The Making of Nordic Larp: Documenting a Tradition of Ephemeral Co-Creative Play

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ABSTRACT

Research and documentation of live action role-playing games, or larps, must tackle problems of ephemerality, subjectivity, first person audience and co-creation, as well as the underlying question of what larps are. In this paper these challenges are outlined and solutions to handling them are proposed. This is done through the prism of producing a picture-heavy art book on Nordic larp. The paper also discussed the problems of writing about game cultures as an insider and makes a case for addressing normative choices in game descriptions head on.

Keywords

role-playing games, larp, documentation, Nordic, games, play, game culture

INTRODUCTION

Live action role-playing, commonly known as larp, has been invented and reinvented in numerous places over the last decades. For instance, Hook (2008) discusses the origins of British larp, considering the *Dungeons & Dragons* adaptation *Treasure Trap* (1981) the first British larp. Tresca (2011) lists early American larps and proto-larps such as *Dagorhir* (1977) and games of the MIT Assassin's Guild (1980), pointing out that the early Swedish larp was established around the same time. Pettersson's (2005) account of the origins of Finnish larp is similarly sporadic.

Larp has been established in different places around the globe for a number of reasons. Morton (2007) and Bowman (2010) discuss predecessors of larp, agreeing that it is somewhat unclear when something constitutes a "larp" instead of an improvised performance, historical re-enactment or a religious ritual. On the other hand, the anti-role-playing film *Mazes and Monsters* (1982) spread the idea of larping wide and far, allowing people to "invent" larp for themselves.[1] In this paper our concept of larp follows Montola (2008): Larp is a role-playing game that uses the physical world as a foundation in defining the game world.

Due to this pattern of sporadic emergence, larp cultures have evolved in very different directions. While in the US, larps are stereotypically either rules-heavy combat-oriented fantasy campaigns that are run as small business franchises, or theatre-style larps that use cards for conflict resolution and are staged in gaming conventions (see Stark, forthcoming), the Nordic larp has evolved in a different direction.

While boffer combat and convention larp also exist in the Nordic countries, there is also an ambitious subculture that develops larp as an expressive form. This subculture, centered around the Knutepunkt convention, has created larps about refugees, cancer, masculinity, military occupation, marginalization and consumerism. The games often have high production values, participation fees upwards of €100 per player, and they are connected through critical and academic discussions published in annual convention books. As a form of expression, larp is comparable with performance art: Undocumented achievements and lessons are quickly forgotten.

Seeing value in this subculture, we set out to produce the book *Nordic Larp* (Stenros & Montola 2010), attempting to create a document that enables an informed discourse on the subject. In this essay we unpack the challenges of larp documentation, and explain the methodological choices made in order to overcome those obstacles. While this article addresses a fringe tradition of non-digital role-play, the challenges and solutions we present are relevant for not just for larp and role-playing games in general, but they also have implications for all study of games when it happens through actual play.

The primary aim of this paper is to explain the general challenges of larp documentation and to explore solutions through the experience gathered from the *Nordic Larp* book project. The secondary aim is to contextualize the book and explain some of its underlying assumptions in order to make the document more useful for the game studies community. The intention is that this article helps researchers who are not familiar with Nordic larp to situate it when discussing role-playing games. Finally, we address challenges of studying games *through actual play*, in a way that is relevant not just for the study of larp, but other games as well.

THE NORDIC LARP BOOK

The *Nordic Larp* book was created in co-operation with the community of players and game organizers who make up the tradition to ensure that it would reflect the tradition, and not just the parts known to the editors. The Nordic tradition has actively sought to document and advance its self-understanding in form of an annual book published since 2003 (starting with Gade et al., 2003), so negotiating this collaboration was relatively easy. The editors have also contributed to the community for over a decade as players, theorists and professional researchers.

The process was kicked off in at Knutepunkt 2009, where the project was introduced in a workshop. The workshop initiated a dialogue on which larps should be included. The central selection criteria were defined as *wide spectrum* (representative of the different sides of Nordic larp), *photographic documentation* (of sufficient technical, aesthetic or journalistic quality), *impact* (having impact on the scene or as having been influenced by the scene), and *description and analysis* (quality of the proposal).

