





A larp is a meeting between people who, through their roles, relate to each other in a fictional world

– Eirik Fatland & Lars Wingård



Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away

— Philip K. Dick

THE PARADOX OF NORDIC LARP CULTURE

Jaakko Stenros & Markus Montola

Documenting the Nordic culture of live-action role-playing is a paradoxical task. One needs to balance between underlining the similarities and shared influences of the larps produced in Nordic countries, while avoiding promotion of a false idea of a monolithic, homogenous culture. Like the label “Hollywood films”, “Nordic larps” covers a loose group with numerous commonalities, even though there is no single universal denominator.

Larp was imported, discovered and rediscovered in different Nordic areas at different times. It is not easy to pinpoint the first larps, due to the wide gray zone existing between simpler forms of larp and advanced forms of children’s pretend play such as *cops and robbers*. It is easy to retroactively stick the label of larp on numerous theatrical play activities or to find events that were called larps at the time but bear little resemblance to larp today.

The established Nordic larp cultures trace their roots back to the 1980s, when they emerged sporadically, often unaware of each other. The combined influences of cultural phenomena such as the wildly successful *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) and other tabletop role-playing games, the anti-role-playing film *Mazes and Monsters* (1982) that taught thousands to larp, as well as tales and first person experiences of foreign larps, especially British, were often instrumental in creating the foundation.

Tolkien societies, historical re-enactment, scouting, assassination games, community theatre et cetera also contributed to the formation of larp culture. Nordic countries have a long history of self-organized youth and young adult clubs and societies, which both influenced the content of the games and provided organizational structure. Governments, municipalities, churches and student unions often support these youth activities financially, or provide access to larp venues such as cabins, youth centres and university buildings.

A key ingredient is also the *freedom to roam*, the right of general public to access both privately and publicly owned land. As long as you do not disturb the privacy of people’s homes, you are

allowed to camp in forests, pick wild berries, flowers and mushrooms, swim, boat, hike – and larp. This everyman’s right makes larping in wilderness inexpensive and relatively uncomplicated.

While different larp cultures were born in isolation around the Nordic countries, their interaction started to grow during the 1990s. *Trenne byar* is often credited as a starting point of the Nordic larp community. Indeed, it was the game where many of the Swedish and Norwegian participants first started to realize just how many people shared their hobby. The first *Nordic* larper meeting Knutepunkt was held in 1997, and it immediately became an annual event. It provided an international stage for discussions and arguments about larp, about lessons of earlier games and about interesting games to come.

One obstacle between cultural exchanges between the different Nordic countries was language. Though Swedish, Danish and Norwegian are related, they are not interchangeable, and Finnish is completely different. As travelling abroad to larp became more common, some game organizers also started to plan for this. Most games are played in the local language, but nowadays there are often special roles for foreigners, such as ambassadors and prisoners of war. Some games are also run in English.

Characteristics of the Nordic tradition

It was in this environment that the numerous styles of Nordic larp emerged. The village larps emphasised the wonder of cohabiting coherent fantastic worlds. The vampire chronicles ran for years, inspired by the revolutionary tabletop role-playing game *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) and its larp rules *Masquerade* (1993), fostered playing styles centred around long-running social intrigues and politicking. Combat-oriented fantasy larps, culminating in a traditional battle at the end, were seemingly about conflict, but they also taught the players to expect dramatic fulfilment. Games drawing on historical re-enactment,

◀ *Amerika* (2000) brought the consequences of consumerism out on the open in Oslo. (Play, Britta K. Bergersen)





TRENNE BYAR

THE WOODSTOCK OF NORDIC LARP

Erlend Eidsem Hansen

WE WERE MARRIED THAT EVENING, at sunset. Bashfully, she had drawn her hood backward and revealed her elven ears to me. Now, entirely naked, she immersed into the lake, pointy ears towards the dark blue sky, my own elven princess. In the distance the echo merged with drumming, battle cries and murmur of folktales, forty campfires sparkled through the gentle summer night.



A game with supernaturals runs a risk of turning other characters into a supporting cast. In this game, they were used as a supportive function – as plot instigators and emotional kickstarters. They could touch on exact details in the humans’ background and story, since they had full access to all character material. Each one was based on a signature emotion which influenced the quartets in their care. Their driving force was a possessive love for humans.

