

Pix or didn't happen

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DOCUMENTATION

Intro

Role-playing games, both larp and tabletop, are an ephemeral art form. The games are usually done only once, and people hear about them through word of mouth. Now, in the era of unprecedented ease in publishing stuff on the internet, is the time to change this and start documenting games properly.

Body

I don't know how many role-playing games I've created or run. With larp, the number is small enough that I can make an estimate. Tabletop games, I have no idea.

Some time when I was twenty, I started to give numbers to the sessions in a tabletop campaign. Kulak #1, Kulak #2 and so forth. I didn't do this when I was in high school and in junior high, and I've never played so many role-playing games as I did during those years.

For me personally, the motivation to document role-playing games was born of a desire to have some record of the things I've created. Role-playing is ephemeral by its very nature, but I didn't like the feeling that there was no evidence of all those games I ran as a kid. I have some memories and some indecipherable notes, but that's all.

When it comes to role-playing in general, I think documentation is important for different reasons. Those games that have been written about are the ones that enter the canon of Nordic role-playing. Others fade into obscurity.

It's not just a matter for art larps and other ambitious productions. Every game benefits from having great pictures. It's a peculiarity of Russian larp culture that they take their larp photos very, very seriously. Because of this, the internet is full of great-looking Russian larp pictures. I'm sure all the players who played in those games look at these gorgeous images of themselves and think: "Man, that was a great game".

Autodocumentation

My practical motivation for documenting larps has been to have pictures and other material I can use to make a presentation of my own games. I want to have something on my website from each game, and I want to be able to explain with pictures what I've been doing. I've made games in an art context where this kind of documentation is necessary, but I also like to have a memory of the things I've created.

My first major game was Luminescence, with Mike Pohjola. It had twenty players, semi-naked, wallowing in a roomful of flour. The game was produced in just three days, and as often happens in situations like this, documentation suffered. We, the game masters, were not present during the game, and were unable to obtain photographs.



■ A still from the video documentation of the larp Luminescence

After the game was over, I asked the players to recreate some moments from the game, and shot it on video. This material, about fifteen minutes, is the only actual record of the game. Thanks to the specific visual character of the game, I've been able to use stills from the video as photos, but normally you can't do this: the video frame resolution is much too low for the purposes you need still images for.

Otherwise, asking the players to recreate key moments was a very successful strategy. Since the players were hyped up after the game and they have all the stuff in fresh memory, they were able to perform very well. I was able to move among them with the camera in a way that would have been impossible during the actual game.

Shooting video from an actual game tends to result in squalid-looking footage in which nothing happens. So much of role-playing happens inside the players' heads that even the most action-oriented game doesn't look so hot when you look at the video record. Part of this is because it's really hard to get in there to shoot proper images without getting in the way, but it's also because when you remember a game, you think of all the meaningful moments, all the action, all the drama, but when you shoot video, it looks like you have a record of all the boring stuff instead. The same problems probably plague the editors of a reality TV series like Big Brother. A dramatic recreation is the perfect solution. The players perform for the camera the things they have already experienced inside their heads.

My book about role-playing games, *Roolipelimanifesti*, was published a year after we made Luminescence, in 2005. I included two example games in the book, an outline for a tabletop campaign and a larp scenario. To publicize the book, I ran the larp in an abbreviated form at the 2005 Ropecon role-playing game event in Finland.

The game is called Ala-aste (Elementary School), and is the worst-documented game I've made. It was about a class of fifth-grade school-children during a normal school day. To prepare for the game, I ran a workshop to help the players to regress to the appropriate level of mental cruelty and primitive social dynamics.

The official Ropecon photographer of that year, Olli Rinne, wandered in just then by accident. I asked him for the pictures afterwards. They proved surprisingly good. The workshop was very physical, with the players wrestling on the ground, and photos with action are always better than photos with no action. I suspect the photos were better than any that could have been shot during the game. These pictures and a few scraps of paper the players doodled on during the game are the only thing left from that game.

By 2008 I felt I had learned my lesson, and had decided that I would document rigorously every game I made. For once, I would have proper pictures!

