

Tabletop RPG meets performing arts

Bringing pen & paper role-playing to the stage

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PERFORMANCE

TABLETOP

At first this looks like an ordinary tabletop role-playing session. Three guys at a table. Describing, debating, occasionally speaking in character. Nothing you have not seen before, and admittedly not too exciting to watch. But then: As the game master goes on explaining a dangerous path across the mountains, a large image appears behind the three, showing that very rocky pathway through jagged cliffs, partly covered with moss and grass. Soft music begins to play, emphasizing the uneasy mood of the way. You almost believe you can see the two characters walking in the image.

A few minutes later, one player stands up and walks some steps away from the table. Warm light fades in, and you see that in the dark another participant has been waiting who now portrays a non-player character. The scene that has been set up in your mind by the descriptions before now begins to take physical shape on the stage in front of you. While you

are drawn into the action, you wonder for one moment: is this still tabletop role-playing? And if not – what is it then?

It is August 2008. In Leipzig, Germany, four role-players and two actors have set out to incorporate performing arts techniques into tabletop role-playing and to bring the result to a theatre stage, with inspirations drawn from cinema, actor reading sessions and poetry performances. As the game master of that evening, I will describe the foundations, preparations and the result of our experiment in this article. Come and follow me.

Shaping the idea

Shortcomings at the table

I have been playing tabletop role-playing games since 1995, and over the years I have become more and more dissatisfied with the setting these games are actually played in. I wanted to take part in an exciting story and go through an atmospheric experience. Instead, I found myself sitting at a dining table covered with scribbles and cola bottles, looking at a wall opposite the window. To me, such surroundings have always interfered with the vivid imagination of strange places and dramatic events.

In my experience this is not an uncommon problem: depending on how much they felt distracted by their surroundings, the players I have met have developed a number of approaches to improve the situation of the game, such as:

- darkening the room
- using dim sources of light, like candles
- playing background music, predominantly film music
- bringing accessories to the table like a puzzle, an old key or the like

These have become fairly widespread techniques for pen-and-paper players. On the other hand, costumes, cloaks and dresses are rarely found at the table (except at RPG conventions) and have remained within the domain of larp.

Playing around with the above approaches, I finally came to wonder: how – and how far – can one intensify the tabletop role-playing experience by customizing the gaming environment in the real world?

Gathering inspiration

However, that thought did not come out of the blue. Back in 2005, I watched the movie *The Piano Tuner of Earthquakes*. The story takes place on a mad scientist's island, and the motion picture features impressive, disturbing, hard-to-decrypt imagery, oozing with a mysterious symbolism.¹

Walking out of the cinema I was impressed by how a strong (though uneasy) atmosphere could be created simply by using gloomy, symbolic images. I immediately thought about using this as a device at the gaming table by means of *video projection*, yet unresolved difficulties – how do you set up a satisfying projection in a living room? – prevented me from trying it for some time.

The second inspiration came when the German actor Rufus Beck did a reading of *Drachenglut* (by Jonathan Stroud, original title: *Buried Fire*) at the Leipzig Book Fair. Beck is critically acclaimed in Germany for his Harry Potter audio books. He turned up with a laptop which he read the text from, but which he also used to play some atmospheric sounds in the background – not necessarily music, but shifting ambient-style sounds to reflect enigmatic parts of the story.

As mentioned above, I have been playing background music myself at tabletop RPG sessions since 2004 with very satisfying results. “There are certain pieces of music you use”, one of my players recently said, “that flip a switch in my mind, and I am there, right in the game world.”

¹ There is a trailer on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOxn6XkCYRA>

To me, Beck's performance underlined the power and the importance of this technique and set the seal on using background sounds for the experimental session that began to take shape in my head.

The most recent inspiration was Benjamin Bagby's recital of *Beowulf*.² Bagby performs this poem from the 8th century BC in original Old English (Anglo-Saxon), a language which has been out of use for hundreds of years. Being an actor, he uses just about any possibility entailed in his voice and body: whispering, shouting, declaiming, singing, gesturing. He accompanies himself on a reconstructed Anglo-Saxon harp.

I own the DVD and I watch it regularly for fun and inspiration. To me, Bagby is a storytelling archetype for every game master. But he especially provides examples of techniques that can be used within performing arts-oriented role-playing. I have been thinking about bringing an instrument to the table for some time, to comment on the action and create transitions. Bagby shows how to handle such a device in an effective way.