We needed professional actors or very accomplished larpers for these parts and worked intensely with our cast during the pregame workshops. They practiced wordless communication, explored extreme emotional states and trained for a precise body language, inspired by the movement of birds or schools of fish. In-game, they wore a special incense-like scent which conveyed their presence even when they stayed hidden.

The feedback on playing these parts varied widely. Some felt unprepared, some were stressed out by the intense pregame work. A few were unimpressed by the angel function as such, while others had the time of their lives. One angel player even married one of his protégées.

Dancing on the Head of a Pin

I had to leave the game area after an emotional outbreak. Went to a Chinese restaurant and had a beer. A few middle aged guys – to all appearances family men – were sitting around, drinking at seven in the evening on a Sunday. One of them got up to leave, but was so drunk that he stumbled on the door mat, then once again. Seeing that, the only thing

that came to mind was how unrealistically he was overplaying it all. (male player, post-game survey)

With the many layers to this onion and the larps within the larp, each participant had a unique experience. The mental patients were kept locked up and argued ceaselessly with each other and their caretakers, were taken out for meals among the weekend visitors, worshipped their false god in the attic and were even given an in-game tour of the Womb by their protector angel. The owner of Jegelinstitutet drank, watched porn, yelled at his naïve secretary and was beaten up by an ex-convict who was hitting on what he considered to be his girl. An average visitor went through birth canal therapy, Christian counselling and physical exercise – all the while wrestling with inner turmoil, receiving in-game calls from relatives and friends, having their quarters wrecked and even set on fire, as well as enduring increasingly inedible health food served in the cafeteria.

The angels moved through the corridors of Jegelinstitutet alone or in pairs, dressed in plain grey clothes. They stood silent in the background or gently touched and whispered to their protégées. At pivotal moments, several of them gathered at once, carefully moving in unison to set the mood. One-on-one, they were free to speak more directly to their mortal, tugging on his or her heart. As their own stories unfolded, one among their number fell from grace. This led to a major confrontation with God, who raged at them through sound, then slowly progressed to despair, sorrow and final silence during a several hours long scene in the Womb.

Every night, scenography and content was modified to reflect

◀ *Staged picture taken before the game to illustrate the inspiration material. (Promotion, Isabelle Hesselberg)*



The futuristic setting, as well as practical game design, called for a gender neutral space force. (Portrait, Olle Sahlin)

The machine crew interacted with every part of the submarine, climbing hatches for access to the most claustrophobic of crawl spaces. >
(Restaged, Olle Sahlin)







Everyday work was an important part of the game. Fishermen, having returned from the fishing boat, slaughtering their catch. (Diegetic, Britta K. Bergersen)

their own research by reading books and interviewing people who might cast more light on their character.

These were highly motivated players, and they needed to be. The larp was role-played in the persistent style common to Nordic larp: Every action taken and word spoken was to be in-character, without exception. When the air alarms woke players up at midnight, they were expected to role-play from the moment of gaining consciousness. Furthermore – the players were expected to live the daily lives of their characters: Every day of the larp, no matter the weather, fishermen set out to sea in boats, women toiled away as seamstresses at the textile workshop, housewives kept house, and met at the grocery store to purchase goods and exchange gossip. *Theatre without audience* is a poor metaphor for this kind of role-playing; theatre edits, selects, highlights, abstracts. *1942* consisted of the raw stuff.

The characters were divided into two main camps: Some 70-80 souls constituted the civilian population of Herdla, subdivided into families, spread over some 5-6 houses – one of which functioned as a pension, another as a grocery store. Roughly a kilometre away from the hamlet, in a field that had been used as an airfield during the war, was the German garrison, consisting of some 20-30 Wehrmacht soldiers, the Red Cross and a group of East European POWs used as forced labour.

Inventing a model that would later be used for similar larps (such as *Once Upon a Time*), the organizers described the characters with written life stories, featuring three relational dimensions: work, family, and social circles. So a man might be a fisherman, a father, and a participant in the underground poker game, while his wife would be a seamstress, a mother, and an anti-gambling activist. All of these dimensions were typical during the War, but their combinations made each character a unique and fictional person.