The next fall a call for proposals was issued. Certain larps were listed as particularly desirable, but any larp could be suggested. 29 larps were selected. To ensure a wide spectrum, soft quotas were used – the selection would include a distribution of larps over 15 years, with numerous larps from each Nordic country[2], and larps representative of different genres, design philosophies and playing styles. Similarly, it was important to ensure that the authors also represented a variety of viewpoints.

In Knutpunkt 2010 the project progress was reviewed with the community, collecting general critique on the work, checking facts and looking for missing photographs. Before

the publication in the end of 2010, one last larp was included and two contextualizing essays were finalized.

CHALLENGES OF LARP DOCUMENTATION

This documentation project combines elements from cultural studies, history of performance art and design research. The aim was to capture many voices of a unique subculture, making it understandable for nonmembers. However, each of the 30 game descriptions can also be approached as a document of a particular performance. Unlike in performance art, these documents are not conceived of as instruction of how to restage a piece, nor are they attempting to turn the readers into comparable audience with the original participants (see e.g. Boal, 1992; cf. Auslander, 2006; Santone, 2008). As much as they are looking backwards and building a history, they are looking forward, hoping to offer insights and inspiration for future work.

Many challenges of documenting larp are similar to the problems of documenting performance art.[3] For example the liveness cannot be transmitted when an event is remediated, the cultural context may be lost, the work done by the "audience" is often ignored, filming or photographing the work is important in addition to textual description to transmit a sense of "how it was", but can overdetermine the perception of the work (Jones, 1994, 1997; Apple, 1997; Dixon, 1999; Santone, 2008, 2010; also Kaprow, 1961). The similarities are most striking when comparing larp to early performance art, especially Happenings (Harviainen, 2008), when documenting the piece for posterity was not always planned in advance[4], whereas today it can even be argued that "when artists decide to document their performances, they assume responsibility to an audience other than the initial one, a gesture that ultimately obviates the need for an initial audience" (Auslander, 2006).

In contemporary Nordic larp, the absent "audience" is not given importance (the works of Brody Condon are an exception, see Stenros, 2010a). Experiential accounts first in larp magazines (such as *Fëa Livia* or *Larppaaja*) and later in Knutepunkt books have been common, yet thorough documentation by the larp organizers and designers has usually been prompted by the need to report back to financers (e.g. Koljonen et al, 2008). A few larp designers have been a bit more concerned with preserving the reasoning behind their works (e.g. Pohjola, 2005; Pettersson, 2009; Harviainen, 2009).

However, it is common to incorporate photographing in Nordic larps, both to document the event for the participants and to show to non-participants what it was like. Though sometimes the players are simply instructed to ignore the photographers, it is more common to incorporate characters that have a diegetic purpose for taking photographs (when games are set in the 19th century or later), or by hiding cameras and photographers (in games set before the invention of camera) (cf. Fatland, 2009). This is similar to how Allan Kaprow started to document his Happenings, by incorporating photographic gestures into his performances (Santone, 2010).

The growing field of role-playing studies typically utilizes methods from film studies, education, performance, cultural studies – or game studies (e.g. Henriksen et al., 2011). Yet none of these fields studies larp *as larp*; even game studies carries with it certain assumptions of what games are and how they can and should be approached as artifacts or procedures. Game studies as a field offers tools for the study of larps, but due to the emphasis of digital games in that field, much of the game studies thinking needs to be

adapted. It is also important to openly address questions about how larp is constructed with these tools.

> As gameplay is necessarily symbolic, games are *intersubjective* phenomena whenever more than one person is involved. Every player has subjective, unique, unverifiable, unpredictable and uncontrollable perceptions of the game state and game rules. (Montola, forthcoming.)

The particular challenge of capturing larp can be broken down to five parts. First of all, *role-playing is subjective* (Montola, 2008). In a larp that has thirty participants there are thirty unique experiences. It is not just that every participant creates their own individual reading of the events, but that each player's experience is built from instances that are only accessible for them. Each player has a different character, different path through the experience: It could even be argued that prisoners and guards are playing different games in a prison larp (Montola, forthcoming):

> As all participants of these fleeting and distributed games produce meanings, the semiotic structure of ephemeral play differs from the most typical forms of performance. To compare with classical music: Even though the sound of a symphony orchestra is very different depending on whether the listener stands next to violins or trombones, she can, at least theoretically, receive all signs produced by the musicians. In pervasive games, larps and online worlds no participant is able to access all the game content. (Montola, forthcoming).

