LARP AS PLAYFUL RESISTANCE

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Abstract

This study examines how larp (live-action role-playing) is used politically. It focuses on three political larps from Finland: *Dublin2* (Kaljonen, Raekallio, and Motola 2011), *Halat hisar* (AbdulKarim et al. 2013), and *Baltic Warriors: Helsinki* (Pettersson and Pohjola 2014). They are analyzed in light of Mouffe's (2005) idea of political as a form of agon.

Introduction

Larp is a form of role-play where players physically enact their characters actions (see e.g. Hitchens and Drachen 2008, 10–11). Larps are typically (but not necessarily) played with more players than table-top role-playing games, with participant numbers ranging from a handful of people to thousands.

Nordic larp is a tradition of larping originating from the Nordic countries. Stenros and Montola (2010, 15) warn against the "false idea of a monolithic, homogenous culture." Instead, the label "'Nordic larps' covers a loose group with numerous commonalities, even though there is no single universal denominator" (cf. Arjoranta 2011). However, they list some characteristics of Nordic larp (Stenros and Montola 2010, 20):

- They are ambitious, competing in scale, novelty or experimentation.
- Designers and players are – and are expected to be – very committed to the larp.
- They are uncommercial, not intended to make money.
- The scene around Nordic larp includes intense philosophical debates about the philosophy of larping.
- They have minimal game mechanics.
- They have high production values.

While this is hardly an exhaustive definition, it helps in getting a preliminary understanding of what Nordic larps are (see also Fatland 2005; Deutsch 2015; Saitta, Holm-Andersen, and Back 2014). Larp is usually seen as a frivolous activity, and studies often focus on issues of personal experience (Hitchens and Drachen 2009) and design (Lamerichs 2011; Montola and Stenros 2009). Previous research has looked at using larp

for educational purposes (Mochocki 2013; Balzer 2011), but research into the playful politics of larp is scarce (see e.g. Kangas 2015).

This paper focuses on three larps from Finland, *Dublin2* (Kaljonen, Raekallio, and Motola 2011), *Halat hisar* (a.k.a. *Piiritystila* or *State of Siege*) (AbdulKarim et al. 2013), and *Baltic Warriors: Helsinki* (henceforth *Baltic Warriors*; Pettersson and Pohjola 2014) and discusses them as political larps and playful resistance. The author has participated only in the last larp, relying on documentation and participant testimonies in analysing the other two larps.

Play, agon and politics

The connection between play and culture is well established, even if it is difficult to pin down exactly (e.g. Huizinga 1949; Sutton-Smith 1997).

This study views play and playfulness as a broad category of things in light of Caillois (1961) and Sutton-Smith's (1997) elaborations on the variety of forms of play. Sutton-Smith's (1997, 4–5) list of different playforms is informative in this sense: he lists 189 different playforms, many of which are appropriate for or practiced mostly by adults.

Building on the earlier work of Huizinga (1949), Caillois (1961, 12) divides play into four forms of *agon* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (pretending), and *ilinx* (vertigo). As previous researchers have noted, role-playing games are a combination of all of these, with different researchers emphasizing different aspects (e.g. Harviainen 2011, 178; Stenros 2008, 15).

When discussing the connections between politics and play, it is most fruitful to focus on what has been called *agon,* best translated as competition or contest (Caillois 1961, 14; Huizinga 1949, 30–31).[1] The agonistic playforms include at least sports and related phenomena, but Huizinga (1949, 90) seems to have no problems viewing things like warfare as agon (see also Sutton-Smith 1997, 76). However, he does not do so without criticism:

> Huizinga's thesis is also a particularly agonistic and machismo view of play history. His definition of play primarily as contest reflects the widespread male rhetoric that favors the exaltation of combative power instead of speaking comprehensively about play itself. (Sutton-Smith 1997, 79–80)

Despite this criticism, this study focuses on the agonistic aspects of play, since those are most useful for theorizing about politics (however, see also Sutton-Smith 1997, 74, 97, 102 for the impact of playful identities to politics). In theorizing about political larp, this study relies on a view of politics that is closely related to Huizinga's view of agon. This view of politics is espoused by Mouffe (2000; 2005) and views politics not as

