

## **School of Flour**

*Developing methodology through eight experimental larps*

By Mike Pohjola

“If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research.”

- Albert Einstein

### **1.0 Introduction**

In this essay, I deal with the growth of the understanding of methodology in my work. I will introduce eight case examples of experimental larps I've created to portray the development of their methods from 1997 to 2004. I will explain the methodology of these larps and analyze its effects.

In the first part, I chronologically introduce eight larps I've run, and several larps I've participated, as well as other things that have affected my work. In the second part, I explain the methods categorically to show their evolution.

### **2.0 Larps and inspirations**

As with most larp writers of the mid-90s era, I started with fantasy larps. I was taught the rather formulaic style widely in use in Finland in the early 90s. Typical larps lasted six to eight hours, and all characters should have a minimum number of contacts and plots.

The larp experiments of that time were attempts at cyberpunk or horror, there being a strong belief that the form needed little developing. At the same time, there was a continuing discussion between the dominant dramatists and the simulationists. The dramatists underlined the importance of acting and plots, while the simulationists wanted a more realistic and less melodramatic view of the larp world. Most of the simulationists had strong roots in the tabletop community.

Following the discussion and participating in it, I started agreeing with the simulationists. The immersionists later emerged from the ranks of the simulationists, and formed the loose coalition known as the Turku School.

After a few years of debates, most people agreed that character immersion was the goal in role-playing, even if the methods for achieving it were different. The dramatists believed it could be best achieved by lots of plots to react to in-character, while the simulationists believed it could only happen if the character lived in a believable society in a believable world. Both had good points, although back then I condemned the dramatist view.

## 2.1 .laitos (1997)

My boldest early experiment was the larp .laitos, set in a high school in a totalitarian future. The original concept was far from that.

.laitos originally set out to combine Happy Days style cheery rock'n'roll high school with cyberpunk's cool technical gadgets. I called the genre "cyberRock'n'Roll." As the concept developed, and the suitability of a school environment for a larp fully dawned on me, the game became the opposite of cyberRock'n'Roll, being more like schoolpunk, with no technical gadgets. The result was a bit like what a high school might've been in the world of **George Orwell's** 1984.

One advertisement e-mail described the larp:

*"The society controls the people's contentment. The individuals unfit for society are removed in the name of the common good. The Masters rule the world. The Overseers make sure the Masters are obeyed. Anti-social behavior is destroyed wherever it is seen. Good children turn in their parents, the youth remove the unwanted material from among each other, the grown ups observe the others' obedience. In schools the submissive teachers give falsified information to indifferent students. .laitos is such a school."*

People commended it as the first art larp for the larger public, and proof that art larps don't all have to be 20 person experiments. This one had roughly 70 players and the game was open for anyone to sign up. As the concept of the game changed radically during development, many people assumed it would be a happy high school parody without the oppressing undertones. Even they quickly adopted the new genre.

## 2.2 Paljon melua tyhjistä (1998)

With the success of .laitos I wanted to do something that would be intentionally experimental from the start. When panclou printed **Eirik Fatland's** article on fateplay, I was sure such a dramatist brutality would never work, but wanted to try it out, anyway. Thus, in 1998 I ran Paljon melua tyhjistä (Much Ado About Nothing), an attempt at a fateplay based on the **Shakespeare** comedy. For reasons I'll explain later, this was my least successful experiment. So far.

As I now understand, the point of fateplay is to employ simple pre-determined plots in larps in order to bring about powerful scenes and emotions. Paljon melua tyhjistä took a part of the method, but none of the goal, making a minute-by-minute schedule for each character. This misunderstanding of the fateplay method proved a very interesting experiment. It created a terrible larp that was nevertheless a powerful learning experience. In retrospect, Paljon melua tyhjistä combined the worst parts of both theatre and larp.

## 2.3 International influence

During the next few years, I ran the Myrskyn aika fantasy campaign, and studied literature, media

theories, and Aristotle. I also got my first influences from the international role-playing community. A bunch of friends dragged me to my first Knutepunkt in Denmark, I visited an American larp convention in New Jersey, and discussed theory and practice on international forums. **Joc Koljonen's** magazine *Panclou* provided an excellent medium for longer articles, and heavily stimulated the theory debate.

When Eirik Fatland and **Lars Wingård** wrote the Dogme 99 manifesto, it was reported and translated in the Finnish forums. By the time the English translation of the Dogme was published, I could counter with the Turku School's Vow of Chastity of the Player. For *Solmukohta 2000*, I had finally written the Manifesto of the Turku School. The ensuing debate between Eirik Fatland, myself, and others brought about new ways to enhance the immersive experience.

Many people, myself included, demanded thematic content in larps. As I strongly believed a larp was experienced by the player only through the character, the theme should also be evident in the character, preferably as an inner conflict. (Because a character's inner conflict would be with the player even when she was alone.) As the shared immersive experience of all the players forms the whole of the larp, so the shared themes would form the thematic whole. In other words, each characters' theme and inner conflict would have to reflect the larger themes and conflicts of the larp.

## **2.4 Europa (2001)**

As a result of our debates, when Fatland started writing the Dogme larp *Europa* with the *Weltschmerz* group, he asked me to collaborate as the Finnish character designer. I agreed. The larp was unlike anything seen in Finland, a bit like *.laitos* made more topical and political and focused. Providing the players with five days in a refugee center as refugees of the Nordic wars was certainly the most political larp I had heard of by then.

One of *Europa's* few problems was the alternate reality setting. The idea of having Nordic people as refugees in Eastern Europe was good, but the world of the characters was left a bit sketchy at times. In a way, the setting was too much a narrativist outline instead of a simulationist world. I believe a more solid background would've grounded the larp more firmly in reality beyond the refugee center.

