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eye-witness to the illusion: an essay on the impossibility of 360° role-playing

Since the mid-nineties, a new larp aesthetic has developed in the Nordic countries, especially Sweden and Norway. I call it the 360° illusion, and attempt in the following a description of its special circumstances. Its most obvious characteristic is the ambition to place the players in a physically total, real and present environment, while refusing to limit itself to realism in genre or subject matter.

Its most surprising effect is its incompatibility with roleplaying as it has previously been understood within this gaming culture. The 360° illusion at best can create intense experiences, but it does so through replacing *internal visualisation of the room and psychological immersion into character*¹ with *physical presence in the room and visualisations, both internal and external, of character psychology*.

Readers who dislike theoretical terminology will benefit from skipping the middle section: some practical discussion of actual games is included toward the end.

Speaking of the experience of larping inevitably puts one in an anecdotal and subjective position, which is why I have chosen the essay form. A full disclosure of my position relative to the larps and larpmakers mentioned would run as long as the text itself. In short, I have played all the games used as examples unless otherwise indicated. Inevitably, most of these larpmakers are acquaintances or friends. Out of the games mentioned, I was a character coach for *Euro-pa* and peripherally involved in character writing for *Hamlet* and *OB7*.

The full 360°

At Knutpunkt in Stockholm in 1998, Samir Belarbi gave a presentation of *Föreningen Visionära Vetenskapsmäns Årliga Kongress* (“The Annual Congress of the Society of Visionary Scientists”, FVV), a larp he had staged on the Stockholm-Turku ferry². Whether by coincidence or through prescience, FVV exemplified everything that a then emerging Swedish gaming style would strive for: a complete universe available to interact with, a situational, emotional and physical realism in character immersion, and

a what-you-see-is-what-you-get attitude to the physical environment of the game. I call this style the 360° illusion, in reference to the totality of both the physical game environment and the space for immersion it strives to create.

An onboard conference centre was rented for the titular meeting. The players stayed in character for the exact duration of the cruise, bringing only character belongings with them (although, presumably, off-game IDs). The setting automatically solved some of the central challenges later identified with the style and especially with larping in “the real world”: providing borders to the game that are solid but feel permeable, managing character movement and communication, and dealing with non-player interaction.

In contrast to a situation in which a person larps in public in his home town, here the player’s private life could intrude on the character’s experience only in the unlikely event that another passenger happened to be an off-game acquaintance. And as for interaction with non-players, the choice of location made sure that they would in some sense be “in character” as well.

To Finns and Swedes alike, these cruise ships function as transitional or indeed ritual spaces. It is an unvoiced cultural given that what happens on a cruise does not “count” as part of every-day life. Nearly all groups of passengers define for themselves a new set of behavioural rules for the duration of the cruise, whether the trip to them is labelled “family vacation”, “romantic getaway”, or “graduation blow-out” – or larp. Thus the FVV players could assume with some safety that non-intrusive weirdness would be dismissed by the other passengers as some variant of cruise behaviour, rather than mental illness or offensive provocations.

FVV became significant both because of its artistic merits and the way it was discussed on the local and Scandinavian level³. The players’ appreciation of

the every-day tragedy of their superficially comical characters opened new avenues of subject matter and tone. The game fed a debate on the ethics of real-world larping that continues to this day. And at an especially fruitful moment it helped raise the bar on illusions of reality. Belarbi was at the end of an influential larp career and never made another game. But in the year he gave his presentation, preparations for Daniel Krauklis’s hugely influential *Knappnålshuvudet* were already under way⁴.

Apart from Swedish influences, it seems almost certain that Krauklis’s team was influenced by the experiences of Eirik Fatland, who had previously organised the similarly pioneering *Kybergenesis* in Norway. Some of Fatland’s methodology was adopted for *Knappnålshuvudet*, which also had a Norwegian player presence.

Tracing influences is very hard, but regardless of causality I would argue that *Knappnålshuvudet* and its direct Swedish descendants, like *Carolus Rex*, *Hamlet* and *Ringblomman* (all with participating players from at least one other Nordic country), share their aesthetic with contemporary Norwegian games like *1942*, *Europa* and apparently *Panopticon*⁵.

