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Nordic game subcultures: between LARPer and avant-garde

This article is about structural resemblances, linguistic and rhetoric similarities and media-strategic as well as tactical operations, that Nordic LARPer and 20th century avant-garde artists share. Many of the 20th century avant-garde movements and subcultural formations started from a shared collective experience and then branches out into refined, diversified and individualized forms of expression. Futurism, DADA and Fluxus, Punk, Emo and Goth did originally constitute a dress code, a toolset, a jargon, a mission statement and a territorial assignment within the cities they choose as the center of their activities. Manifestos defined what a Futurist, Dadaist or Punk would most probably think and say, and how he or she would say it. A similar observation can be made for the communities that engage with live action role playing games (LARPer) in the Nordic countries. The Turku manifesto and the Dogma 99 manifesto influenced directly and indirectly how the Nordic LARP subculture framed itself and presented itself to the world. The initiating, collective experiences of Café Voltaire, the Wuppertal art galleries, SOHO, and respective locations for Nordic LARPer have been constitutive for the process of identity building and identity shaping for artists and gamers alike.

KEYWORDS: *LARP, Avant-garde, Punk, Futurism, Art Manifesto*

If a special flavour of gaming deserves to be called “a subculture” with all of the tangible and non-tangible assets of rebellious music and avant-garde rhetoric, dresscode, code of honour, cryptic messages, social politicking, commitment to the agenda of a specific age group, and a rootedness in a well-defined territory, then the Nordic LARPer would certainly qualify.



Figure 1 – LARPers. Photo by Axel Schnepat.

This article is about structural resemblances, linguistic and rhetoric similarities and a joint set of tactical operations, that today's Nordic LARPers and 20th century avant-garde artists have in common. The proposition made here is not based on the genealogical assumption of one subculture having developed out of another subculture. What we want to point out here is rather that there is a distant resonance of structure, language and politics in between two movements that happened in different centuries and at different locations. The methodology used here can therefore not rely on spatio-temporal, historical consistency, but needs to compare the aesthetics of different subcultural movements. Such a comparison has to start on surface level and look at wordings rather than at words and their meaning. Such a comparison will also initially look at dress codes and not at a “system of fashion” (Barthes 1967) or an alleged “meaning of style” (Hebdige 1979). We hope however to be able to hint at a vicinity of attitudes, ideas and values that help detect relations beyond the borders of countries and centuries.

A LARP is a live action role playing game, and the games of that kind that have been developed and staged in Finland, Iceland, and the Scandinavian countries have created communities that strongly resemble 20th century avant-garde groups. The Larpers present themselves to the world with a set of attitudes not unlike the ones that Futurists, Fluxus artists or DADAists cultivated to shock their contemporaries. The Nordic Larp communities also share the obsession with publishing manifestos and establishing master-apprentice relationships

that the art movements of the first five decades of the last century had. A first look at “The Vow” of the Dogma 99 manifesto and the statements that can be found in the Turku Manifesto reveals similarities to the Futurist Manifesto from 1909 and consecutive manifestos from 20th century avant-gardes. Both Dogma 99 and the Turku manifesto have been written at a time when Nordic Larp was still in its infancy¹. The manifestos have not only shaped the behaviour and consciousness of tens of thousands of Larpers, they have also created a community of young people that considers themselves a special group of people within society. Ironically the Turku manifesto ends with words that describe this group as something even bigger than a group and as powerful as a class in political economy:

“The simulationists and the eläytyjists have nothing to lose but their chains. But they have the whole world to win. TURKUIST ROLE-PLAYERS OF THE WORLD, UNITE!”²



Figure 2 –Larper. Photo by Axel Schnepat.

It is obvious that the Turkuist role-players are by no means a class and even hardly a relevant social group. There is however good reason to describe them as a subculture in contemporary society along with other subcultures like Emos, Innocents, Post-Punks, Stilyagi and Goths. The manifestos that speak about the autonomy status and self-imposed rule system of larpers have a vague resemblance to a constitutional text, but they differ from legal documents or corporation mission statements by a rebellious undertone of opposition and provocation. The following observations on the subcultural character of Nordic Larpers are therefore based on an analysis of style of the Larpers’ vows and

1. Trenne Byar from 1994 is considered to be the first relevant Nordic Larp. (Montola & Stenros 2010: 31 – 38)

2. An eläytyjists is a person who believes in immersion in Role Playing Games and who practices it instead of pretending and acting like on stage.

manifestos and on a historical comparison to manifestos from the history of 20th and 21st century avant-gardes. It is not so much the content that the manifestos try to communicate but the phrasing that tells us something about the respective subcultures.³

Dogma 99: Furthermore, I swear to regard myself as an artist, and any LARP I write as my »work«. (...) My highest goal is to develop the art and medium of live-action role-playing. This, I promise, will be done through all means available, and at the expense of good taste, all conventions and all popularity amongst the so-called LARPerS.