*Europa* was also the first time I had been to a larp that lasted for more than two days. Five-day larps are normal in Sweden and Norway, but in Finland they are practically unheard of. Thanks to *Europa*, I began to understand immersion better, realizing that in a long larp, the player's mid-term memory consists only of the larp: even if the mind wanders, it automatically wanders only within the larp and the character.

## **2.5 inside:outside (2001-2002)**

*Europa* was immediately followed by the second Norwegian Knutepunkt. During the conference I approached the post-*Europa*-high Fatland to suggest a larp project we would design together. He immediately agreed. Neither of us had a concrete concept at this point, but ideas soon began to

fly.

We wanted to make a larp like nothing that existed before, something like Kafka's *The Process*, or Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. *Prisoner's Dilemma*<1>, and the slightly more elaborate *Wolf's Dilemma*<2>, provided action to the setting, and the larp had form: a prison where a bunch of normal people are forced to face dilemmas. The early dilemmas would be like the *Wolf's Dilemma*, then they'd move on to *Prisoner's Dilemmas*, and finally to the truly horrible ones. The worst ones were not non-zero-sum games anymore, they were purely moral dilemmas: Are you willing to choose one of your cellmates to die, as the price for your freedom?

To our knowledge, this was the first time a larp (or indrama<3> as we called it) was created on such an international scale, with both writers being equally important and still living in different countries. The dialogue between Fatland and myself forced us to think outside of our separate boxes, each idea needing to be justified independently of tradition.

inside:outside was by far the most focused larp I had created by this point. The exchange of ideas between Fatland, myself, the other team members, and the players sparked some great insights into what larp can be. Only having one hour to prepare the players forced us to heavily condense previously existing techniques, and many of the methods developed for inside:outside are still used in our work.

## **2.6 Hamlet (2002)**

The larp *Hamlet* by **Martin Ericsson** and **Christopher Sandberg** was a major revelation for me. The game contained numerous experiments, and all of them worked well to create a brilliant whole. I believe it is still the best larp I have attended.

The division into three thematically different acts, and the famous monologues were the biggest methodical lessons I learned from *Hamlet*.

## **2.7 Ei minulta mitään puutu (2002), I Shall Not Want (2003)**

*Ei minulta mitään puutu* was a small larp I wrote for the Turku Book Fair. The game had about a dozen characters, and it only lasted two hours. As the production budget was minimal, I wanted to focus on the writing, and the themes of the game to make this the ultimate Turku School larp.

I gave myself a few guidelines: The theme of the game would be death. The theme would be reflected in each character's inner conflict. The style would be slightly gothic.<4> The genre of the game would be emotional realism. There would be an emotional turning point for each character during the game. This proved a success.

The game was set at the Memorial Service of a recently deceased businessman. It was structured as a murder mystery, including a butler (that didn't do it), a bunch of suspects, the real murderer, and a detective disguised as a waiter. This was to be the background, but the important thing would not be what happens, but what the characters feel while it is happening.

I felt the game worked pretty well, and edited it into a six-player version that was published in English as I Shall Not Want in “The Book Of LARP”. I ran this version in the Lucca convention in Italy in 2003.

## 2.8 Myrskyn aika: Unia hiekasta ja raudasta (2003)

Some of the methods learned in experimental larps were later put to use in the Myrskyn aika (The Age of Storm) campaign ran by myself and **Jami Jokinen**. The campaign is set in an “evil empire” where the games would follow the lives of a group of rebels fighting for what they saw as good.

The setting and concept of the Myrskyn aika campaign was later developed and expanded into the role-playing book Myrskyn aika (published by Johnny Kniga Publishing in 2003). To publicize the book, I decided to run an introductory Myrskyn aika larp in the Finnish Ropecon convention that had housed inside:outside in the previous year. **Taika Helola** helped me in design and production.

## 2.9 The end of the Age of Manifestoes

Several more revelations were due in 2003. The first one followed the Turku Manifesto being published in As Larp Grows Up. In the foreword I admitted that the Manifesto had for the most part outlived its usefulness, even though many of the ideas were still solid.

*“The most interesting dramatist concepts have evolved just as much as those of the eläytyjists and simulationists. So much so that they're all transcending into something much bigger. What the next step is, it's hard to say yet. Perhaps we'll focus on making the role-playing media popular again, now that we can roughly agree on what that media is. And that it is a media. Or perhaps role-playing will continue evolving for a long time. Clouded is the future. Still, it seems clear the "Age of Manifestoes" (1999-2002) helped make it happen.”* (Pohjola, 2003c)

The two years that followed As Larp Grows Up certainly did see the emergence of something new with Panopticorn, Mellan Himmel och Hav, and several smaller experimental games. I also revised the Turkuist ideas in the article Autonomous Identities: Immersion as a Tool for Exploring, Empowering and Emancipating Identities (Pohjola, 2004a).

## 2.10 Panopticorn (2003)

Panopticorn produced by **Irene Tanke** had Eirik Fatland as their lead writer, and he again made me the character developer for the Finns. Panopticorn is a good example of a larp that took many of the methods learned in small, experimental larps and made a really good game that had innovative content and a solid form for it. Perhaps the most influential concept for me, personally, was the effort Tanke's team had seen in creating a working micro society.

*“The Panopticorn unit was the life of the characters. They ate at the agency, they slept at the agency and they even shagged at the agency. During the days of the event the Panopticorn agency was the one and only reality for both participants and their characters.”*(Widing, 2004)

The methods for this were adopted from real-world work spaces, and creative McJobs, like actual ad agencies. The result seemed more like a cult which indoctrinated the characters in the environment.