All these larps received thorough post-game analyses at Knudepunkt conventions, feeding experiences and ideals of game aesthetics back into the scene, and less directly spawning projects with similar ambitions. These include otherwise fruitful games, like *Moir* and *Dragonbane*, that aimed for but did not successfully achieve the 360° illusion, and several games like *OB7* and *Prosopopeia Bardo*, in which I did not participate and therefore cannot adequately judge.

In the following I will focus on differences in the Swedish and Finnish traditions, as these are the gaming cultures with which I am most familiar.

Great Pretenders

In tabletop and freeform role-playing games, it is possible for players to explore dreams, memories and the borders of the map, to acquire and use items that are not represented by props or by stats, or to call a character's previously unknown aunt on a moment's notice. While none of these things are impossible to do in larps, making the option available is usually too impractical to bother, curtailing both the plot content of Scandinavian larps and the in-game actions of players in them⁶.

In many other countries, the entire toolkit of tabletop is available to larpers too, making any action possible as long as one has access to a game master and a willingness to abstractly simulate physical action. Scandinavian larpers generally have neither. They would rather drive game events in a less plausible direction than play changes that require off-game logistics, like a note on a building informing players it is in fact now representing a smouldering ruin.

Yet most Scandinavian larp traditions have in fact made do with more than one kind of representation⁷. A sheet for a cape, a boffer for a sword, cardboard for a gun, a hand-written note for a lock on a door, a classroom for royal chambers, a game of chance for physical conflict. We imagine our co-players as taller, as not having a ponytail hidden in their collar, as elves, as charismatic beauties. The imagination is a strong muscle, and as long as that muscle is willing to work, a total and present 360° environment is not strictly necessary.

Transforming input into powerful images, holding them in one's mind and manipulating them is the most basic role-playing tool. We employ it to place ourselves within a narrative, but across society it is used for many other purposes. Athletes and dieters call it "visualisation", others prefer "meditation" or "hypnosis" – pagans, doing it in a group not entirely unlike tabletop roleplayers, refer to it as "magic". In tabletop, the information is mostly aural and

gradually added, which initially requires a high level of concentration, but allows for a strong, real-feeling image and consequently a strong gaming experience. Contrary to the common-sense assumption, the game environment is easiest to believe in when it is entirely restricted to the imagination.

In Swedish freeform (close to some American variants of larp), the imaginary world is partially mapped out on the physical room. And in Scandinavian style larp, time and space are generally represented on a scale of 1:1, even when items, costume and the physical environment are not indexical.

The way we use our mind-muscle while larping is by accepting input for the visualisation from our whole perception – by systematically manipulating and filtering our reading of the surrounding reality. As a process this is much more complex than collective visualisation in a mood-lit room, especially since one needs to be very attentive to the ways a greater number of co-players have interpreted the available information.

On the other hand, the sheer concentration can actually be helpful in suspending disbelief. In my experience, the process gets less demanding over time, which could help explain the special intensity of first larp experiences – the initially required discipline keeps the mind from bothering us with off-game thoughts and non-game associations.

Larping in representational games is a process of continuous translation. Back in the days when players commonly wore nametags, we made them invisible by convincing our brains that the tags were an externalised image of our character's memory processes. We turned whole characters invisible by systematically ignoring anyone with a fist above their head until our brains, too, pretended that they were not there. Our brains retroactively corrected ugly sets and bad props to fill our in-game memories with beautiful rooms and period clothes.

Settling the art debate

Metaphorically speaking, this kind of larping is almost like coping with autism. In our daily lives, we can assume that reality is what it is: a chair will carry our weight, a cloak will warm us, food is edible, and alcohol is intoxicating. But to function in a representational larp, we must constantly question even perceptions that in our daily lives are completely automatic.

From the player's vantage point, natural laws and causality are out of sync, memories are unreliable, making assumptions about the world is a struggle, and even human contact can be incomprehensible. Is the opposing character lying – or is the co-player just really, really unconvincing? Editing this barrage of information into a coherent whole is challenging and exhausting. But when it works, it is exhilarating, because the whole we construct is not “reality”, it is “art” – and let us just sidestep the elitist baggage of that word for now by defining it in a formalist way.