In designing the characters, the larpwrights drew on their own knowledge of the occupation – for example, one character was based on an organizer's uncle, a member of the resistance who hid weapons in his basement, thereby endangering his whole family. Another character – Håkon Hammer – was based on the father of a local Herdla man, who had shared his story when the organizers talked to the present-day inhabitants in order to prepare them for the larp. Håkon Hammer had been despised as a local traitor – an officer in the *Hird*, the Norwegian Nazi army. In reality he had been a spy for the resistance, secretly carrying an English uniform in his backpack so he could invoke POW status in the event of being caught. Post-war, he was ordered to maintain cover, and the fact of his service was not known until the 1970s, when he was awarded a medal and publicly recognized as a war hero briefly before his death. Though vindicated in public, not all in the community were willing to accept his restitution.

Authenticity and Historical Accuracy

It is difficult to say how historically accurate *1942* was, for how do you measure such things? Against general history books or subjective memories of survivors? Could Thomas Nes do justice





PANOPTICORP

BRILLIANT NEXSEC MINDFUCK FAILURE?

Ole Peder Giæver



ONCE UPON A TIME

EVERYDAY STORIES FROM THE OLD WEST

Asbjørn Rydland

Dappled sunlight falls on the waking Main Street. The barber whistles as he whets his razor, customers sipping coffee while they wait their turn. A telegraph operator hurries down the boardwalk and knocks on the door. In the distance, the sound of metal rings from the blacksmith's.

Morning turns to evening. The clang of iron is replaced by the din of voices and clinking of glasses from the saloon. The pianist teases tunes from his off-key instrument. Lamps and fires light among the tents of New Town, silhouetting the inhabitants against canvas. There are no such shadows playing on the walls of Madame Starr's Boudoir, but the cries and groans emanating from the tent leave little doubt about the activities within.

Once Upon a Time was a Western larp set in the fictional town of Gibson, Wyoming, 1887. Inspired by an assortment of stories and archetypes from both history and Hollywood, it was a hybrid of realism and romanticism. This duality gave the larp a broad scope of ideas and a multitude of stories and conflicts, and turned Gibson into a varied and believable community. Add to that the incredibly detailed costumes, props and set design, and you'll get some idea of what it was like: While *Once Upon a Time* was not the first Norwegian larp going for a high visual standard, the scenography stood out for its level of detail, and for being purpose-built for the larp. Every element was designed and placed to add to the illusion.

In addition to story and character writing starting a year and a half in advance, physical preparation for the event took months, ranging from creating small details like bottle labels and hymnals to building the town itself. From April to August, organizers and volunteers put thousands of hours into setting the stage for the small town drama, and the whole process was a testament to how even the highest ambitions can be met when players and organizers work together. The larp was played around a permanent outdoors stage area for *Western Shooting* (a sport featuring period guns, costumes and old west events that can include staged shows with stunt riding, gunfights, fist fights, etc.), with a dirt street complete with building fronts (but little or no interior), a small saloon and a field. During the weekends

over the course of three and a half months, dozens of volunteer players helped the organizers refurbish and double the size of the saloon, and turn the field into a town.

The saloon and the café were the heart and belly of Gibson, the bank and mining company offices were the town's financial hubs, while the barbershop and the general store were the gossip hotspots. Overseeing the store fronts and covered boardwalks of the Main Street were the *Gibson Gazette* and the Sheriff's office. Towards the outskirts of town were the tent streets. In addition to family homes, there were the doctor's, the undertaker's, the photographer's, and last but not least; staring each other down from either end of the street were the brothel and the church. In addition to the saloon and café there was a total of six barracks and storefront buildings and some 30 tents.

I've done a quick estimate, don't really want to do the math:
For this larp I've put down between 300 and 400 work hours since April. It was worth it. (the construction foreman)

The painstakingly thorough work in designing and decorating the town paid off in suspension of disbelief. Walking down the Main Street, everything around you would pull your mind into 1887 and make you completely forget about the 21st century. To strengthen the illusion further, all play was in English. "This town ain't big enough for the both of us" just doesn't sound right in Norwegian. This language policy also made it easier for non-Norwegians to participate.