*“The participants became deeply manipulated by the clever organisers as they gave away their language and thus their thoughts. After just a day many participants were thinking like binary machines: hot/not, lassex/nexsec, upcard/downcard, always judging co-workers as effective or worthless.”* (Widing, 2004)

Through these methods, Panopticorn became the most integrated and holistic larp I know of.

## **2.10 Mellan Himmel och Hav (2003)**

Ars Amandi’s Mellan Himmel och Hav used many of the same techniques of society building, but had a more specific use for them. They used the techniques to transcend the division into sexual genders. This succeeded so well that the new words used in MHOH (such as new non-sexual pronouns) managed to not only create new ways of thinking (like in Panopticorn), but to also show the problems within our current ones – such as dividing people into genders based on their biological attributes.

*“Most players said afterwards that the new social rules (like the deconstruction of gender: a man isn’t a man but a morning or evening person, and should behave like one) very quickly felt natural.”*(Tidbeck, 2004)

## **2.11 File Not Found (2003)**

Arte ry, a Turku-based organization of artists, was running an art festival called “Virasto” (“Bureau”). Photographer Juha Allan Ekholm wanted to explore his photography in relation to live role-playing, and we decided to co-operate on a bureau related larp. The game design Ekholm and I did together, with me writing and him later taking photos inspired by the larp.

There is a large bureau building in Turku which holds a number of different state institutions, including the County Land Survey Office, the County Arts Committee, the Province Environmental Center, and a dozen other offices. The building itself is seven stories high with a large basement complex. We were promised we could use this space as the location for our larp, titled “File Not Found.”

This should have been a more or less routine experiment. The larp’s experimental nature and ultimate downfall was due to the fact that it was to be played among real bureaucrats during office hours. A couple of bureaucrats (from floors 3 and 5) had agreed to serve as NPCs providing stimulus for the characters. Much of the actual physical content of the larp was to be

characters filling forms and finding obscure clues on papers left around the building.

That was the theory. The practice was that the lobby clerk who was supposed to get the players started on their search for clues, had forgotten what to tell them. She was also getting frustrated by all the calls she got from the real-life bureaucrats that were bothered by the strange people. The janitor of the building (who had given his permission to use the building) was furious when the players entered the (unlocked) basement, and almost threw us out. As a result, the characters spent most of the time in the lobby mingling with each other. Rather ironically, this bureaucracy larp worked on paper, but couldn't exist in the real world.

The attempt to change the bureau atmosphere had been successful, but the larp ended up lackluster. The attempt to play among real people while interesting, didn't take off at all. The concept of finding different interpretations for a mundane environment worked well, though.

After the larp, Ekholm spent several days at the building taking photos inspired by the larp. The series "The Vanishing of Teodor Björklund (Roleplay Scenes)" premiered in the exhibition "That which is ordinary" at the Turku Arts Museum in the fall of 2004.

## **2.12 Luminescence (2004)**

Writing articles for *Beyond Role and Play* had released a lot of artistic energy in myself and Juhana Pettersson. Pettersson contacted me a month before *Solmukohta 2004* with a very peculiar idea for a larp: a bunch of people in their underwear in a room full of flour. How could I resist?

We wanted the focus of the larp to be in the flour, the extraordinary sensory experience of being knee-deep in the stuff. But how to justify the flour? Would the characters be bakers or captives of an alien space ship? Or could the flour be something more insubstantial? Could the room represent the characters' childhood or their feelings of guilt?

What else could happen in the larp, except for the standing around in flour? I wanted to take *inside:outside's* abstract nature further, and Pettersson criticized the use of narrative elements in larps in his *Beyond Role and Play* article:

*"Forget narratives, forget how the game might appear or sound later. The player experience is the only relevant thing. [...] Think what are the experiences you want the players to have, what are the perspectives you want them to take, and what are the characters you want them to employ, and proceed from there. Talking about role-playing in terms of stories is not just regressive and near-sighted – it's embarrassing."* (Pettersson, 2004a)

One possibility would've been to have the characters be the players' own subconsciousnesses, but in the end this would've made the interaction very abstract. Designing *Luminescence* was a difficult balancing process between the surreal and the concrete.

In the end we wanted to have the people interacting within a realistic frame, but in a surrealist environment. Apart from flour, the environment was enhanced with a strong green light, and a soundscape consisting of absurdist monologues and various strange music. The characters were

to be cancer patients in a group therapy session.

### **2.13 Todellinen kaupunki (2004)**

The city of Kuopio in Eastern Finland holds an annual public art festival ANTI. Juha Allan Ekholm suggested we participate in the festival, and I agreed. The concept of the festival was to offer “a venue for new and unexpected ideas to be realized in a city environment by means of sound, light or environmental art, performance and live art.” Public art was described in the festival brochure by Professor Mary Jane Jacob:

*“Public art (as distinguished from art in museums) is intrinsically tied to a place and all that it contains and implies, physically, culturally, personally... Public art participates in what art fundamentally does: to awaken our perceptions to the everyday. It can bring us to a new awareness, a sense of heightened, deepened, self-reflective awareness. And site-specific public art – located in the actual places and rhythms of everyday life – can be the most articulate mode of making.”*(Jacob, 2004)

Todellinen kaupunki dealt with the theme of the city, and was played all around the city. Unlike in File Not Found, this time the mixture of mundane and larp reality worked well.

Several of the other artists of the festival were enthusiastic about Todellinen kaupunki, and some joined in with quickly written characters. The photography inspired by the larp project is still going on, and will probably become an exhibition of its own together with the series taken in File Not Found.

## **3.0 Methods evolving**

Throughout these larps and revelations, I’ve grown to adopt new methods, develop old ones, and experiment with many aspects of the medium. In this chapter, I try to outline six different methods that I have worked with in my larps, and that other people have influenced. These methods are abstract elements, rituals, character creation, dramaturgy, anagnorisis, and instructing physicality.