If “reality” is the amalgam of our understanding and experience of nature, society and culture, then “art” constructs subsets of reality that are independent from some of its rules. All of art is based on treating information differently than we normally would – this, briefly, is the meaning of “estrangement”⁸, which is the Russian formalist name for what art does. A traffic light turning red does not stop us walking if it is in a gallery, and we do not run screaming out of the movie theatre when King Kong attacks (although we do jump in our seats if he does it suddenly, since many of our responses are faster than our powers of contextualising analysis).

Estrangement from ordinary codes of communication through flexing our powers of perception is the source of the pleasure of art. And according to thinkers ranging from Victor Schklovsky to Jean Baudrillard, the purpose of fiction and artifice is in fact to invigorate our relationship to the reality around it⁹.

In a 360° game, when what you see is what you get, the role-player's whole struggle of continuous visualisation goes out the window. If the game-makers succeed in presenting the player with a reality they can find plausible, then the world is the world is the world, enabling an experience that does not perceptually come across as fictional. There the estrangement arises not from the language of the situation, but from the role we present in it and the difference to our everyday lives.

Depending on the setting, content and success of the game, this sense of estrangement can become very strong, but not necessarily very different to any situation in our private lives that we would describe as feeling “unreal”.

To a player from a strongly representational game culture, the 360° environment can be startlingly disappointing. If no effort of self-estrangement goes into putting you in that fictional space, then it is indeed often *you*, not the carefully constructed character with its carefully filtered thoughts, that stands awed in the medieval village.

As long as immersion into the game world requires continuously transforming your understanding of reality into the significantly different perception of your character, even brooding in relative isolation (“Turku style”) is an interaction with the game itself. If, on the other hand, the environment requires no transforming visualisation, the experience of being in character must be supported by something else entirely. But before I get into what that can be, we must make a small digression to consider what believing in a character entails.

Portraying “self”

Aesthetically speaking, realism is only an –ism among others¹⁰. It is prevalent enough in Western culture to sometimes get confused with reality itself: many of the symbols and agreements of its constructed representations are common enough not

to create an obvious sense of estrangement in the audience any more.

But we certainly have the choice of telling stories about reality differently. When I speak of the 360° illusion, it is not because “360° realism” sounded less cool: it is because this aesthetic – not unexpectedly in a cultural form sprung from the fantastic – does not seem to accept the adequacy of the realist narrative as a description of reality. Nor does the ambition to create a tangible world limit the larp-makers to realism in genre or subject matter.

Represented “reality” must always be pruned for length, plausibility, dramatic purposes and on ideological grounds. This is demonstrated by the vast chasm between fictional representations of identity (causal, coherent, with specific properties) and our first-hand experiences of being “ourselves” (random, biological, in a variety of social roles). We turn ourselves into fictions too. We say: “I am like this” to explain our actions coherently, even though we know that is not what we are like at every moment of every day.

It is not impossible for art to convey subjective identity. Modernist novelists like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf had some considerable success at this. Unfortunately, the better the artist mimics stream of consciousness, the less we understand of, or care about, the plot. Even Woolf’s accessible *Mrs Dalloway*, while leaving us with a detailed snapshot of its main character, suffers from this problem: it is difficult to remember what actually happens in it.

Being fiction and belonging to our culture, it makes practical sense for larps to operate with characters that are realistic – in accordance with our cultural traditions if not our personal experience. But since in larps we observe the fictional character from inside an actual head, this is the one art form where this tension between realism and reality is difficult to ignore.

In a representational game, with all the translation going on, “being in character” is like reading a novel – or rather improvising one in one’s head. Reading icons like “room” and “gun” creates one’s own character too, because text always implies an author, and interpretation always implies an interpreter. The process of visualisation is perhaps not unlike the language we interpret to harvest the experiences and emotions of *Mrs Dalloway* – except that in this case, we also participate in writing the book.

In an indexical environment, on the other hand, since everything around us is “real”, the estranging fiction emerges from the characters we play. In comparison with what it feels like to be me in a room, being my character in that same room does not feel real at all.

Even if we manage not to think of our off-game lives – which is not all that difficult, once the mid-term memory gets filled with game events – we are left with immense mental resources used, typically, to think as little as possible. In the vast expanse of identity, the character information we had going in (name, number of siblings, location of secret map) only amounts to some insignificant rubbish in the corner of a vast, echoing emptiness. In reality, our thoughts and memories are manifold. In the game, our characters become single-minded in the extreme.

