

CROSSING

THEORETICAL

BORDERS

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EDITED BY
KARETE JACOBSEN MELAND & KATRINE ØVERLIE SVELA
THE OFFICIAL BOOK OF KNUTEPUNKT 2013



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Knutepunkt is a meeting place, somewhere we can exchange ideas, thoughts and observations. It is a place where theory is crossing borders, and where experience blends with theory.

We want to facilitate the book being read and understood; that the theoretical contributions can be beneficial and not out of reach for any of us, especially not the first-timers at Knutepunkt. Therefore, we have borrowed some conceptual clarifications from nordiclarp.org, trying to make our community and its ideas more accessible. In the words of last year's editor Juhana Pettersson (2012: 10): "Academic writing about role-playing games has its own venues, leaving us to take a more essayistic approach. I'd say the fight for credibility has been won, so we're free to focus on what's truly interesting"; we have also decided that we wanted our theoretical contributions to be shorter and more journalistic, and as catchy and appealing as possible.

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THE DIEGETIC HORSE YOU RODE IN ON!

J. TUOMAS HARVIAINEN | “When someone turns my hobby into a science, I’ll quit,” said a friend of mine, who used to organize larps. True to her word, she has stopped making them, but I believe it had more to do with her schedule than any research. Her point nevertheless stands, and is witnessed time and again in action.

As in many professional areas, a one-way gap exists between those who do theory, guidebooks, and analysis, and those who create actual works. Whether in engineering, education, or larping, the same rule too often applies: Those who feel a passion for doing, yet have a dislike of studying, tend to also dislike all analysis and theory relating to what they do. It is seen as someone else trying to impose rules on their art and craft. In larps, surprisingly enough, this also goes for documen-

tation, not just analysis. As larp documentation has come to encompass not only a few photographs and a short description of sporadic, memorized events by a player or two, but rather entire books, this is a dramatic isolationist attitude.

When I addressed this issue to some degree in the KP2011 rant book (Harviainen, 2011), I expected the problem to be much smaller. I was sadly mistaken. Evidence has repeatedly arisen, on internet fora, in chats, and in personal discourse. What first seemed like a gap between habits and patience has revealed itself as a gap between play cultures.

Excluding certain very useful practical tools like the *Ars Amandi* method, design inventions do not seem to spread much, despite the fact that people are in direct contact with each other, or are even friends. Though this does not seem probable, it is actually quite natural. Role-players have a very strong tradition of wanting to create their

DESIGN INVENTIONS
DO NOT SEEM
TO SPREAD MUCH

own game systems and fictional worlds, one that may rise from the wargaming roots of role-playing games (see e.g. Peterson, 2012), even when they derive material from other games and popular fiction. This emphasizes the “auteur” aspect of larp design – everyone wants to innovate on their own and come up with the credit for inventing something great. What we need is a willingness to try out the new inventions elsewhere, to break the auteur-mold in some parts while sticking to it for the larger vision, and we’ll be fine. Just look into the



widening success of *Ars Amandi* and its descendants, as a guiding example, and you'll get a good idea how it's done.

I have come to expect something between an aggressive knee-jerk statement (starting with a statement containing the word "pretentious") and the very rare maximum positive "OK, interesting, but not something I'd do myself" from certain very vocal people. Many, but by no means all, of them come from the British larp communities. These reactions appear when they are exposed to either anything relating to larp theory (mostly hostile) or to documentation (mostly indifferent). Yet this undercurrent has also existed within the Nordic scene. It seems to me that it went into hiding when the Knutepunkt scene managed to agree to disagree and start look for commonalities, around 2006-2007, but it has recently resurfaced.

I believe the reason for that is the increase in documentation, particularly very thorough, stylish documentation

DIVERSIFICATION OF
LARP-RELATED
TASKS IS SEEN AS A
LOSS OF FOCUS

seen in books like *Nordic Larp* (Stenros & Montola, eds., 2010), *Do Larp* (Andresen et al., eds., 2011) and *The Book of Kapo* (Raasted, ed., 2012). A small but vocal group of larp organizers has interpreted this as, "we're

more interested in promoting and documenting than in making good games". In other words, diversification of larp-related tasks is seen as a loss of focus and a waste of energy. This is highly reminiscent of the critique leveled against many larp theorists and analysts, who have been

perceived as coming from an ivory-tower angle, as they are not themselves larp designers or organizers. The rare few theorists who do design, myself included, get complaints from the same people about design bias in what they write about. It appears that, for some, the very act of analyzing larp causes a taint, the taint of misplaced scientific thought that worried my friend.

The recent reception of my traditional, popular Knutepunkt presentation, which summarizes each year's academic larp publications and key documentation epitomizes this. Unable to attend the event this time, I sent a proposal to the program team to do it by way of video. They asked some extra questions and promised to respond the next week – and then completely forgot about the whole thing. While just one occasion, this illustrates the way many people still ignore research and documentation they themselves do not see as worth adapting. Or, on the other hand, it may be just an accidental omission, the reception of which reflects the paranoia that a researcher develops regarding potential audiences. So take my words with a grain of salt.

OR, IT MAY REFLECT
THE PARANOIA
THAT A RESEARCHER
DEVELOPS

Nevertheless, improvement has been seen – outside the Nordic countries. When things expand outside our own circles, people suddenly start to pick up ideas and play with them, improve them, and so forth. This goes way beyond just individual emissaries. We are seeing a new wave of influences, as the concepts reach new hands and develop. What we know as *Nordic larp* is currently de-

veloped in an inclusive way outside its places of origin. Its strongest new ideas are neither appreciated by us, nor applied by us, but by non-Nordic readers who have an interest in putting the good parts to actual work. Just look at some of the examples in *States of Play* (Pettersson, ed., 2012) or *LARP: Myśli i Skice* (Chmielewski, ed., 2012). Whereas we tend to stick to, say, our favorite template for creating larp plot structure, someone out there is reading our descriptions on the various ways we each do it, and choosing which ideas to apply for what game, and how. Meanwhile, we just bicker on which of them is best.

We have lost our edge because we are content to ignore the wider world represented by the growing corpus of literature. Perhaps it's time to change that.

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ARS AMANDI

a technique where the players are facing each other, and the way their hands touch are meant to simulate sex and intimacy between the characters.

BLACKBOX

a room where players
may go to play out scenes that
don't fit the here-and-now
of the larp.

NAMING THE MIDDLE CHILD

ANNA WESTERLING | After play-testing my latest scenario for the Danish role-playing convention Fastaval, one of my Swedish larp friends said, “This was a great larp.” To me, the scenario was clearly a freeform scenario, but to this young Swedish larper it was clearly a larp. Why did we view it so differently?

I will sort out the origin of freeform and its many names, how it has crossed borders both between different gaming cultures and different countries, how the crossing created new ideas and hybrids with new names, and how that makes it harder for us to communicate about what we do. I have been a part of both the larp and the freeform scene for over 15 years and I have watched what once began with players throwing out their rule-books, later became an important part of Nordic larp.

TERMINOLOGY: TABLETOP – FREEFORM – LARP

I see role-playing games as a continuum, with tabletop role-playing games at one end and larps at the other.

In a tabletop game, you sit around a table while a gamemaster tells you where you are, what the world looks like, what happens when you do different things, and so on. You have characters that have different skills and qualities and it is up to you as the player to manage these skills and collaborate with the other players' characters to win the adventure of the game. The players push the game forward by telling the gamemaster what they want to do next. Games may have more or less competition, tables and dice, or drama and interaction between the players. Each game session usually takes four players and lasts about four hours, although the same characters may appear in multiple episodes over a long period of time.

MORE OR LESS
COMPETITION, TABLES
AND DICE, OR DRAMA
AND INTERACTION

At the other end of the spectrum, you have larps, where players physically embody a character in a 360° setting. You walk, eat, sleep and dress as your character and everything you see is part of the game. There is no gamemaster or skill sheet, but rather a character, some relationships and your own improvisations and interpretations based on them. Larp focuses on interaction with the other players and the environment. The number of players is infinite and in theory, the game can last forever.

Somewhere in-between these two poles, we have freeform games. Freeform games use a gamemaster to tell

the story and set the scenes. Typically written for four people, a freeform game features collaborative storytelling, lasts about four hours, and takes place in a neutral room. The play focuses on telling a good, predefined story through improvisational playacting. Scenes are played “on the floor” – four chairs easily become a car and a banana a gun. Most often, the scenarios deal with contemporary problems in a realistic setting.

THE ORIGIN OF FREEFORM AND ITS SIBLINGS

In the 1980s, tabletop role-playing was big. *Dungeons & Dragons* was everywhere, including toy stores, and the tradition of role-playing conventions in the Nordic countries began. Gothcon, Sweden, began in 1977 and Fastaval, Denmark, started nine years later. Somewhere around that time, people started writing games.

A tabletop game is part of a system, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Vampire the masquerade* or *Call of Cthulhu*. The players drive the scenario so there needs to be both a world and an extensive set of rules to handle the scope of the players' ambitions. The systems must be able to handle this variety, and provide tables and dice to resolve every possible eventuality. When writing a scenario, or adventure as it is called in tabletop gaming, you choose a system and world for it as a base. When registering a scenario at a convention in Scandinavia, you specify which system.