### **3.1 Abstract elements**

One problem with simulationism is that it requires for every element in a larp to represent itself. This is, of course, impossible, and strangely lacking in the simulationist tabletop role-playing games. I have made some attempts at creating specific content that would be on the grey areas between diegetic and nondiegetic.

#### **3.1.1 Background music**

One inspiration from the fateplay method in Paljon melua tyhjässä was the use of nondiegetic music. A well considered soundtrack could have worked for the game, underlining the mood of

individual scenes. The characters wouldn't hear it, but it would affect the players' feelings. As the game's schedule was known before the game, a soundtrack would've been relatively easy to make.

As it was, though, the game had three extremely cliché songs played for key scenes, such as the Star Wars theme song during a love scene. While the technique itself is good, this experiment turned me and many of the players off from nondiegetic music for years.

### **3.1.2 Nondiegetic costumes**

Perhaps the only experiment in Paljon melua tyhjistä that wasn't a total disaster were the costumes. To create a more theatrical feel for the game (which was set in Renaissance Italy), the players were told to wear whatever clothes they would feel suitable for their characters, from any period. Just no Nike logos, or the like. This was moderately successful, although in future larps it resulted in more specific guidance (like colors and styles) for the player costumes.

### **3.1.3 Monologues**

Hamlet's monologues were a strange mixture of diegetic and non-diegetic.

*"At the agreed signal, a bell tolling, all action would stop and the players gather around the central circle. A text character player would get up and read the relevant soliloquy, or in some cases perform a short piece of dialog or even just weep, as Gertrude did over Ophelia's body at the end of the second act. [...] [E]very word spoken during the soliloquy breaks is every character's inner monologue, a reflection of the mental state of everyone at court. [...] We gathered around the circle and heard those words, Claudius cursing God or Hamlet contemplating suicide, and we listened attentively and mirrored it in what was going on with our characters, and then the bell would toll again and return us to whatever we were doing just before."* (Koljonen, 2004)

The emotional impact of the monologues was immense. The idea that one could portray the character's inner world in this manner had not occurred to me, but it was definitely something I would later want to use.

### **3.1.4 The Rule of Normalization**

Luminescence had a really cool environment, and a solid basis for immersion and interaction. What was lacking was a unifying element. Why would the group therapy session take place in a room full of flour? Was it a normal room that the characters for some reason saw like this? Was it an experimental therapy technique? How could we explain it? And furthermore, how could we prevent the interaction falling to the level of talking about the flour?

Could the entire physical reality of the larp be labeled as nondiegetic? Then how could the characters mess around with the flour? In the end, we realized that although the location of the

larp would have to be physically real, it would not have to represent the diegetic location. At this point in our discussions we made frequent references to the movie *Dogville* (Von Trier, 2003). In *Dogville* the world of the characters and the world shown to the audience are different. In *Luminescence*, we decided, the world of the characters and the world of the players would be similar, but unlike the players, the characters would find it completely normal. They might not have been to a flour therapy before, but they would not find anything strange about it. Thus they could play with the flour and react to the soundtrack, but they wouldn't spend their time wondering why the room was so strange.

This method (that we came to call the Rule of Normalization) worked wonderfully, and would allow any number of abstract scenographies for larps. Typically the setting of a larp is supposed to represent the character's physical reality, but here it could be in dialogue with it. We were very happy with this, and intend to use it for future projects, as well.

## **3.2 Rituals**

In Finnish tradition, ritualistic elements have often been neglected in larps. What I know I have learned by accident or through my Scandinavian contacts.

### **3.2.1 School anthem**

In the fiction of *.laitos*, each school day started with the singing of the school anthem, and a speech from the principal, a teacher or a state official. The school anthem was based on a melody of an old religious song often sung in Finnish schools in the last day of spring.

The image of seventy people all singing a highly submissive song in unison still lives strong in my mind. It was strongly ritualistic, and a great start for the game, since it created a feeling of unity between the characters. I wish there would've been a similar ritual at the start of every lesson.

### **3.2.2 Norwegian tradition**

In 2002 I had two revelatory experiences. One was participating in a ritual workshop by Fatland and **Erlend Eidsem Hansen** in the Swedish Knutepunkt. This was the first time I had attended, and it felt like the school's anthem from *.laitos*, just longer and more powerful.

I realized the methods for immersing in a character and immersing in the magical reality of a ritual were very close to each other, and could probably work well together. This was well known at least to some Norwegians at the time.

### **3.2.3 The wake**

In *Ei minulta mitään puutu*, I directly employed the singing method of *.laitos*. As the setting was

a wake, I could easily include Christian funeral hymns, and even a prayer. This real-world religious ritual worked well with the gothic mood, and the theme of death.

### **3.3 Character creation**

The dominant method for character creation at least since the early 90s Finland is pre-written character descriptions given to players by the larpwrights. The text is traditionally in second person prose: “You were born thirty years ago to loving parents...”

The descriptions typically included a biography, contacts, and motivations for actions in the game. Although I’ve often used this method, I also consider it very problematic. Apart from the tedious workload, one of the biggest problems for me personally, was being forced to see the lives of characters as narratives leading logically from one point to the next, and the underlying assumption that in this narrative should be hidden all the contacts and plots the character has.

#### **3.3.1 Multiple characters**

In order to give all the players enough to do in *Paljon melua tyhjästä*, some players were given several minor characters, such as Constable Dogberry and Balthasar the Bard. This is standard operating procedure for theatres, so I figured it would be worth a shot. However, at least in this case, it made any possibility of immersion impossible, turning the role-playing into mere bad acting.

#### **3.3.2 Character creation as a dialogue**

Sometimes characters are developed in a continuous dialogue with the players. This technique prospers in tabletop role-playing, but is a bit rarer in larps.

