PLAYING REALITY
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ARTICLES ON LIVE ACTION ROLE-PLAYING

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Articles on Live Action Role-Playing

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Larp – acronym for Live Action Role-Playing, a form of artistic expression where the participants share a common fictive setting, enacting fictive personas. There are many variations, where neither settings nor personas are that fictive, but the main characteristic of larp is anyhow a collective creation of experience by and for the participants themselves, not for spectators. Thus the gap between artist and audience is abolished; here there are just fellow co-creators.

Knutpunkt in Sweden, Knudepunkt in Denmark, Knutepunk in Norway and Solmukohta in Finland – meaning nodal point – is a larp conference circulating between the Nordic countries since 1997.
Playing Against the Modern World?

Is there a longing among young people for the civilization of the disassembled welfare state to crumble entirely? Is there a yearning for archaic rites and authenticity? And are these exploited for a decided purpose by certain business interests?*

— BARN & UNGDOM #5 1995

THE QUOTE is from an interview with Didi Örnstedt and Björn Sjöstedt in 1995, when they were leading what could be described as a crusade against role-playing games. This was about the same time as I started playing role-playing games. In retrospect, the most interesting part of the interview may be their obvious inability to understand why young people in the highly organized society that they considered Sweden to be, would choose to go out in the woods to play medieval or post-apocalyptic role-playing games, rather than take part in the various activities that well-meaning adults provided for them at great cost. Örnstedt and Sjöstedt reacted in fear at this tendency, which they described as a “right wing anarchist

* Swedish quotes have been translated by the author of this essay.
ideology” (ibid.), they are however not the only ones who have found it difficult to understand.

**Changing values and world-views**

Many role-playing games seem to include a rejection of some of the values that we have come to identify with modernity, such as belief in progress, rationalism, efficiency and rational social hierarchies. Role-players are not alone in this questioning. On the contrary, we are often considered to live in late-, or even post-modern times. Role-playing games, and indeed role-players as a community, may instead be interesting examples of a number of larger social trends.

Örnstedt and Sjöstedt feared the deconstruction of individual identity and the individual’s connection to what they considered the real world. Nine years after the article quoted above Martin Ericsson wrote in the Solmukohta 2004 book:

> [...] making the players shed their former selves along with their entire socio-moral luggage before entering the game should be the primary goal. Currently there seems to be a lot of hesitation among players and organisers about going into games naked and head over heels, yet the game will touch deeper if one gives oneself up to it completely and enters the liminoid space as a humble initiate rather than a headstrong actor.

—— ERICSSON 2004

He is not alone in this view. Like Örnstedt and Sjöstedt, he sees potential in role-playing as a ritual vehicle to transcend our everyday selves. Unlike them he is aware of the extraordinary effort it takes to accomplish this. He also implies that this is an effort that many role-players do not make. This puts him at a long distance from Örnstedt’s and Sjöstedt’s worries about children mistakenly slipping away from their everyday selves when playing dangerous games outside the reach of “loving and supporting grown-ups” (Barn & Ungdom #5 1995).

Role-playing can be seen as a way to change the way we look at the world by trying to see a different world (the game world) through the eyes of a different person (the character). It also creates a space that reinforces this alternative frame of reference (Harding 2007). There is an escapist side to role-playing games. At their most basic level they are about leaving ones ordinary troubles for a while. To some it is a conscious effort to live a large part of life outside the strictures otherwise placed on them. This ritualized escape have been considered to question what we have come to see as the modern worldview in at least two ways: it helps players view things from a perspective different from the one dominant in our society (i.e. a modernist perspective), and it questions the modernist idea of the individual as a constant rational unity. As all strong experiences these games are likely to change the way that we view the world and ourselves.