Role-play is co-creative. Each participant not only witnesses (some of) the play of their fellow players, but also contributes through their own actions. The amount of participant output varies from one larp to another, but in all of them the player is a co-creator. She is not just choosing from pre-existing paths, but bringing in her own contributions and making her own choices – cutting her own path. Jussi Ahlroth (2008), a critic at the largest Nordic newspaper, has written about the problems this creates for larp criticism. He also uses the orchestra metaphor:

> Would we accept it that a violinist wrote a review of a concert she played in? I think everyone would say no. It would have to be someone in the audience. But what if there was no audience? What if the concert was performed only for the orchestra itself? Then the question would shift. What could the violinist write about? The composition, yes. The conductor, certainly. But not her own playing.

> This is relevant because somehow, we have to admit the fact that when it comes to role-playing games, the violinist will always be writing the review. (Ahlroth, 2008)

This means that the authorial intentions of the larp designers are not as privileged as the authorial intentions of performance artists.

This brings us to the third challenge: *role-play is aimed at a first person audience*. In order to understand and appreciate larps and other role-playing games, one cannot simply stand back and observe them. One needs to participate. Larps are not performed for an external audience – indeed this is what separates them from theatre. Watching larp is like listening to a film; you may be able to follow parts of it, but you lack a central part of the expression. In larps the first hand experience, watching the events unfold, participating in them and feeling them through your character, is pivotal (Image 1). Larpers call this the *first person audience*. (Stenros, 2010a; Montola 2010; Sandberg, 2004.)

Image 1. "Performing for the first person audience: Even though the poker faces hide emotions, *The Executive Game* was all about character immersion. (Restaged, Kalle Kaivola)." Quoted from *Nordic Larp*.

The fourth challenge ties the three previous ones together: *role-play is ephemeral*. Koljonen (2008) argues that a "larp does not exist until it is over, but at the moment it ends, it dissolves." There is no way to access the whole of larp, not as a player or a game master during the game and not as a critic, journalist or researcher after play has ended. Capturing the event on film does not solve the problem either, as it is impossible to record each gesture and sigh taking place in a large area – and even if that was possible, it would still not portray the event as it is experienced by the first person audience. After a larp ends we are left with recollections, interpretations and experiences, texts that were used to set up the game (*prediegesis*, Fatland 2005), photographs, props and scenography.

Finally, *what is the essence of larp*? Is larp an artifact, the collection of all the texts that set it up, all the props and game mechanics, something that can be run multiple times with different players? Or is larp the experience, the playing of the game, in which case each instance of the "same" larp is actually different (see also Björk, 2008)?

Documenting Ephemera

In order to document a larp the question of essence needs to be addressed first. What is it exactly that we have attempted to document? In *Nordic Larp*, we aimed at describing a tradition of Nordic larps. The aim was to communicate what these kinds of games are like and how the larp expression is used in this context. In order to do that the book attempted to show the full spectrum of this tradition, the thoughts, methodologies, mechanics and practices thereof. This was done by presenting 30 different games.

The documentation was done by writing down and displaying with pictures what happened: the form (of larp in general and the individual differences), the events (a narrativization of what happened, as remembered afterwards), the expressive techniques (what tools and rules were used), the structure (when, where, by how many people), the

first hand experience (what it felt like to be there), and what is the meaning that the players and the game organizers have been attached to the event.

Notice that this is distinctly different from addressing games as artifacts or procedures. The attempt was not to create a document that would enable someone to restage or replay these games. We sought to capture instances of play instead of formal structures. The two cannot be completely separated when play is studied, as larps are partly *second order design* (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003). That kind of documentation does also exist for larp, both as game staging instructions[5] and as descriptions that also describe some of the production work (Andresen et al., 2011).

Nor was the attempt to simply document a player culture. As opposed to a systemic approach, our activity approach conceives of larp as something that is actualized in the moment of play.