In **Jami Jokinen’s** and **Jori Virtanen’s** *Ground Zero* (1998) the writers would provide the player with an outline of a stereotypical 60’s American character, and the players would fleshen it out in e-mail conversations with the writers and the other players. The writers promoted the dialogue, not the outline, as the main part of the character creation process. Similar techniques have been used elsewhere (including *Europa* and *Panopticon*), but this was my first contact with it.

#### **3.3.3 Simple character concepts developed by the players**

In *inside:outside* the characters were written as simple as possible. Each had very clear political or social opinions, and a personality that would in some way conflict with the opinions. There was the Middle-Class Christian, the Value Relativist Construction Worker, the Elitist Anarchist, the Utilitarian Doctor, and so on. Characters had no name, no gender, no nationality, or other such aspects when they were given to the players. Instead, the players were presented with a list of questions they would have to answer to make the characters more complete. This is one method I’ve used in almost all of my games since then:

- “1. *Where are you from? The country is the same as your own country. What city? What part of the city? What street?*
2. *What’s your name?*
3. *How old are you? When were you born?*
4. *What did you do yesterday?*
5. *What were you supposed to do today?*
6. *What hobbies do you have?*
7. *How are you not the typical stereotype of anything?*
8. *What were your parents/siblings/children like? What were their names?*
9. *Is the character single? If not, what is/are the other person/people like? What are their name?*
10. *What’s your best friend like?*
11. *What’s your sexual orientation? Any quirks?*
12. *How do you deal with those that have differing views from your own?*
13. *Is there something in the character that doesn’t perhaps quite fit the picture?”*

Each run of the indrama would start with Fatland’s drama exercises, in which players would immerse in the history and personality of their characters, the questions being read aloud to them again. The players also visualized their characters waking up in the morning, feeling good, feeling bad, going through their typical day and giving the players a frame of reference for the character’s basic emotions.

This was followed by the players being led one by one to the game location with their eyes closed. Then the lights would go out, and everyone would listen to Fatland’s trance induction monologue which was a variation of the one he developed for Europa. He would count from ten to one, making the players focus on and adopt particular elements of the character. At the end of the monologue the players would have become their characters. (There was a similar count but backwards at the end of each run.)

Fatland would leave the room, the lights would go up, and the indrama would start. This process of gradually getting in the character enhances the immersive experience greatly.

### **3.3.4 Different styles of writing**

Myrskyn aika: Unia hiekasta ja raudasta (The Age of Storm: Dreams of Sand and Iron) allowed me to try out different styles in character writing. For a long time already, I had seen the traditional prosaic style as a hindrance, but had not had a proper chance to experiment with it before this.

I came to like a list of relevant points as a character writing method. The writer has the freedom to just relay the facts, or focus on particular details, depending on what fits the game best. This was the method I have since used in all the larps where I have had pre-written characters.

### **3.3.5 Character creation as process**

MHOH had a method for character developing that I had not witnessed previously. The characters and the details about the society were created democratically, in workshops between players and game masters.

*“Much of the information about the planet and its history was created in the interaction between players and writers. The advantage was that everyone had a part in creating the world, which lead to some amazing solutions and stories about the colony and its inhabitants.”(Tidbeck, 2004)*

While in Europa and Panopticon and Ground Zero, the character creation happened in a dialogue, here it was more of a process. The focus is on the player creating the character themselves with the aid of the larpwrights, but not necessarily under their continued monitoring, as in a dialogue.

The creation didn't only focus on details of the characters' backgrounds, but also on specific emotional moments, like the marriage of one's children. Many theatre techniques were employed to create an effect similar to that of Hamlet's monologues: the focus was on the characters' emotional states. Developing characters through their emotions, not through their past deeds seemed like a logical result of emotional realism in games, and made MHOH a very emotion-laden game.

### **3.4 Dramaturgy**

In earlier days, I spoke out against larp dramaturgies, since they seemed to me a dramatist method of creating narratives in larps. At the same time I realized a game without a good rhythm wouldn't succeed very well.

Now I've come to understand the importance of dramaturgy, not as telling stories, but in creating an environment where the events can work together with the themes, not just near them.

#### **3.4.1 School hours**

.laitos was dramatized to resemble an ordinary school day. Start at eight o'clock with a ceremony, then four 45-minute lessons, lunch break, four 45-minute lessons more. Between lessons were 15-minute breaks where all the students were forced outside. This strict schedule worked very well to promote a school atmosphere.

#### **3.4.2 Fateplay catastrophe**

The larp Paljon melua tyhjstä was divided into nineteen scenes, lasting from five to twenty-five minutes. The original play contains only eighteen scenes, but some events that were only mentioned in the play had to be dramatized for the larp. There were two nights and one dinner happening between the scenes. The totality of the game would be three hours and five minutes.

An example of Don Leonato's schedule:

*”15:00-15:15 In front of the house*

*You talk with your friends in front of the house.*

*Upon receiving a letter, you let everyone know what it says.*

*After Beatrice has abused Benedick’s name for a while, you explain the situation to the envoy.*

*You happily welcome Don Pedro and your other friends.*

*You introduce Hero to Don Pedro.*

*After Benedick and Beatrice start arguing, you encourage everyone to go indoors.*

*Inside you trade news with Don Pedro.*

*You invite everyone to the dining room. You also invite Don Juan, since Don Pedro has forgiven him.*

*15:17-15:20 In a room*

*You enter the room narrowly missing Borachio.*

*You want to know if Antonio’s son has taken care of the music for the masquerade.*

*You are amazed when Antonio tells you news about Hero, but want to consider them a dream until they come true. Still, your daughter must know immediately, so that she has time to come up with an answer.*

*You send Antonio to convey the news to Hero.*

*You both leave the room.”*

As one can guess after reading this one character’s script for the first three scenes, there was little or no room for improvisation, interaction or character immersion. Most of the time the players could only concentrate on the careful following of their instructions. In ideal circumstances, the interesting scenes created would’ve sparked new situations and emotions, but here any possibility for that was eliminated by the incredibly strict guidelines.