◀◀ *Trouble between local and roaming cowboys was one of the main conflicts. (Portrait, June Witsøe)*

◀ *The larp kicked off with one of the work crews returning from the mine. (Portrait, June Witsøe)*



ENHETSFRONT

A COMMUNE FOR DISILLUSIONED IDEALISTS

Marthe Glad Munch-Møller & Aksel Westlund

THE LIVING ROOM IS WARM, *and the fumes from the kitchen make Tove regret that she, on principle, demanded that men did the cooking. She is doing her best to avoid the gaze of her partner Sean, and hides her legs under the chair to avoid him constantly kicking her under the table. He's trying to tell her something, maybe a cue for the card game. Or perhaps he's just punishing her for her lack of enthusiasm about Trotsky last night. As their opponents keep piling tricks, Sean lets out a telltale sigh. Tove gets up and leaves before the round is over. He grumbles, but as she closes the door behind her, they have already started a new game.*

Enhetsfront (United Front) was a game about the early stages of a new commune being created by a group of old friends and new acquaintances in urban Oslo in the year 1978. The game intertwined personal plots and political disputes with the themes of personal choice and the sense of self-worth in an increasingly tough political and social environment.

Enhetsfront was the second larp organized with the *collective method*. The method was formulated during the creation of the game *Kollektivet* (The Commune, 2004), named after the commune serving as setting for the game. The idea was to create a larp that dispensed with the traditional role of the organiser, and to redistribute the responsibility and power equally among all participants. Equal distribution is always a challenge, and it was something that several of the players found problematic before the larp process started. The workload was shared on a series of participant meetings and discussions were held on how to make sure that all the participants stayed part of the process. After *Kollektivet*, Martine Svanevik presented the method in detail in *The Collective's Little Red Book* (2005). *Enhetsfront* was a test on whether the method was useful.

The Collective Method

Collaboration is an end in itself, both practically and creatively; creating larps is just as much fun as playing them, and fun grows in the sharing. When the *Enhetsfront* process started, all the

participants were young and relatively new to the Nordic larp scene. Some did not feel confident to take the step into larpmaking. Others had noticed that when people signed on to a larp it was more important who the game organisers were, than the theme of the larp. We thought that a larp where the participants all created the game together would create an environment where good ideas could be developed, and where names and track records would be less important than in the rest of the larp community. By avoiding terms like *game designer* and *organiser*, we simply wanted to appeal to people who wanted to create and participate in their dream larp. To quote the *Little Red Book*:

By “taking the power back” and distributing it evenly among all participants, one demystifies the role of the organizer, clearly demonstrating that a great larp can be the product of great participants rather than great organizers.

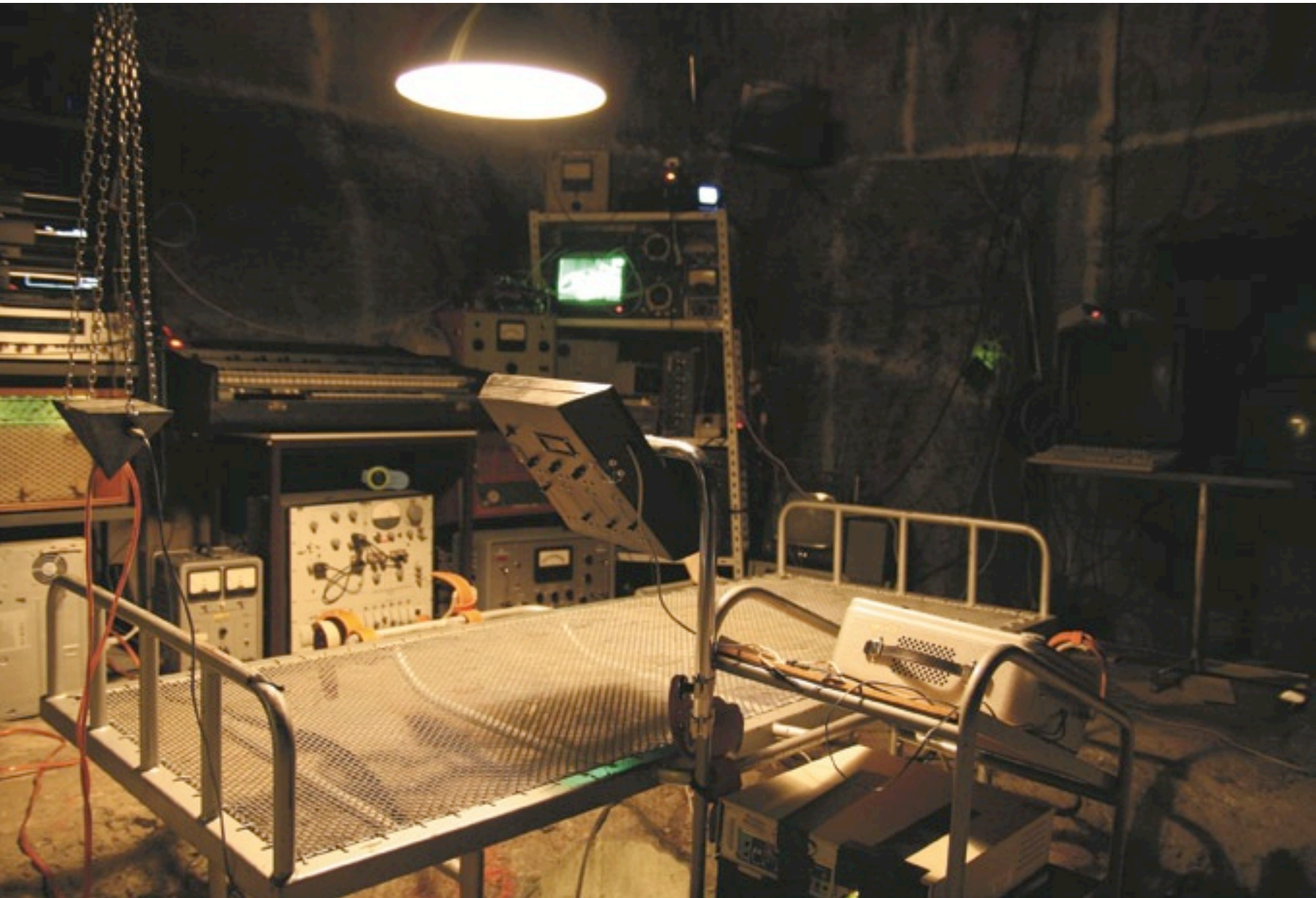
We also wanted to play in the games we made. Many of the problems of organisers playing in their own games, such as having possibilities to influencing plots and power structures not available to average players, are eradicated when all players become organisers. The method has other strengths as well: Since the plot structure is distributed, there is no big picture, and the plot gains complexity and organic unpredictability of a real social network. Any structures emerge in play; it is pretty much impossible, and undesirable, to enforce any particular theme or plot structure before play starts. As one participant put it during the