You could argue that this creates estrangement. At its best it can certainly convey the experience of leading a passionate, unmediated, non-reflexive life. At its worst, it makes belief in the character impossible. Perhaps this is why Swedish fantasy larpers in the mid-nineties said that they sometimes did not even feel in character until the third day of the game.

In medieval underwear

One reason for the 360° illusion to emerge so strongly in Sweden in the late 90s was that the fantasy genre already had a head start¹¹. For years, Swedish fantasy gaming had increasingly focused on period outfits and gear. Many Swedish larpers

very seriously believe that even period underwear is necessary as not to disturb oneself or the co-players with reminders of the outside world. (Requiring a substantial investment of time and/or money has the additional affect of guaranteeing that the players show up on the day).

This sense of responsibility for the closest co-players is fuelled by the tradition of plotting the games on the level of (sometimes quite large) character groups. As for individual character personalities, in this type of game the players or player groups pretty much developed those themselves.

The appeal of this style of gaming – of being in, experiencing and sharing a fantasy world together – is obvious. Yet at its most extreme, this tradition is said to have resulted in larps focused entirely on hanging out: off-game buddy groups on feel-good fantasy tourist trips to campfire country. There may have been some truth in this, but on the other hand the same games also catered for player groups interested in interaction, especially political or armed conflict (“adventure”, broadly speaking).

Still, if one considers larp an opportunity for in-character socialising in a visually realistic fairytale environment (last-day orc attack optional), there is really no need and scant opportunity for character immersion in the sense of translation and visualisation.

On the other hand, since the activities one’s character engages in – walking on uneven paths, cooking on open fires, digging, drawing carts, swinging swords, crapping in a hole and generally roughing it – are mostly outside the scope of one’s private life, they are enough to conjure up a sense of estrangement akin to that of an exotic vacation.

This method of physical immersion has the added benefits of continuously reminding the player of the tangible reality of the game world, of encouraging

the players to action, and of bringing a vivid sense of immediacy to the proceedings. The head may be resting, so the speak, but the body is alive.

I do want to emphasise the continuing validity of this aesthetic even as I presume to call it anti-intellectual. If one’s goal is to give the players new ideas and insights, achieving it through a larp of this kind would be quite challenging (although historically not impossible). Similarly, achieving sense of wonder will get progressively more difficult as players get used to the environment.

By the late nineties, many larpmakers were looking for new options. Some took the complete environment to other worlds and genres (the Star Wars-game *Röd Måne* set on a forest planet especially springs to mind), others went looking for ways to insert ideas and advanced storytelling in it, and out of these quests the 360° illusion emerged.

When the 360° illusionists looked for ways to fill the mental space left by receding imagination, they turned to two important facets of the tradition of Swedish indexical fantasy. The emphasis on physical immersion – later leading to an almost comical proliferation of pre-game physical improv sessions – was carried over as an ideal of good gaming. And so was the inherent assumption that larping is a group activity. This has resulted in the ensemble playing method.

The ensemble player employs aspects of his role to support the initiatives of his co-players with the express purpose of creating satisfyingly dramatic situations for the group to experience. The ensemble is collectively responsible for the dramatic arc in the whole game as well as each scene, and may choose to do something implausible or illogical to achieve the most moving narrative. An influence from the Swedish free-form scene, which has viewed playing in a similar way since the early 90s, is not unlikely.

Personality Striptease

In Finnish larps, by contrast, the characters have usually been written by the game-master, who communicates the plot to each player in the shape of a more or less detailed description of the character's situation and psychology.¹² Since reacting to new in-game information in plausible accordance with this description is ideally necessary for further information to be revealed and the plot to unfold¹³, Finnish larp culture places great weight on psychological immersion into the role.

The task of the player could be summarised as mastering his character before the game, and explore the truth of this character through action and interaction during it. Performing this task correctly or even enjoying it does not in itself require immersion on the level of actually feeling the character's emotions – they only have to be taken into account. I suspect psychological immersion became the Finnish ideal because the fog of emotions helps to obscure the (sometimes clunky and obvious) mechanism of the gradual reveal of the story arc.

From deep inside the fiction, the fiction is always logical, and for a character, the unfolding action is always new, whether or not the player has seen stories take similar turns before. Thus immersion strengthens the player's experience of the narrative. The downside is that a highly immersive player playing a passive, grieving or shocked character will sometimes block the action unnecessarily. Very roughly put, the Swedish tradition tends to lean on action, sometimes created through emotion, and the Finnish on emotion, sometimes expressed through action.