### **3.4.3 Act structure**

Hamlet was divided into three acts different in theme, character motivation and even mechanics.

“The general ambiance of each act had been prescribed – first act: party at the end of history, second act: intrigue, third act: despair” (Koljonen, 2004) The rules supported this thematic structure: “In the first act, you would hardly be affected [by violence]; in the second you could be seriously wounded but would die only if you chose to; in the third act any hint of violence would lead to an untimely and spectacular death.” (Koljonen, 2004)

Days or even weeks of game time could pass between the acts and it would not hamper the game at all:

*“The game’s first act – Shakespeare’s third – ends with Hamlet being banished for England. It is unclear from the text how long he is gone, but here it was established that our four-hour break moved the plot about two weeks forward.” (Koljonen, 2004)*

In a simulationist larp all this would have been unacceptable, since the characters would need to know what went on during those missed weeks: “Why didn’t my character take care of this and that during the time we skipped?” Yet, it worked. Because the important thing was not what

happens, but what the characters feel while it is happening. Very revealing for me, and I've later come to call this genre emotional realism.

### 3.5 Anagnorisis

Having read Aristotle, I had started thinking on how to adopt his idea of anagnorisis, emotional turning point for larps. I deal with this issue in the article "Give me Jesus or give me Death!" in Panclou:

*"Now, the easiest way of getting anagnorisis, the moment of recognition for all the characters, is to make it an anagnorisis of the world: Oh, this isn't a normal world because there are vampires. If you know about it before the game, it's not really an anagnorisis for the character, but still functions as such for the player: This world is different from my world. Even if all the characters don't get the anagnorisis during the game, their players will in the debrief. Everybody recognizes something new about the game world. (This is the reason so few games are set in the real real world.) It's a bit less easy to create an anagnorisis of the events. That might require railroading, or writing an extensive plot-structure. Still, that's often done. A typical example of an event-based anagnorisis is revealing the murderer in the murder mystery. So that's what happened! It was Gnrl. Alert with the Mustard Enema on the Dining Table. The best and the most difficult to create is the anagnorisis of the character. For individual chars that's easy, but trying to produce it for all the characters is muy difficulto. And more importantly, the game often goes incredibly improbable when that is tried. And improbable, of course, is the same as not realistic." (Pohjola, 2003a)*

I decided to test these ideas in practice.

#### 3.5.1 A letter

I wanted each character in Ei minulta mitään puutu to have a dramatic arc, with an emotional turning point, anagnorisis: a moment of recognition and realization which would change the course of their motives and emotions. This is already very close to narrativist ideas on larp, except that the goal is to provide the experience for each character, not necessarily for the events of the larp itself.

The anagnorisis was mostly achieved through the reading of the deceased's letter, some of it also through interaction between the characters.

As the game structure still remained entirely improvisational, I had no way to guarantee there would be turning points for everybody, so the letter also worked as a turning point for the whole memorial service. If the events of the game would've resulted in the characters deciding not to read the letter, then most of the turning points would have vanished, and it would've probably made sense to have that element as a predetermined fate.

#### 3.5.2 Inner conflicts

Although set in a murder mystery context, I wanted the actual content of *Ei minulta mitään puutu* to be how each character dealt with death, brought about by the death of a person they knew. Some were angry, others were saddened or afraid of their own mortality. One character had come to the service to pay last respects for his rival before going to kill himself.

The dramaturgy of the game was also focused on the same conflict. There were speeches to the dead, singing of hymns, prayer, and reading a letter from the deceased. During the breaks tea and biscuits were served while the characters made small talk. These discussions also naturally turned towards death, as that was the foremost thing in each characters' mind, thanks to the inner conflicts.

I ran the translated version *I Shall Not Want* in an Italian convention for larpers who didn't believe in immersion at all. The inner conflicts proved a particularly strong element for them, allowing them to just play on their own characters' clashing emotions and feelings. Many of them came to thank me later explaining how you could role-play alone, and how they really had immersed in their characters.

### **3.5.3 Personal changes mirroring social changes**

The idea of each character's theme mirroring the themes of the larp made many *Myrskyn aika* games much stronger. Occasional fateplay elements have allowed us to strengthen the emotional impact of some key turning points.

The idea of personal changes mirroring social changes was also the key in *Myrskyn aika: Unia hiekasta ja raudasta*. The major conflict in the world of *Myrskyn aika* stems from the coup by the evil emperor. Could we make this change of power somehow personal for each character?

We decided to use the magical elements that fantasy provided, and have the characters start a hundred years earlier, then magically lose a hundred years, and awaken in a world where they're outlawed. Each character would thus have something (family, power, money) that they would lose at the blink of an eye. How this would reflect on each of them would be the point of the game.

### **3.6 Instructing physicality**

While immersion is mostly a spiritual task, the portrayal of the character has a strong physical element. The extrovert character portrayal, acting, has always been problematic in larps.

In theatres it is simple to give an actor instructions: the director can advise the actors during rehearsals. In larps it is very problematic, since often the player and larpwright don't even meet before the game. This is perhaps a reason why most players (at least in Finland) have a very specific style of physical playing, that stays the same from game to game. Some bother to come up with mannerisms or the like, but the acting is rarely unified in any particular game.

Mellan Himmel och Hav is one of the few examples to the contrary. Players were instructed in moving and talking in a non-gender way. Yet, even here the players were not given advice on how stylized the acting of emotions, for example, should be.