In the selection there are 23 larps that have only been played once and seven games that had been staged multiple times. The latter group reveals the complexity of the issue: In the Nordic larp tradition, the two runs of *Hamlet* (Bergström, 2011; Koljonen, 2004) or the three runs of *Ground Zero* (Virtanen, 2011; Hopeametsä, 2008) are simultaneously considered the same larp and yet not the same larp. The importance of co-creation ranges from tremendous narrative impact to small but crucial nuances of personal expression. Each play experience, even of the same character, is different – and again, there is a qualitative difference to interpreting the same revisitable text and the co-created, unscripted larp performance (also Harviainen, 2009).

Co-creation based on second order design is thus the process; the game designers create the prediegesis, and each player contributes.[6] Three different instances of the same larp are not the same larp, but it can seem like that since even if a larp is only played once, the shared larp is an illusion. The shared understanding of a larp is in large part constructed in a social process after the larp has ended, and influenced by the effort and commitment of the participants (*post game lie*, see Stenros et al., in press). The same applies to repeatable larps when they are played back-to-back or within the same gaming culture. The prediegesis is the foundation from which the shared understanding of the larp emerges during and after play.

In our work we have attempted to capture the threefold form of larp: the game design, the player experience and the subcultural understanding of the larp – even if untangling the three can be impossible.[7]

Four Solutions
To overcome the above outlined challenges of documenting larp, and taking into consideration the threefold form of larp, four strategies were adopted.

Each larp was described by one to three authors. This creates a problem with subjectivity and capturing the big picture. We attempted to overcome this through *polyphonic description* (Clifford, 1983). Cases are written by players and designers, journalists and researchers, which we hope provide for different voices and approaches. Together they give a deeper picture of the Nordic larp tradition. Providing a multi-faceted understanding of individual larps was harder, so we requested the authors to include citations from players other than themselves. Yet having three voices from a game that was played by a thousand people is still far from comprehensive – indeed the quotes may even foster a

false sense of unity between all players. Still, in the short space allotted to each larp this deemed an acceptable solution.

Image 2. The photographs classified as "diegetic" were taken during the games, by players portraying their characters, using appropriate equipment. Here, three Danish vagrants, captured by the disposable camera of their fellow hobo in *The White Road*. Quoted from *Nordic Larp*.

Many of the larps were played more than a decade ago. Player interviews conducted so long after the fact are hardly reliable – especially due to the social narrativization of games. On the other hand some writers were able to challenge the 'official story' precisely since so much time has passed since play. In any case, the texts are in relation to the community. To make the constructed nature of the stories of the games visible *transparent narrativization*, reflexive writing, was encouraged and prose passages were included to convey the fictionality of some of the recollection.

To counterbalance the subjectivity, the ephemeral nature of larps and the narrativization, we included as many sources of information as possible, to ensure *differing angles of representation*. Each larp was represented by descriptive and analytic text, both subjective and objective angles, usually citations from game materials or other players, but also by different categories of images. These illustrations included pictures of props, game advertisements, character portraits, photographs of actual play, restaged pictures of play, diegetic images produced in play (Images 2 and 3), photographs taken in preparatory workshops, debriefings and game master headquarters, and so forth. The interplay of captions and images turned out to be crucial in conveying something of the first person experience to the reader (Image 1) – and of course in positioning the picture as taken during play, preparation or as part of advertising (cf. Auslander, 2006). In addition basic information (e.g. length, budget) for each game was provided.

Finally, we issued a *requirement of participation*. Each case is written by a player or an organizer. Of course, in game studies the requirement of play is taken almost as given today (Mäyrä, 2008, Aarseth, 2003). However, this also means that each participant was

also a co-creator, and thus they were reporting on their own work. This problem of insider status is discussed below.

Image 3. An example of how caption transforms the meaning of this diegetic portrait taken during the game: "Portrait of a Norwegian-German couple. Such liaisons were seen as treasonous by the civilian population, and the woman could face ostracism or worse if discovered. (Diegetic, Britta K. Bergersen)." Quoted from *Nordic Larp*.