DADA manifesto, 1918⁴: We consider this to be the most valuable form of art: An art that is fully conscious of the thousand of problems that face our time; an art that dares to be thrown onto pathways directed by last week's explosions; an art that reassembles its body that has been disassociated by the attacks of the former days.

Dogma 99: We seek to oppose the pitfalls of conventional LARP, the dominance of the mainstream genres, and the refusal of the general public...

A Slap in the Face of Public Taste, 1927⁵:

To feel an insurmountable hatred for the language existing before our time.

The Manifesto of Futurist Music, 1910: To combat categorically all historical reconstructions and traditional stage sets and to declare the stupidity of the contempt felt for contemporary dress⁶.

Turku Manifesto, 1999: The Turku School struggles for the immediate and long-term goals of the eläytyjst and simulationist role-players, but presently it also stands for the future of all role-playing. In Norway the dramatists are trying to re-invent theatre, but there the word of the Turku School still brings hope to the oppressed simulationists.

A Slap in the Face of Public Taste, 1917: We alone are the face of our Time.

Through us the horn of time blows in the art of the world.

The past is too tight. The Academy and Pushkin are less intelligible than hieroglyphics.

Throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc. overboard from the Ship of Modernity.

It is also not by chance that the form of Dogma 99's Vow of Chastity with its 10 numbered proclamations corresponds to the 14 numbered statements of the filmmakers' Dogma Manifesto from 1995 and to the 11 provocative statements Marinetti proclaimed in his Founding Manifesto for Futurism.⁷

3. Dylan Clark (2003) points out that one should not mix up the subcultures with the prophets and leaders of subcultural movements. In this respect the manifestos say probably more about the prophets than about the believers.

4. German original: "Die höchste Kunst wird diejenige sein, die in ihren Bewußtseinsinhalten die tausendfachen Probleme der Zeit präsentiert, der man anmerkt, daß sie sich von den Explosionen der letzten Woche werfen ließ, die ihre Glieder immer wieder unter dem Stoß des letzten Tages zusammensucht."

5. David Burliuk, Alexander Kruchenykh, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Victor Khlebnikov: A Slap in the Face of Public Taste, 1917

6. Balilla Pratella: The Manifesto of Futurist Music, 1910

7. Marinetti used the form of a numbered list of statements to suggest a clear logical structure of his thought, not unlike Wittgenstein did in his 1921 tractatus. In Marinetti's case at least the enumeration was a rhetoric manoeuvre, the numbered arguments do not follow a linear logical development.

Erik Fatland and Lars Wingård, the authors of the Vow of Chastity and masterminds of Dogma 99, repeat a canon of statements that has become a convention within avant-garde manifesto writers. Futurists, Dadaists, Fluxus masterminds, Vienna “Aktionisten”, Webartists, Game Artists, Critical Engineers and finally Nordic LARPers All seem to share an attitude and a rhetoric ritual that is based on these rhetoric figures:

1. Proclaim that something that has not been considered art is art now. (“Nordic LARP” in the case of Dogma 99, “Noise” for Luigi Russolo and the futurists, “Radio“ for the Kunstradio manifesto).
2. Tell the world that every form of your medium preceding your own attempts within this medium are to be regarded detestable. (“so-called LARPers” for Dogma 99; “Pushkin, Dostojewskij and Tolstoj” for the Russian Futurists; “La Gioconda” for Marinetti).
3. Use swearwords for your predecessors (“...the filthy slime of the books written by the countless Leonid Andreyevs” or “from the heights of skyscrapers we gaze at their insignificance!” for the Russian Futurists; “Fuck the Magic Circle!” for the AMAZE manifesto; “the [TURKU] school is struggling against the short-sighted, the conservative, and above all, the gamist and dramatist schools”, as the Turku manifesto put it.)
4. Construct a rationale why your own region or country is the most feasible place to create works of excellence. (Scandinavian “allmansrät” for Nordic Larpers as Montola and Stenros observe; Italy for Marinetti: “It is from Italy that we launch through the world this violently upsetting incendiary manifesto of ours”; the USA for Burljuk: “America is worthy of GREAT NEW ART“).
5. Develop a dresscode, a disguise or a costume that makes members of the movement immediately recognisable (various historic or futuristic costumes in the case of Nordic LARP; black coat and bowler hat for the Futurists; black polo neck for the existentialists; leather, torn t-shirts and rivet stud spikes for the Punks).

The aim of the manifestos seems on one hand an attempt to gather a crowd but on the other hand also to prove deviation from the norm and to gain recognition as a relevant phenomenon. Why would anyone bother about a bunch of Scandinavian youngsters having fun in the forests, if the very same youngsters were not to launch a manifesto, declare their otherness and curse 99% of the gaming community of having missed the point? Probably nobody. It is therefore strategically important to publish a manifesto and declare oneself as arty, rebellious, non-conformist and dangerous. The result of such action is that the group switches opponents. It is not any longer the parents or the local forest authorities one has to quarrel with, but art critics, university lecturers and game studies journals.