² Available on DVD at <http://www.bagbybeowulf.com/>. A fragment can be watched on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VX_mDfRib8k

The concept: making fun sound serious

When an occasion was at hand to finally bring these ideas to life (more on that later), this was the concept I suggested to my friends and players, trying to persuade them to participate:

The *foundation* of what we are about to do is the well-known form of tabletop role-playing, using pen, paper and dice. Procedures and responsibilities are the same: the game master controls and describes the action, the NPCs (non-player characters) and the circumstances; the players control their respective characters.

The *idea* is the considerably increased effort of the game master to create a vivid impression of the events and the atmosphere for the players.

³ For the function of the “playing field” see also Huizinga (1938).

The first component is a special *room*. The game shall be played in an environment which explicitly differs from one’s habitual home environment or spare time surroundings. The location shall be quiet, spacious and have a minimum of distractions.³ Theatres and cinema auditoriums fulfill a comparable function; smaller theatres seem particularly suited for this style of playing.

In that room the game master shall use *music, noises, sound effects* like reverb or voice distortion as well as *image and video projection* during the game to create moods or to accompany and comment on the action. Using these devices shall never be a goal in itself, but serve the storytelling instead. Handling the media technology must not disturb the flow of the game.

The game master shall adopt a broad range of *storytelling techniques*. In addition to descriptions, monologues and direct speech of NPC, he shall play an instrument where applicable.

The game master and the players shall use the space and the quietness of the room to physically act out confrontations and dialogue. The possibilities to do so when sitting at the table are usually very limited. In performance-oriented role-playing, the participants shall leave the table every now and then to physically perform scenes. There is no need nor demand for professional acting; rather, it is about visualizing and getting a feeling for the arrangement of the characters. Should someone not wish to leave the table, he/she is not forced to do so. Only the game master *must* use the space offered by the environment, be it only for monologues.

By using music and projections and acting out scenes, the session inevitably takes on some features pertaining to performing arts. As a consequence, an *audience* can be admitted to experience the story from the perspective of a passive observer. After adequate preparation, persons from the audience may be involved in single scenes, joining in at a sign of the game master. The session, however, is *not improvisational the-*

atre, and although a satisfying public performance may be an interesting by-product, it is not the goal of the game.

Because of the increased effort both in storytelling and in the usage of multimedia, the game master becomes the shaper of the experience to a much greater extent than in an ordinary tabletop game. Thus the term *auteur role-playing* can be introduced, as an allusion to *auteur film-making* and *auteur theory*.⁴ Instead of setting up a canvas where players can do whatever they like, this concept rather suggests that the players use their characters to contribute to the game master's vision of the story.⁵

To my present knowledge, a game modelled on this concept had not been tried out nor documented before.

I must specify that these ideas were *not* inspired by the role-playing games published by White Wolf, Inc. (such as "Vampire" or "Werewolf"). True, there are similarities in the approaches: role-playing is understood as a *storytelling game* with the game master being the principal storyteller. Also, live-action is regarded as a valid form of gameplay.⁶ However, mixing tabletop, larp and performing arts techniques and bringing the result before an audience sets us apart from these games.

From a larp point of view the question may arise as to why I chose to maintain the tabletop concept without turning it into a Live action role-playing game as a whole. The answer is that all those techniques were meant to *enhance and strengthen* a tabletop experience. In an experimental session I wanted to find out how well they serve this purpose. Acting out dialogue and scenes happens to be one of the devices of performance-oriented role-playing, but the session could have been conducted without using live acting at all. When the occasion was at hand to perform the session, all devices were tried at once. Although it resembled a larp event in appearance, conceptually we always remained adherent to the tabletop style of play we were accustomed to.

⁴ See also Truffaut (1954)

⁵ See also The Manifesto of the Turku School at <http://www2.uiah.fi/~mpohjola/turku/manifesto.html>: "The role-playing game is the game masters creation, to which he lets the players enter. The game world is the game master's, the scenario is the game master's, the characters (being a part of the game world) are the game master's. ... This does not mean that the game master should tell the players what their characters should do."

⁶ See also Davis, Graeme, Rein-Hagen, Mark and Wieck, Stewart: *Vampire: The Masquerade*. White Wolf Publishing, 1995.

Preparations: setting up for the journey

The occasion

Renting a stage, motivating participants and finding an audience for such an experiment are not as easy tasks as one might think. I have been turning the ideas mentioned above around in my mind for quite some time, and there were several obstacles that held me back.

