



s.jonsson, m. montola,
j. stenros & e.boss

five weeks of rebellion: designing momentum

Abstract

In October 2006, thirty dead radicals possessed a group of larpers for a month. Brought back to life by techno-occult devices, they went on with their struggle to create a better world. The mundane reality was used as the stage for the collective story about personal influence, political change and constructed nature of reality. This article shows what happened behind the scenes of *Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum*, looking beyond the surface of various design solutions.

Introduction

Built upon the foundations of larp, MMORPG, cross-media gaming, urban exploration, political protest and alternate reality gaming *Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum* was a pervasive game about conformism and revolution. The aim was to wander the borderlands between ordinary and ludic, exploring the design space where reality and fiction merge into a seamless, immersive and coherent role-playing experience.

The basic idea of *Momentum* was to take our everyday life as it is, and add a little magic to it to create an

enticing story space. In *Momentum* everything was taken as it is; Stockholm represented Stockholm and the old nuclear reactor hall represented an old nuclear reactor hall. Players role-played copies of themselves in the fiction – when a player went to school or work during the game, so did the character. And as the game ran 24 hours a day and seven days a week for 36 days, the players had no choice but to combine their ordinary and secret lives.

All the players, as their character-selves submitted to be possessed by spirits of dead revolutionaries. Most of the time they were students, employees, fathers, girlfriends and such, but in secret they gathered in their base or out on the town, let the rebels loose and plotted strikes against conformism. They studied occultism, debated beliefs, staged rituals, ran demonstrations and planned a revolution, in secret and in public, alone and with others.

Add up 30 players, 30 dead radicals, five game masters, a dozen NPC players, one phased out underground nuclear reactor, one reality and an overwhelming

amount of game material. Mix it up and enjoy the game.

Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum was created by Staffan Jonsson (producer), Emil Boss, Martin Ericsson and Daniel Sundström (design), and Henrik Esbjörnsson (locations) with the help of a large team¹. It was created as an experiment on seamless pervasive role-playing for Integrated Project on Pervasive Gaming IPerG, and built on the experiences from an earlier game, *Prosopopeia Bardo 1: Där vi föll*².

Lessons of Där vi Föll

Reality is constructed by social agreements. Everything that changes these agreements can be regarded as magic. "I hereby declare you man and wife" is a spell. "You are under arrest" is another. They both change the world for those participating in the ritual. But everyone can use magic. If you are not satisfied with the rituals of society, go make up your own.

Many of the ideas of *Momentum* were originally tested in *Prosopopeia Bardo 1: Där vi föll*, including indexical propping, possession model, runtime game mastering, seamless merger of life and game et cetera. *Där vi föll* was played by 12 players in Stockholm for 52 hours in 2005.

Momentum was an ambitious attempt of scaling the game up in terms of duration and number of players, having 30 players play for 36 days continuously. This required especially addressing the issues of pacing and viability. In *Där vi föll* the players played rather continuously for the whole 52 hours. In *Momentum* that was not possible as the players had to be able to go about their ordinary lives as well.

Constructing a game where participants could drop in and out at any time and still experience a coherent whole was demanding. The game masters who had stayed awake for most of *Där vi föll* couldn't do the same in *Momentum*. It was important to create orche-

stration tools to facilitate the communication of the large game master group, in order to maintain the illusion of continuity among the players.

The *Momentum* possession model was changed from the one used in *Där vi föll* a bit in order to make it easier for players and more sustainable over very long durations. In *Där vi föll*, the players themselves were possessed by spirits. Many players found this gigantic leap of faith difficult to play out. In *Momentum* the two-tier model of "host" and "spirit" was expanded to a three-tier model. In the revised model, the player can alternate between host and spirit, but he can also go completely outside the game and be just himself by using the safe word "prosopopeia".

Thus the participants of *Momentum* role-played themselves in a slightly more magical version of the ordinary world. During the game they got possessed by the dead revolutionaries, all real life persons that the players had to do research on. The role-taking model was based on the ritualistic traditions regarding possession as a form of self-hypnosis eventually leading to contact with invisible entities. The possession in *Momentum* was like immersion is in role-playing: The players shared minds and bodies with their spirits.

