (2009) goes even further. It is a digital game that deletes a file from the user's computer every time she destroys another spaceship

would make their way to galleries and museums. Whether these tailored larps will develop into a subgenre of art gallery larps remains to be seen.

Just like most situation specific participatory events, larps resist easy commercialization. Nothing lasting is created; there is only the ephemeral event and the experience. Residual works based on larps are seldom produced. But more importantly, larps require a strong commitment from the participants in order to be appreciated. Whereas contemporary art has become “yet another form of mass culture” (Manovich 2009), larp has thus far resisted being streamlined and packaged in this manner.

Nordic Larp as Art

Game designers and academics specializing in larps agree that live action role-playing can be art, but it is not always clear what they mean by that. Larp has been called among other things a medium, an art form, a social art form, a new performance art that creates a social body, and a subjective form of art.⁷ The uniqueness of the role-playing expression is concisely captured by Juhana Pettersson, who writes about larp as experiential art:

It is an experience consisting of active participation and creation, of being a subjective spectator, of engaging with both the in-game and the off-game levels of the game. It is an experience of negotiating a large amount of communication and complex, artificial social systems, out of which the game itself emerges. (Pettersson 2006)⁸

While books tell and theatre shows – the experience is conveyed through sympathy and empathy – larps make you enact and experience first hand. This takes place in a setting and a structure which is consciously designed, played with dual awareness of the game and ordinary life, and co-creative power in inter-immersion with fellow players who share and strengthen the experience. Role-playing is designed social experience as an art form.

The *cluster theory of art*⁹ provides a hazy set of criteria that any potential work of art is compared to and must meet in some way (Tavinor 2009). Obviously this is a fuzzy, debatable way of drawing the line between art and not-art, but the criteria art scholars have compiled are

⁷ For different takes, see Harviainen (2010), Fatland & Wingård (1999), Vanek (2009), Bowman (2010), Flood (2006), Mackay (2001) and Pohjola (2003). Note that On the other side of the fence there is silence: no researcher of art has written on the subject..

⁸ Pettersson’s essay is titled *The Art of Experience*. Art in this context refers to art as in artistic, not craft (see also Pettersson 2005).

⁹ There are too many definitions of art to get into in the context of this essay. Cluster theory is chosen based on its practicality, approachability and the fact that it incorporates most angles on art in its criteria.

very revealing of the way “art” is constructed in our society. Berys Gaut (2000) lists ten properties that usually count towards something being considered a work of art – and the absence of which is seen as an indication of it not being art:¹⁰

(1) possessing positive aesthetic properties, such as being beautiful, graceful, or elegant (properties which ground a capacity to give sensuous pleasure); (2) being expressive of emotion; (3) being intellectually challenging (i.e., questioning received views and modes of thought); (4) being formally complex and coherent; (5) having a capacity to convey complex meanings; (6) exhibiting an individual point of view; (7) being an exercise of creative imagination (being original); (8) being artefact or performance which is the product of a high degree of skill; (9) belonging to an established artistic form (music, painting, film, etc.); and (10) being the product of an intention to make a work of art. (Gaut 2000)

With this kind of a list and the works presented in this book, it is relatively easy to argue that at least certain larps are art. Yet ultimately, even if a few singular larps or a tradition of larps fill enough of the above criteria – or are similar enough to canonized pieces of participatory art – that still does not make larp part of the art world, art in the *institutional* sense of the term.

It is one thing for the game designers and larp researchers to say that larp is art – meaning probably that it carries cultural significance, has social value, can generate strong emotions, and is a source of aesthetic experiences – and quite another for larp to become part of the established world of fine art. The traditions and canons of art change and develop over time as a result of the field of power relations where the meaning of art is constantly negotiated. The central question is the *power and legitimacy* to define what art is. In order for larp to become a part of the tradition of art, someone in the art field needs to attain the power and the will to make larp art.

Tradition is an important consideration in defining art. In order to present a worthwhile piece, the artist is expected to know the relevant tradition and to position her work in relation to it – or at least seem to do so. In many role-playing cultures formal renewal is not necessarily considered a virtue. It is possible in many places to offer a larp constructed out of very similar building-blocks year after year – not unlike the market for popular genre movies.