FOUR CHAIRS EASILY
BECOME A CAR, AND
A BANANA A GUN



When people started to write scenarios without a pre-defined system there was a problem when registering those games to conventions. The scenario without a system became freeform. So freeform is originally literally that; a role-playing game which is free of a form or a system. In Sweden it was called freeform (Sw. *friform*) while in Danish it was systemless or ruleless (Da. *systemløst* or *regelløst*).

When conventions wanted to hold competitions in role-playing, from a tabletop point of view it was natural to let teams compete in how well they managed the adventure and this is how it is still done at Swedish conventions. However Danish Fastaval took a different turn by intro-

ducing a scenario-writing competition in 1992: the Otto prize. Fastaval acknowledged that the scenario writers were the most important contributors and rewarded writers of new freeform scenarios, to motivate the making of even better scenarios in the future. (Bach Petersen, 2011)

There were some regional variations, for example, Emma Wieslander visited Fastaval in the early 1990s, and brought the idea of a scenario competition to Sydcon, Sweden, awarding the first Emmie prize in 1994. As a result, Sydcon became the center of the Swedish freeform scene, since it focused on scenarios rather than teams. The different ways of rewarding games created two very different cultures.

A game being signed up to a convention under the term system-free or freeform, could include anything from an unpublished dungeon crawl, to a game based on acting and improvisation. The fact that the term was so wide became a problem. Around 2000 a community of experimental game designers began to form in Sweden and had a hard time explaining what type of games they designed. Freeform was too

**IN JEEPFORM,
RESTRICTIONS
FOSTER CREATIVITY**

wide a designation, so instead they dubbed their style of game jeepform. You could google it, and it was their own term. A few criteria for jeepform are presented at

jeepen.org. In short, it revolves around scenarios that have a message or premise – something the game is about – rather than simply a setting. In jeepform, restrictions foster creativity and let the players know where the story is headed, and designers trust the players to make the game a rewarding experience. Jeepform has since influenced the way we see freeform so what I describe above as freeform – “on the floor”-play with improvisational elements – also describes jeepform.

In order to specify different types of games on the scale between larp and tabletop, even more terms have been introduced. In addition to freeform, the Danes also use the term semi-larp. The word originates from when larpers arrived on the Fastaval scene (traditionally the province of tabletoppers) and brought elements of larp and improvisation into the games, the result being semi-larps. Semi-larp overlaps with, or perhaps

belongs under freeform’s wide umbrella. When the tabletoppers edged toward the middle of the spectrum, they called it freeform, and when the larpers did so, they called it semi-larp.

The ironic thing is that despite being called free, freeform differs from both tabletop and larp in that the players do not drive it. Freeform relies on a predefined story, with the gamemaster setting scenes based on written material. In both larp and tabletop it is possible to end up in a situation where the gamemaster asks, “What do you do now?” When it comes to story, freeform stands out for being the least free and having the most restrictions.

FREEFORM SNEAKS INTO LARP

So why did my young Swedish larp friend call my jeepform freeform roleplaying game a larp?

When I joined the Swedish freeform scene around 2000, the Swedish freeform operated on the side of the ordinary scenarios as a strange, artsy thing, in contrast to Fastaval, which incorporated freeform. But around 2003 the freeform scene at Swedish conventions died. Only a few people wrote freeform scenarios, and after they left the convention, no one else did. After Danish designer Frederik Berg Østergaard visited Sydcon, he simply brought jeepform and its frontman Tobias Wrigstad over to Fastaval, which still had a robust freeform scene, since the Danes had chosen to encourage writers.

**THE FREEFORM SCENE
AT SWEDISH CON-
VENTIONS DIED**



I stopped visiting conventions when the freeform scene died, but by then I had learned that a four-hour game in a classroom could deliver a game experience as good, or better than a four-day larp. I wanted hard-hitting games that delivered a good emotional experience; fewer people and a shorter time made the story tighter.

I still loved larps, and decided to mix the forms. In 2007, I designed *A Nice Evening With the Family*, which combined freeform and larp. I got Tobias Wrigstad, who by then had spent four years on Fastaval, into the organizing team. *A Nice Evening* used jeepform and freeform techniques. We used preset stories – seven different Nordic theatre plays – forbade secrecy, used acts to pace the game and let players work in small groups with a gamemaster. We had freeform improvisation based around the story both in a mandatory one-hour so-called meta-hour, and in a voluntary black box. We focused on telling a tight story that would touch us all.

A SHORTER TIME
MADE THE STORY
TIGHTER

This tradition of the meta-hour in larp continued at the convention Höjdpunkt (2008). Admission was free if you contributed a game, workshop or other non-lecture experiment. Mostly populated with *A Nice Evening* players, many attendees experimented with stuff dubbed meta after the meta-hour. We continued to mix larp and freeform and started the whole convention with a jeepform game that all participants played in small groups.

FREEFORM HITS THE NORDIC SCENE

The main organizers of the Norwegian Knutepunkt 2009, Trine Lise Lindahl and Tor Kjetil Edland, also attended Höjdpunkt and incorporated the idea of opening the convention with a freeform scenario. The following year I served as the main organizer of Knutepunkt 2010 in Sweden, and opened the convention with a freeform game written by veteran Fastaval-writer Mikkael Bækgaard. This was important since the Knutepunkt and Fastaval scene until then had existed separated from each other, both exploring progressive interactive storytelling in what they saw as different forms; larp and freeform. This was yet another way of bringing them together. In all we made the structure of Knutepunkt 2010 very game-influenced with a show, don't tell theme and lectures limited to 45 minutes.

BOTH EXPLORING
PROGRESSIVE INTER-
ACTIVE STORYTELLING

The freeform games were now an official part of the Nordic larp scene, although the organizers of Knudepunkt 2011 in Denmark chose not to continue the game track, arguing that they had their games at Fastaval, and Knutepunkt was for something else. But freeform games, metatechniques, and A Nice Evening had already made their impact in Norway, influencing the design of 2010's *Mad About the Boy* by Tor Kjetil Edland, Trine Lise Lindahl and Margrete Raaum, and 2011's *Just a Little Lovin'* designed by Hanne Grasmø and Tor Kjetil Edland. Both larps used acts to pace the game, refrained from having secrets, and included a black box for meta-scenes; in other words, used improvisational

freeforming as part of the game. They also included the classic larp technique of total freedom for the players, thereby balancing the games between script and freedom, control and chaos.

Meanwhile, in Sweden, tape-larp was born, an offshoot of the experiments born out of Höjdpunkt and the larp convention Prolog, which began in 2009, and had access to many large black boxes. Many of the experiments were done in the style of the movie *Dogville*. Players and organizers put tape on the ground to denote different play areas.

So when my young larp friend, who entered the scene around 2010, called my freeform game a larp, she wasn't totally wrong. The Swedish freeform scene died in 2003, and what I once knew as freeform has long since been adopted by the Swedish and Norwegian larp scenes, and incorporated the same techniques into the Nordic larp tradition. At Fastaval, my scenario still counts as freeform, but they also see big inspirational potential in the international larp scene. In Fastaval's 25th anniversary book, Danish designer Max Møller wrote "It would be fantastic if Fastaval became the boiling pot for the meeting between Danish scenario culture, American indie role-playing games and Scandinavian larp" (Bach Petersen, 2011; my translation).

SOME KIND OF HY-
BRID THAT GOES BY
A MYRIAD OF NAMES

What began with some players throwing out their rulebooks is now some kind of hybrid that goes by a myriad

of names – freeform, semi-larp, tape-larp, jeepform, indie games, role-playing and so on, depending on what culture and country you are in. It is not larp and it is not tabletop, but rather something completely different. We need to find a common name; otherwise, how will we communicate about the sorts of games we make? We still have borders to cross in terms of finding a common language.

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BLEED

When emotions bleed over
between player or character,
in either direction

THE NARRATIVE PARADOX

BJØRN FLINDT TEMTE | If you've ever ventured into the more academic regions of interactive storytelling literature, you have undoubtedly come across the term *Narrative Paradox*. This paradox describes the clash between player agency and auteur intention, which is only too relevant for the digital interactive narratives. If you give the player total freedom to choose his or her actions within the story, it is utterly impossible to also have a controlled and thus great narrative. At least, this has been the general conception within the academic community since its inception. But, while the narrative paradox may very well hold true for normal interactive digital narratives of both game and non-game variety, is it also relevant for larps?

In my opinion, role-playing games have long been the most effective medium for interactive narratives, and

I believe that they hold the solutions to many of the challenges within the academic interactive narrative community. Nevertheless, I do think that role-playing games are also affected by the narrative paradox, and that we have more or less consciously been finding solutions through our scenario- and character design. For instance, while frowned upon, railroading is a most natural reaction to players exercising their agency in ways that disrupt the organizer's planned narrative path.