We recognize that this requirement of participation can help foster mystification of the first hand experience (c.f. Clifford, 1983), yet chose to do it anyway. On the other hand as editors we had not attended all larps that were featured, yet we do make generalizations based on the first hand accounts. This is similar to how performance art history is written:

> While the viewer of a live performance may seem to have certain advantages in understanding such a context, on a certain level she may find it more difficult to comprehend the histories/narratives/processes she is experiencing until later, [...] [I]t is hard to identify the patterns of history while one is embedded in them. We "invent" these patterns, pulling the past together into a manageable picture, retrospectively. (Jones, 1997)

DISCUSSION

In a study of role-playing games, the game design, the player experience and the subcultural understanding of the playing are intertwined. Separating them from each other can be extremely difficult, and we need terminology and tools to do that. For example in order to uncouple design and player experience terms like implied player (Smith, 2006; Sotamaa, 2009), second order of design and co-creation have proven useful. Decoupling subcultural understanding is similarly complex as in the field of game studies a researcher is expected to also be a player.

Writing History as an Insider

Henrik Örnebring (2011) has pointed out that "most of the works on Nordic larp have been written by people who are themselves involved in Nordic larping and part of the scene as both producers and consumers." He has warned that this is far from the ideal of a critical, disinterested scholar. Like the aca-fans in the Henry Jenkins (e.g. 2006) mold, the "scholarship in this field, while it may be theoretically advanced, is essentially very close to fandom." Örnebring is especially worried that if the people involved in the scene are allowed to write their own history, they will use value-laden language to tout their progressiveness and construct an "evolution" where the Nordic larp culture is seen as "better" than other similar cultures of play.

Indeed, the foreword of the book openly declares that "This book documents and celebrates the Nordic tradition of live action role-playing games, a powerful and unique form of expression that has emerged and developed during the last fifteen years". This is the trend when it comes to the written history of Nordic larp, which started with fanzines and game advertisements, moving on to annual books in 2003 (Gade et al, 2003) and the sporadic documentary films[8]. Many of these texts are not distanced academic pieces, but pragmatic dialogue of designers and players. However, disregarding this written tradition completely because parts of it do not meet academic standards would be a mistake. Using it simply require the researcher to be more critical of her sources. Especially the normative choices made by the authors need to be questioned. For example, writing the book constructed the "tradition of Nordic larp" as a side product.

Finally, the idea that reports could be written by someone who is not a "consumer" of larp is more problematic than participant created reports. Due to the ephemeral nature of these games and the first person audience it would be very difficult to report about these games without playing them. Of course, it can be argued that a player need not be an insider; she need not be a fan or part of the scene (cf. Jones, 1997), however, documenting certain kinds of larps does require at least some understanding of the contextual culture, which is easiest to achieve through playing. This criticism does not only apply to Nordic larp, but also to research of online role-playing games (e.g. Bartle, 2003; Castronova, 2005; Taylor, 2006; Copier, 2007; Pearce, 2009), tabletop role-playing games (e.g. Mackay, 2001; Bowman, 2010; Cover, 2010; Tresca, 2011) and, as Montola (forthcoming) argues, even game studies at large.[9]

All play experiences and cultures are transient and ephemeral, which makes assessing the reliability and validity difficult. In digital online role-playing games this is a little easier as these games have huge numbers of players – with tabletop and live action role-playing games it is considerably harder.

Illusory Objectivity

Nordic larp has not undergone the processes of productization and standardization that are typical for mass-marketed products of the culture industry. Even approaching larp as a service (Rifkin, 2005) is problematic, as participants contribute as co-creators, and the relationship between players and larp organizers is more complex than that between a customer and a service provider. The reasons for this include the low level of commercialization, the disinterest towards attracting mainstream audiences, and the lack of need for mass distribution. As a result, there is no standard format of Nordic larp: The games included in the *Nordic Larp* lasted from hours to over a month, had from six to a thousand participants, and were created with budgets ranging from negligible to hundreds of thousands of euros. This lack of standardization runs through all the processes of play; production, design, game mastering and playing.

To capture this plurality, we collected the key data into an infobox, enabling comparisons between the different larps. The fields in the box are: name, credits, date, location, length, players (number of participants), budget, participation fee, game mechanics and other material.

Providing such data builds an illusion of objectivity, even though the "hard" data is constructed through a surprising number of normative decisions. Even after the initial decisions were made, some points of data were difficult to fit into these categories. These problems of classification turned into an interesting exercise on understanding the variety that characterizes the Nordic larp scene. The infobox of *Dragonbane* (Image 4) is a good example.