**A romantic heritage**

What we do see at most live action role-playing games is, at least in Sweden, young people creating games in the forests inspired by romanticized versions of the Middle Ages. This is easy to see as escaping the strictures of modern society into a simpler or more authentic life. The works of J.R.R. Tolkien, which has inspired much of the fantasy genre in both literature and role-playing games can, for example, be read as rejecting both industrialism and the more collectivistic and relativistic
bedecked with classical columns and gargoyles. Residents are dwarfed by the sheer scale of architecture.

There is little hint of nostalgia in this description, aside from the gothic imagery. It is, however, setting the stage for a bleak world without much room for the individual. There is a lot of room for the morbidity that so horrified Örnstedt and Sjöstedt. Role-playing games have often also turned to the apocalyptic (as the White Wolf games often do) and to the post-apocalyptic. “Dark games for dark times” as the Sverok chairman and future IT mogul Jonas Birgersson is quoted saying in Barn & Ungdom (#5 1995). Role-playing games of this kind can often be read as a satire of our own society, thus creating a critical distance at the same time as providing escape. Both as critique and escape they can, however, be a way to handle anxiety in what is often characterized as a risk society (Giddens 1991), not necessarily in the sense that we face more or greater risks than for example medieval peasants did, but that we are constantly faced with the mediated images of disaster, and thus constantly reminded of the risks we face, or imagine.

MARKET AND ART

So far I have not been in complete disagreement with Örnstedt and Sjöstedt. The last sentence of the quote is where they descend into virtual paranoia: “And are these exploited for a decided [“bestämt”] purpose by certain business interests?” Role-playing games in Sweden have developed into a highly decentralized voluntary non-profit movement. Especially live action role-playing games can only be organized thanks to enormous amounts of voluntary work. Gabriel Widing (2008) describes this in terms of a gift economy, in the anthropological sense. Status in the gift economy is created by the destruction
of resources. This description is almost diametrically opposed to the logics of the market economy. This attitude is, however, is not unique to role-playing games. Instead it is quite similar to the logics and motivations of much other voluntary work (cf. von Essen 2008 or Harding 2009). It is typical of modern society that a voluntary sector has grown up in opposition, or complementary, to the commercial and public sectors. It is in this third sector that people may seek escape from the concerns of for example working life and school.

Some features of how live action role-playing games are organized are, however, different from the established ways of organizing cultural activities. According to the writers of the book *Deltagarkultur* (“Participatory Arts”, Haggren, Larsson, Nordwall and Widing 2008), live action role-playing is by definition a collective creation. As every participant is also a part of the art work, that art work only exist through their work. When participation ends, the art work remains only as memory (cf. Harding 2007). In this sense we have to do with a whole new kind of art that is produced by and for the participants, and unable to exist without their active participation. In a sense this fulfills the old dictum of art for art’s sake.

*Deltagarkultur*, however, focus more on the cultural impact than on the purely artistic ones. Participatory arts is contrasted to spectatory arts, a concept that encompasses almost all established forms of art and entertainment, i.e. art and entertainment that do not involve the audience/participants in the creative work. Parallels can be drawn between this view of art and Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s (1996) views of mass culture as a commercial force making people passive. The major difference would be that while they defended high culture and criticized popular culture, the writers of *Deltagarkultur* turn their argument against high culture, although certainly including most of popular culture as well. Rasmus Fleischer has argued that one need not go so far as the writers of *Deltagarkultur* and “assume an absolute distinction between active participation and a passive viewing […] which] leads to a nihilistic ideal. Participation becomes an even gray porridge, in the long run a duty”. The alternative is to see that “[t]he relation between artist and audience is an incidental agreement that may very well be reversed the next day” (Fleischer 2009).

The main concern of Örnstedt’s and Sjöstedt’s may, however, have been their view of the players of role-playing games as unsupervised children. Viewing young people as children appears in fact to be an underlying assumption in their whole discourse. This is the same point that to many role-players marks their scene as egalitarian: that this is an activity that participants organize together and for each other, rather than an event that is organized by outsiders in favor of participants. The national organization Sverok have stood for a similar line of argument; that they are an organization in which young people organize activities together. Örnstedt and Sjöstedt, on the other hand, assumed a need for supervision and education, preferably by trained professionals acting within the framework of a welfare state (cf. Örnstedt and Sjöstedt 1997).