Railroading also, to me, symbolizes the key difference in approach between linear and interactive narrative authoring. Authors of linear narratives, be they writers of books, films, TV or even games, approach the task with an attitude that they are the creators and mediators of the *story*, and it is merely a question of conveying this story optimally to the reader or viewer. Reversely, I have found that the most effective approach to writing (or rather, constructing) interactive narratives is to be more of a facilitator. The best interactive narrative *writer* is thus not a storyteller, but a story *enabler*, focusing on creating a structure and character set which allows the most possibilities for meaningful player agency. Each of these should allow the players to collaboratively create an effective emergent story. As soon as you start to believe that you know the best way a role-playing scenario will be played, you're leaning too far towards storytelling. Reversely, rely too heavily on the players to be able to create a good story, and you risk giving them a disengaging experience with an aimless and disinvolved

THE MOST EFFECTIVE
APPROACH IS
TO BE MORE OF A
FACILITATOR



ing story. So, whether you pre-write the characters for a larp, or host character creation workshops prior to actual play, you have probably experienced the difficulty in striking a balance between play opportunities and tight plot structure, especially if you desire to convey a strong theme or concept. Fortunately, by becoming aware of the narrative paradox, you can take several measures towards striking a balance that few other mediums afford. Ask yourself the following questions when preparing a larp, and the answers should help you give more agency and a better story experience to your players.

What's your authorial approach? Do you have a strict story progression in mind, with a clear opinion about the story evolution? If yes, then you should consider either adding more plot strands to the story, using some of the other tools mentioned here to allow for greater agency, or maybe just consider letting go of the reins a bit. Maybe run two playtests, one with a tight structure, and one where you sandbox it and observe how things evolve?

What's your setting framework? How much does your setting restrict the player agency, and is it done through narrative or game mechanisms? The players will usually be much more forgiving towards restricted agency if the story world has internally consistent logical explanations for these restrictions.

Are your characters set up with internal and external conflicts, and will these naturally create story opportunities? If you rig your characters too rigidly, with character descriptions that almost dictate how the player is to re-

act in any given situation, you effectively restrict player agency. Reversely, tightly rigged characters, when done right, are a great tool for evolving the story in the intended direction without resorting to more drastic means.

Do you have any planned instigating story events that can be used to propel your story forward? These can be used to rein floundering stories in if the players are going too far off course. But use too many, and you risk effectively railroading your players. Ideally, create a number of instigating events, then select and introduce the most relevant ones when the time is right.

Lastly, don't forget that all the meta-aspects of the game, from contents on the website to the way you're behaving as you introduce elements to the player, all put the players in a specific mood. If everything is tight, cool and professional, your players will go into the scenario with a very different starting point compared to a more loose and casual approach.

The narrative paradox, like bleed, is defining a core characteristic of RPGs and larps, yet one which we haven't had a term for until quite recently, at least not in our community. Nevertheless, it has affected so many of our role-playing experiences, that we're long overdue with a debate on its precise implications and remedies. So, let us.

CUT AND BRAKE

if things get intense, the players can say the safeword "cut" to stop the play, and "brake" to downplay the scene.

DEBRIEFING

a structured conversation held after a larp ends; critique and evaluation; and de-roling, helping players to articulate and deal with difficult emotions, thoughts or relationships that arose during the course of the larp.

BEAUTY OR THE BEAST?

LAURA MITCHELL | In academic studies of monsters and the monstrous, monsters have two purposes. They are the Other against which order may be defined and simultaneously, the deviations from the order, the potential for a new and different (potentially horrifying) world (see Botting, 2003). Monsters offer possibilities, but they also endanger the present systems. In UK larp, the term *monster* is used to describe volunteers who assist in running a larp. This includes performing non-player characters or just helping behind the scenes. The organizer tasks of recruiting monsters and determining their compensation are considered both very important and somewhat sensitive, as some monsters can turn out to be incredibly helpful larp citizens, and others a great burden to organizers. I suggest a possible three-tier category system of the types of monster roles or activities

common in UK larp, and would like to ask: does labelling these volunteers monsters emphasise their role as beauty, or as beast?

MONSTERS IN UK LARP

Most UK larp relies on a crew of volunteers to run, often known as crew or monsters. These volunteers may help with anything from digging holes, to acting out the roles of bad guys, refereeing game regulations or providing first aid. They are usually rewarded in some way for their time and involvement, either through in-game benefits, or out of game perks such as free food, indoor accommodations and the like.

To be more specific in the use of the term: although volunteering to monster, or “going monsterring” may refer to helping with any backstage task to facilitate the game on behalf of the organizers, in most cases it refers to performing a costumed acting role according to a specified monster brief. A brief comprises a rough guideline from which the volunteer may improvise an appropriate script of dialogue or behaviour.

MONSTERS AS SERVANT OF THE GOD-LIKE MASTER

Where a player in a larp game may have full control of their actions and dialogue, subject to the restrictions of their embodied capabilities, monsters can be understood as lesser people, subject to the whims of the organizer or referee. Some monster roles may involve representing cannon fodder such as weak little goblins or gretchen tasked with inconveniencing players, who in turn are obliged to slaughter the beasts and reaffirm

their status as heroic figures – the larp equivalent of removing a household spider from the bathtub. There is little opportunity, in such roles, for the monster to act autonomously or to sway the course of events.

Even in more developed monster roles, such as reoccurring appearances of evil masterminds or other knowledgeable figures that interact with players, the detail of the brief and the abilities associated with the role lie firmly in the hands of the organizers. Monsters, then, are in this sense the indentured servants of the fantastical performances constituting larp events, with organizers and plot writers their masters. As creatures without free will they are not fully human, but stunted individuals subject to their Machiavellian overlords. In a sense, they are pitiable monsters, unable to reach the status of a fully autonomous player. These servants constitute the difference between a heroic player figure and the meagre monster. By their existence they create the order of the game and also highlight the possibility of a terrible enslavement, which in many ways describes the everyday and mundane life the game may be trying to present an escape from.

AS CREATURES WITHOUT FREE WILL THEY ARE NOT FULLY HUMAN

THE OUTSIDER, THE ANTI-HERO

A depiction of monsterring as serfdom is one many players would likely reject as inaccurate and derogatory to the volunteers who put in time and effort to make the game possible. Like any labour, monsterring is often a process with tangible and intangible rewards. To paint



a picture of monster volunteers as shackled servants would be the same as stating that the ticket sales clerk at the cinema, or the teenager in costume at a Harry Potter attraction is in some way monstrous. While some sociologists would likely take such a view, it is worth exploring the potential rewards of monsterring more thoroughly.

In most games that require significant numbers of monsters, a select crew of volunteers will be recruited for the whole period of the event. The event may offer several enjoyable elements, such as successful role performances, social camaraderie and broader exploration of the fantastical world experienced through the perspective of the bad guys. In return for being the unpopular vil-

lain, monsters are often provided with free food and/or board. In persistent game worlds, monsterring may likely confer benefits on the volunteer's player experience, through transferable advantages or items which have a particular effect in the game. These are often tailored to the volunteer's preferences by way of a token exchange system, so those playing fighting characters might "buy" a special weapon, while knowledge based characters might buy access to libraries of information on languages or herbs.

Although in theory monsters might be paid in *real* coin for their time, I have never encountered this or heard of it in the UK larp context. The closest such exchange I have come across has been payment "in kind", in

the form of monsters being offered the ability to keep game costumes or props for personal use, or discounts on such items from affiliated traders. However, there are distinctly intangible benefits accrued through regular monstering. Experienced monsters gain expertise

REGULAR MONSTER-
ING IS OFTEN
RECOMMENDED TO
NEW PLAYERS

in many aspects of the game such as the rule mechanics, the makeup and costume presentation of particular monster types, and in the improvised portrayal of diverse and sometimes complex roles. For this

reason, regular monstering is often recommended to new players. In each of these areas stalwart monsters acquire a level of kudos or respect from the community, and are often consulted on difficult situations or recruited to show new volunteers “the ropes”. Such veterans are often identifiable by their extensive repertoire of stories about earlier experiences, accounts that often figure the storyteller in a significant (and at times even maverick) role. It is this social approval of the volunteering role that perhaps lifts the monster from wage-slave to contributing citizen. Rather than beasts, monsters are understood to be beautiful inside. By their otherness they highlight the importance of heroic players, and their possible mentor role offers the possibility of heroism outside the conventional means of the game. Monsters, then, do not only highlight existing systems (of play) by their otherness, but also teach us about the limitations of those systems.

However, as I once discovered, rejecting payment as a monster is considered unacceptable, as such behav-

iour undermines the status of monsters as a whole as no more than the servants described above. As much as such community members may be applauded, monsters must remain outsiders, just as the anti-hero must disappear into the sunset.

THE INVISIBLE MAN, THE TERRIFYING UNKNOWN

The function of monster roles in larp is to introduce or advance moments of dramatic tension as part of the narrative encountered by players. However, when they appear in the game, it may not always be apparent that they are a monster. Some games make frequent use of planted characters under the control of the organizers, either to add drama to the game or simply to add colour and assist with creating a particular ambiance. Although referees and “backstage” crew are frequently easy to spot by specific markers that denote them as outside the game world (high-visibility jackets, specific costumes or coloured markers are often used), many in-game monsters are carefully costumed to be indistinguishable from a player character. Although in many circumstances players within the game can identify monsters by their lower costume standards, or by recognising the volunteer, monsters which are concealed as players or simply well-costumed and prepared can pose an invisible threat.