In *Där vi föll* the border between game and ordinary had been hidden by giving the players as little off-game information as possible and in every way denying that the game was a game. This proved to be at best confusing to the players and removed the common ground and common agreement that has showed to be so important for improvisation in the Swedish larp scene. The problem was that there was no *agreement* on how to play and what to play.

Momentum was clearly marked it as game with a regular information site, a participation contract and a player seminar *before the game*. But when the game started the players where supposed to go into seamless mode where they played a carbon copy of them-

selves in a magical world. During the game the ludic nature was denied and the game was treated as reality.

At the start of the seamless period the players were called to a meeting where the game-masters explained that everything is real and that *Momentum* wasn't a game but a real phenomena masked as a game to hide it from the rest of the world. This technique, earlier seen in many pervasive games including *Där vi föll*, was used in order to create a seamless transition from the preparation period to the game itself.

Reasons for seamlessness are political, practical and diegetic. If you have seamless integration of ordinary reality and game reality, you don't *have* to treat the game as a game. By not talking about the game as a game and dropping the meta-game, you can take it much more seriously. This solution also allows puzzle-solving game challenges, as the players are able to use their full range of skills while still maintaining the stance of role-playing.

Advanced Runtime Game Mastering

Momentum was a game about playing with social agreements, looking for new perspectives to our lives, and letting the lives of others inspire us to new behaviour and ideas. The design mixed hard facts about the dead radicals with the players' subjective imagines of them. The dead came alive as the magic of immersion turned stories into action.

Runtime game mastering is the process of influencing the flow of a game in real time. In *Där vi föll*, runtime game mastering depended on direct game master observations, NPC reports and technical surveillance. The methods of *Där vi föll* needed to be improved in *Momentum* in order to make long-term game mastering efficient and less taxing for the people running the game.

Momentum complemented the methods of *Där vi föll* most importantly with the use of *controllers*, four players who served as game master informants,

sometimes also secretly guiding the players. The primary use of a controller was to act as the eyes and ears of game masters: It's very difficult to understand a given role-playing situation through sensory equipment, but an on-site person can analyze it much better. The controllers were also a feedback system telling how players liked different game elements during the game that could be used in further runtime game mastering. They also refereed the player ritual performances from their own aesthetic perspective, deciding if rituals succeeded or failed.

In *Momentum* the controllers were also used as the backup solution in case of technology failures: The designers started with three plans using different amounts of technology. Planning for failures saved the game – some central pieces of equipment were critically delayed and never made it to the game. As a solution, the role of the controllers was increased, and the game content was changed from gamist exploration of magical landscape more towards personal drama.

Other methods that enabled scaling up, pacing and viability were the intricate mythos and proper orchestration tools. The world of *Prosopopeia* has a very complicated and intricate mythos of what was happening on the other side. It was rooted in real world history, focusing on threads such as electric voice phenomenon, Enochian magic and revolutionaries, but expanded on that. The idea was to make it self-sustaining, something that the players could research independently from thousand and one subtle clues in the game. This created a lot of content for the game, but it also enabled the game masters to make snap decisions when the players surprised them with the direction they were taking the game. Having a solid, mythic foundations enabled the game masters to improvise better on the spot.

The game masters used a web-based orchestration tool, where they gathered information about players

and characters, kept notes on the individual plots, stored sound files that the players had sent and received and where the diegetic reports from the spirits were kept. This tool made it possible for one game master to initiate a plot on his shift and another to pick it up later.

Design Principles

The struggle for a better world continued beyond death. There was no heaven or hell, only another journey through a world calling out for renewed responsibility and action. In life after death, activists, hackers, environmentalists, anarchists and terrorists fought on against representations of the same oppression they experienced in life. The post mortem revolution was threatened not only by hostile powers but also by schism and strife among the revolutionaries. In order to save the revolution, thirty spirits were sent back to life, to wage war from the lands of the living.