I made a twenty-player art game for the Freefall larp festival, produced together with the Solmukohta 2008 Week in Finland prequel event in Helsinki. The game was called Muovikuppi (The Plastic Cup), and was about material stuff. The characters were a family dividing an inheritance and the central physical metaphor in the game was that the players would express themselves by smashing cheap, light green Ikea coffee cups into the ground.

Destroying 200 coffee cups is pretty harsh on the floor, so the game was played on parking lots. This also made the cleaning easier. There was no scenography, except for some funky lights when the game was played for the first time. I figured that, since the players would have to stretch their imaginations anyway, the game wouldn't suffer if I hovered around taking photographs and shot video.

I don't think the game suffered, but the photos were not very good. I now have a large selection of pictures showing people's backs. Since I was off-game, it was hard for me to get into a good position to shoot without being a nuisance.



■ Pre-game workshop of the game Ala-aste.

Photo
Olli Rinne



■ A recreated scene from the larp Muovikuppi.

Photo
Staffan Jonsson

One of the players spontaneously decided to recreate some of the game-play after the first game and took photos, and during the second game a player shot pictures while she was playing. These images were far superior to those I shot. The players were inside the game, and thus better able to place the camera where it should be.

The video I shot is mostly useless, since it just shows a bunch of people talking and occasionally smashing coffee cups. Even the destruction looks boring if you're not close enough to really understand what's happening.

My most recent game is called Lumimyrsky (Snowstorm). I made it for the Finnish role-playing convention Ropecon in the summer of 2008. It was a ten-player, one-room game relying heavily on text and music. The in-game story was about three teams of workers lost in a snowstorm in Antarctica. They seek refuge in an abandoned base. While there, they begin to suspect that there might be another person there, a mysterious "eleventh".

I made one of the characters a photographer and another a photo hobbyist, and gave the players small digital cameras before the game. The pictures the players took form the main record of the game. This strategy is not so easy: the photography has to be integrated into the story of the game, and is limited by the photographic abilities of the players.

Still, I got enough pictures to make it okay. I hedged my bets by designing the lights in the game area so that the pictures would probably be dramatic no matter how you shot them.

Another thing I did in Lumimyrsky was to put a digital voice recorder, a device much smaller than a pack of cigarettes, under a table in the game area. I guessed the players would congregate around this table for much of the game, and the device had a quite good microphone for picking up voice even a long way off. Thus, I have a voice recording of the entire game.

Sometimes you have to ask yourself what the documentation is for. When you listen to the recording of any role-playing game after the fact, it sounds slow, boring and superficial, no matter how brilliant the game

actually was. I have no idea what I should do with this recording. I made it because it was easy to make it.

Why to how

How to document your game depends on the purpose of the documentation. The Russians don't document their games because they need a portfolio for an art gallery like I do. They document their games because they want to have pictures in which they look really cool.

Even though our purposes are different, we both want fancy photography. I edit a Finnish role-playing magazine called *Roolipelaja*, and we regularly publish articles about larp featuring large numbers of color photos. You can really tell who's been putting some thought into their larp pictures and who hasn't when you look at the stuff submitted to us. Sometimes, the images are gorgeous. Other times, they're intensely boring, stuffy pictures of people in costumes posing, taken with a flashlight.

The best pictures are taken by an actual photographer.

The next best pictures are taken by the players, during the game. Often this is not possible. It's hard to justify cameras in a fantasy game, although I suspect that, in many cases, the players wouldn't mind.

The third solution is to fake it, and ask the players re-create events and situations after the game. Make sure there's enough light, remember that fancy angles often make for better pictures, action is better than no action, and never use the flashlight.

The best documented game I have seen is *Dragonbane*. They had to document properly because many of their sponsors wanted to see what their money had been spent on. I didn't participate in the game, but I have a fair idea of what happened after going through the *Dragonbane*: the *Legacy* documentation book and DVD.

The book tells the story from the perspective of the production. With all the problems the larp had, the production story is quite interesting, and it's rare to have documentation about a game focusing so much on how the game was created and produced.

The book hovers somewhere between a document fulfilling promises made to sponsors and a complete historical record of the game. I'm sure future larp historians will be delighted with the DVD, which contains a preposterous amount of text files, pictures and other effluvia from the game. My favorite was the pdf file which contained the instructions for the driver of the giant mobile dragon.