Firstly, renting and setting up even a small theatre stage for a private gaming session is both expensive and not very satisfying if there are only a few people involved. Secondly, making it a public performance with strong elements of improvisation might scare off participants who like to play, but are afraid to perform. So I decided early on that the first performance should not be public, but rather have a limited and selected audience. Thirdly, how to convince ordinary tabletop players to participate in such an unfamiliar event? Experimental larp sessions are *far* less common in Germany than they are in the Scandinavian countries. The kind of game we were about to play might raise eyebrows even amongst active larpers here.

The solution to all of these obstacles came with my private birthday party in August 2008. This was a splendid occasion to rent a small theatre which also had an adjoining cafe where the party could take place. Approaching possible participants with a wish for my anniversary made refusal just a little more difficult. In addition, it provided a willing audience of about 40 people, most of whom already knew each other. Finally, the occasion of the anniversary enabled me to raise some financial backing for the performance.

The participants

The active participants were:

- Florian B. (myself) as the game master
- Long-term role-players Alexander M. and Stephan S. as players
- Another role-player, Volker G. and professional actors Stephan T. and Tilla K. as NPCs
- Yves B., who works for a local TV station, as light and sound engineer

I decided to involve only two main player characters. One reason for that was to make it easier for the audience to keep track of the story. Also, with more main characters we would have had less play time for each.

Briefings

Alexander M., Stephan S. and I have been working on a role-playing world and rule set for a couple of years now⁷, and we know each other's style and preferences. Both at first had some objections to the project; while Alexander quickly decided to face it head-on, Stephan said he would participate, but still continue to consider role-playing as a kind of private activity that in his mind does not belong on a stage.

7. <http://www.drei-rpg.de/>

It had been clear from the beginning that our world and rule set would provide the canvas and rules for the session. I prepared a basic background situation with a city involved in border skirmishes, and we created the two main characters. Being the two principal players, Alexander and Stephan received no information on planned in-game events or developments.

Next I approached Stephan T. and Tilla K. Neither had any previous RPG experience. While the two agreed to participate, I learned to my surprise that improvisation is considered a very difficult process by actors who are much more used to developing a character from a given text. I

had planned to create several characters and assign them on demand, but then I decided to give one fixed NPC to each. We had two preliminary meetings where I revealed my plans for how the action could develop in-game.

At this point it was clear that the game would center around these four players, so I just had a quick arrangement with Volker G. via phone and email; he would just have a short appearance on stage.

Yves, who was going to be responsible for live light and sound engineering, was instructed just like all other participants. He received all the documents about the playing style, the content and the characters, as I wanted him not just to turn knobs, but to adjust light and sound according to the pace and the intensity of the action.

All players were asked to wear darker colors at the performance, no funny prints and no bright shirts, following the principle of minimal distraction. As laid out in the concept, there were *no costumes* as such, yet we had some props such as a walking stick, some chairs, a cup or a handkerchief.

Time frame

The playing session was scheduled to start at 21:30. There had been some previous debate about how long it should last. Though entertaining the audience should not be the goal of the game, we did not want to bore them either. I decided to fulfill the expectations an audience might have about the duration of such an event and therefore to use approximately one hour.

The stage

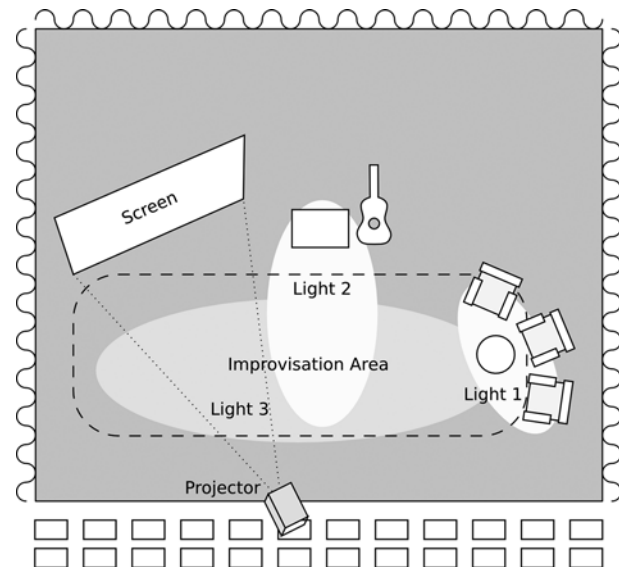
The stage is about six meters wide and five meters deep. It is mainly used for smaller and independent theatre productions. In our setup, the left side of the stage was dominated by the *projection screen*. I placed the projector in the first row of seats close to the mixing desk where Yves B. supervised the media technology. In the middle of the stage there was a solitary *music stool* for me to perform longer monologues or play guitar. The table and the three chairs were on the right side of the stage and a bit closer to the audience. The free area in front of the screen, the stool and the table was intended for *acting out scenes*.