The first design principle was to create a game as close to the border of reality as possible, integrated in and interacting with the players' everyday lives. Montola (2005) writes about three ways in which pervasive games break the boundaries of traditional games. *Spatial expansion* means that the games are played everywhere and in everyday environment – streets, cafés, workplaces and back yards. *Temporal expansion* means that the games are interlaced with everyday life, the games can call you in the middle of the night or all of the player's life might be part of the game. *Social expansion* means that non-players are pulled into the game as spectators and participants. *Momentum* employed all three expansions to create a game where reality and fiction were seamlessly mixed, where players could not tell where the game ended and the ordinary world began.

The emphasis was on the social expansion. Blurring the line between participant and non-participant meant that the game would bleed into the ordinary world. The provocative idea was that *real people* are

the most interesting possible feedback system for the game. The game could have an effect on the world of ordinary life and *change* it for real. Influencing the game world also lead to influencing the real world.

The second design principle was to *create a dynamic story*. When playing in reality the variables are so many that a certain outcome can't be predicted. Technologically mediated game mastering was used to face this challenge.

The design reflected lessons learned from *Där vi föll*, which had been very gamemaster controlled and directed. In order to have both a satisfying story and enough freedom, *Momentum* was designed to have a number of different endings and alternate story threads depending on the choices of the players.

The third design principle was to *use reality as the source book*. Any piece of information needed in the game was sought from the real world and real history, until something was found that fulfilled the need of the game. The fiction of the game was woven from these threads of reality.

Art and Politics

The afterlife of Momentum is an allegory for the future. The spirits of dead radicals are stuck in the old ways, and try to use their old methods when facing contemporary problems. When they are forced to go beyond their prejudices, and learn new perspectives can they find working methods for change. Action instead of reaction, responsibility instead of resigning. The characters of *Momentum* were dead radicals from recent history, people that have given their life to a cause and that not even death could stop. Strong characters were used to give the players courage and incentive for taking their play out in the streets and also underline the seriousness of the thematic and story. By taking a role of someone who had made a great change, the hope was to help the players to understand that they have the power to change the world as well.

The story was about change, articulating how something is not right on both our world and on the other side. The old metaphysical idea, “As above, so below”, was used as the guiding principle in negotiating the relationship between this world and the next. The problems of the world of the dead are reflected on our plane and vice versa. “The Gray”, agents of conformism, were the main opponent in the story.

The game was designed to intertwine with the ordinary life of the players. Yet it was implemented in such a fashion that players were able to control how much to play over extended time. The idea was to create internal dilemmas: “Should I go to the movies or let Ken Saro-Wiwa out?”

The historical characters were chosen with several criteria. They were relatively recent in order to understand world of today with things such as internet and electricity, as that is not very interesting to play and would have diverted attention from the central theme. The chosen rebels were people who were fighting for one single thing, people like Chico Mendez, who was shot by the logging companies for speaking up against the exploitation of Brazilian forests. This was used to underline an anti-conformist attitude and prompt questions. “You are able to change your own world and your own life. What is really important? What do I really want to accomplish?”

To create collaboration, context and to illustrate the different approaches and methods of change the characters were divided into four groups represented by the four elements, which also provided a supportive context where experienced and active players could support less active and experienced players. When the players chose a character they also unknowingly chose a side in the revolutionary struggle.

Water represented revolution by individual enlightenment; dreamers, poets and hippies fighting for a world with brighter colours – a world more open to indivi-

dual interpretation. A typical character here would be Ron Thelin, one of the founders of the hippie movement. Air wanted a revolution of the mind, liberating information, encouraging research and distributing insights and ideas to everyone. A typical air character would be Tron, a member of the Chaos Computer Club and creator of the cryptophone.

The rebels of fire wanted a revolution through direct confrontation, to respond to injustice and oppression with force. George Jackson, a member of the Black Panthers, who died in prison stood proud in their ranks. The earth faction was grounded in the concrete; they knew that whatever humanity is going to do it has to be sustainable and well thought through in the long run as well. Judi Bari was an environmentalist who fought for the redwood forests, knowing that without earth we are nothing.

The elemental groups provided social and ideological context for characters and social frameworks for the players. All the groups had basically the same goal but very different methods of getting there. Also, after the success or failure of the revolution the strife between different factions was the source of drama.