Howard S. Becker (1982) has discussed art as a social, collective activity created not just by singular creators, but by larger *art worlds*. He has identified four different ways to stand in relation to these art worlds: integrated professionals, mavericks, folk artists and naïve artists. The first two refer to people who work or have worked directly in art worlds. The latter two are

¹⁰ Gaut does not consider his list a definition, but many others, such as Tavinor (2009) and Dutton (2006) do. For a comparable list, see Dutton (2006).

of interest in relation to larp. First of all, larp can certainly be characterized as *folk art*, as like quilting it is

done totally outside professional art worlds, work done by ordinary people in the course of their ordinary lives, work seldom thought of by those who make or use it as art at all, even though, as often happens, others from outside the community it is produced in find artistic value in it.

Many larp traditions deny that role-playing could ever be art and instead call it entertainment. However, the Nordic larp tradition has been self-identifying as art for some time. Becker's category of naïve artists, or perhaps *naïve art*, is a slightly better fit:

Its makers work in isolation, free from the constraints of cooperation which inhibit art world participants, free to ignore the conventional categories of art works. To make things which do not fit any standard genre and cannot be described as examples of any class. Their works just are, and can be described only by enumerating their features. Once described, they cannot then be assigned to a class: each is its own class, because it was made without reference to anything else, and nothing else has been made in reference to it. (Becker 1982)

Though this description may work from the point of view of professional art worlds, it seems ill-fitting when viewed from the angle of Nordic larp. Nordic larp as a whole may seem like a text book example of naïve art, but individual larprawrights are certainly aware of each other's works. Also, the ideology of building on previous work, of some sort of progress, has crept into the Nordic larps and established a tradition. Perhaps the best way, in Becker's terms, is to characterize Nordic larp as an art world of its own.



The residue from larps and Happenings can look astonishingly similar. On top Robert Whitman's Mouth (1961) (Robert R. McElroy, quoted from Kaprow 1966), on bottom Hamlet (Play, Bengt Liljeros).

Play and Games

In this book it has also been taken for granted that Nordic larps are games. Yet this stance can be problematized quite easily. It is obvious that Nordic larps are *play*. But are they really *games*?

One oft-cited definition of a game is provided by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004), defining game as “a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules,

that results in a quantifiable outcome.” Role-playing games in general seem to fit this quite well: there are players who often have goals that are non-trivial or in conflict with each other, there are rule structures even if they are at times implicit¹¹, there is an outcome, even if it can be difficult to quantify that outcome. Yet the fit is not perfect. The authors of this definition have called role-playing games a “limit case” of games because they lack a quantifiable outcome (Salen & Zimmerman 2003).¹²

In essence, what Salen & Zimmerman are saying is that role-playing games do not necessarily have a clear winner. Each character may have her personal goal and purpose, and they need not be in conflict with the goals of others. Every character might succeed in reaching her goal – or it could be that no-one succeeds. Even more problematic is that the players’ goals may be in conflict with those of the characters’; a player may push her character to fail on purpose.¹³ Creating and embodying a tragedy, like in *Hamlet*, is as valid a goal as winning in the game. This is almost unheard of in games; games are almost always played to win, not to lose. Finally, the goal of the player can be just to simulate everyday life in a fictional setting, to inhabit and be someone else regardless of grand schemes, facetious goals and irrelevant plots.

If games are conceived of as systems, as artefacts, as objects, then finding the game in role-playing games can be difficult. The rules can change during play, the game master has considerable leeway, specific goals may be missing, the outcome of a session can be quite muddled, it can be impossible to say who won or lost. Indeed, it is also worth noting that Salen & Zimmerman were mostly discussing traditional tabletop role-playing games, not larp. The issues that are slightly problematic in tabletop role-playing game are magnified in larps; in tabletop games all the players and the game master usually inhabit the same room, but in larps the participants can be dispersed around a house or a city – and no-one has an overview of the game until it ends, if ever.

Even so, larps have traditionally been considered games – at least by larpers. Most consider them to be an offshoot of role-playing games – the kind of role-playing games that emerged in the early 1970s and which generally are said to be invented by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson. This is curious as history is rife with cultural practices that feature role taking: rituals staged by ancient pharaohs, the thematic definition of a game is provided by the Roman Empire,

¹¹ Or they can be “invisible” (Montola 2008).