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[1] Of course, this is not the only possible approach to looking at the connections between play and politics. For other approaches see e.g. (Crossa 2013; Mann 2015; Mikkonen and Bajde 2012).

a settling of differences and dividing resources, but as an agonistic battle over the political:

> Contrary to what neo-liberal ideologists would like us to believe, political questions are not mere technical issues to be solved by experts. Properly political questions always involve decisions which require us to make a choice between conflicting alternatives. (Mouffe 2005, 2)

This seems like a fruitful conception of the political to think through questions of playful resistance and politics. Considering its roots in agon, it is easily combined with the playful. However, playfulness can also easily work in service of hegemony. Sutton-Smith (1997, 87) writes about sports:

> These are the forms of play with the greatest public prestige in the modern world. They are the hegemonic forms of play in which the hegemony is typically that of the politically powerful over the less powerful, of the owners over the team. It is also, even more pervasively, the hegemony of men over women.

Other forms of playfulness, like festivals, can also serve the hegemony, by embedding power structures into play and thus enshrining them as natural (Sutton-Smith 1997, 85, 93–94). Mouffe (2005, 1) warns that artistic critique can also easily end up in service of dominant structures of power:

> The aesthetic strategies of the counter-culture: the search for authenticity, the ideal of self-management, the anti-hierarchical exigency, are now used in order to promote the conditions required by the current mode of capitalist regulation, replacing the disciplinary framework characteristic of the Fordist period. Nowadays artistic and cultural production play a central role in the process of capital valorization and, through 'neo-management', artistic critique has become an important element of capitalist productivity.

The next chapter considers larp in light of this agonistic conception of the political.

Political larp

In this study, larp is seen in conjunction with critical art, with a special relation to theatre (Lampo 2011). Larp is a useful tool for criticism since it by its very nature requires the imagining of alternatives.

> Role-playing can be seen as a way to change the way we look at the world by trying to see a different world (the game world) through the eyes of a different person (the character). (Harding 2010, 219)

Sandberg (2004, 274–75) sees larp as being performed to a "first person audience," with the primary spectators being the players themselves. This way larp can be seen as a more focused, if less public, form of critical theatre. If this kind of critical larp is possible, then it would be possible to view it in light of Mouffe's (2005, 4–5) political, and the idea of critical art she builds on top of that concept:

According to the agonistic approach, critical art is art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony.

Then, critical larp would be larp that "gives a voice to all those who are silenced." That is a particular type of political larp, distinct from political larps serving "the existing hegemony."

It seems that it is exactly the kind of critique Mouffe calls for which Söderberg (2013, 100) has in mind when he states that "play is political" or when he describes larp as "counterculture" (see also Kangas 2015, 83–87). Stenros and Montola (2010, 23) list 7 of the larps covered by the book Nordic Larp as politically motivated and 3 as slightly politically motivated (out of 30 total).[2] However, they do not elaborate on the criteria of being political or the differences between the two categories.

However, it is always important to remember that players may not view their actions in light of the political meanings of games and play (Sutton-Smith 1997, 76, 93, 106). As Sutton-Smith (1997, 77) writes, "the rhetoric and the play are never identical" (cf. Sutton-Smith 1997, 78).

The next three chapters give an overview of the three larps being analysed, *Dublin2*, *Halat hisar* and *Baltic Warriors*.

Dublin2

Dublin2 (Kaljonen, Raekallio, and Motola 2011) was played in 2011 at the Lasipalatsi square in Helsinki. It was made in collaboration with the contemporary art museum, Kiasma.

Dublin2 is described by its makers as "a larp balancing between a game, a public artwork and an activist framework" (Kaljonen and Raekallio 2012, 28). A participant at the larp, Korhonen (2011), calls it at form of political expression, clearly seeing it as a part of the continuum of political larps. *Dublin2* was an explicit commentary on a specific part of EU immigration legistlation:

The larp was designed both to criticize and provoke public debate on the faults of Dublin II [regulation]. (Kaljonen and Raekallio 2012, 28)

Participants took roles as refugees, trying to cross the border, bureacrats and border guards, guarding the process of immigration, or journalists and human-rights activists, documenting and criticizing the process.