IT MAY NOT ALWAYS
BE APPARENT THAT
THEY ARE A MONSTER

A key aspect of this lies in the function and status of a monster. These monsters are dressed as players, in the same space as players, indistinguishable from them, yet

their intentions are unknown, and may be threatening. These double agents may be less attached to their roles than players, and as they are under the control or direction of the organizers their motivations are unpredictable. Should a monster die, they are likely to still fulfil

THESE BEASTS
WITH A BEAUTIFUL
FACE THREATEN NOT
ONLY PLAYERS,

their function by adding to the drama of the game, yet for such an occurrence to befall a player undermines their position as key agents or heroes in the narrative. Monsters are, in this sense, a threatening

beast, different from players and yet seemingly the same. In this sense monsters truly are monstrous since they illustrate the arbitrary distinction drawn between player and game-world. At the same time as their presence heightens and draws attention to that boundary, their task is to artfully conceal it from players; to promote a sense of reality in the construction of the fantasy. Yet in some cases monsters do not remain under the control of the organizers, but may “go rogue”, interacting with players on the basis of outside commitments and diverging from the game intentions. These beasts with a beautiful face threaten not only players, but also organizers and other monsters attempting to maintain the boundary of the game world.

A DOUBLE-EDGED EXPERIENCE

To be a monster at a larp is something of a double-edged experience. The very existence of monsters, as of the back-stage crew in general, is to perpetuate the dominant fictional narrative. Yet in the liminal space they occupy, this in-between world that separates the

fantastical construction from the mundane one, monsters highlight the fragility of both those worlds. Combining the view of monsters as servants and as anti-heroes, monsters may well be both beauty and beast in the possibilities they offer. However, as the unknown, monsters embody the psychological terror of what may be. This perhaps explains why organizers are often very careful in how they recruit their monsters, even to the extent of cliqueness, as the best beast is the one you know to be beautiful.

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THE POETRY OF PLAYFULNESS

TOMAS HV MØRKRID | All game-design is based on the players' ability to use a game; their will and ability to make it their own. A design is a proposition for play; an invitation to playfulness. The goal of all game-design, implicitly or explicitly, is to inspire, prepare and help the players. A game is a framework for directed playfulness.

So; when designing a game we may ask ourselves:

WHAT DO THE PLAYERS NEED?

The answer is simple, and challenging; the players need to be told how to play the game, and how to play with each other. Even though they may know each other well, a game purports to transform them into strangers, and thus they need to be given a clear method of interaction. The purpose of the method is to make the game

something special; something that removes the players from their own life and world, and puts them into characters that partake in a different life-drama.

Whatever game you make; whatever drama you aim for; your players will need a method.

WHAT DO THE PLAYERS BRING TO THE GAME?

The designer is not alone in bringing a game about. The players will help themselves in playing the game, with their insights and skills. If you let them, the players may bring a wealth of interactive tools to the game!

People are interactive all the time, in their everyday life. From a very young age an average human is trained in interactive practices. As adults we command a vast arsenal of gestures, postures, words, phrases and intonations to be used in any game of role-playing.

Players come with a system of ethics too; a sense of right and wrong, and an insight in the connections between choice, action and consequence. They bring with them their experience in trying to be good human beings. A role-playing game may be viewed as an exploration of ethics, and as such any adult participant is equipped with tools to make it work; an ego, the strong will, the good will, the higher will, and most important; the imagination of empathy.

Most people even have hands-on experience with the process of taking on different *characters*, both in children's

THE DESIGNER IS NOT ALONE IN BRINGING A GAME ABOUT

The instructions on how to play the game were not written down, but were given in a one-day Muu-leader course, led by the designer. The only way to buy the game was to participate in such a course.

The game plays out in a minimalistic setting; a glen in the woods, with a small lake and a brook. The muu doesn't do much in this place; it sleeps, eats, bathes, dreams. That is about it. Next to nothing is actually happening.

Although Muu is a strange little game, players took to it. They laughed at the clumsy creature the game had them transform into. They loved the way the game forced them to see the world as a muu. It made them clumsy, curious, harmless. It helped them to create Muu'ish dreams about "Sunberries". It helped them into "Allmuu", and the mutual sharing of emotions. It drew them into the meditative state of being "Muu", exploring a world made magical by a carefully and poetically woven point-of-view.

The typical reaction to a game of Muu is laughter, and a mixture of awe and puzzlement. After the typical game-session, players tend to lean back, to share calm and content smiles with each other. A strange and simple game, Muu is.

THE DIALOGUE

Muu was a marvel to me. I did not understand it when I wrote it, but slowly the game revealed to me that we may express ourselves through game-design. Anyone

may do so. And more; Muu made it clear that players use role-playing to express themselves. As if they were storytellers, actors, jazz musicians...

The jazz in Muu is of a special kind. When the Muu-leader start weaving the spell of the game, with a calm and reassuring voice, using words like "Allmuu", "Bigtree", "Starmoss", "Sunberries", "Pricklyspring" - it is easy to become a "muu". Nine out of ten players fall into a spell of naïve muu'ishness.

WHY?

Due to the dialogue. Dialogue is the heart of a role-playing game like Muu, and words are the heart of dialogue. A designer may work with words and dialogue, directly, giving the players key phrases in a new terminology, enticing them to change the way they speak. To view the dialogue as part of the method, and work it, is a way to make your game produce unique fiction in the hands of the players.

The one defining element of a game of Muu, is the way the dialogue is formed during play. The character-sheet delivers the key phrases to the players, so these are at hand during the whole game. The muu-leader makes use of the phrases in ways that connects them with the muu-world, and expand the poetic terminology with additional phrases to make the dialogue become even more muu'ish. While doing so, the leader inspires the players to adopt the naïve language; so the game is enabled to

THAT IS ABOUT IT.
NEXT TO NOTHING IS
ACTUALLY HAPPENING

9 OUT OF 10 PLAYERS
FALL INTO A SPELL OF
NAÏVE MUU'ISHNESS



build a unique fiction with strong narrative logic, by the use of practical poetry.

The key is to inspire players to play with their language. You may work with poetic, cool or funny phrases, fictional names included, to help players give color to their fiction. If you succeed in influencing the way players talk, they may weave a powerful spell on themselves, happily magicking themselves into the fantastical identities and relationships buried in your game. It is not the only way to great fiction, but it sure is exciting to work the in-game language of role- playing games.

AN EPIC IN TWO HOURS

Autumn of Life is a LAP; a *Live Action Pocket-play* game. Live Action Pocket-play is a new way of designing for in-

teraction, a hybrid of verbal and live action RPGs. Playfulness is the primary design-principle of LAPs.

Autumn of Life was designed in 2006. It starts out with simple premade characters, and dives into the deep end of understanding the life and soul of a human being. The epic focuses on a group of old friends. One by one they die. The game plays out at their funerals. The vision of the game is to explore emotions connected to a long life; hope, disappointment, sorrow, longing, bitterness, fulfillment...

The easily understood setting (our own world), the simple characters (five short paragraphs describing each of them, no numbers) and the well known social situation (sitting at a table after a funeral), makes for a game that may be pre-

pared and played with ease. There is virtually no threshold of rules or other things to understand; the game is based almost solely on the social skills of adult people, and on the ability of the game to incite playfulness in them.

The game leaves the players to improvise lifelike characters during play, inspired by the short paragraphs, and to develop realistic relationships in the same way. A very simple and intuitive method is used to support the interaction and to give direction to the drama, ensuring that the game is indeed a tour-the-force of friendship and remembrance.

**ALLOWS PLAYERS
TO BE PLAYFUL IN
A SERIOUS WAY**

Game-play is simple, almost as an ordinary dialogue. There is little effort to this way of playing. And still the theme takes hold of the players. Players are touched by the game; the grave beauty of life and death, the painful insights, the simple identification with character.

Autumn of Life is a simple game, that allows players to be playful in a serious way, weaving a two hour epic of astounding complexity.

THE BARE NECESSITIES

To make complex interaction, we need inspired players, and a method that gives direction to their gameplay. The basis of any method is the social skills of the players. The more you are able to tap into those skills, the more your game will benefit from it. Keep in mind that people are ready to use those skills anytime, so it should not be hard to do.

To keep players in the blessed state where they are ready to use themselves, you need to be simple and expedient. Make use of the bare necessities, and trust them to make your game work.

SELL YOUR VISION

Players come with curiosity. Transforming their curiosity into inspiration is your first task as a game-designer. The best way is to ease them into the method, carefully introducing the elements needed to create the interactive drama, carefully establishing your vision. You need them aboard, inspired, energized, ready to play!

KEEP THE ENERGY

Complications in the set-up saps energy from game-play. Bad communication erodes the will to play. My advice is to keep rules simple, and focus on player skills. Keep the players happy, lead them in long strides towards game-play, and let them loose.

TRUST THE PLAYERS

Face it; interactive design is dependant on the skills of the players. The players are the ones fulfilling your vision, by the power of their social skills. They are well versed in dynamic co-play. It makes sense to let them use themselves in a game, fully and freely. If you do, the players will fulfill your dreams of a great game. The result will be a rich and engaging fiction.