At *Knappnålshuvudet*, the characters were treated as storytelling functions in the Finnish manner. But in harmony with Swedish larp culture, Krauklis and his team placed equal emphasis on physical improvisation as on the written materials. Just as the psychological institute in the game was indexical and present, just as the whole world was available

to the players on a 1:1 scale, so the entire body was co-opted for a playing field. That the characters were all in therapy, much of it tactile and bodily, was in retrospect even more important than the pre-game improv in keeping the body involved. The player-characters were encouraged to experience grief, anger, frustration, and joy all through: involving lungs, muscles, tear ducts, and brain chemistry.

A hen on the open sea

Only a decade ago, the idea of going to a larp to suffer was considered new and fairly foolish. To some, *Knappnålshuvudet* may still sound like a pretty terrifying experience. As for suffering, that really does not need to deter from art – if people avoid reading *Crime and Punishment*, it is not on account of the titular criminal getting such a bum deal. It is because involvement with any story of that ambition and magnitude seems like a commitment. Ah, you say, but then the pain stays in the novel? The reason *Knappnålshuvudet* was not terrifying is the same: its borders were clearly defined.

Borders that limit the game are useful for the dual purposes of framing the fiction and for creating an atmosphere of safety and trust. Knowing that something has a beginning and an end not only makes turning it into a narrative possible – it also makes almost anything tolerable in the middle. Marking this beginning and this end with a ritual action, however minor, is especially helpful if the intervening period is to be spent away from one's everyday self.

Let us imagine for a moment that I am getting married, and my friends, in a profoundly disappointing misjudgement of my taste, organise my hen party on the Stockholm-Turku ferry. They bring me to the harbour blindfolded, revealing where we are only as we show our passports to the customs official.

The boat is reached through a series of gates, one of them the entirely fictional gate with the ship's name painted on it, by which the ship photographer takes

a humiliating group picture. This is the first activity of the party and the cruise: I do not usually allow strange men to take my picture, but I am already bound by the implicit rules of the party. I do not usually drink alcohol on a Tuesday afternoon or a Wednesday morning, dance sexily in a Spider-Man costume while singing karaoke, or travel without a cell phone and computer, but on this cruise, I probably would. In real terms, these things should be as embarrassing to me on the sea as they are on land. Yet I am prepared to accept them in this context.

If you argue that these are all minor things that I would be shallow to care about anyway, consider for a moment that a significant number of polled Finns were of the opinion that casual sex while intoxicated on a cruise does not count as infidelity. Would I crown my hen party by sleeping with the cruise host? No, as “I am not like that.” But neither am I the person who appears in public in a Spider-Man costume and a beer-stained tutu. The Meilahti model postulates that the fictionality of our larp roles in comparison with our other social roles is irrelevant, since the experiences are real (Hakkarainen and Stenros, 2003).

That does not render the limits between these roles irrelevant, on the contrary we rely on borders in real life as well to enable a hierarchy between our experiences, allowing some of them to “count” more than others towards the construction we consider our “identity”. A series of gates helps me encircle my cruise experiences with a border marked “exceptional, true”, just as standing in a circle in a darkened room listening to a certain song can help me mark an overdose at a larp as “exceptional, fiction”.

Highly representational larps automatically include all kinds of borders and differences in comparison with real life. Restriction to a specific area, violence without physical consequences, the memory of “my husband” devoid of corresponding emotions, and of course the limited range of thoughts and actions that were available to the role in the fictional situation

– all of these are estranging, which helps us organise the information as “art” rather than “life”. (A ritual ending – an applause, a debrief, a silence, a gate – is often helpfully tacked on anyway).

In a 360° illusion, where many borders are obscured on purpose, others may need to be erected. *Knapp-nålshuvudet* had an agreed-upon time frame, but no physical borders. However, the unravelling of the plot was directed in some detail through the use of fates (*skjebne*)¹⁴, constructed to ensure an intense catharsis experience for each player. Limited to one a day, the skjebnes were only minimally intrusive to player freedom, but they served as a reminder that the action was not arbitrary, giving the players a tool to bounce improvisations off – or to support themselves on if they felt like the story was pulling them under.