Dragonbane

CREDITS: Timo Multamäki (producer), Elge Larsson (contacts in Sweden), Christopher Sandberg (game design), Heiko Romu (scenography), Esa Arbelius (props and building), Henri Sareskivi, Sanni Turunen, Essi Santala, Fredrik von Post & Eero Alasalmi (dragon), Anna Nummi (costume design), Niki Bergman (PR & media), Tiinaliisa Multamäki (finance), Mike Pohjola (world design), Morgan Jarl, Maija Nevala, Lillebjörn Rugstavold, Tiina Kuustie (player manuals, characters), Janne Särkelä (sounds & music), Timo Leipold (boot camp, Supplementica Valenorica), Jussi Syrjä (video), Mikko Mähönen (3D), Stamp (NEST), Janne Björklund (photography), Martti Ervasti (masonry), Jarno Kantelinen & Simon Farsi (graphic design), Stefan, Keijo, Kukka, Tomas Wiklund, Karoliina Artjoki, Team Spain, Gruppo La Greca (Cinderhill construction) and a large international team
Date: 27 July – 4 August 2006
LOCATION: Älvdalen, Sweden
LENGTH: 6 days
PLAYERS: 500 participants in the project in some way, 325 players
BUDGET: €500,000
PARTICIPATION FEE: €145
GAME MECHANICS: Veritas, simple magic rules. No combat rules.
OTHER MATERIAL: *www.dragonbane.org*

Image 4. The seemingly objective infobox for *Dragonbane*, quoted from *Nordic Larp*.

Though Nordic larp is known for its minimalistic *game mechanics*, in most cases they do not fit on one line. This section is only meant to give a gist of the rules – often by words that refer to specific discussions and traditions. The editorial choice to give little space to mechanics reinforces the idea of Nordic larp as rules-light and emphasizes that the editors consider the core of these larps to be somewhere else.[10]

The *participation fee* is less problematic. Most larps have set prices for entry – even if it is often possible to carry out additional tasks in exchange for part or the whole fee. Members of the organizing team do not always pay the participation fee. Also, many larps included supporting characters, which have assigned tasks or plot points to carry out, and they sometimes pay a reduced participation fee.

The Nordic larp tradition is non-commercial. The larps are created by expert hobbyists for other passionate amateurs. Thus, *budget* figures, even if they account for every cent that went through the game organizers, hardly reflect the true costs of larp. Volunteer work and non-monetary support are not included. If organizers provide costumes, they increase the budget significantly, but if players bring their own gear, the costs are invisible.

Even the number of *players* is debatable. The line between organizer and player is blurred in a co-creative medium. This challenge is even more severe in *pervasive larps* (see Montola & al. 2009), where outsiders may be drawn to participate.

Listing the *creators* of a larp is far more difficult than counting the players. In a co-creative medium each participant contributes to the totality of a larp. Listing all participants would be impractical, and disingenuous, as certain participants certainly contribute more. However, drawing the line between the expected and normal player co-creation, and special tasks carried out by the organizers is hard. Also, in games like *Dragonbane*, hundreds of people participated in the production work.

The question of crediting reveals important philosophical undercurrents in the larp community. If larp is seen as an all-embracing *Gesamtkunstwerk* aiming at the creation of a total illusion of another world, the role of the chef is an important creative task. In *Mellan himmel och hav* (Gerge, 2004; Stenros, 2010b) people ate specifically designed dishes made out of edible clay, candy, seaweed and porridge. On the other hand, if the chef is a character among the others, the food is prepared as much by a player as by a character. In *Trenne byar* (Hansen, 2010) a group of hungry players took the initiative to themselves, controversially slaughtering and preparing a sheep for food – in character. Typically, the creative input contributed before or outside the game is credited, but the creative input generated in play is not.

In the realm of digital game industry, IGDA has published a 15-page guideline to standardize game accreditation.[11] For example, it is suggested that a Credits Keeper is designated to update the records during production, in order to ensure that people who leave company are not left out of the credits. In larp no such guidelines exist. Recently many larp organizers have started to produce games professionally – either creating larps for larger audiences or by moving into the game industry – and thus, credits have started to matter more.