ENGAGE!

A role-playing game is an invitation to play. There is no play without playfulness.

Trust is essential to playfulness. Keep a smile on the faces of the players, and you keep trust with them. Smiles will make them trust each other too.

Give light rules, easy to read and understand, obviously useful in substance, and easily implemented.

Give clear and inspiring information that lays out the theme for the players, and ensures that they invest in it right from the start.

DIRECTED PLAYFULNESS

The instructions of a game should engage the social skills of the players. People tend to feel good when they are allowed to make use of their own faculties. It gives them a feeling of mastery, of being whole, beautiful, and empowered.

Ideally you want players to use their own skills as fully and wholly as possible, in a happy state of directed playfulness.

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DIEGESIS

the world of things that are true to the character – as opposed to the player – at a larp.

IMMERSION

a state of mind where a player does not need to actively suspend disbelief in the fictional universe, where role-playing flows as naturally and easily as if you really were the character.

THE IMMERSIVE PEN

NATHAN HOOK | Much has been written in the academic field of creative literary fiction writing on concepts and approaches used by writers. These concepts are compared and contrasted with larp play, design and writing, to search for techniques and approaches used by writers that can be adapted to be of use to larpers.

IMMERSION, FLOW AND RAPTURE

Virginia Woolf (1953) described creative writing as “the greatest rapture known to me”. Along these lines the psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (1996) expressed the notion that “creative achievements depends upon single-minded immersion” which relates to *flow*—timeless concentration.

While immersion is a well-known concept for larp playing it is not normally spoken of for larp designing. This raises the question of whether it is the action of design-

ing a larp or the action of playing in a larp that best equates to the activity of a creative writer. The division that appears natural in larp is seemingly not present in creative writing.

Some experts advise new writers to think of themselves as receivers and suggest methods for “harnessing the unconscious mind” (Anderson, 2006) to overcome the conscious trying to censor creativity. Examples of these methods include free writing (spontaneous writing without preplanning or editing) and clustering (drawing spider diagrams of connected ideas and concepts). The tools and techniques developed for creative writers when facing writer’s block may also be useful for larpwrights when faced with writer’s block. This approach of writing in the moment without preplanning also compares well to the nature of conventional larp play – acting in the moment without preplanning – and stands in contrast to more pre-scripted traditions of acting. As noted earlier creative writing equates to both larp design and larp play.

METHODS FOR
HARNESSING THE
UNCONSCIOUS MIND

Research has found evidence that creative writing is of a higher quality when done for intrinsic reward such as personal enjoyment rather than extrinsic reward such as for praise or publication. It may be worth reflecting that much of larp design and larp play is done for intrinsic motivations.

In another parallel between creative writing and larp playing, writers often speak of using “special rituals

and different locations” (Anderson, 2006) as part of the process of writing. This compares well to the ritualised entry points of entering the magic circle of a larp play space; the intention in both cases being to induce a particular mental state by using features of the immediate physical setting. Perhaps the same techniques that some larps already use for beginning play may be relevant as tools for larp writers when beginning the design process.

CHARACTER CREATION

“Characters pre-exist. They are found. They reveal themselves slowly – as might fellow-travellers seated opposite one in a very dimly lit railway carriage” (Bowen, 1948; quoted in Allen, 1958).

Both creative writing and larp writing involve character creation. However some writers such as Bowen in the quote argue that the term *creation* is misleading. Some larps agree with this and speak of characters revealing themselves, while others completely reject the idea.

Nevertheless, creative writing experts identify four main approaches to character creation, and it may be helpful for larpwrights to consciously reflect on their choice of approach. These four approaches are autobiographical, biographical, inventing from scratch and a combination of these approaches.

In larps where players write their own characters they naturally tend to use the autobiographical method of using an aspect of themselves, as discussed by Bowman



POSSESSED BY THE
GHOSTS OF REAL LIFE
HISTORICAL FIGURES

(2010). The character shares many of the physical attributes of the player-writer and much else besides will bleed-in. Even if the organiser writes the character brief, how that brief is interpreted and developed still means that a large slice of the player is autobiographically written into the character. The jeep tradition of *playing close to home* might be viewed as a reinvention of the autobiographical method used by writers. Another example of this is when organizers typecast players to particular parts that fit them.

The biographical method refers to basing a character on a person known to or researched by the writer. Historical larps and vampire larps featuring actual people from history would be explicit examples of this. Another example would be *Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum* (2006), where players played themselves possessed by the ghosts of real life historical figures.

Invention to fit the setting is certainly used in traditional larps where a character may be defined by their profession (e.g. priest, warrior) or a choice from a race of stereotypes (e.g. a fantasy race).

Increased awareness and a conscious choice of approach would be a helpful tool for larp writers, as it is for creative fiction writers when creating characters. Conscious use can provide a tool to create a set of characters and spark creativity when faced by writer's block. The choice of creative approach can also be explained to players as

part of the documentation to help them relate to the material. For example, a pre-written character could be compared to a known historical or fictional person as a quick way to convey their personality and concept to the player. An example of this can be found in *Vampire: The Masquerade*, where “Queen Anne, the vampire prince of London” is modelled on the real life Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (whose career Queen Anne fostered in the setting).

Aristotle (1996) used the term *consistent inconsistencies* for characters that have internally conflicting personality traits, such as an extrovert who is secretly shy or someone dominant in some contexts and submissive in others; modern experts advocate using this principle to add conflict and depth to characters. Some tabletop role-play games require players to define personality traits, with the expectation of dramatic internal conflict when different traits push towards different courses of action as well as external conflict between strongly motivated characters. Examples include *Pendragon* (1985), *Ars Magica* (1986), and *A Song of Ice and Fire*

RPG (2009). Larp characters briefs tend not make use of this in this way – however, explicitly stating the character’s core personality traits can be a good, concise way for a larp writer to convey a character’s personality to a player, or for a player to convey a character they have written to the organiser. It can also be a good way to ensure the character’s personality meshes with the overall wider themes.

ARISTOTLE USED THE TERM ‘CONSISTENT INCONSISTENCIES’

STORY, PLOT AND GNS

Role-playing writers have developed the gamist-narrativist-simulationist (GNS) model, describing three contrasting creative agendas – playing to win, playing for a story, and playing to explore a setting. Although we might expect creative writers to favour a narrativist approach, I find that many experts actually argue for a more simulationist approach to writing.

Creative writing experts define a story as a “narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence”. *Plot* is a story with the addition of causality; the reasons for those events happening are given. Some experts argue there is greater dramatic potential where plot includes mystery; events happen for reasons that become known later. If we accept these definitions, then the term plot should be reserved for simulationist approaches that aim to create internal causality rather than approaches that play for external reasons such as playing to win or playing to create drama.

Applying this approach to larp writing suggests that writers should not plan events directly but instead use causality as a writing tool; establish a web of causality from which events can organically develop and ideally include a natural mechanism in which hidden causality can become revealed later on. Narrativism is poor at creating mystery since it does not create underlying reasons that can be revealed later.

Character and plot are interlocking. Events emerge from character or the characters attract certain events. This

resonates strongly with the approach currently popular in UK larp of *player-led* or character-driven larps, where the player characters, as opposed to NPCs or impersonal forces, are the prime movers in the setting. In this

WRITERS VARY IN THE
IMPORTANCE THEY
ATTACH TO PLOT

tradition characters are given access to readily apparent means to affect the wider campaign setting. Some creative writers argue for focusing on what a character will *do*, sometimes presented as *character + conflict = plot*. From the perspective of the GNS model this argues for a simulationist approach of plot arising as a property from the natural interactions of characters. Some writing experts go as far as arguing for the Stanislavski method of acting to be applied to fiction writers writing about characters.

In contrast, fantasy writer Ursula Le Guin (1998), whose fiction inspired the larp *Between Heaven and Sea* (2003), argues for the validity of other approaches outside this simulationist stance: “Plot is merely one way of telling a story, by connecting the happenings tightly usually through causal chains”. As this quote illustrates, creative writers vary in the importance they attach to plot.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS

Creative writing, larp design and larp play are all inherently creative processes that involve bringing characters to life. All three activities offer the possibility of achieving an immersive flow state and draw upon writers’ or players’ biographical, autobiographical and



imaginative resources to create characters. A surprising number of creative writers argue for immersing in the creative process and applying simulationist principles to their activity.

What can larpwrights take away from these creative writing concepts? I suggest that they should reflect more consciously on the writing process. In the same way that some larps begin with rituals, is there some personal ritual that helps ignite the process of larp writing? Would techniques such as free writing or clustering be useful to developing ideas?

When creating characters, one should also be conscious about what mixture of invention, biographical or autobiographical approaches is being used and how that awareness can be used in communicating the character to a player. It also can be worth reviewing characters to see if they include consistent inconsistencies.

When writing a story or plot think your approach to causality and to what extent you support it. Consider how to structure plot elements so that as events unfold the underlying causes for earlier events are initially hidden (creating mystery) but are likely to be later revealed.