Long-Duration Larping

Rebel headquarters were prepared in the first Swedish nuclear reactor that was shut down in sixties. R1 was the base of operations in Stockholm, the secret hideout you could visit at any time. It consists of 43 rooms far below the ground, hosting a command centre, a war room, a gym, a green house, a library, and the reactor pit. Here the spirits communicated with their comrades on the other side using computers, sliders, radio transmitters, synthesizers and crystals – all based on historical theories on talking with the dead.

In most larps a player is supposed to play all the time the larp is running. In order to allow long duration *Momentum* was different: the game *was* on all the time, and the players were supposed to live their lives

in it. The possession model was used as the solution: The players were an army of sleeper bodies, enacting their possessors when visiting R1 or when meeting each other.

As the game was on all the time, anything in the surroundings could be a part of the game. This makes the players see and interpret things they have not noticed before in their everyday environment. Exploring these clues allows new sub-stories emerge in surprising patterns. Changing the players changes the way they perceive the world.

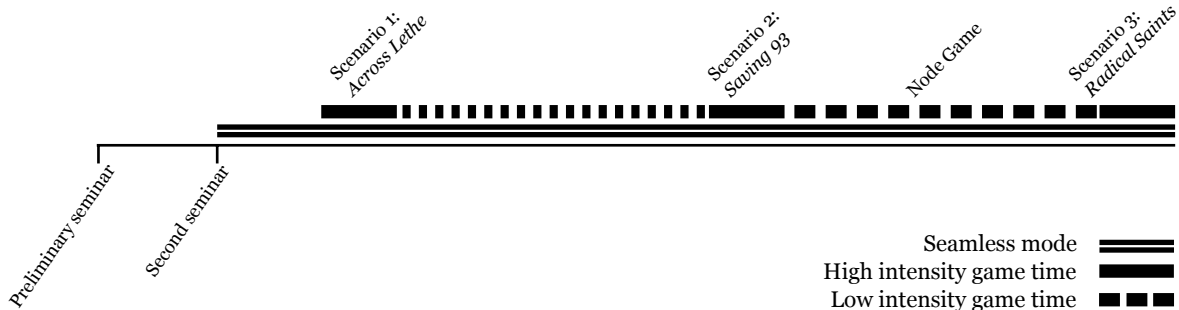
In order to create a collective experience for all 30 players and to make sure that they felt that the game was a coherent whole, the game was structured in high and low intensity periods, and the players were given an advance warning on when the game would go to high intensity. These periods were three weekends during the game, and at these times the players were supplied with lots of prepared game content.

If one person played only the recommended weekends and another played all the time, they could still play the same game – the different levels of activity and information adds an interesting dynamic to the play. The players kept in touch during the game through meetings and a web community that they created for themselves.

The game structure was influenced by two things: first of all, the structure reflected that of a revolution, and secondly it was paced so that even player with no background in role-playing could participate. Playing a seamless game is difficult, and thus a learning curve and a supporting context needed to be provided. In the beginning the game was strongly guided, but as the players learned to fly, it opened up into a more challenging, performative, player-controlled and eventually public experience.

The central theme of the scenario was revolution, and thus the classical structure of revolution shaped the game. In the beginning of a revolution the radicals have a common enemy as the central unifying force, but after the success or failure the rebels lose their unity. In the case of success a new society has to be built and new order needs to be established, and in the case of failure the rebels need to struggle for survival in an even more oppressive environment. This was reflected in the scenario structure, which started with collaboration culminating in the decision between victory and loss in the middle of the game, and left two last weeks for infighting over the future of rebellion.

The game was preceded by a seminar where the players were given instruction on how to play a seamless game and for example the safe word was



introduced. As the game started, the first week and the first high intensity weekend was focused on introducing the world of *Prosopopeia* and mindset of the game rather than creating player-driven drama or facing challenges. The purpose of the tutorial week was to set up the scene for things to come. The first high intensity weekend, *Across Lethe*, represented the oppression of the time before a revolution. It set the stage and showed how the player headquarters was supposed to be used.