I suspect that most larp organizers don't feel as great a responsibility for future generations as the Dragonbane team did. Their desire to create a historical record was quite extraordinary. Nevertheless, one of the things you learn from the Dragonbane documentation is that having good pictures is gold. I never really understood the dragon or the village before I saw the many photos they had. You get it when you see how small a human being is next to these immense constructions.

The Dragonbane documentation is organized so that the story of the game and the best pictures are in the book. The DVD is a storehouse which has everything. It's useful if you have a lot of time, but hard to approach. It works well when you first read the book and then explore the DVD archive.

A larp produces a surprising amount of documents. There are character descriptions, promo pictures, player material and maybe a website. Compiling all of this and adding photos taken at the game makes for perfectly serviceable larp documentation. Making a data dump like the Dragonbane DVD is very easy, even when you don't have the energy, resources or motivation to actually publish a book like the Dragonbane people did.

No visual

So far, I've been talking about larps, but tabletop games can be documented too. When I was a kid running Advanced Dungeons & Dragons 2nd edition games, I hit upon the idea of documenting the game with a voice recording. I suspected my players would not be happy, so I made the

recording in secret by hiding a Walkman with the earphones plugged into the microphone jack under the game table.

Afterwards, when I listened to the recording I was surprised to discover we sounded like a bunch of hysterical kids high on ice cream and soda. When you play, it feels like you're killing orcs and saving princesses (or just killing orcs, as we weren't really big on the princesses at that age), but when you listen to it, it's giggling fits, bad jokes, endless off-game comments and fighting.

Recording tabletop game sessions is almost useless as documentation. A friend made a record of a gaming session for an academic study of how people navigated the various levels of fiction and reality in a game, but – apart from special cases like that – I think we need something else.

In 2006, I started a campaign called Tuliunikko (Fireflower), about superheroes in Hollywood. I created a primitive blog for the game. The plan was to write a report of each game and publish it there. The blog was a useful way to give the players material about the game world, and I used it to publish or link to stories or pictures that somehow related to the campaign.

My blog didn't have a 'comments' function, because of primitive software. I saw what you could do with a game blog only after Mike Pohjola started his Tähti (Star) game. He used a proper blogging platform and also wrote descriptions of all the game sessions, as well as doing all the other things that I had done. But thanks to the comments, we, the players, were able to comment on his descriptions of the game, make our own links, and – most surprisingly – allow for people who had nothing to do with the game to make their own comments and requests.

The blog is not a documentation tool as such, but using it alongside a tabletop campaign leaves behind an accessible, already published record of the game. People who don't play in the campaign can read about it and players can refresh their memories after long breaks between game sessions.

The traditional, if exceedingly hard, way tabletop games have been documented has been through the publication of role-playing game books.

These books are often based on someone's game, but usually all the trivia and incidents of the original game have to be shorn away before the thing can be published as a proper role-playing game.

Mike Pohjola published a role-playing game based on the Tähti campaign. Reading the book, you get a much clearer idea of what the game is about, but the original game blog is much more faithful to the game that was played. Although Pohjola created both, the book was based mostly on his vision, while the blog reflected the communal effort of creating a game together.

There are some classic examples of tabletop campaigns being recorded via a published game. The Dragonlance novel *Dragons of Autumn Twilight* is based on an actual role-playing campaign also published as adventure modules. After the book was published, the authors (Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman) felt that basing their books on the game was too restricting and didn't make for a good story, so the second and third instalment in the trilogy were novels first, and games second.

The great thing about the Dragonbane documentation book was that it allowed the larp to be documented as it was. It was not Dragonbane: the Roleplaying Game, but an actual record of the game itself.

The problem with the blog and the published game is that neither of them really documents the methods and formal innovations made in a tabletop game. A published game can't, by necessity, be a reflection of the actual game, and there's no need to discuss the game on an abstract level in a blog if it's made primarily for the participants.

Most importantly, all of these documentation methods fail to capture the actual experience of playing.