A similar marker of the fiction’s borders is the safety word, borrowed into intensive larping from S/M world and used to perforate the surface of the story when its reality becomes too uncomfortable.

Moirá, which required the players to perform in (iconic) heavy make-up in the otherwise purportedly indexical environment, successfully mapped out the borders of its fiction on the building in which it was played. The top floor was the in-character game area, on the middle floor a player would still be in character but perform actions not normally expected of fairies, such as brushing teeth, and the lowest floor was entirely off-game and used as a dressing room for touch-ups. Converted into a physical act, passing in and out of character became as simple as the verbal markers used to do the same in a tabletop game.

Reliable but permeable borders

Time, space and story borders are helpful, but also a nuisance. They impose on all larpers a filter of self-censorship, which in all too many games is in conflict with both the ambition to create cool situations and the ambition always to act in accordance with charac-

ter logic. The player is forced to censor all off-game thoughts, which is inevitable to some degree, and all character impulses that are impractical to realise in a game situation, which can actually be avoided.

Creating a real 360° illusion requires solving this problem, which FVV can elegantly illustrate. Since the game was set in our reality, it automatically provided a complete world of experiences to reference during the game – removing the problem of players having to edit their associative processes or to make up fictional but “commonly known” cultural phenomena. The practical constraints of being at sea solved the problem of unrestricted physical movement diluting the interaction.

The common problem of characters needing to contact other fictional characters, forcing the players to make up plausible reasons not to, was automatically solved by real-world technical limitations: at the time, the ferries were equipped with impractical and unreliable satellite phones, and had no cell coverage for most of the cruise.

The space ship of *Carolus Rex*, the asylum centre at *Europa*, and the bomb shelter at *Hamlet* all functioned similarly – adding one crucial aspect, the permeability of the border. Even when a physical border is logical to the game world – a border the characters *do not want to* cross – the players veer toward treating it as an absolute that their characters would not conceive of violating – a border the characters *cannot* cross.

To liberate players from this self-censorship, the totality of the surrounding world needs to be demonstrated. *Hamlet* had three phone lines out of the bunker that the players could use to call anyone they pleased in all of fictional Denmark – and reach them or not, depending on the roster of experienced table top game masters at the other end managing the simulation of the surrounding world.

A few hours into *Carolus Rex*, a retro-futuristic pulp adventure set during a war between the space empires of Sweden and Denmark, the ship made contact with an escape pod from another ship. The players struggled for some time to find a way around this dilemma – they could not explore it, since they “knew” that their space ship was really a museum submarine, and that only the game masters and the off-game world remained on deck.

As the ship’s AI, played by a GM on the outside, steadfastly refused to accept any of their many excuses, the docking was finally performed. Down the opened hatch came a large group of uniformed enemy combatants, portrayed by Danish larpers secretly smuggled to the game area and kept hidden until the Swedish players were all in the game.

A plausible universe can deliver surprises. To make the player accept the border of the game as something else than the border of the fiction, it is the duty of the truly illusionist game master to demonstrate that characters, plots and information could, and sometimes will, cross them.

360° Surreality

In games concerned with people not in continuous action – prisoners, asylum seekers, philosophers, the grieving, the waiting – physical immersion is a less helpful practice. To simulate a freewheeling, unpredictable inner universe other methods have proved necessary. This was the break-through innovation of *Knappnålshuvudet*: the emphasis on creating character memories not only before the game (through agreement, improv, literature and private preparation) but during it.

Into the otherwise indexic milieu, three symbolic elements were introduced to reflect and affect the inner landscape of the characters: sound, emotions externalised as invisible non-player characters or “angels”, and an abstract room in which dreams, memories or emotions could be acted out with the aid of these angels.

Before *Knappnålshuvudet* sound design, efficient because sound so easily slips past our analytical faculties, had long been neglected in the larp world. At the larp, meta-diegetic music played at low volumes within the building created moods or associations for the players to engage with. In the abstract game space or “womb” (see below), a soundscape composed for the purpose represented the voice of God (the same composer, Henrik Summanen, would go on to create the 72-hour meta-diegetic soundtrack for *Mellan Himmel och Hav*).

