

Introduction

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“Larp, the Universe and Everything” is an anthology of articles on the theory and practice of live role-playing. It is published in conjunction with Knutepunkt, the annual larp conference rotating between four of the Nordic countries, and named in the host language: “Knutepunkt” in Norway, “Knutpunkt” in Sweden, “Knudepunkt” in Denmark and “Solmukohta” in Finland. The meaning is the same in all languages: a nodal point, a place that connects places.

Since its inception in Oslo, 1997, Knutepunkt has fulfilled the promise of its name by bringing together disparate communities of role-players from across the Nordic countries and the world for an extended weekend of lectures, parties, workshops, play and performance in a spirit that is simultaneously festive and serious. There is no central organization behind Knutepunkt. Each event is organized by entirely autonomous groups, and continuity is maintained by the twin pillars of “network”

and “tradition”. Though helped by grants from public and private sponsors, Knutepunkt and its sub-projects (including the book) are still carried entirely by the hundreds of work-hours put in by volunteers from the larp and role-playing communities.

“Volunteers”, in this sense, does not mean “amateurs”. The people who meet at Knutepunkt work out of love of role-playing, but the quality of the things they produce, whether conventions or live role-playing games, is usually comparable or superior to the products of salaried professionals. Ours is a network of professional amateurs, and — as of 2009 — one that includes the occasional amateur professionals, who have converted their hobby into a source of income. This year is the thirteenth Knutepunkt, and the fourth to be held in Oslo. “Larp, the Universe and Everything” is the 8th Knutepunkt book. Those are some big shoes to fill. And, as usual, there are traditions to be upheld – or mutated – or reacted against.

Nordic and international

Whatever else it may be, Knutepunkt has always been decidedly Nordic. That we spoke and wrote in English at the first Knutepunkt was simply an afterthought, a necessary bridge between the Scandinavians and the Finns. One of the earliest discoveries made at Knutepunkt was that the Nordic larp cultures had a lot more in common with each other than they had with “LARP” (or “LRP”, or “GN”, or “Interactive Theatre”) in other countries.

The Nordic style, as most “schools” and art movements, is easy to recognize but hard to define. There’s the sense that a Nordic larp should be considered a work of art, to be taken seriously – even though participants will joke about it, about themselves, and possibly get drunk before, during and after. There’s talk of immersion, of being one with the character and forgetting everything else – but the immersionist dogma has always had its dissenters. There’s the ideal of the total illusion, the larp where costumes and scenography are perfect – and then there are experimental

larps where you're sitting around in just your underwear, but your character isn't. There's the dominance of rule-free, unstructured play that relies on the honor and improvisation of players rather than points, dice and referees – even though the distinction between the “meta-techniques” currently in vogue and “game mechanics” is mostly theoretical. There are “arthaus” larps set in every possible genre or milieu except fantasy, while the Nordic fantasy larps are often called “mainstream”. There's the belief in the creative power of larpwright *auteurs*, bordering on cults of personality – but also leaderless “collective larps” and “larphackers” who take it upon themselves to save a dysfunctional larp from its creators.

Possibly as a result of the Knutepunkt books' online availability in English, the publication has gathered attention from outside the Nordic countries. People eager to discuss larp and tabletop role-playing – from the perspective of the hobbyist, the artist or the professional – read and write for the books. We did not have a specific focus on international larp when soliciting and reviewing articles, but a global perspective has emerged nonetheless. **Agnese Dzervite** (p.9); **Schmit, Martins & Ferreira** (p.75); and **Tadeusz Cantwell** (p.43) bring us reports of how larp is done in Latvia, Brazil, Britain and France respectively, styles that will seem both familiar and alien to Nordic readers. On the other hand, two Nordic style larpers – **Andersen & Aarebrot** (p.55) – describe their experiences assisting larp organizing in Belarus. **Andrea Castellani's** (p.187) “Karstic Style” is no less Nordic in its approach and references than the “Turku School” or the “Stockholm Narrativists” – except for being based in Trieste, Italy. And one need only take a look at the child-sized boffer swords for sale in a typical Danish supermarket to see that far from all Nordic larps fit the stereotype of the Nordic style.

The stereotypical Nordic larp is played only once, at a secluded location. The pervasive larp breaks out of the seclusion to spill over into the outside world, while the repeatable larp is designed to be played in multiple instances by new groups of players. **Montola, Stenros & Waern** (p.197) provide us with the fruits of the EU-funded IPERG research project, in



■ “Speculative Larps” panel at Knudepunkt 2007

Photo
Britta Bergersen

the form of a *smörgåsbord* of readily applicable philosophies and strategies for the designers of pervasive larps. **J.Tuomas Harviainen** (p. 97) discusses the design of repeatable larps, based on ample hands-on experience, and recommends strategies for facing the design challenges of such larps. Both have plenty to offer for the designers of single-serving, reclusive larps.