Lighting, sound and projections

The theatre featured professional lighting equipment and a technician to do the setup. Together we prepared three areas of light: a spotlight on the music stool which left the rest of the stage in darkness; a warm light on the table and chairs; and a broader light for the “acting area”. During the game Yves B. faded the lights in and out.

The music and the video source for the projections came from a laptop. Since an “auteur” game master must have complete control over sound and images, I wrote a program for that purpose which I could run from a computer keyboard that I put next to the table. The program was able to fade images and music in and out at the press of single keys.

All images were based on photographs taken by me over the years. They showed mountains, lakes, skies, medieval houses, walls or details like locks. Following the principle of minimum distraction as explained above, no



■ Sketch of the stage setup

Illustration
Florian Berger

humans or animals were in the pictures. I edited the images to make them look somewhat more mysterious than ordinary photographs, so that they resembled things as they would appear in the game world. Additionally, I prepared a map of the fictional world for projection to show where the action took place.

The performance: letting scenes roll

An introduction

Though tempted to start the game right away, I began with an introduction for the audience. Most of them were unfamiliar with any form of role-playing games, and no one had heard about the particular fantasy setting of the story before. The introduction was done with all lights on and no music or projections, to separate it clearly from the actual game. I explained what tabletop role-playing is, what we were about to try and that there had been no rehearsals.

■ Setting up the stage

Photo

Alexander Marbach



The role-playing session began with a pre-arranged projection of text and images, accompanied by music, telling about the in-game background situation. This served the purpose of putting players and audience in the desired mood for the game. Next I, now in the role of the game master, picked up the story told so far and went on to introduce the setting and the characters.

The game

The actual game unfolded as usual as an alternation of actions, descriptions and dialogues between players and game master. Upon the start of a new scene or the characters' arrival at a new location, I would go to the "acting area" and portray some NPC that the players were going to encounter. Among the locations for the action there were an inn, a market place, the ruler's palace and some places in the wilderness. When a scene ended, I often went to the music stool to tell about subsequent events or play an instrumental piece on the guitar.

There were very exciting moments when the additional players had their call and acted out their respective NPCs. Especially the actors found interesting ways to bring their characters to life. For example, Stephan T. invented a recurring line that his character would use to greet the player characters, showing his inner distance to them. This developed into a kind of running gag and made the audience respond to every appearance of the character.

The end

Over the course of the game it became evident that a role-playing session has a much slower pace than a movie or a play. The game took almost twice as long as scheduled and did not find a truly satisfying ending, though a fairly consistent and interesting story had emerged. We finally came to a point where the main location, the city, was about to be attacked. It would have fitted the story well had the characters decided to leave the town after all that had happened, but since they opted for staying and fighting, the game



- Still setting up. The screen is in place

Photo

Alexander Marbach

- Acting out with a professional actress. The white background is the projection screen.

Photo

Thomas Sandkühler

would have lasted even longer. Therefore, it was necessary for me to do a cut and end the game with a monologue, suggesting the further development of the story and the characters. This was foreseen and arranged with Yves before, so the monologue was pronounced at the music stool with me in the spotlight, followed by a fadeout of all music and lights and some time of darkness. Naturally, the audience applauded, and then everyone went on to celebrate the game (and the anniversary) with some scotch whisky.

Results: lessons learned

The author's impressions

The performance was an experiment in more than just one way. I tested a variety of techniques in parallel, and I will now comment on each one separately. The components tested were:

- the room: unfamiliar, big, sparse, quiet
- lighting: lighting moods and fades
- projections: orientation, comments, mood
- monologues and instrumentals performed by the game master
- acting out scenes on stage
- incorporating other role-players and professional actors as NPCs
- playing before an audience
- enhanced authorship of the game master throughout the game

What follows below are my personal impressions and reflections.

The room

In the room there was an atmosphere which differed considerably from “living room” role-playing. Its size allowed thinking and playing in scenes and bigger gestures. In addition, it offered the possibility to alternate between closeness and distance, which is not possible in an ordinary tabletop session. So an area of 6x5m proved to be sufficient space for a tabletop playing and occasional acting out.