The second high intensity weekend, *Saving 93*, was played two weeks later. It opened up the drama; *Saving 93* was about how the revolution was resolved, and decided whether the rest of the game was a success story about the victory or a tragedy about bitter survival. In this phase the players had to think, plan, coordinate and execute activities. Collaboration as a key ingredient in creating a revolution was emphasised, and thus the factions were working together and competing simultaneously.

During the last high intensity weekend, *Radical Saints*, the players had to be competent, confident and organized enough to go public with the characters. It involved a lot of non-players in the interaction and allowed the players to do whatever they wanted with the fact that they were playing a game in secret. In the culmination of the game there were two major public events on the last Saturday of gaming. First one of them was a public demonstration parading through downtown to honour the dead, and the second was a homecoming party where the vessels bid the spirits goodbye and celebrated their victory, before going home.

The intent in these last events was to make the players feel that *they* had planned and executed the party and the demonstration by themselves, instead of having the game masters organize everything. The game masters had acquired a demonstration permit and informed the police in advance about the route it would take and organized the party venue, but the

actual content was left for the players to produce in both cases.

Conclusion

I am not my name
I am not my body
I am not my mind
I am not my thoughts
I am not my breath
I am not what I create
I am not my memories
I am not what I forget

Then what am I but motion and flicker in the mind of another.

-Anna-Ki Henriksson

The *Prosopopeia* series experiments with highly pervasive ways of role-playing. The intent is to create game experiences where game content and ordinary reality are impossible to differentiate. Successful execution of this kind of game both brings the excitement of the game to the players' ordinary life, and the thrill of non-safe reality to the game experience.

Momentum was an attempt to take the framework of role-playing and use it to bring together the post-modern politics of identity, the aesthetics of urban exploration and the tactics of activism, and take the action to the streets. The game was constructed to show that if we want to we can enchant our lives by making them a game and make that game matter. Seamlessness was a requirement as in order to make a game about social construction of reality, the game had to be framed as reality. By showing the players that they can confront the consensus reality, conformity and boredom with magic in a game-that-is-real, they would see that the same methods would work in ordinary life.

Momentum was also a game about change; by doing symbolic resistance it allowed you to step outside the

boundaries of the usual 'real'. Role-players have been sitting on elven pillows long enough – *Momentum* wanted action, relevance, and responsibility.

Acknowledgements

This paper would not have been written without the dozens of people who made *Momentum* happen or the thirty players who devoted considerable effort to play it. This paper was written as a part of the EU-funded Integrated Project on Pervasive Gaming.

References

- Jonsson, S., Montola, M., Waern, A. & Ericsson, M. (2006): *Prosopopeia: Experiences from a Pervasive Larp*. Proceedings DVD of ACM SIGCHI ACE 2006 conference, June 14.-16. West Hollywood, ACM.
- Montola, Markus (2005): *Exploring the Edge of the Magic Circle. Defining Pervasive Games*. DAC 2005 conference, December 1.-3. IT University of Copenhagen.
- Montola, Markus & Jonsson, Staffan (2006): *Prosopopeia. Playing on the Edge of Reality*. In Frizon, Thorbiörn & Wrigstad, Tobias (eds.) (2006): *Role, Play, Art. Collected Experiences of Role-Playing* 85-99. Stockholm, Föreningen Knutpunkt.

Notes

- 1 Karl Bergström, Torbiörn Fritzon, Niclas Lundborg, Pernilla Rosenberg, Sofi a Stenler and Tobias Wrigstad (scenario design), Anders Muammar (props), Karim Muammar (rules), Linus Gabrielsson, Henrik Summanen and Jonas Söderberg (sounds), Anders Daven (graphis), and Moa Hartman (costumes). The game technology team also included Karl-Petter Åkesson, Henrik Bäärnheim, Sofi a Cirverius, Anders Ernevi, Pär Hansson, Niclas Henriksson, Tony Nordström, Erik Ronström, Olof Ståhl, Anders Wallberg, Peter Wilhelmsson and Maria Åresund.
- 2 *Prosopopeia Bardo 1: Där vi föll* was created by Martin Ericsson, Staffan Jonsson, Adriana Skarped and others (June 2005, Stockholm) has been discussed in detail before (see Montola & Jonsson 2006 and Jonsson & al. 2006).

GAME