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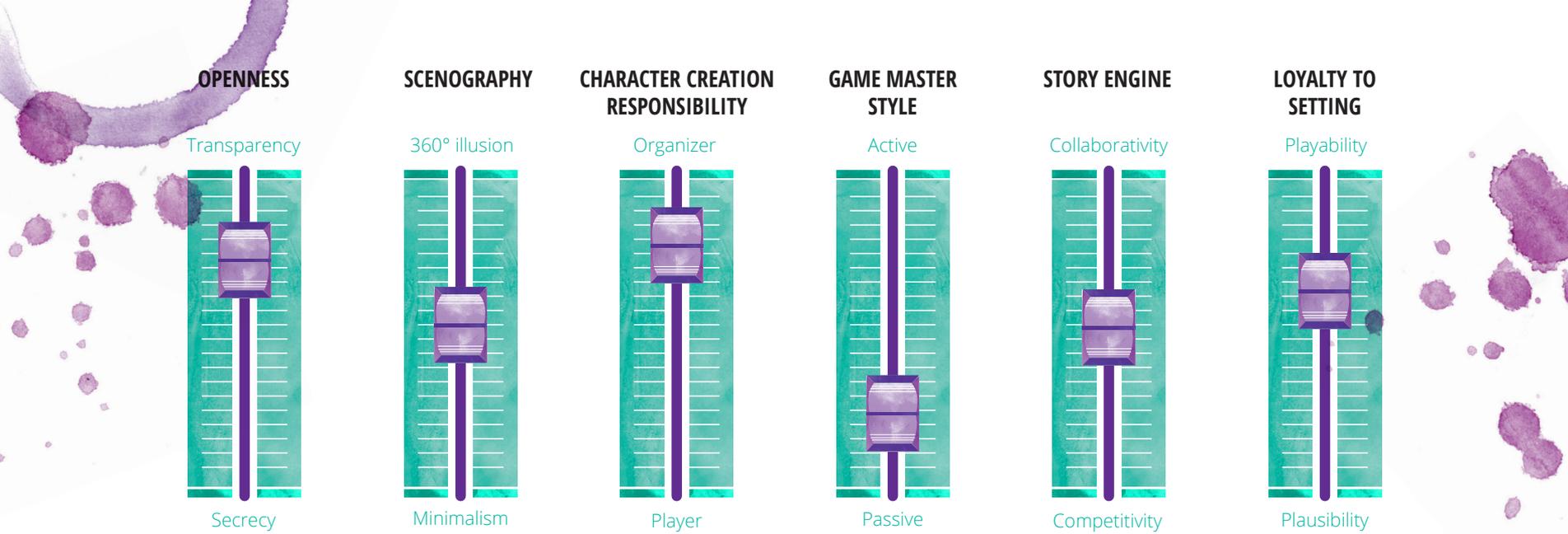
as few secrets as possible are kept from the players, and between players. That means that that any characters, plotlines and the like are available to all participants.

THINKING IN TERMS OF FADERS

THE MIXING DESK OF LARP

MARTIN ANDRESEN & MARTIN NIELSEN | The Mixing Desk of Larp is a framework for organizing your thoughts about larp design, originally developed for the Larpwriter Summer School in 2012. Look at it as a pedagogical tool more than a theory of larp design – it is an aid in visualizing the most important design choices a larpwright makes.

The mixing desk serves mainly two purposes: raising the awareness of which design opportunities exist and making you more conscious about your default design choices. The main idea of the Mixing Desk of Larp is that a larp designer can be thought of as a technician controlling the lights or the sound of a concert or theatre performance. At your disposal, you have an array of faders, increasing or decreasing the amount of lights of different colors or the volume of specific sound fre-



quencies. In the same way, you can adjust the faders of the Mixing Desk of Larp, changing the larp you're designing. For example, you need to set the level of transparency, decide on the responsibility for the character creation process and make a choice on whether your scenography should be minimalist, 360°, or somewhere in between. With all of these decisions, you probably have a *default position*, a way you or your community usually design games. Thinking in terms of these faders is a way to become more aware of the possible choices one makes when designing a larp.

On the next pages, you'll find a short description of each fader and their maximum and minimum positions. For most of the faders, the maximum and minimum po-

sitions are mostly theoretical concepts, impossible to reach in practical larp design. They nonetheless serve to illustrate the possibilities of a larp designer.

Of course, there are endless numbers of faders that could possibly have been adjusted on the Mixing Desk of Larp. We have no intention of covering all possible design choices, but have focused on some of the most important parameters that can be adjusted when making a larp. The choice of faders is based on Nordic larp in 2013, and might have been others in 2000 or in other larp cultures. We hope and believe that other larpwrights will add their own faders and remove the ones they don't find fruitful when using this framework. Happy twisting!

OPENNESS

Is information about the game – such as character descriptions or events that are going to happen – secret for the players or can anyone read it? Is it actively facilitated that you share secrets before the game start? Transparency can make it easier for players to help each other play and create a stronger drama, but it will ruin any surprises for the players. There are also intermediate possibilities where there are secrets for some of the players, but not all, or where the players themselves choose what to reveal.

SCENOGRAPHY

How does your larp look? Do you aim for a 360° illusion, where everything the players see around them is part of the larp? Or do you use a minimalist approach, where you only pay attention to the objects that have a function in the game? Do you accept that an object represents something else than what it really is?

CHARACTER CREATION RESPONSIBILITY

Who creates the characters? Do the organizers write them? Do the players? Or maybe they are created together during a pre-game workshop? Combinations of these are also possible; for example, where the organizers create the characters, but the players develop them during a workshop before the larp. Player-created characters might make the players more attached to the characters and relieves the organizers of some of the work. On the other hand, organizer-created characters might make it easier to create a setting and fiction coherent with your vision.

GAME MASTER STYLE

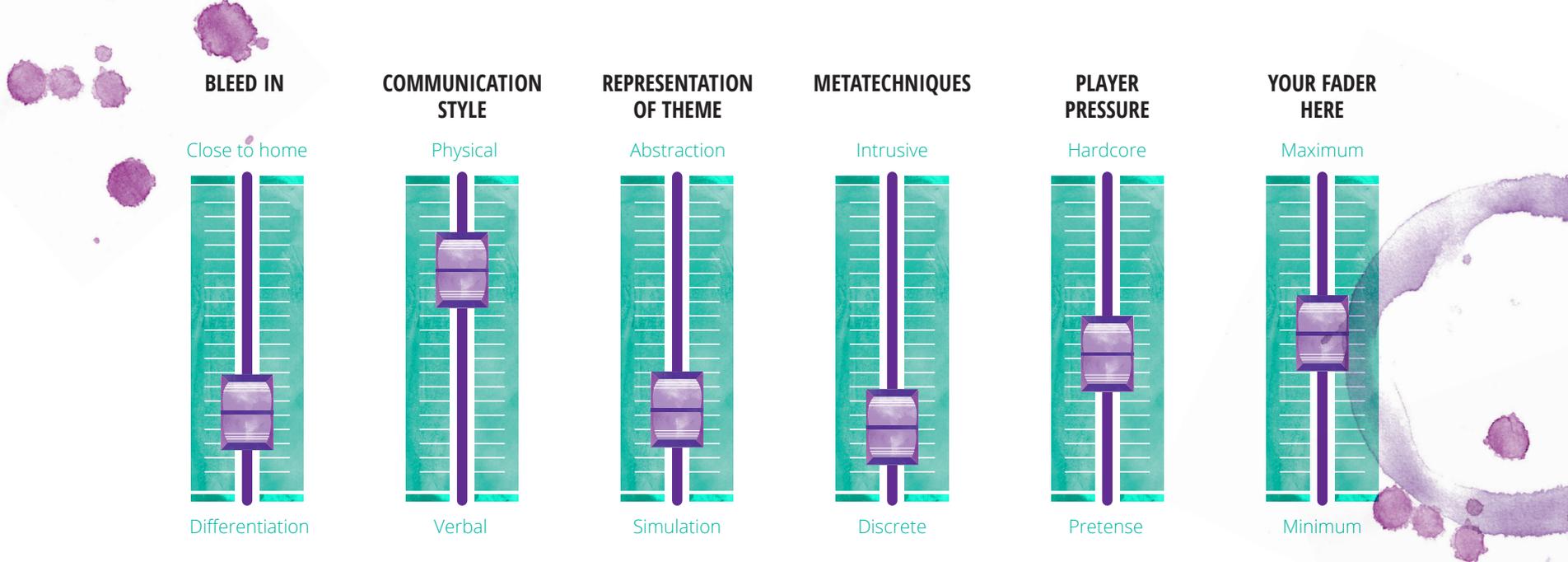
Some organizers consider their job done when the larp has started; then, they leave everything in the hands of the players. Others influence the game in different ways as it goes along. Are you an active or a passive game master? Game mastering might also be of different sorts: the discrete ones, like sending instructed players into the game, or the extremely intrusive ones, like stopping the game and instructing the players to do a scene again differently.

STORY ENGINE

What motivates the players in your game? Having something to win or a goal to obtain, be it individually or collectively, can be an easy way to motivate players, especially for beginners. This is the competition approach. On the other hand, you often get more interesting stories and stronger player experiences when the players collaborate – for example, by deliberately getting their characters into trouble, i.e. *playing to lose*.