◀ *This bedroom was the home of one married couple and a third person, who slept on the couch. (Play, Agnete Brun)*





Even though full-force boxing would be doable in a larp, the System Danmarc boxers had to pull their punches. (Play, Michel Winckler-Krog)



The EVP rig, located where the nuclear reactor used to be, was used to communicate with the dead. (Detail, Staffan Jonsson)
◀ The player headquarters used to be a nuclear reactor. (Detail, Alexander Graff)



*As the headquarters was located 30 meters underground, there were no windows. Yet there had to be plants in the Earth room.
(Detail, Jaakko Stenros)*



A tight unit of Talabheim swordsmen falters at the tips of the front line of spears defending a small bridge. (Play, Kim Aagaard)

a somewhat dangerous and rather drawn-out affair that rarely was any fun.

Krigslive aimed to change this by setting up an out-of-the-box set of rules for weapons combinations, fighting formations and morale, enabling entire units to surrender or flee the battle. The larp series also re-introduced a tactical element to battles in an attempt to make fighting more interesting. The downside is that *Krigslive* has a relatively large set of rules taking up 8 pages. Thus the main characteristic of *Krigslive*, and probably the main reason for its success in Denmark, is that fighting is a fun and tactical affair that enforces a certain game balance on unit combinations and weapons.

A character death against the will of the player is a problem in many larps where players are allowed to kill each other without prior agreement. Two rule mechanics allow *Krigslive* players

to stay in the game until the end:

First, *Krigslive* features morale points instead of hitpoints: Each character has a number of these depending on her armour and unit type. These points decrease with every hit, until all points are gone, and the character is defeated. This leaves the player to choose to flee, surrender or act wounded. Fleeing and surrendering as game elements have made *Krigslives* more varied, fun and especially safer than other boffer larps, and also throughout the series as the concepts have been properly implemented. This was especially clear in *Krigslive V* as the civil war setting with civilized soldiers on both sides meant many would be inclined to spare their old neighbours quarter as compared to crazed fanatics or barbarian warriors of other fantasy armies.

Secondly, people do not die when choosing to fall wounded. They simply cannot take part in the same battle again, but may

participate in the next fight – preferably with someone tending their wounds in between or at least with a good rest in the shade and a lot of water.