Length and *date* again seem more clear cut. However, many of these larps were preceded by workshops in which game mechanics were practices, characters and the world

developed and dramatic exercises carried out. Customarily larps are also followed by a debrief, where players and organizers discuss the larp, its events and its meaning. A few of the larps were preceded by minilarps that set the stage for the larp proper. Finally, sometimes players practice their characters before the larp begins – for example by carrying out tasks and exercises provided by the game organizers. We chose to view only the runtime of the larp proper as "length", even when the understanding of the larp was prepared in the workshops and narrativized in the debrief. The dates of a larp in the book include the larp proper and the debrief, but also the workshops and even after party if these are arranged continuously at the same location.

The least problematic field in the infobox is *location*. However, the specificity of a given location varies in the book. For larps with a distinct play location, the name of the estate where the game was played was given, and for games with a more generic setting (and for pervasive games) only the city was mentioned. For one game, *Bratislavan syntiset yöt* (Harviainen, 2011), the gaming location is secret and thus the location was given only very generally ("Southern Finland").

Finally, there is the question of the *name* of a larp. Although the name of a game is usually not debatable, language and player interpretation can complicate the matter. We decided use the names of the larp in the original language that the organizers had given to games when they were played. However, sometimes players would use different names. For example *Helsingin Camarilla* ("The Helsinki Camarilla", see Loponen, 2010) was referred to by most players as *Helsingin iso Vampire* ("The Big Helsinki Vampire") to differentiate it from the other, smaller *Vampire* larp campaigns running in Helsinki.[12]

This example infobox shows how normative choices are made constantly in order to represent an intangible cultural object. These representations, when created by, with and for a Nordic larp tradition influence the self-understanding of the scene. Side effects of this process include the creation of a canon of notable larps (although that was not the intention), establishing one format of documentation (alternatives do exist), cementing an idea of what "larp" is (not preparation, workshops, debriefs, etc.), and most importantly constructing a "tradition" (these larps are connected, but naming it a tradition is a powerful meme).

CONCLUSIONS
In this paper we have discussed the challenges of documenting role-playing games through the prism of the *Nordic Larp* book project. By opening up this process we hope to have shown the strengths, weaknesses, and limits of our approach to addressing the challenges posed by the questions of ephemerality, first person audience, subjectivity, co-creation and essence of larp.

We advocate a transparent approach to the study of role-playing, one that recognizes that the game design, the player experience and the subcultural understanding of larp are intertwined. Studying any one of these aspects separately, without regards for the other two, seems problematic. However, recognizing the cultural assumptions and overcoming the implied player can be difficult. Ultimately normative choices need to be made, which makes disclosing those choices ever important.

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ENDNOTES

1 Just like the film *La decima vittima* (1965) had popularized assassination games earlier (Johnson 1981).
2 Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden – Icelandic larpers are not connected to this tradition.
3 The Nordic Larp book was partially inspired by Allan Kaprow's 1966 tome, *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings.*
4 This also applies to other types of games, such as massively multiplayer online games and alternate reality games, though the problems faced by those are more similar to challenges faced with documenting media art.
5 For example *Prayers on the Porcelain Altar* by J. Tuomas Harviainen (http://pommesgabel.com/prayers) and *Doubt* by Fredrik Axelzon & Tobias Wrigstad (http://jeepen.org/games/doubt).
6 As Sotamaa (2009) has noted, there is an overlap between play and design in digital games as well.
7 Note also, that in this paper we refer to larps not by listing their developers and publishers (as is the official DiGRA recommendation), but by referring to accounts of play. This is symptomatic of the difference in how 'game' is understood.
8 The makers of *Futuredrome* (2002) created a film at the event. They shot 140 hours of footage around the larp, though the film concentrated on a few characters with a set plot. In addition to the official film the larp organizers made the footage available on the website for anyone to edit. (StoryLab, 2003)
9 With the proliferation of casual and social games, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find any contemporary game scholarship conducted by "non-gamers".
10 Compare this with the American hobbyists' books on tabletop role-playing games that have a strong focus on explaining the rules (see Holmes, 1981; Swan, 1990; Schick, 1991; even Fannon, 1999; also Stark, forthcoming).
11 http://archives.igda.org/credit
12 Additionally, the exact spelling, punctuation or capitalization of larp names varied in different sources, in which cases we had to make choices. Larps are not the only games with name confusion; for example some alternate reality games have no official names. *I Love Bees* (McGonigal, 2006) is also known as *ilovebees* and *Haunted Apiary*, and *The Beast* (McGonigal, 2003) is also known as *The A.I. Web Game*.

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