LOYALTY TO SETTING

Larpwrights often have to consider the tradeoff between playability and plausibility. When making a historical game, for example, having a female factory owner might be highly implausible. However, it might be very playable – creating lots of interesting drama and intrigues for the players to use in the larp. In most games, you leave out the characters that have nothing to contribute to the drama, even though it would be plausible to have them there. Sometimes, you make unlikely twists to make the outcome of a story un-



predictable. How true will you be to your setting? A plausible story might be a requirement for players to believe and immerse into the fiction. But, the players also need drama and often the least plausible setups create the most drama.

BLEED-IN

Do you use elements from the players’ real lives in the game (close to home), or do you deliberately try to create a barrier or distance (differentiation) between the character and player? Using the players’ own experiences or background might create a stronger emotional experience, but also has its downsides: making the game less larp and more reality. It can divert focus from the story and the emotions the story creates to the emotions

the players bring with them into the game. Taken to the extreme, you might have the players play themselves, just in an alternative setting. Are you willing to lessen the player-character divide?

COMMUNICATION STYLE

What kind of communication style does your larp encourage? Is the natural way to interact in the game through talking, or through physical action and body language? Communication style can be adjusted through the characters, through workshops, through scenography design, or through simply telling the players what you want. A physical communication style might be more thrilling, letting the players immerse more through using all of their senses, but a more verbal

game might be easier to involve new players in, as well as being more realistic in many settings.

REPRESENTATION OF THEME

How does your larp represent the reality of the setting? Is realism your goal? Or do you use abstract or even surrealistic elements to focus on the feeling and atmosphere of the setting or to highlight a particular aspect of the game? If the goal of the game is to create the atmosphere of a prison camp, you might do this in two ways: by trying to simulate an actual prison camp or by using abstract or surreal elements to create the feeling of one.

METATECHNIQUES

Metatechniques are techniques for giving information to the players, but not the characters, during the game. Examples can be “inner” monologues that are played out during the larp. The players can hear these, the characters cannot, but nonetheless, they can be an aid for creating stronger drama. If metatechniques are used in a game, they might be intrusive or discrete. Examples of intrusive metatechniques are techniques that force all other players to stop while it happens, while a more discrete technique might be, for example, having access to a special room where players can go to act out scenes from the past or the future. This fader illustrates the combination of the amount of metatechniques used and their degree of intrusiveness.

PLAYER PRESSURE

There are some things in larp that are difficult to play out. Hunger, violence, sleep deprivation, drinking, sex

and drug use might be examples. If you want to include these elements in your game, how do you do it? Do you put the pressure on the players as well as the characters by using with hardcore methods such as real alcohol, real food deprivation, and waking people at night? Do you shelter the players from the pressure on the characters by using replacements like boffer swords, fake alcohol, and telling the players to pretend to be hungry or sleep deprived? Hungry players will, of course, feel what it is like to be hungry, but their ability to role-play and enjoy other aspects of the game might be hampered.

FINAL WORDS

The Mixing Desk of Larp is a work in progress. It’s a pedagogical tool aimed for presenting and structuring some of the most important design choices of larp in a convenient form. We thus believe there are plenty of other faders that could be part of the Mixing Desk, and would emphasize that the framework is open to extensions.

Some of the extensions and design choices that we have been playing with for a future version of the Mixing Desk are more faders that deal with metatechniques (amount vs. type); chronology and representation of time; degree of pervasiveness; utilization of random elements; and player freedom. Probably, there are other faders that are much more useful that we just haven’t thought about yet. Use your experience and imagination and adapt the model to your own larp writing style!

360°

a design ideal where the aim is to make the physical immersive experience as complete as possible, i.e. 360 degrees around you.

OUT OF OUR HANDS

HANNE GRASMO & TOR KJETIL EDLAND | How do you ensure that all the participants get the experience they were promised when they signed up, and still enable strong participatory power? Dealing with this seemingly impossible contradiction turned out to be a key challenge when designing *Just a Little Lovin'* (JaLL), where we wanted to realize our vision while at the same time provide the players with the freedom to shape their own characters and stories.

All larps are about the co-creation of stories. Two runs of *Just a Little Lovin'* has showed us that it's possible to design a larp in a way that ensures a high probability that all participants in the larp experience the central themes as envisioned by the designers. This can be done without sacrificing the high standard of participatory

agency expected by most larpers. In the two runs, many of the character interpretations and the way individual stories and relationships unfolded, varied substantially. But no matter how different the individual stories and fates of the same characters became, all stories unfolded within, and reflected, the overall narrative of the larp.

THE STORY OF AIDS NEEDED TIME TO PASS

The concept of the larp is a story about people in the gay community in the US in the 1980's, when the AIDS epidemic hit. Still, we wanted to make a game on issues and themes with contemporary relevance. AIDS, with its

connotations of sex and death, has a strong potential for telling stories of universal themes that would genuinely touch the players; to further provide an experience from which

our participants could reflect on questions of identity and “how I want to live before I die”. Through the development of the characters and the on-site workshops, we sought to create a dialectic between desire (symbolized by gay culture and alternative lifestyles) and the fear of death (symbolized by HIV and cancer). These two were in turn balanced by strong and multifaceted friendships. We also promised to ensure that the participants could feel safe enough to step outside their comfort zone, both as larpers and as human beings.

In order to tell these stories, it was necessary for time to pass in the narrative. We compressed the timeline of the epidemic somewhat for our story, and decided to divide the larp into three acts, reflecting both the pas-

sage of time in the lives of the characters, and also the different stages of the early years of the epidemic; ignorance, paranoia and response. All the acts took place at a 4th of July party, three years in a row. Before each act, we expressively told the players which themes each act should focus on, and left it up to them as a group to decide exactly how their characters would play out these themes. The breaks between the acts also facilitated that each participant individually, as well as the ensemble as a whole, got the chance to reflect on their own story so far, and what would be good to emphasize in the next act in relation to the three main themes.

DIRECTING THE THEMATIC FLOW OF THE GAME

We wanted to let the characters become multidimensional beings and evolve beyond aesthetic clichés. Hence, we held workshops the same day as the game started, and in the act breaks, where we worked together with the players to develop their template characters. While we were the main creators of the narrative outlines for the first act, most of the storylines were out of our hands after the first year had been played out.

Creating true stories of desire and friendship, touching the hearts and desires of the participants, could not have been done without placing responsibilities for the continuous story in the hands of the players. One of the reasons for this is bleed. We don't believe that the strongest emotions are created when you stay in character 24/7 with as few distractions as possible to break

CREATE A DIALECTIC
BETWEEN DESIRE AND
THE FEAR OF DEATH

WE WANTED TO LET THE
CHARACTERS BECOME
MULTIDIMENSIONAL

the illusion. We see bleed as a better tool, and taking breaks from the fiction can enforce the story and your emotional experience of it.

But, how do we maintain the vision of the game when the players are free to create the narratives? Much of the solution lies in the use of meta-techniques. How we focused, created and executed these techniques were one of the most important design decisions in realizing the larp we envisioned.

THE LOTTERY OF DEATH

In lots of larps there is plenty of death; mostly characters killing each other. We searched for a way of portraying death of characters that had the potential of tapping into our universal fear of the fact that one day life ends for all of us. We understood that this meant the players could not be given the power to decide whether their characters became infected with the HIV virus or not, or if, and when, their characters would die. Our “Eureka!” was to re-

DEATH ARRIVED IN A META-SCENE AT 11 O’CLOCK

discover certain randomizer techniques, much from the childhood of larp and roleplay. We imagined that a lottery would serve to copy life itself.

Death arrived in a meta-scene, played out at the end of every act, 11 o’clock in the morning. Two characters played by the organizers, embodying “cosmic funeral agents”, arrived at breakfast to host the Lottery of Death. The instructions were as follows: “Write your name on the tickets, at least one, maximum five, and



put them in the hat”. The number of tickets should be in accordance with how your character has put himself at risk of becoming infected. Every year, the funeral agents picked out approximately 10 people, randomly drawn from the tickets in the hat. This created some very strong reactions from their friends and lovers as they walked away.

But the lottery wasn't conclusive. Chosen randomly, some of the 10 ended up in the coffin in the year between the acts, while others got grave news from their doctor.

THE PHALLUS METHOD

On both runs of *Just a Little Lovin'*, nearly every character had sexual encounters portraying a great variety of emotions and situations. We had a vision for a meta-technique for sexual play that would be visible, direct and which could easily portray gay sex and *anonymous* sex. The Phallus Method challenged our players, but at the same time made erotic play safe. Most importantly the meta-technique had a great impact on HOW the stories unfolded in an erotic way.

The scenes of sexual encounters were about much more than horniness. In the larp, we used sexuality as an engine for a wide range of emotions, relations and rationalizations. Most people experience powerful feelings while having, or trying to have, erotic interaction. There are perhaps negative emotions like rejection, suppression, shame or loss of control, but also positive ones like true connection, holiness, strong friendship, and

the feeling of being appreciated. If you dare to play out horniness, lust and desire, you gather courage to open your heart for other emotions as well.