### **3.6.1 Ars Amandi method**

Mellan Himmel och Hav's perhaps most lasting legacy is the Ars Amandi method of simulating sex.

Typically sexual encounters are dealt with dry-humping or back massages, both very unsatisfying methods. The first has more to deal with players' wants than characters', and still leaves participants unfulfilled. Massages, on the other hand, offer none of the feelings of sex, just providing a way to communicate the existence of the sexual act for the other players.

With Ars Amandi's method, sex was simulated through fondling each other's hands and arms. The method allowed many different styles of sex, one could be shy or aggressive or tender or submissive or avoiding or casual, or whatever. What this was, was a demand for the players to physically act some key elements of the larp out in a specific way.

Similarly, the players were instructed to walk and stand in non-gender-specific ways. Standard theatre procedure that in larps has typically been left for the individual player.<5>

## **4.0 Larp as kaleidoscope**

All these different realizations and experiments have lead to the roots of a larger discovery. In a larp, as in any art work, the key themes should be visible everywhere. In each plot, in each character's inner conflict, in each name, in the physical acting, in the characters' pastimes, in every possible aspect of the larp. Everything should mirror everything else. In this way the themes will transcend into a whole bigger than its parts.

### **4.1 Bureaucracy as a theme**

The artistic point of the Virasto festival in general and of the larp File Not Found in particular was to explore the different meanings of bureaus and bureaucracy. In File Not Found, each character would be a bureaucrat of some kind (tax official, postal worker, synagogue secretary, customs worker, ministry clerk...) with a very particular view on bureaucracy (idealist, by-the-book, social democrat, ambitious...).

Thus, each character's personality and profession would mirror the main theme of the game. To make this more practical, they were also kept occupied by a peculiar bureau themed activity, such as crossword puzzles, chess, or knitting.

The reason for the characters to come to the office building would be to search for a missing bureaucrat called Teodor Björklund. Björklund's entire existence had been erased from all the

files: no birth certificate, no graduation papers, no social security records, nothing.

The dramaturgy was supposed to be something like this: The characters enter the building each at their own pace. They go to the lobby clerk who gives them a form they have to fill with the instruction to take it to an NPC in the Social Affairs Department. She would then take the form for processing, and give the character a paper with an obscure clue. After processing the characters would return, be given a new form, and told to take it to another NPC in the Consumer and Competition Office. Again the processing would take place, after which the next form would be asked to be returned to the clerk at the lobby. (Most characters would probably not make it this far.) In the times spent waiting, the characters would follow the obscure clues to more obscure clues, such as parking halls or meeting rooms.

## 4.2 Physicality as a theme

The concept Juhana Pettersson and I presented the players of Luminescence with was “an abstract live-action role-playing game of physical experience.” An indeed, we wanted to enhance the physical experience in any way possible. The theme of the larp would be physicality represented by death, and all the characters cancer patients. The situation in the game was group therapy for the terminally ill.

*“One of our central concepts was to make the game experience a principally physical one. Instead of a social experience, this would be an experience of the body. We had some rules strengthening this idea, like the players were told to touch the person they were talking to, if possible. The game space was fitted so that the decor would create a strongly physical and unique experience.”* (Pettersson, 2004b)

The rule of the characters having to touch each other when talking to one another was strongly influenced by the *Ars Amandi* methods of physical acting instructions.

The soundscape was filled with strange music and surrealistic monologues. They were coded as affecting the characters’ subconscious self only, not being something they could comment on during the game.

Half of the monologues were scripted by me with a few thematic directions given by Pettersson: death, sex, hope, peace, winter and snow for the first stage, and death, sex, despair, hysteria, frost and ice for the second stage. The other half of the monologues was improvised by **Samantha Rajasingham**. The monologues kept playing through most of the game, these from the second stage:

*“One, two, three, four, five, sex, semen, penis, penetration, death.  
The vast emptiness of space is in my head. I must eat the penguin dipped in metal and put your mother back in the refrigerator.  
Have you ever fucked a penguin? They’re okay, but I don’t like the color.  
Once upon a time there was, but that was a long time ago.  
Every time I’m raped, I keep thinking about igloos.  
The mammoths are all extinct now, just like I once was. But then again, what is life but a series of*

*unconnected mammoths?"*

The written characters mostly contained a few personality traits, a description of their cancer, and a way the cancer had affected them. Again, the list of questions (now added with questions dealing with cancer and physicality) proved a useful tool for the players to develop their characters.

The environment worked even better than we thought it would: *"[The players] really went to town with the flour, having flourfights, burrowing into it, pouring it onto each other, stuffing it into their mouths and underwear. The players reported that the flour was very versatile as a medium for nonverbal communication and as a tool for all kinds of symbolism. The people stuffing it into their underpants had prostrate cancer. Perhaps the most poetic thing we heard was from a guy who had been lying down in the flour for a long time. When he got up, the shape of his body was still visible in the flour. He touched it and could feel the body heat dissipating the same time as his touch destroyed the fragile image itself."* (Pettersson, 2004b)

### **4.3 The city as a theme**

Writing *Autonomous Identities* (Pohjola, 2004a) for *Beyond Role and Play*, I had read a bit about postmodern identity theory (Hall, 1996), which strengthened my belief that each person has multiple identities they can adopt at will. I touched this already in 2001 in a Panclou article:

*"Sometimes, when you play a character long enough, explore the character's feelings and attitudes and memories, that character becomes a "real" individual, a new role inside your head."* (Pohjola, 2001)

In *Autonomous Identities*, I took these ideas further, and proposed that perceived realities can be changed the same way characters can:

*"As larps grow less abstract and more complex, they start to resemble not just fictitious realities, but also possible realities. They become Temporary Autonomous Zones in which the participants willingly live a different life"* (Pohjola, 2004a)

This line of thinking lead to the question: Could each participant of a larp have a different concept of the reality the larp was set in? To explore this I took the concept of a city, and tried to explore the different meanings and realities that could be found in it. The larp *Todellinen kaupunki* (Real City) is described like this in the festival program:

*"People's roles and identities can change. Real city springs from the idea that the mask covering the whole of reality may change shape. Role players move around in the game, seeking the true Kuopio from behind the masks of history, city planning and art festivals."* (Pohjola, 2004b)

Each character of *Todellinen kaupunki* would have a completely different way of seeing the city. One would only focus on the social reality, another would see everything in a historical perspective, a third one would see the city as an ugly growth on the face of our planet, and a fourth would be constantly afraid of terrorist attacks. Among the more fantastic realities was an

immortal who had been unable to leave the city center for a century, and a character who had somehow started sharing the thoughts of the city itself.