My overall feeling concerning the room was not very comfortable, which I now attribute to its emptiness and size. The big floor, the black curtains and the sparse furniture made it hard to sit back and relax. On the one hand, this made me more active; on the other hand, I wished myself back to a cozy couch from time to time. My impression was that this kind of room does not yet provide the ideal surrounding for intense role-playing; the factor of feeling well and at home is not to be underestimated (see the end of this article for future ideas). Looking back I think it is advisable to have a warming up session in such an unfamiliar environment to get a feel for it. In our case we only had the stage for one night, so there was no time for such a session.

Lighting

The spots and lighting moods in the different areas, and especially their fading in and out when appropriate, provided an essential contribution to the atmosphere; only the light defined the meaning and impression of the different places on stage. A theatre stage is therefore a very good place for this style of play, even if there is no audience, because professional lighting equipment is mounted in the right places and there usually is an experienced technician to help with the setup. In addition, the role of the live lighting engineer is not to be underestimated. He or she must be able to follow the flow of the action and sometimes anticipate the game master’s intentions. That was why I instructed Yves as if he had been a player (see above).

Projections

The projection of a map was a nice alternative to a hand-scribbled sketch, and also allowed the audience to understand the spatial relations of the different scenes. Regrettably, I could not use the projection software to its full extent, since I was not able to trigger the images without looking at the keyboard. Besides, I was locked to my chair when I wanted to change images because of the computer keyboard that was placed there. Even a wireless keyboard would have looked odd if I had carried it around. My next approach is going to be a programmable remote control in conjunction with an infrared receiver connected to the laptop. This would provide a small device to change music and images to be used anywhere on the stage.

Sadly, the projections had to be faded to black for almost all acting scenes, in order to avoid projecting the image on the players. A projection from the rear would have worked out a lot better, also because in that case the players would have been able to react to the imagery.

When the projector had been turned off, the big white screen turned out to be a strange background for the scenes. An unobtrusive

- During the game. On the left a glimpse of the projection

Photo

Thomas Sandkühler



screen would have been better, but might be harder to build. Of course this problem does not occur when using rear projection, where there is no need to turn the projector off completely.

Acting out

In my view, the acting out of characters by using the space provided proved to be the strongest part of the experiment. Although the acting was intended as a supplement to the imagination we created at the table, often the physical components that are missing in tabletop role-playing made it easier to play the character and deepened the experience. I will give two examples: the character of Alexander approached a commander, trying to change his mind on how to deal with the crisis that threatened the city. I described the hall and the throne of the commander, put a chair on the left side of the stage, took his role and asked Alexander's character to enter. Alexander came from the dim light and could now incorporate the physical distance between us into his acting. A second example: the two player characters tried to obtain information at an inn, which we made up by putting some chairs here and there in the improvisation area. Tilla played the innkeeper, I remained at the table. Sitting in the middle of the stage, Stephan S. asked out-of-character whether there was a lone person present that looked like a salesman. I said "Yes, some tables away from you", and described what he looked like. Then Stephan – now in character – looked around the inn and made me be the salesman, because I would portray that person anyway and I was actually sitting some tables away. He left his companion and approached me, and we acted out the dialogue at the playing table. These possibilities led to a stronger profile of both the characters and the situation as such. The acting component ("role-playing" in the sense of the word) pushed the strategic parts of the game into the background. Whether one likes that or not is of course a matter of personal preference.

Audience

Reactions during the game showed that the spectators were able to follow the story and appreciated what happened on stage. However, I consider the audience to be a distracting factor:

- The whole stage geometry was designed towards a watching audience. I would have preferred an orientation towards the players, a much more closed-in stage layout (table and screen). That way the attitude would have been „playing for ourselves“ rather than „playing for someone else“, and it would also possibly have improved the impression of the room.
- The natural demands of an audience watching a stage performance kept interfering with the flow of the game; in particular the necessity for speaking up (since we did not use microphones), and requests for more detailed explanations of actions or characters to allow the spectators to follow the action.
- The factor I was most conscious of was time. Under normal circumstances, I would have used a much slower pace for the game. Thinking of the audience, we imposed a limit of roughly one hour on ourselves, which created considerable pressure once we exceeded that time-limit. Especially during scenes between the main players and the actors where I was not involved and which I did not want to interrupt by force, I often felt uneasy and thought “this is taking too long, the audience is getting bored”. In a private session I would have sat back, relaxed and watched the action roll instead. To keep concentrating on acting scenes, I mostly shortened travels of the characters that normally are affected by random encounters. At the end of the game this led to a feeling of rushing through the locations. Without an audience, the same story normally would have been played over a course of about four hours.