The Phallus Method can shortly be described like this: Keep your clothes on (at least your underwear). Have a phallus ready. The phallus is gender-free, so everyone can use one; and it will simulate hetero and lesbian sex, as well as gay sex. For the first run we made soft leather-dildos, for the second run they were wooden with bright 80's pink paint. To simulate sex, there must be physical contact between the phallus and both bodies: hands, hips, legs, face. It can be theatrically simulated between the legs, but only if the participant agree to do so. We told the players that it was important to negotiate between them exactly how a scene should be played out, to achieve both a safe and intense experience. As this was a story about HIV, one of the reasons we needed phalluses was to make it possible for the participants to easily portray whether they chose to use condom or not. This is, after all, a story of a sexually transmitted disease.

A very important part of The Phallus Method was having a monologue to end the scene. Every participant should say out loud, one by one, the thoughts running through their head at the end of the sexual act: How does (s)he feel now, how was it, describing something that felt especially good or bad. When all monologues were done, one went out of the meta-moment, and back into the regular flow of the game.

SEXUALITY AS AN
ENGINE FOR A WIDE
RANGE OF EMOTIONS



We hope that the collection of tools we arrived at were the right ones, giving our participants maximum freedom within the inevitable frame of historical events in which we placed the characters. We arrived at the techniques mainly by considering which techniques would serve to portray this period and our universal themes. So, the design of the game was specifically connected to the theme of the first years of the AIDS epidemic. We do, however, cheekily want to share this little canon with you, believing it might have points on larp design that are relevant beyond our specific game.

THE LITTLE LOVIN' CANON

1. Vision before design

Your vision makes design demands. The vision is the horse, the design the carriage. Good techniques can be wrong for your game.

2. Love creates conflicts

Love and desire are better motivators than revenge, and most of us have more experience with those feelings, than with the desire to kill someone.

3. Emotions are the driving force

Larp is a unique art form; no other art form creates the same degree of personal experience. Enforce the universal emotions: (such as) desire, fear of death and friendship.

4. Hands on the steering-wheel of the narrative

The designers shall be strongly involved in creating directions and storylines in pre-workshops and act breaks.

This includes more than creating a sandbox in terms of a fictional world for the participants to play around in.

5. *Participatory creativity gives stronger immersion*

Tight design rather than loose frames creates participatory creativity. Plan your workshops for participatory creativity.

6. *Breaks provide space for actions and emotions*

Incorporate act breaks, meta-breaks and time passing where nothing happens. When the character is allowed to “sit on her own shoulder”, understanding arises, emotions immerse and new paths of the story unveil. You don't have to stay in character the whole time to have a strong larp experience.

7. *Randomizers copy life itself (and death)*

When the larp starts, the designers' tasks have ended, and they should not set themselves up to fail by trying to micromanage the stories of the characters. When the larp has come to life, let randomizer techniques and the decisions players make take over.

8. *Repetition builds a lifetime*

If the same kind of event happens repeatedly, the character will feel they have a fuller life, yesterday, today and tomorrow.

9. *Explicit sexual meta-techniques create safety*

Sexuality is a useful instrument for creating other strong emotions. When meta-sex has a clearly developed technique, which includes pre-larp training, peo-

ple feel safer daring to play out explicit scenes. Having an audience is an advantage. Public sex scenes feel safer than private ones. Safety is felt in your own body through developing familiarity with the tools for playing out erotic feelings.

10. *It is impossible to make the larp in advance*

Right here, right now. Extensive demands on players to read long texts about the game world, or countless meet-ups before the game, often results in some of the players being unprepared while others are super-prepared. The right moment to begin the real preparations is when you all meet for the larp. Workshops and larping are two sides of the same experience, and should be held in the same week(end).

LUDOGRAPHY

Just a Little Lovin', 2011. Tor Kjetil Edland, Hanne Grasmø; Norway.

MOMENT OF TRUTH

YARASLAV I. KOT | Throughout all the larps I've participated in, the silent moments have brought me some of my greatest experiences. These are the moments where nothing is spoken or nothing unusual is done, yet when you look around you don't see players in character, but characters themselves. Moments when nothing pulls you inside of the plot, and yet you are already deep in it.

My aim is that mentioning these silent moments, and recollecting some of my personal experiences, will aid other players in acknowledging them as they happen, notice their beauty, and experience them more clearly.

...What a beautiful moment. The dawn is about to break. Our jeep with dark, opaque windows is standing at ease at the edge of this little park. It is quiet. What

a beautiful moment. I simply walk. Enjoy the taste of morning air. The taste of dawn; the faint taste of sun. The park is quiet, and yet a few others can be seen in the gray misty morning air. I know who they are and I am not bothered. The Prince with his men look like a Halloween crowd. I walk alone. What a beautiful moment. Arkadiy catches up behind me, holding an umbrella above my head. I am lucky to have his loyalty. We walk without a word. What a weekend. All that has happened: rumors, Sabbat, ancient prophecies, Lidia, rituals, the visit of Arhont, and other stressful circumstances, which led us all to this museum of ancient stones. All those close and dear to me remain, and the Prince fears and trusts me even more than before. What a beautiful moment. All is done and the White County of Belarus will be as quiet as before... In such moments I miss the times of breath. Arkadiy opens the car door for me. The dark interior of the expensive car looks unusually unappealing. One last glance upon the emptiness of the park. What a moment. The door slams shut. The moment passes as the vehicle takes us away from this peaceful place – back to the luxury of the Asylum...

SUDDENLY YOU
ARE FLOODED BY
THE INTENSITY

Sometimes, there are in-game moments where you do nothing but walk, or stand still and perform some trivial task... And suddenly, you are flooded by the intensity of this imaginary setting that you and your fellow larpers have created together. Thinking back, this particular moment becomes prominent: the moment where you sensed the truth around you, when doubts and precon-



ditions faded away. When you feel that you are exactly where you should be, and this place is *here* and *now*; in a space shuttle lost in some interdimensional loop-hole with a bunch of aliens, among Robin Hood and his merry men taking care of the forest hideout camp, stalking the night with kindred hunting for blood... Wherever it is, you feel that you fall in place with the world you created. Perhaps we are larping to find our place at least in some world; like cross-dimensional der-vishes or gypsies, seeking a time and place we can call our own?

...I cannot feel my legs... We've walked for weeks now. Lost count of how many. The jungle turned into the womb of some fable monster, which consumed all survivors. Now, draining our life force, it relishes each

drop of it. No! I will not allow it to end like this. Take a step. One more step. Two more. Up the hill. Look around and check if everyone who started walking in the morning remain on the trail. All. Only yesterday there were more of us. My friend Bharat. Don't think of it Bhanu, don't think. You are the village's Elder. You have no right to show weakness. You have no right to show doubt. For these people you are the future, it is your place in the world. Every death feels like a drop of burning tar that sticks to my heart. Every death of a loved only works to strengthen the chanting: "You have no right to show weakness. You have no right to show doubt." Ancestors, give me some more strength! Give me some more dreams! Savitri follows unquestioningly, which means that I am walking the right way, which means that the ancestors have not left me, they have not

left us. Green jungle walls surround us, like vultures, waiting for our weakness. Teasing, whispering, inviting us to stop and become a part of the Great Jungle, making us forget all worries. Begone! Nonsense! Our people will live! One step. Another one.

SILENCE COULD BE
AN EVEN MORE
POWERFUL LARP TOOL

One more. Don't break the rhythm. Around the bend there will be a little meadow. Then there will be a swamp, but I know where to cross

it. Don't slow down. I can't feel my legs... My head is spinning from the fatha root – but without it I will not know where to go. All warnings have been given dozens of times. Pramila, when he elected me as his successor, said: "The day when you will overpower yourself – you will find the answer to all questions." Others remained... All those who could not... We learned how to say goodbye in silence, often and forever... Step. Another step... I can't feel my legs...

Have you ever noticed how silence could be an even more powerful larp tool than the most intensive debate? When you hear your thoughts, and you discover that they are not yours anymore... They belong to your character. And her or his worries are now filtered through your heart, leaving trace of a life you never lived, a trace of worlds that never existed and the memory of heroes never remembered.

...We approach the village where, within the cabin, my beloved Maria with her mother and many other noble women of the county of Minsk have gathered for Christmas fortune-telling and empty conversations. If she has

gotten my message we will have a secret meeting later... For now we have to leave our horses and cross the field afoot. All is white, the snow is everywhere around us, two hussars of the Alexander regiment, crossing the field. Black uniforms with ornaments of silver cord melt with the colors of the winter night. We are moving toward the thin gray line at the horizon. The sun is rising but it is not seen, and the clouds are as white as everything else that surrounds us. No one can be seen around, only the field and the anticipation of the secret meeting with our loved ones. The morning has awakened the mist, which swallowed us whole in its milky abyss. Silence is white, all around us, above and under. Here we are, drifting, up to our knees in soft and dry snow, as if within a rift out of time and space... I stop and take a deep breath. 1811 indeed. I am here and my love is right through this veil... A bright future... Till death do us apart...

THE CLOUDS ARE
AS WHITE AS EVERY-
THING ELSE THAT
SURROUNDS US

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