One of the points of the larp was to change the reality of the city, change the way the city is perceived. For this purpose, many of the characters would not know each other beforehand, and would be forced to interact with normal, non-playing people, as well. The action of the game was to have each of the characters trying to solve a mystery. The clues were given for the other characters, and pictured around the city. A plaque in front of a cathedral could be decoded to explain the birth of the European Union, the city map would reveal secret geometrical symbols that would point to a street address that would give the last digits of a significant phone number, and so on.

Thus, each character would be a comment on the city in some way, and each player and character would see a completely different city. The physical city was also made a character, or a co-interactor. Every action taken or idea thought of during the game would strengthen the themes.

## **5.0 Conclusions**

It is my hope that the chronicling of these experiments, some successful, some less so, will be of some use to other larpwrights and role-play artists out there. And I challenge others to write about their own works in a similar manner, to inspire myself and others.

The medium of larp is an infant one, and there will be much more experiments coming before we begin to grasp everything it can be. Boldly, my friends, towards the unknown!

## **Ludography**

Europa (Eirik Fatland, Irene Tanke, 2001)

Ground Zero (Jami Jokinen, Jori Virtanen, 1998)

Hamlet (Martin Ericsson, Christopher Sandberg, 2002)

Mellan himmel och hav (Emma Weislander, Katarina Björk, 2003)

The Myrskyn aika campaign (Mike Pohjola, Jami Jokinen, 1998-2001)

Panopticon (Irene Tanke, 2003)

.laitos (Mike Pohjola, 1997)

Paljon melua tyhjästä (Mike Pohjola, 1998)

inside:outside (Eirik Fatland, Mike Pohjola, 2001-2002)

Ei minulta mitään puutu (Mike Pohjola, 2002)

Myrskyn aika: Unia hiekasta ja raudasta (Mike Pohjola, Taika Helola, 2003)

I Shall Not Want (Mike Pohjola, 2003)

File Not Found (Mike Pohjola, Juha Allan Ekholm, 2003)

Luminescence (Juhana Pettersson, Mike Pohjola, 2004)

Todellinen kaupunki (Mike Pohjola, Juha Allan Ekholm, 2004)

## **Filmography**

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### **Author's description**

Mike Pohjola is a larpwright, an author, a poet, and a playwright. Internationally he is best known as the author of the Manifesto of the Turku School, recently republished online at <http://www.iki.fi/mikep/turku/> Pohjola's role-playing book *Myrskyn aika* was published in 2003 by Johnny Kniga Publishing. He lives in Turku, Finland. [mikep@iki.fi](mailto:mikep@iki.fi)

<1>In the Prisoner's Dilemma, popularized by the mathematician **Albert W. Tucker**, two criminal suspects are arrested by the police. The police have insufficient evidence for a conviction so they try to get the suspects to confess. The police offer them a deal that if they confess, then they will go free and their accomplice will be sentenced to twenty years in prison. If neither confesses, they will only be charged six months for a minor charge. However, if both confess, they will both get ten years.

The Prisoner's Dilemma is a classic example of a non-zero-sum game. As long as neither talks, it's a win-win situation. But as one suspect can't be sure of what the other suspect is doing, there's a chance the other one is confessing, in which case the other one would be better confessing, too.

<2>In Wolf's dilemma you are offered rewards instead of punishments, and the amount of participants is bigger, say, twenty people. If even one of them votes out of line, then nobody gets the big price, and only the ones that voted out of line get the small price. The rest get nothing.

<3>Fatland and I didn't want to call inside:outside a larp or a role-playing game. I had had dozens of conversations where I'd say that what D&D players do is not role-playing, and they'd tell us we don't have the right to take away their word. The larp community had attacked Fatland's work (like *Europa*) and told him it's bad for the hobby if he calls such works larps. So we decided to adopt a word first featured in the *NeoKultur* magazine (Anonymous, 2001), and call inside:outside an indrama.

In the manual for the first tour, inside:outside was described like this: *"If you know something about devising theatre, psycho drama, role-playing, performance or interactive story-telling, you*

*might have a general idea of what inside:outside is about. But this is none of those and all of those. We call it indrama, for it's interactive, you're inside the performance, it is immersive, and there is no difference between the audience and the performers. You are it. You're the show.*"(Pohjola & Fatland. 2001)

Some other role-playing artists have adopted the term, some have not, even though many want to take a step away from the D&D players. One problem when marketing inside:outside in Norway was that the art establishment which had just learned that larp could be art was baffled by this new word.

<4>The slightly gothic style of Ei minulta mitään puutu appeared mostly in decorations and character descriptions, and was carefully balanced so as not to make the larp too obviously any particular genre. It made sense for the characters to dress in black in a memorial service, and candles were tolerable. Most characters' names had something to do with death: Winter, Black, Shelley...

<5> In the fiction of MHOH the fondling of arms was something the characters actually did instead of penetrative intercourse, but that is irrelevant for the method.