¹² According to Juul’s (2005) influential definition, classic games have six features: rules, quantifiable outcome, valorization of that outcome, player attachment to the outcome, player effort and negotiable consequences for ordinary life. He considers tabletop role-playing games a “borderline case” because the human game masters compromise fixed rules.

¹³ See Montola 2008 on exogenous, endogenous and diegetic goals.

Commedia dell'Arte, mask play and religious liturgy around the world, etc. Even during the 20th century there are numerous non-ludic uses of role-playing in at least the fields of psychology, social psychology, education, training and theatre.¹⁴ The list is long and varied, but it does show that the tendency to pretend to be someone else in the land of make-believe is something that not only children have done throughout history, but something adults have engaged in as well (Walton 1990). Role-playing is a fundamentally human activity.

What Gygax and Arneson did in 1974 with *Dungeons & Dragons* was to productize one form of role-playing, just as Jacob Moreno had productized another form into psychodrama almost a half a century earlier (Montola 2009). The form of role-playing that emerged in the 1970s was heavily tied into a tradition of gaming. *Dungeons & Dragons* was based on *Chainmail*, a miniature war game, which was based on the first modern war game outlined by H. G. Wells in *Little Wars* (1913). Wells was influenced by the German *Kriegsspiel* tradition of miniature war games that were used to teach military strategy. Following this thread leads to *chess*, the forefather of European war games – and thus one of the forefathers of role-playing games (Parlett 1999, Lancaster 1999).

If larp is an offshoot of role-playing games, then at least historically they are games, emerging from the tradition of games.¹⁵ However, in many larp cultures theatre, the Scout Movement and historical re-enactment have been at least as influential as games. Most larpers do see larps as part of a larger field of role-playing games and thus as part of games. Yet this affinity is at times and in some larp cultures more a function of history than a reflection of current practices (Mäyrä 2001). It seems that Nordic larps, though certainly related to games, are drifting ever further away from the core of game play as they absorb in influences from elsewhere. But it remains to be seen whether this means that they are becoming less like games, or if the whole realm of games is expanding.

The Borderlands

¹⁴ For an overview of larp-like practices throughout the ages, see Morton (2007). However, the cultural contexts before industrialization were so different that not all activities having the formal traits of larp should be labeled as such (Montola et al., 2009). For an overview of role-play in the context of social psychology, see Yardley-Matwiejczuk (1997) and Henriksen (2007).

¹⁵ It is also interesting that most names that are today given to larp omit the word “game”. Live action role-play, live role-play, theatre style are all labels that have severed the etymological connection to games. Yet the instances of play are still referred to as “games”.

Though the core of larping can be clearly separated from ideal forms of theatre, performance art and games, it does not mean that there is no common ground or overlap between these fields. As influences travel, boundaries have become blurred.



Garbage, the hidden excrement of consumerism. Amerika was about consumerism, liberty, capitalism, the American Dream and the gap between the rich and the poor. (Play, Britta K. Bergersen)



Walkabout (2009), staged by Teatteri Naamio ja Höyhen, combined pervasive games, larp, performance and theatre. Player-participants were slowly pushed into playing Tarot archetypes. (Diegetic, Matti Keltanen)



Tower Room (2010) by Johanna MacDonald had four stages: durational, performance, larp and theatre. Here, Icaros is sacrificed in the theatre stage. (Play, Pilar Andeyro & Alejandro García)

There have been attempts to bring larp closer to theatre and to make it more spectator-friendly: for example *System Danmarc*, *Amerika* (Fatland 2009) and *Kalevala: Vainovalkeat* (Kalevala: Warning Beacons, 1999; see Leppälähti 2009) were all staged in a way that made them visible to the public and some of them even offered tours of the gaming area for outsider spectators. Viewing is not the same as participating, but that does not mean that the spectators could not get something meaningful and worthwhile out of these games:

Amerika was walled off, but from the terrace on the north end of Youngstorget any pedestrian could have an excellent view of the larp. Some stood there for almost the whole duration of *Amerika*, following the movements of a hundred characters – reality theatre before the break-through of reality TV. [...] late at night, a stranger walked up to the organisers by the gates of the larp, and exclaims: “I’m so exhausted... I’ve stood up there and watched for fifteen hours... now I have to get some sleep. But I’ll be back first thing in the morning!” (Fatland 2009)

Though larps are sporadically staged and played in view of the public, this has not become common. Being looked at changed the larps. It emphasises the performative side of the playing and violates the privacy of these events. It is one thing to play a role in the safety of a group where everyone participates and quite another to subject oneself to the judgement of an audience.