Military Logistics in Larp Organizing

To simulate war, you need armies with lots of people. This is a reason why *Krigslive* has been working hard to grow large by Danish standards. The key has been to make participation simple. While you can spend a lot of money to create custom gear, *Krigslive* has embraced the mass-production of uniforms and weapons for entire regiments. Still, most regiments do spend a lot of time before the game on impressive gear. According to a poll, an average participant spent almost €300 on equipment: uniforms, weapons, shields, camping gear.

As for the gear, instead of complex and unique characters, in *Krigslive* you can manage with only a name and a military rank – unless you choose to create a deeper character for yourself. Preparatory work of the individual units is usually distributed by the players responsible for each unit, usually also the people who lead the regiments to war in the game. Due to the simplicity and work distribution, *Krigslive* is comparatively easy to organize: A lot of organizing and communicating is delegated on the unit coordinators.

Apart from contact and coordination, the main logistics in large fantasy larp organizing are food logistics, building the set and housing the players. The *Krigslive* players sleep in tent camps, the food is pre-cooked and distributed through the diegetic military system. Both solutions, along with communication based on the military structure of the larp, reduce the workload of the organisers, making it easier to organise huge events with a few organisers and helpers.

The final important characteristic is that no two *Krigslives* in a row have been organized by the same group. The concept is well-established and the logistics are rather simple compared to other larps, so it is comparatively easy to organise a *Krigslive* compared to inventing a concept of your own. The new organizers bring in their own ideas, concepts and energy to the project, and establish it in their social networks. This has enabled the event to grow, and have a major impact on the Danish larp community.

Krigslive in the Danish Boffer Scene

Krigslive is a social event; many participants consider the increasingly ambitious afterparties at least as important to their experience as the larp itself: *Krigslive* is a place to go to meet friends, an event “everybody” in the scene participates in. The series connects larpers from across Denmark and has a grand community-building effect.

As a major continuous campaign and an important meeting point, *Krigslive* has influenced the gaming cultures across the whole country. Though this is a slower and somewhat elusive process, it is evident at several points: First, *Krigslive* forces everyone to participate under a common set of combat, safety and weapon rules, which gradually helps harmonize such systems

across the country – mostly because people spend a lot of resources acquiring equipment for *Krigslive*. This equipment, which meets the *Krigslive* rules requirements and safety standards, is reused in other games. Such standardizing influences make it easier to participate in larps organized in different parts of the country.

Secondly, and more importantly, players from different cultures or regions get to know each other and start participating in each others games, which is exemplified by young players from Copenhagen welcoming players out of Jutland and vice versa. Also some simulationist players especially from Jutland are welcoming the more narrativist or dramatist styles primarily found in Copenhagen, influencing the larger larps in Jutland these years. Whether this is because of *Krigslive* is hard to tell, but it is definitely part of the trend.

The above was especially clear for *Krigslive V: I Kejserriget blev jeg født...*, the most epic and most beautiful larp of the series thus far. It was the biggest larp in Denmark for several years, and surely a game to be remembered.

Krigslive V

CREDITS: Allan Davidsen (game design and participant contact), Kåre Murmann Kjær (logistics, project organization), Sune Jensen (logistics and food) and Thomas Aagaard (game design, participant contact, economy). Helpers: Bo Karlsen (logistics and food), Kim Aagaard (logistics), Christina Cecilie Sørensen (first aid), Anders Kramer (homepage), Michael Gärtner Nielsen (props), Morten Hagbard and Amy Hagbard (clean-up).

DATE: 7-10 May 2009

LOCATION: Tornby Klitplantage, Northern Jutland, Denmark

LENGTH: 36 hours of play

PLAYERS: 460, including the organizers

BUDGET: €26,000

PARTICIPATION FEE: €50

GAME MECHANICS: Boffer weapons. Rules for formations and morale. Rules-heavy compared to other Danish larps, but easy-flowing in the actual fight.

OTHER MATERIAL: www.klv.krigslive.dk/KLV

NORDIC LARP: THEATRE, ART AND GAME

Jaakko Stenros

◀ *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 Neon-hämärä (Neon Twilight, 2009-). (Diegetic, Sasa Tkalkan)*

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 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.

Improvisation and performance are so central to larp expression that at first it may seem difficult to distinguish the

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 (Böckman 2003).



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)

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 first hand. 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

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.

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 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).