**NETWORKING INTO THE FUTURE**

Gabriel Widing argues that the production of live action role-playing can be described as a network structure: a loose structure connecting various groups of organizers and participants. The same individual may at one time be a participant and the next time an organizer or a writer. As role-players grow up, the network structure appears to grow into a quite different alternative:
people of all ages participating on equal basis in the same events. This may sound utopian, and to some extent it is: a network is not necessarily an equal structure, it has nodes, and some of these have more connections than others. Yet, the relationship between nodes in a network is a complex one and depends on context and situation (Castells 1996), and is quite different from a structure in which adults under the guidance of professional pedagogues – such as Örnstedt and Sjöstedt – provide activities of their choosing to young people who are treated as children.

One cannot help to notice the sharp contrast that an organizational chart of Sverok presents when compared to the network structure presented by Widing and others. Both views may, however, be true as most role-playing events are organized at the level of member associations in Sverok, rather than by its national or regional bodies. These member associations display a wide variation and are in many cases quite short-lived. It is for example not uncommon for a group organizing a game to simply set up an association that may or may not cease to exist when the game is finished. Many associations are thus ad hoc organizations and the field of organizers and participants may thus be better described in terms of a network than by an organizational chart that superficially resembles that of most national youth organizations in a Sweden that has essentially been a neo-corporative state (Harding 2009).

**CONCLUSION**

If the descriptions presented in this essay are correct, it is no surprise that role-playing games seemed both alien and dangerous to Örnstedt and Sjöstedt, who both appear to have identified strongly with their roles in the professional hierarchies of what they describe as the “civilization of the disassembled welfare state”, legitimized by their status as educated adults and, to some extent, as guardians of a rationalistic modernity. That modernity is giving way to post- or late-modernity. Trends that once were alien, are now major characteristics of a *Zeitgeist* in a society where the deconstruction of identity is part of governmental rhetoric and vampires and disasters are the theme of any number of blockbuster movies.

This makes role-playing games interesting in their rejection of rationalistic modernity, organizationally, as well as in terms of genre and narrative. This is, however, not to say that they herald any end of civilization, or even of modernity. Romanticism and the Gothic have been present in reactions against an overly rationalistic modernity for as long as it has existed. Network structures may be how almost everything is connecting today. The inclusion of Sverok among the established youth organizations of Sweden may be a sign of the counter-culture’s ongoing integration into society, as may the recruitment of role-playing organizers to do participatory appendices to popular TV-shows. This may not be a revolution, but it remains a way of handling anxiety in a changing society by providing escape, as well as critical distance, possibly in a way that is constructively creative to society as well as to the individual. Much as the old Romantic movement, it is a sign, and a symptom, of that rationalism alone does not give meaning to human life.

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LITTERATURE


Fyhr (2003), De mörka labyrinterna. Gotiken i litteratur, film, musik och rollspel, Göteborg: Ellerström.


Vampire: The Masquerade, no date, printed in Canada, White Wolf Gaming Studio.


Örnstedt and Sjöstedt (1997), De övergivnas armé. En bok om rollspel, Stockholm: Norsteds
Playing reality is an anthology of articles on live role-playing, a new art form where the Nordic countries are at the front edge. This book covers a wide range of topics and genres, from practical advice, historical reviews and visions of possible futures to semiotic and philosophical analysis. They show some of the diversity of participatory arts, and will thus be of interest for anyone in the fields of art, education or performance. It wouldn’t be misleading to claim that live role-playing has realized the dream of the Gesamtkunstwerk – at last!

Playing reality is published for Knutpunkt, the Nordic conference on live role-playing which alternates between the Nordic countries. In 2010 it’s held in Sweden.