Auteur-style role-playing

My ambitious plans of an auteur-style role-playing game have not been fulfilled by the experiment. According to the concept, the experiment should have been an experience created by the game master using monologues, music, images and NPCs, with the players contributing the character actions within the constraints of the overall story arch. But I clearly underestimated both the duration and the impact of the live action scenes. Although, as the game master, I still controlled the media devices and in theory could interfere with any scene, the initiative of the participants, especially the NPC actors, greatly influenced the road which the story took. The best example is Stephan T., who by his own initiative dropped important information about a planned assault on the city long before I had intended it. This of course greatly changed the pace and the direction of the story, while all I could do was to react to this development. It turned out to be a good and exciting turn in the end, since that way Stephan T.'s character seemed much deeper and more important to the players; it also created a sense of the story coming from all sides, not only from the game master. Dividing up hints and clues between NPC players may therefore be a valuable technique for further sessions. My final impression is that this session was rather a collaborative piece of art. *Auteur-style* role-playing worth its name must to a greater degree be the product of the game master.

Impressions of participants and spectators

The overall impressions of the players and actors were that the experiment worked out pretty well – an interesting story had emerged, there was satisfying role-playing and a feeling of flow. In the audience there were mixed opinions. “I liked the projections”, someone said, “Together with music and light they created a great atmosphere, like at the movies.” Someone else added “Now I have an idea what tabletop role-playing is about. I do not necessarily want to become a role-player now, but it is an interesting activity.” Some spectators stated that it was difficult to follow



- The game master plays an instrumental piece

Photo
Thomas Sandkühler

all the names of the characters, especially since I played several NPCs as the game master. Almost the whole audience agreed on one thing: the performance was “too long” (see also my notes on that above). Since there are movies or stage performances that last considerably longer than the two hours we needed, I attribute this to the amount of imagination and concentration required to follow the action. After all plays and movies visualize the action to a great degree, leaving not much for the recipient to picture and remember.

From a player’s point of view, Alexander M. explained that the audience had been a stimulus for quality, but also disturbed the game by changing the agenda. “I had the feeling of owing something to the audience – after all, on a stage an audience is not to be ignored”, he said.

The typical game elements (such as the rolling of the dice) were found to be underrepresented by several participants. Volker G. suggested a “dice cam” to incorporate this into the projections and thus engage the audience.

I had a special interest in the impressions of the professional actors, since they had not been in touch with role-playing games before. Stephan T. found that the (already simplified) rules were still pretty complex. “It was strange to see you negotiate ‘Do I hear him saying that or not’. An actor would just pass over that problem or act out speaking quietly.” He also perceived the background music as a “killer”: “The permanent playing of mystic music made spectators sleepy. Less could be more here.” To Tilla K. it was unclear who could be a possible audience for this kind of performance. “At best it could be a niche event, like a sophisticated music session which might be fascinating for the musicians involved but not for the listeners.” Finally Tilla said that “bringing tabletop role-playing to the stage automatically makes theatre productions the reference. Thus, the visualization will always lag behind – and who wants to be ‘second best’ forever?” To the actors, tabletop RPG seemed closer to radio drama than to stage play, so they suggested further experiments in that area.

Future work

Looking back, I think that tests of single components would have yielded better results. But the anniversary brought about the unique chance to try it all at once, and this being an experiment, the outcome was not bad after all. For further tests I will split the original concept into two approaches:

- Approach 1: *Audience-oriented Role-playing*. Focus on performance, respecting the demands of spectators, all in all closer to improvisation theatre. I will involve actors with improvisation experience; at the time of writing, contacts have been made to a group of actors specialized in improvisation.
- Approach 2: *Auteur-style Role-playing*. No audience, smaller and cozier room. Tests with music, projections, acting area, monologues and instruments.

So this is what we did in August 2008. Thank you for following me that far. If you participated in a similar event and would like to share your experiences, I would be glad if you got in touch with me.

Thanks

I would very much like to thank everybody who made that performance possible. Thanks to Thomas Sandkühler and Alexander Marbach, who took the photos in this article. A very warm “Thank You” also to Matthijs Holter and Tor Kjetil Edland and all the others from the Knutepunkt 2009 team.