Player experience

Player experience is the Holy Grail of role-playing game documentation. Recording sound, shooting video, taking pictures, all run into the problem that larp and tabletop games are not geared for performance. Much of the game is internal, and because of this, games seem unspectacular when

viewed from the outside. Even dance and theatre are hard to document this way, and they're supposed to be seen by an audience.

Role-playing is meant to be experienced from the inside. If you really want to record the totality of your achievement in role-playing, you have to document what the player feels and experiences during the game.

I started larp with *Vampire: The Masquerade* games. They were long-running campaigns, and after each game, the players were asked to write a report of the game for the game masters. They usually wrote about what their characters did, but sometimes they also talked about their own experiences in the game. In retrospect, the bits about personal experiences were the best part.

Those Vampire games left behind a record describing what had actually happened in the games, not just the game master's vision of what she thinks should have happened. The Vampire games were really big on secrets, so the reports were for game master eyes only. In a contemporary game with a more open design aesthetic, it might not be a bad idea to have a website where all of the reports would be published after each game.

The only way to get to the player experience is to ask the player to describe it. If you really want to document the player experience in your game, you should ask the players to write reports of their own or interview them after the game.

This is not always easy. The Dragonbane people asked players to write reports but very few actually did so. As a result, the Dragonbane book is weakest on this. After my larp *Lumimyrsky* I attempted to create an after-game discussion with players to have some record of their experiences in the game, but it wasn't very successful. The game was held at a convention, and people were anxious to leave for other programming.

Still, these are obstacles that can be overcome. It's generally a good idea to manage expectations by telling the players in advance what is expected of them, so they know they'll have to articulate their experiences after the game.

The Finnish bomb shelter larp Ground Zero inspired an email list discussion after the game. The game was emotionally transforming, and a

lot of the players wished to discuss it afterwards. This was great for documentation purposes, because email exchanges create an automatic written record that's easily quoted and edited into some kind of a whole.

Writing is an often-overlooked method of documentation, and also the best. Nobody is going to understand what larp pictures mean without an explanation. Often, a 500-word description of the game written by the designers is worth more than a thousand pictures. Since role-playing is not primarily a visual medium, you can best explain in words what the game was like, why it was designed the way it was, what happened in it, what worked, what didn't, and what it was about.

Word out

Publishing game documentation on the internet is really easy, especially if you use a blogging platform like Wordpress. It takes me about an hour to write a description of a larp I've run and upload some pictures.

Other ways of recording a game are more expensive (the Dragonbane way of publishing a book and a DVD) or rely on the whims of editors (publishing an article in a game magazine). I try to provide a platform for people who want to showcase their games in the magazine I edit. While we feature maybe twelve larps each year, over 150 games are made in Finland annually, many of those interesting and innovative and certainly deserving of wider notice.

Retroactively, Luminescence has become the best documented of all my games. This is because my co-creator Mike Pohjola and I have written about it so much in various publications and platforms, from the role-playing game portal rpg.net to the various Knutepunkt books over the years.

Crucially, for rpg.net I wrote a straightforward description of the game and what it was about. There are two ways to write about a game for a publication like the Knutebooks. You can write about the game and its central themes and creative agenda, or you can use the game as an example to make a point of some kind. Articles in the first category are

quite rare, articles in the second quite common. The theory of larp benefits from whatever insights these articles contain, but often they are also the only lasting record of the game they incidentally describe.

The 2008 Solmukohta book *Playground Worlds* contains some exemplary examples of larp writing. Jonas Trier-Knudsen's *Stupid Stories: Using Narrativism in Designing Agerbørn* explained very well what the game was about and why it was made, but also gave an impression of how it felt to participate. Bjarke Pedersen and Lars Munck's *Walking the White Road: a Trip into the Hobo Dream* was similarly excellent, all the more so because it documented a game with a very small number of players. Johanna Koljonen has always written about larps with emotion and recognizability, and her description of *Dragonbane* here remains the best account of how it felt to actually play in it.

I've published documentation from my larps on my website. I run a tabletop campaign called *Tuliunikko 2* (a sequel to the original campaign) which has a blog (in Finnish). I've found that apart from being very easy, having a record of the games I've made is kind of satisfying. I like to talk to people about my games. Why not take it to the next level?

Ludography

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