Meta-diegetic sound was apparently also employed at *Europa* to simulate post-traumatic stress in the asylum seekers – although curiously, my brain has filtered out this information from the in-game memories themselves¹⁵. Both *Hamlet* and *Carolus Rex* used diegetic sound (bombing, crowds, engine sounds, torpedoes sent and received) to create a three-dimensional world around the game area.

In *Knappnålshuvudet*, dumbfounded players were awoken in the middle of the night and led to the womb to “dream” – to act out primal memories or work through the events of the day. In *Europa*, some of the refugees were granted a meta-diegetic meeting with “the bureaucrats”. Although played during the game in a building in the asylum centre complex, these scenes were not to be considered literally true. The players were free to use them as fodder for memories or treat them as daydreams, nightmares or potential futures.

In *Hamlet*, the game action was intermittently suspended for all the characters to gather and hear a performed soliloquy from Shakespeare’s play. The players were instructed to treat the soliloquy as an external manifestation of the psychological struggles of their own character.

In parallel with the 360° illusion – or perhaps as a subcategory of it, if abstraction can be said to indexically represent abstraction – another experi-

mental aesthetic has developed in the Scandinavian countries. These game-spaces are difficult to rate on the symbolic-iconic-indexical scale. What does a symbol represent if it can represent everything? What do your dreams “really” look like from within? Was the trash heap setting of *Amerika* literal? Were the white canvas labyrinths in which *inside:outside*, *Hamlet inifrån* and *Mellan himmel och hav* took place symbolic or iconic?

In *Luminescence*, possibly the most symbolic larp of all time, the terminal patients were placed in an abstractly lit room on a tonne of white flour – and the players instructed to treat this fact as both literal and entirely expected. The way this distances the player from the fiction is positively Brechtian: I suspect the result of this kind of estrangement is the opposite of psychological immersion, but then again, there is something both powerful and appealing about using fiction as a petri dish for ideological reflection. I guess we could call it intellectual immersion.

Not walk alone

The angels of *Knappnålshuvudet* remain the most beautiful illustration of the way the 360° illusion can express inner reality through external action. Each tiny player group was written to the theme of an emotion, given physical form by their guardian angel. The angels were clad and painted all in grey for easy identification, and when there were two or more of them in the room, they moved softly and in seemingly telepathic synchronisation.

The angels were diegetically present, and although the characters could not understand seeing them nor interact with them directly, the players were intended to do both. The angels were even scented to make it possible to sense their presence before they stepped into view.

The angel players (practically bordering on game masters) could punctuate character actions through

physical movement, make suggestions through nudging them in the correct direction, enact inner conflict through whispering in their ears, comfort them through touch or protect them by blocking their way. Since the angels had studied both the character descriptions and the skjebnes, they came across as all-knowing.

If interpretation implies an interpreter, so does interaction, and ultimately this is the form of being and doing that saves the 360° illusion from its own efficiency. A grief-stricken character in a representational game can be immersed in by a player through continuous visualisation even though he is sitting alone in the bathroom. In a 360° illusion, especially in the early parts of the game, balancing the fictional inner life with the actual surroundings is harder. It helps to cry quite loudly, to know that someone might hear – this turns the solitude into interaction, but it is perhaps not what the character would really do with his secret sorrow. At *Knappnålshuvudet*, the character crying silently was at this moment of the story represented by two players: himself grieving, and his angel, that other part of himself, either comforting, or weeping with him, or egging him on.

A feature, not a bug

Even in the best of 360° illusions, some elements that disturb the fiction will remain. If nothing else, having previously seen the players as them selves can provide a blip in the fiction's internal logic – a potentially significant blip, since representational elements in indexical surroundings easily sabotage the whole venture. Given that the illusion is unstable even over the course of the same game, I have seen more failed illusions than I have seen successes. The experiences have been rewarding all the same. The ambition at totality is enticing in itself, and besides, the players can often turn a collapsed illusion into a good (albeit often unnecessarily expensive) representational larp.

Perhaps role-playing games should be divided into three categories: those that are created all through visualisation (tabletop), those that require continuous translation (free-form and larp) and those in which the environment can be accepted at face value (larping in the 360° environment). In the last category, the process of role-playing is the least cerebral. It becomes immediate, physical, and social. It may not even be role-playing in the sense of constructing a shared fiction. As a mental process, it lies closer to the sense in which we role-play in our everyday lives – except that in this role, we actively censor recollections of our other roles and environments.