Larp and role-playing

Names such as “larp” and “role-playing” become problematic when borders are crossed. Most Norwegians would assume that “role-playing” (*rollespill*) refers to tabletop, not larp (*larp*), while the Russian word which literally translates as “role-playing” usually refers to larp and not tabletop. Most cultures treat “Role-Playing Game” (RPG) as a synonym for either tabletop role-playing or computer games inspired by tabletop. But in Brazil, the term includes both of these, and also larp and adventure

books. While definitions and classification are sure to be discussed for years to come, we have for the most part followed the conventions of earlier books by letting “role-playing” refer to the actual activity of playing a role, “larp” (lowercase, as a noun) to events where role-playing involves the players’ whole (usually costumed) body and “tabletop” to role-playing where players might sit down while their characters walk around.

Depending on the host community, Knutepunkt has been labeled either as a “larp conference” or a “conference on role-playing with a strong emphasis on larp”. The Knutepunkt books have always covered a wider array of forms – not just other forms and contexts of role-playing (tabletop, freeform, educational) but also role-playing in relation to art, theatre, games, ritual, and performance. This year’s book is no exception. **William White** (p.173) analyses a tabletop session based on its transcripts, and draws some interesting conclusions about the nature of role-playing. **Florian Berger** (p.111) describes a combination of role-play with theatre.

- Contact improvisation workshop at Knudepunkt 2007.

Photo
Britta Bergersen



But the “role-playing” that Berger has turned into a performance is, in fact, tabletop. The actual act of role-playing has received less attention in the past than theory and design methods. **Morgan Jarl**, correcting this imbalance, brings more inspiration from the theatre to larp – in the form of a manifesto (p.23) and a how-to on character development (p.165).

Schmit, Martins & Ferreira (p.75) discuss the use of “RPGs” in education in Brazil, and use “RPG” as a broad umbrella covering anything from simple single-player games with no actual character improvisation to complex events with multiple role-playing groups assisted by specialized organizer roles. **Hyltoft and Holm** (p.27) adopt a related approach to educational role-playing, blending a learning game with a role-playing frame borrowed from “Harry Potter”. The authors clearly derive benefits from an eclectic approach to these different forms. And so, perhaps, might others.

Looking forwards, looking back

As Knutepunkt book readers in the past, we must admit that we have at times pulled our hair in exasperation at impenetrable prose and incestuous webs of reference. As editors, we’ve grown more humble. Though the Knutepunkt book is not a peer-reviewed academic journal, some of the articles in this book are written in the genre of the academic paper, with citations and reference lists. Neither we nor any of the authors have allowed the format to be an excuse for obscurantism. Academic writing, while it might require more of the reader, should ideally help us see the world more clearly for what it is.

The theme for the 2009 Knutepunkt is “what matters?” Our working title for this book was “fun”, a tentative answer. We envisioned something more akin to a glossy magazine or a coffee-table book; a collection of engaging articles, a fun read. Others must judge how well the final book matches our visions. But our hair is growing back.

When reading through the submissions on their own terms, three other themes emerge: one theme looks at the practice of live role-playing

from the perspective of the designer or practitioner. A second documents role-playing communities around the world. The third theme goes beyond role-playing, towards performance, education and all the other ways that role-playing intersects with the human life. As such, this is a book about *larp*, *the universe* of role-playing communities, and *everything* related. When these three themes could be comined into a Douglas Adams reference, the title became irresistable. And while the only author to seriously grapple with the f-word and its implications is **Katri Lassila** (p.255), it is mentioned frequently enough.

Old-timers have also been talking about making things fun again, and perhaps this book's vision is part of that trend. The second Knutepunkt book was called "As larp grows up". The editors of the last Knutepunkt Book, "Playground Worlds", suggested that perhaps it had. These days, one can detect a certain nostalgia, a desire to be less serious, more impulsive... less adult, perhaps. This is probably a function of growing up itself – as Knutepunkt has aged, so have its participants, and some tabletop RPG communities have seen a similar development, with a return to old-school fantasy games filled with dungeon crawls, kobolds and evil wizards.

But as Nordic larp communities have grown older and more nostalgic we are faced by the uncomfortable fact that many of our past achievements exist only as fading memories. **Eirik Fatland** (p.223) makes an attempt at preserving such a memory, Norwegian mammoth-larp AmerikA. **Juhana Pettersson** (p.131) writes about the why and how of documenting larps, while **Britta Bergersen** (p.145) – whose photography accompanies several of our articles – has made it her job to do just that. They are not the first to mention the need for documentation, and there is still plenty of work to be done in preserving the Nordic larp heritage. But we should also look forward and ensure that the larps of the future be better documented than those of the past.

Growing up, inevitably, means looking to the next generation – our successors in the role-playing movements. Our kids, even. Larp for children, whether to educate or entertain, has been a growing phenomenon. As old-time larpers and role-players have progressed in their careers, they've looked for ways of integrating their "hobby" (or lifestyle) with their work. Those who used to be maverick rebels, larpers with no concern for consequence or what would happen tomorrow, are now responsible adults telling the kids not to hit below the belt and instructing them in the values of co-operation. We can only hope that the kids we treat with such caution and respect will turn around, break all the rules we've taught them, and create their own worlds of beauty, horror and mystery.