The roles were written based on real life stories. By taking the role the players got a chance to study the refugees' backgrounds and empathize with their daily

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[2] 1942 - Noen å stole på, Europa, inside:outside, PanoptiCorp, System Danmarc and Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum are politically motivated. Ground Zero, Enhetsfront and Delirium are slightly politically motivated.

Figure 1 Refugees and the Red Cross. Photo: Mikael Kinnanen (cited from Kaljonen and Raekallio 2012, 30)

> life. A very different picture was drawn for the players in the roles of the Frontex officials. Their duty was to control the borders, which gave them a profession-based starting point to explore the theme. (Kaljonen and Raekallio 2012, 28)

By basing the characters on real people, the larp was anchored into the experiences of actual refugees. This lead to a participant of the larp calling it documentary, a simulation of real events (Korhonen 2011).

The larp was organized in a very public place in Helsinki center, meaning that outsiders – non-players – could also participate, possibly without knowing that the refugees were part of a larp and not actual refugees.

> Someone took a leak next to the fence and there was a lot of shouting, obviously from people who thought the players were actual foreigners. Other people were sincerely curious to talk to the players. Many wanted to know what was going on, but others started to play along. One random non-player even took the role of a lawyer and negotiated his client out of lockup. Some of the players got tips on how to proceed from real asylum seekers who happened to pass by. (Kaljonen and Raekallio 2012, 33)

However, the authenticity of the experience was questioned by some of the onlookers:

> I was lying in the shade of a tent when I heard a group of young newcomers yell to some other participants: "Do you think you are muslims? Don't pretend

to be us. You are not, but we are." (Kinnanen, in Kaljonen and Raekallio 2012, 33)

Clearly, these passers-by were not convinced that the larp was representative of the reality it was trying to portray. At least one participant did not see it in terms of larping, preferring to frame it in terms of performance:

> The game was nevertheless slightly more of a performance than a larp. I find it more interesting to think of the piece as an intervention or a work of new genre public art than as a game. (Kinnanen, in Kaljonen and Raekallio 2012, 33)

However, for the current purpose the distinction does not seem relevant. It is probably mostly revealing something of that particular players conception of larps.

Halat hisar

Halat hisar (AbdulKarim et al. 2013) was played in 2013 at Parkano, Finland. The larp was funded by the Finnish Cultural Foundation and the Arts Promotion Centre Finland. *Halat hisar* portrays a Finland occupied by a foreign military regime. It is explicitly trying to portray the experience of living in Palestine for political purposes (Pettersson 2015, 60–61). The organizers write:

> We have built the history and current situation of Occupied Finland to mirror those in real world Palestine, at least to some extent. ("On Palestine" 2013)

Figure 2 A demonstration in Halat hisar (CC BY 2.0: Tuomas Puikkonen)

Instead of trying to create an accurate portrayal of Palestine, Finland was metaphorically transformed into Palestine. In the larp's fiction, Finland was occupied by the fictional people of Ugrics, who "had made large parts of Finland into their 'ancestral homeland' of Uralia" (Pettersson 2014, 7). To achieve the goal of metaphoric transformation, the larp was designed in co-operation between Finnish and Palestinian larp designers.[3] The inversion of typical roles and expectations was used as a tool to comment on real-world political situations.

[3] For an examination of larp in Palestine see Lindahl (2012).

Finnish players played university staff or students, while foreign players played journalists, NGOs or foreign fighters. Palestinian participants played characters from the Arab countries, which were described as democratic, affluent and desirable places to live in (Kangas 2014). There was also a supporting cast of Uralian Defense Force (UDF) soldiers, representing the oppressors.

The events of the larp were set around the University of Helsinki, where students and researchers were holding a seminar that included the Jordanian Minister of Culture as a guest. He was a controversial figure: he promised more funding for the faculty of humanities, but he also supported the occupying power, Uralia.

Before the visiting minister had a chance to arrive, the larp grew into a pattern of demonstrations and arrests. One of the candidates for the local student elections was shot as part of the protests, leading to international pressure against the soldiers and repeated demonstrations. The soldiers answered by arresting activists.

While fiction, the larp was based on the experiences of the Palestinian designers. One Palestinian participant called the larp "a mirror of what my life seemed like looking from a far away" (Khalil, in Pettersson 2014, 13).