This necessary refusal of complete personality within the complete environment can make the most perfect 360° illusion feel pointless and hollow. With the aid of physical immersion, immediate action and social interaction, and occasional bursts of stubborn self-suggestion, this emptiness can be kept at bay and the off-game blips to a minimum.

That said, the next logical step for the 360° illusionists is to start treating this weakness not as a problem but as an integral part of the aesthetic. At the *Prosopopeia Bardo* games *Där vi föll* and *Momentum* the players were apparently instructed to fill the emptiness with their own lives, memories and experiences. I guess this works, but it does limit the range of possible characters more than a little.

Most larpmakers must find another way to balance the internal illusion with the external, to make the limited personality of the characters generate wondrous estrangement rather than startling disappointment. Only then can the 360° illusion be lived like a life, experienced and remembered with an extra-ordinary vividness, and allowed to affect us profoundly.

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Notes

- 1 English lacks an exact match for inlevelse/eläytyminen. “Immersing” is actually closer to fördjupelse/syventyminen, but in this text the word, especially in conjunction with “psychological”, is intended to retain the nuance of “placing oneself in the position of another through empathy” that “inlevelse” carries with it.

- 2 The description is based on Belarbi's presentation and participant recollections.
- 3 A similar perfect storm of coincidental brilliance provided Finland with its ground-breaking 360° larp, Mike Pohjola's school room dystopia *.laitos* (1997).
- 4 Another strong influence on the naturalism of that game, which I unfortunately know very little about it, was a series of occult larps set in the 1920s, informally known as the Gyllenstierna campaign, that started in the early nineties and reached its finale with *Sista Kapitlet* in 1998.
- 5 For a description of the Norwegian "Hardcore-laiv" aesthetic, see Fatland (2001).
- 6 Scandinavian Style larping is a collective term for the kinds of larps that are indigenous to Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland. Players generally stay in character for all of the game and are attired in appropriate costumes from head to toe. During the game, playing is usually not suspended for sleeping, to simulate fights, or for any other purpose except for safety reasons or to indicate the passing of time within the narrative. Within each of the Nordic countries, however, many different gaming cultures have developed, some of them from international, commercial rules systems, all of them with differing assumptions and ideals.
- 7 I use the word "representation" or "representational" in reference to things that represent things that they are not. This includes both *symbolic* representation, which is dissimilar (like a word for an action or a piece of paper for an object), and *iconic* representation, which is similar (like a gesture for an action or a boffer sword for a real sword). This distinction is mostly overlooked in the article since I suspect that the effort of imagination involved in reading symbolic and iconic input is broadly the same, while reading *indexical* input (regardless of degree – a house representing either that same house or an identical house) requires almost no effort at all. On representation, see Lopenen and Montola 2004, and on indexical propping, see Montola and Jonsson 2006.
- 8 Also translated as being defamiliarized – either way it refers to making things feel unfamiliar.
- 9 In "Art as Technique" and "Simulacra and Simulations", respectively. Baudrillard, with his postmodern doubts about reality, naturally paints this process in a quite more sinister light.
- 10 More properly, a number of related –isms in the arts. Realism was a reaction to romanticism and is the opposite of idealism. Realists attempt to describe things accurately and objectively, aesthetically seeming to reject symbolism and politically often rejecting idealized and beautiful subject matters. The logical problem of realism is, that even naturalistic representation involves interpretation, what is shown is inevitably symbolic of something the artist wishes to convey.
- 11 Other reasons probably include the high level of organisation and positive media image, which enabled financial grants for these often quite costly productions, and participant overlap with the Society of Creative Anachronism.
- 12 Players can express preferences as to character type, but are centrally cast and not expected to prefer playing with their friends.
- 13 While in practice many characters were filler, there was broad agreement within the gaming culture that a good larp made every character feel like the main character – i.e. provided each with ample, personally relevant "plot".
- 14 A storytelling device. A non-diegetic instruction ensuring that the player has his character perform a certain often seemingly unimportant action, or appear in a certain place, at an agreed upon time.
- 15 As in film theory, diegetic sound is audible to the characters, meta-diegetic sound is representative of or directly affecting (the inner worlds of) the characters, and non-diegetic sound is a communication between the author and the audience. An example of non-diegetic larp music is the melody played at the beginning and end of each act of *Hamlet* while the players were going into and out of character.