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The role-playing subculture in Scandinavia

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1 DEFINITION AND ORIGINS OF LIVE-ACTION ROLE-PLAYING

Live action role-playing, commonly referred to as *larping* (from the abbreviated noun *larp*), is a form of role-playing in which players physically interpret their characters and interact in a real setting. It is a participatory medium, in contrast to traditional spectator media such as television and theatre, allowing the partakers to define their world themselves instead of having it defined for them. Beyond these short words it is difficult to give a universal definition of larping, since the phenomenon is fairly new and has in its short life-span developed very differently in different parts of the world.

There is no single point of origin for larping, although a commonly cited source is "tabletop RPGs such as Dungeons & Dragons, [from which larping appears to have developed] more or less simultaneously in North America, Europe, and Australia sometime during the early 80s" (Tychsen, Hitchens, Brolund & Kovakli 2006: 256.) Gamers supposedly wanted more than sitting around a table playing and started acting out their gaming scenarios. Many groups of people claim to have held the first larp ever, although there is no documentation to corroborate any claims.

Within a decade, larping spread to Scandinavia, in which there nowadays exists an array of larping groups and organizations. Larping is still a fairly unknown medium, and those who larp (called *larpers*, interchangeably with *role-players*) are a subculture.

2 SCANDINAVIAN LARPERS AS A SUBCULTURE

In defining Scandinavian larpers as a subculture, I have chosen to use Stuart Hall's [quotation given in lecture] five elements that characterize a subculture: language, music, territory, dress, and resistance. Before discussing what the distinguishing characteristics of larpers are, the criteria for the characterizing elements need addressing. For example, does the *dress* element mean that members of a certain subculture always dress in a certain way, or only at certain times? My standpoint is that both are possible. Goths, for instance, are known to dress in, well, *gothic* attire all year

round, while football hooligans commonly use their regalia only during matches. In other words, an element need not be ever-present in order to be passable.

2.1 Language

This element is perhaps the most prominent one for larpers as a subculture, since larpers certainly use a distinct language, a large portion of which is jargon for outsiders. The very word *larp* is totally lexicalized by larpers, although generally unknown. Another essential expression is *in-game*, which signifies all events and actions of the characters within the game, along with its counterpart *off-game*. At least some terminology must always be learned in order to understand the rules of a larp.

Additionally, larpers assimilate words from their in-game worlds into their normal life. A striking example of this is the adoption of obsolete words and expressions into everyday language. Old-fashioned language being the norm in fantasy-themed larps, many larpers tend to sound Shakespearean with the casual use of archaic words such as "bewilderment" and "forasmuch", considered normal language use among their peers.

2.2 Music

In contrast to language use, larpers seem to have no common taste in music outside of their hobby. Some larping genres, however, have a distinct type of music involved. The most obvious example is, again, fantasy-themed larps, in which folk music occurs a lot.

2.3 Territory

All gaming grounds can be considered the territory of larpers. Some gaming grounds are built from scratch in the middle of forests, sometimes whole medieval villages or market places, while others might be a youth centre turned into an inn or a warehouse

fashioned as a bus station in-game. The only general factor of the larpers' territory is that they tend to be located away from civilization, since larpers do not wish to be disturbed in the midst of the game.

An interesting deviation from the above mentioned striving for solitude is the larping style known as *pervasive gaming*. Pervasive larps are "played among everyday people living their everyday lives" (Montola, Stenros & Waern 2009: xix.) Instead of distancing the larp from uninvolved people, the larp is brought into their midst. Pervasive larps typically avoid involving regular people in the game, although the players may freely interact with the outside world through the lens of their character. Pervasive larps can be seen as an extension of the larpers' territory. Streets, shops and pubs are taken over for the duration of the game, even if their other tenants know nothing of it.

2.4 Dress

The same is true for the larper's dress as for the music. Outside of larps, larpers dress normally. However, in-game clothing is considered a significant part of the fictional culture a character belongs to, and is as such a very important aspect of larping. Game organizers sometimes write highly-detailed instructions on the dress code for a particular larp, with great variation between individual larps due to different genres and settings. Larpers are known to choose their clothing meticulously, and can spend a great amount of resources (time and money) on their character's dress.

2.5 Resistance

The resistance of subcultures is expressed in their apparent nature of going against the stream, "interrupting the process of 'normalization'" (Hebdidge 1991.) That is to say, it is part of the ideology of any subculture to resist dominant culture. However, Elge Larsson (2005) argues that the modern dominant culture is striving for pluralism, which

leaves the individual wanting of an identity of his or her own. "The roleplayer's solution to handle such a pluralistic multitude is […] to roll with the waves, not standing as a pole in the middle of the stream where you slowly erode" (Larsson 2005: 14.) From this point of view, dominant culture is regressive. This is the larpers' "challenge to hegemony", as Hebdidge (1991: 17) states the form of resistance represented by subcultures.

On the other hand, dominant culture defends itself from the resistance offered by a subculture by undermining it. Larpers are commonly criticized for the supposed secrecy of their practices, because of the striving for solitude that was discussed earlier, giving larping a sect-like label. Since games are usually off-limits to non-participants and very few games are documented by means of e.g. filming, there are few ways to counteract these allegations.

Larpers, however, have a way to battle the views of dominant culture on a long-term basis: by enabling the next generation to have a positive view of role-playing through early exposure. Role-playing is being given an increasingly important role in the school system as a means of personal development as well as an educational tool. An extreme example of this new trend is the Danish Østerskov Efterskole, a boarding school that "base [sic.] its teaching primarily on role-playing" (Hyltoft 2008: 12.) Explicitly, the Østerskov Efterskole teaches regular school subjects through role-playing scenarios, essentially *larping to learn*. Scandinavia appears to be the most active area for this use of role-playing, which was initiated in the early years of this century. (Henriksen 2003; see also Henriksen 2004, Larsson 2004 & Harder 2007.)

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