Figure 3 A map of the occupied Finland (cited from Pettersson 2014, 19)
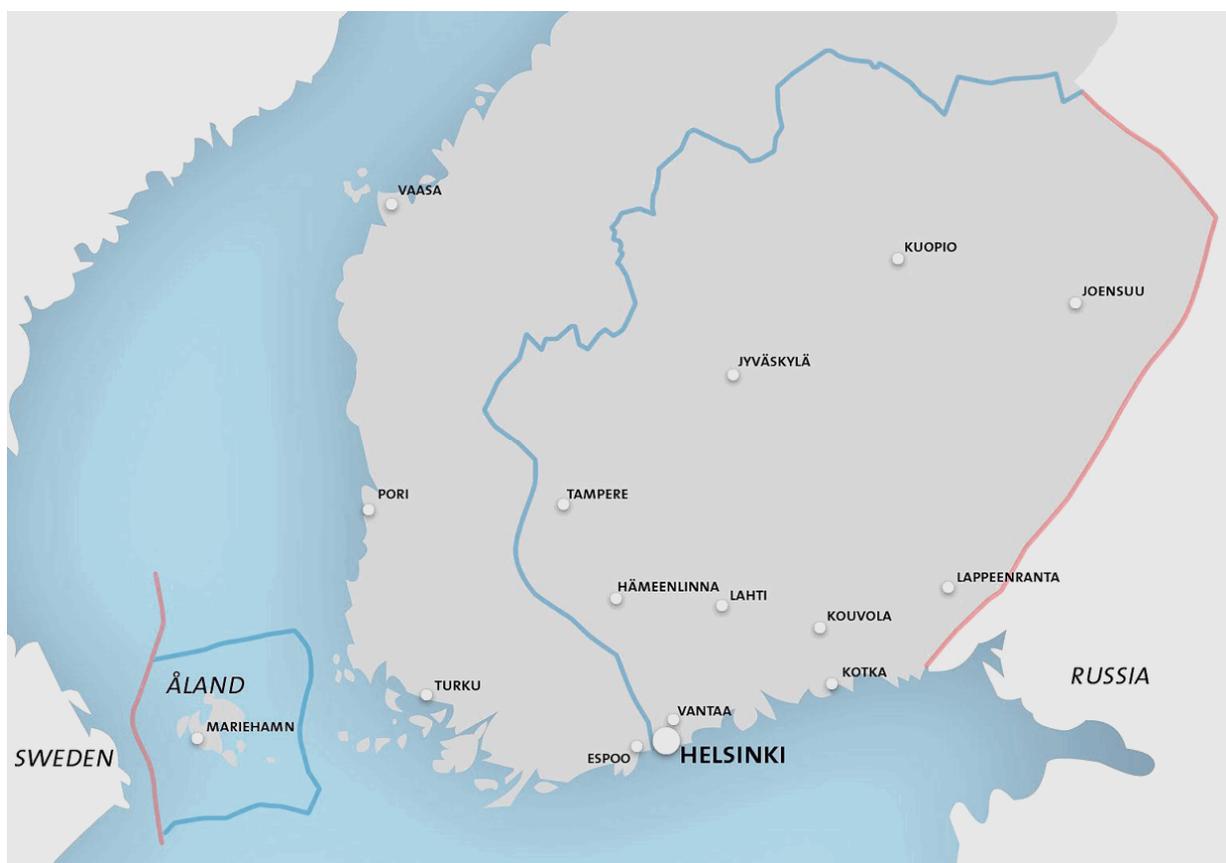
Baltic Warriors: Helsinki

Baltic Warriors (Pettersson and Pohjola 2014) was played in 2014 at Helsinki, in a public place near the shore of Gulf of Finland. It was created together with several partners, including the production company Kinomaton Berlin and the Goethe-Institut.

The larp portrayed events leading to a vote on a new bill on limiting emissions into the Baltic Sea. The larp consisted of players portraying politicians, scientists, lobbyists, journalists and concerned citizens discussing and arguing on whether the bill should pass. Present were all the important party leaders, whose decision was intrumental in what their party would vote. Some of the participants were scientists or lobbyists, working on the actual issues the larp commented on.