The experience of watching and playing remain very different. Indeed, so far there has not been a successful way to fully bridge this gap. It is telling that neither *En stilla middag med familjen* nor *Walkabout* (2009), both marketed as hybrids between theatre and larp, tried to bring in an audience that was not playing.

Similarly, *Luminescence* could well be discussed as performance art. It was conceived of and designed firmly within the realm and tradition of visual and performance art, and it certainly has a suitable appearance. But even if the game world was represented in a very symbolic manner, there was little or no narrative drive and numerous methods of alienation were used to distance the players, the participants still enacted character roles in a fictive setting for themselves, not for an audience. Also, *Luminescence* was played in the context of the Solmukohta 2004 larp convention, not an established context of performance art. Of course, it has been argued that role-playing games are a new performing art (Mackay 2001) and even that larpers are Kaprow's scions and that larps are "Happenings of the Future" (Harviainen 2008).

Consider *The Baudoin/Boudewijn Experiment: A Deliberate Non-Fatalistic Large Scale Group Experiment in Deviation*, inspired by the late monarch of Belgium, who absconded for one day to avoid having to sign a bill that allowed abortion while letting the bill pass into law. In this art experiment

a space is provided to accommodate 200 people, willing to step out of their 'usual life' for 24 hours [...] The space will be closed from the outside world and mobile phones, radios and TVs will not be allowed. This is to emphasise the group aspect of the experiment and to create a structure in which the 'step-out' can be done commonly. [...] basically the experiment will be to see what happens under these conditions; people are freed from their usual constraints, and yet confined in space and time. (Höller 2000)

The event was not recorded in any way. This set-up is quite similar to larps, especially to *Hamlet*, with the exception that in larps there is also a story-world and characters for the participants to play. Yet one might argue that the shared inspiration for the event created, if not a coherent world, a frame for the social context. And when a situation is so extraordinary, the social roles that people play can be hard to distinguish from characters. Martin Ericsson (2009), one of the designers of *Hamlet*, calls larps structured as separate spaces *ecstatic furnaces*:

These games used an isolated place and time, where extreme dramatic situations and hardcore attitudes were combined in order to make consensus reality vanish completely from the mind of the participants. To achieve this, I used the whole liminal-ritual-cultic bag of tricks including isolation, archetypal characters, elaborate costuming, life-and-death narratives, secrecy, intoxication, and militaristic discipline juxtaposed with wild abandon.

Another interesting case is Brody Condon's *Twentyfivefold Manifestation*. This work has three aspects: At the core there is the experience of playing the game staged in a public park in the Netherlands in the summer of 2008 as part of the Sonsbeek sculpture exhibition. In the game, designed by Bjarke Pedersen and drawing directly from the Nordic tradition, the players form tribes that worship in various ways the sculptures created by the other artists featured at the exhibition. The second level is created for the spectators at the park; though they do not understand the game and have no access to that experience, the game is designed in such a way that

it is interesting to look at – and the players have a way of relating to the spectators within their diegetic frame. Condon (2010) used the gameplay as a “generating engine” that produced a striking visual surface for the spectators. Finally, the project was documented as a film that shows the play as well as some of the interactions between the spectators and the players. Though the play experience of larp is not accessible to a spectator, some residue of the play, if the design takes that into consideration, can be presented.

Historically, the connection between larps and games is fairly strong and it is relatively easy to find larps with strong ludic elements. Yet whereas certain staginess and a tendency towards performance are inherent in most larps, the spectrum from clearly game-like larps to simulations with no victory conditions to more experimental, symbolic or hermeneutic “being-there’s” marks a much wider territory. In Nordic larp, where immersion is a common ideal, the character failing to reach his goals is not undesirable but rather a platform for successful tragedy. Even talking about “winning” is frowned upon in many larp cultures, resulting in “games” that are not very ludic.