The larp was played at a public place, with anyone walking by or having a coffee in the nearby café able to witness what was happening. The larp included a fantastical, satirical element: before the vote on the new bill was scheduled to happen, a group of zombie vikings shambled upon the scene. Lobbyists and politicians continued discussing the state of the Baltic Sea, while fleeing from the hungry undead. Anyone killed by the zombie vikings turned into a zombie themselves, joining the ranks of the undead.

The zombies were eventually defeated with the power of clean water and the bill passed, restricting future emissions. The larp was followed with a debate about the state

Figure 4 A zombie Viking and a lobbyist turned zombie

of the Baltic Sea.

The larp was part of a larger project about the Baltic Sea. Other aspects of the project cover the issue through other means, like a transmedia documentary, participatory performances, live debates and a feature film.

Discussion

How do these three particular examples work as agonistic politics? Following Mouffe (2005, 4–5), we can ask: Do they foment dissensus that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate? Do they give a voice to all those silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony?

Both *Dublin2* and *Halat hisar* were affected by the experiences of those that they tried to portray. In *Dublin2* the characters were based on actual people, but these people did not have a say in how their experiences were communicated to the players. *Halat hisar* was co-written by Palestinians, so their experiences had a direct effect on the larp.

In contrast, while *Baltic Warriors* was a commentary on the state of the Baltic Sea, a real issue, it relied on fictional characters that had little to do with the actual people discussing the problem. However, it counteracted this with two tactics. First, both lobbyists and scientists were playing the larp, experiencing it from a different perspective than they usually do. Second, the larp was complemented with a panel discussion, where the events of the larp were checked against the opinions of the experts. However, these experts can hardly be said to be the "silenced" that agonistic politics focuses on.

Because only a limited number of players can participate in a larp, it is hard to reach many people through a larp. Documenting what happens is one possibility of enlarging that reach, but it is not easy: larps are by their nature very ephemeral (Pettersson 2009; Pettersson 2015, 60–61; see Kaljonen and Raekallio 2012, 29 for one solution).

Dublin2 has since disappeared from the internet, leaving only some play reports behind. *Halat hisar* produced a book of documentation, making it possible for future researchers or larp-activists to see how it was done. *Baltic Warriors* is still available online, but the documentation is scarce. However, the project is still not finished, so there might be more documentation coming.

Both *Dublin2* and *Baltic Warriors* were played in a public place, making it possible for spectators to witness the larp. Both larps emphasized the possibility of low-commitment participation by planning ways for spectators to take part in the larp. *Halat hisar* was more isolated, making it harder for outsiders to experience.

In total, the number of people that get to experience any of the larps is low. Whatever voice is given to the silenced is not a very strong one. Directly, they affect very few people. However, through documentation they can transmit their experiences to larger audiences. Pictures of what happened are available online, as are the

participant reports of how it felt to be the oppressed (or the oppressor). Through these secondary media others may also get an idea of what it was like to play in the larps.

However, is it better to read these play reports than the statements of those actually oppressed? Millions of people feel oppression every day, and their experiences are documented in a variety of ways. Whatever power larp has in bringing forth the hidden and the silenced seems to be tied to the possibility of being there, of going through the experiences first hand. This power is diminished if the experiences are only available second hand. Nonetheless, good documentation means that the larps may be organized again, letting new people to live through similar experiences.

Conclusion

Because both *Dublin2* and *Halat hisar* rely on the actual experiences of the oppressed, they can be said to be agonistic in the sense Mouffe (2005) suggests. Especially *Halat hisar* seems to "give voice" to those "silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony," since Palestinians were involved in designing it.

Baltic Warriors is not agonistic in the same sense, but it does not seem to have similar agonistic political goals. It relies on expert opinions on something that is hard to directly experience, but affects everyone living around the Baltic Sea. Those experts can hardly be said to be "silenced," even though one could argue that their voices are not heard loudly enough in making environmental policy.

It is also important to note that the larps were not designed with Mouffe's agonistic politics in mind, so evaluating them in this light might not portray them fairly. However, the analysis helps in recognizing what features make larps agonistic. Future larp designers can use these observations in evaluating how they wish their larps to portray political ideas.

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