LevelFive (2010) was created by the New York –based artist Brody Condon in collaboration with Danish and Swedish larpwrights. It was played twice, at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and at the Zero1 Biennial, San Jose. (Diegetic, Bjarke Pedersen)

That said there are Nordic larps that embrace their game-ness. Heavily influenced by game theory, *inside:outside* is larp that could easily be not only viewed, but played with emphasis on the gamist elements. It also underlines how important the players’ contribution is; different instances of the game can have not only completely different endings, but the overall feeling and style of playing may vary greatly.¹⁶ Even so, *simulation* may be a more fitting term. Indeed, it has been argued that all role-playing is simulation and that the term *operating realities* might be a better fit for the more ludic simulations (Crookall, Oxford & Saunders 1987).

¹⁶ For example, *Prayers on the Porcelain Altar* (2007) by J. Tuomas Harviainen is designed in a way that it can be played as a murder mystery puzzle or an immersionist catfight, or as anything in between.

Erving Goffman (1961) has noted that games “are world-building activities”. Games contain roles, meanings, events and relations that make sense only in their own terms. Role-playing games and larps are a particularly illustrative example of this world-building. The characters that players play inhabit worlds custom-built for this very activity. The actions players take in these worlds need not be sensible or even comprehensible in any other context. Moreover, these games are not just worlds, they are populated by human-like characters who have personal histories, wants and needs, goals and hopes, and who are connected to each other. Larps are *constructed communities*, and they always create some kind of *social* reality.

It would not be too much of a stretch to approach larps as *social art*. The alternative social worlds that they build are not too far from the explicit agenda proposed by Nicolas Bourriaud (1998) in his discussion of relational aesthetics:

[T]he artist must assume the symbolic models he shows. All representation (though contemporary art models more than it represents, and fits into the social fabric more than it draws inspiration therefrom) refers to values that can be transposed into society. [...] Art is a state of encounter.

Larp, co-created by the game masters and the players, simulate, model and inhabit alternative worlds. Even at their least reflective there is a dialogue with society through the players – and sometimes even through direct confrontation (as discussed in the opening essay of this book).

Grant Tavinor (2009) has discussed contemporary videogames as art and done so in the context of philosophy of art. He has noted that the fictional worlds videogames offer for the player to explore and interact with give us something new: “This seems to be something new in art: the representation of the player, their agency, and their aesthetic experiences, *within* a fictional world – videogames seem to provide an active exploratory aesthetics.” Larps offer comparable fictional *physical* worlds, where these new aesthetics of action are employed. If larps are positioned as art, they bring something new to the table and do expand the form art takes.

Similarly, if they are to be considered games, then the idea of a “game” needs to expand to accommodate them. Indeed, larps do seem to be part of a larger trend connected to the expansion of the fields of games and play. The core of games, the so-called *classic games* (Juul 2005), have been surrounded by an increasing number of cultural artefacts, practises and activities that are called “games” but which do not fit the tight systemic definitions. Just in the realm of digital games there are numerous party games with mimetic interfaces where performance almost completely overshadows scoring points (e.g. *SingStar*, *Rock Band*), massively multiplayer online worlds that are more like social places than games (e.g. *Second Life*, *World of Warcraft*)

and toy-like never ending digital life simulators lacking clear victory conditions or even specific goals (e.g. *The Sims*, *FarmVille*).

Finally, there is the question of why. By looking at larps *as* theatre, *as* art and *as* a game, pondering the similarities and differences, we can learn new things about larp as well as about these three other fields. But why would one claim that larp *is* theatre, art or a game? Perhaps these labels can be used to bring in new players; maybe they lend status, legitimacy or societal acceptance to the activity. And they may, perhaps, bring respect and economic compensation for the people working in the field.

Coda

Larps are like improvisational theatre without an audience that is (not) performed for its own sake, rather than performed for an audience. Larps are Situations and Happenings that have been largely disconnected from the canons and traditions of art, set in internally relatively consistent story worlds that feature characters enacted by the participants. Larps are games set in simulated social worlds that do not necessarily have a winner – and even if they do, the players may still prefer to lose.

It is possible to situate larp in the fields of theatre, performance art and games, and to create larps that also fit under those labels, but larp in general cannot be reduced to any of those three categories.

Illuminating though these approaches can be they all reduce larps to a framework that is ultimately ill-fitting.

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