1 – Art. Games subcultures share a desire with avant-garde subcultures to be considered as truly artistic. In the Turku manifesto the third paragraph is not only dedicated to state that role-playing can be an art form. The manifesto furthermore attempts to do the impossible: to define what art is. “Art can be broadly defined to be use of a medium with precision and individuality (which is creativity combined with personality). Thus it is possible to create art, as well as pointless entertainment, with RPGs”. Manifestos from Critical Engineers (2012), Game Designers (2011), Web Designers (1999) and Radio producers⁸ (1998) have told us that every conceivable medium can be declared art. The statement “Radio art is the use of radio as a medium for art” is quoted here to function as a template for future media declaring their art status. If every medium can be declared art, the question arises why it is worth mentioning it for a specific medium. It also raises the question why such a trivial statement should then be published as part of a manifesto. Or is it true what Hans Ulrich Reck suggests in his book on “The Myth of Media Art” (2007): It makes no sense at all to describe media as art, but one should rather talk of “art through media”.

2 – Arrogance. “Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed”⁹. In his 1909 manifesto Marinetti does not provide us with an explanation, why he believes that time and space might have died. It would actually create quite a lot of problems for Marinetti to explain how he could have created speed, if there is no time and space left, because speed is distance taken in a period of time. But that is not the problem. Marinetti fuels the effect of his lines with a rhetoric style and a mesmerising mix of arrogance, provocation and threat. The verbal style introduces a formal framework of assertions that is so strong that logic or inductive reasoning become almost obsolete. The statements of arrogance also protect the subcultural group from any comparative assessment. “The criticized and feared, acclaimed and admired Turku School is here to tell the world what role-playing is, how and why it should be done, and why everybody else is wrong.” A sentence like that prevents from others drawing conclusions, because it states that a conclusion has already been arrived at. This is methodologically hazardous to say the least. But then again: “Realization over Theorization!” as the net.art Manifesto proudly states¹⁰.

3 – Strong Language. The Game Design Manifesto “Controlled Invasion” that was first published in 2011 contains five statements. The fifth statement reads like this: “5 Fuck the magic circle. – we need game ethics!” This is a short sentence to request an unspecified ethical approach to game design, but the phrasing obviously addresses an enemy. The enemy is traditional game design based on the assumption that there is a situation that has been called the magic circle by Salen and Zimmerman (2007) and others. Gaming subcultures need to identify an enemy that they can agree upon in order to create some consistence within the group.

8. *Radio Art Manifesto*, 1998. <http://kunstradio.at/THEORIE/index.html>.

9. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in the 8th paragraph of the *Futurist Manifesto* (1909).

10. Shulgin and Bookchin, 1999

The energy is therefore constructed *vis-à-vis* symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1993) of a strong opponent. For “Controlled Invasion” the enemy was traditional game design, for Nordic Larpers it is the Anglo-American gaming industry. “The supreme demonstrations of the weaknesses of conventional LARP are the commercial products of the Anglo-American gaming industry. By aiming at a lowest common denominator, these publications achieve nothing beyond the infant stage”¹¹. Strong language is indicative of subcultural rhetorics. As long as the verbally uttered disrespect targets just another subculture there is no reason to perceive the rebellious group as countercultural (Turner 2006). Countercultural action is characterized by a profound opposition to the values of a broader societal segment – and not just by disapproval or a specific subculture’s canon of music, fashion and life-style. Insofar the statement of “Fuck the magic circle” can hardly be seen as a countercultural exclamation. Society as a whole has hardly any issue with the concept of a magic circle. It is game studies scholars who cherish the notion and the “Controlled Invasion” invaded or tried to invade just another subculture and nothing more.



Figure 3. Picture made by the Nuremberg-Kulmbach-Connection, 20. September 2008, Author: NKC.

4 – Territorialism. Subcultures are often closely related to the subculture’s birthplace. Many of the 20th century avant-garde movements and subcultural formations started from a shared collective experience in a particular location and then branched out into refined, diversified and individualized forms of expression in different parts of the world. Futurism, DADA and Fluxus on one hand, and Punk, Emo, Innocent, and Goth-style on the other hand did originally constitute a dress code, a toolset, a jargon, a mission statement and a territorial assignment within the cities, where Futurists, Punks, Hippies or Dadaists would most probably be found. The initiating collective experiences of Woodstock, Cabaret Voltaire, the Wuppertal art galleries, Camden, and respective locations for each of the subcultural movements was constitutive for the process of identity building and identity shaping. But for some reason the subcultural group identifies the location where the founding fathers had met in the first place with the location where their followers will meet.

11. *The Turku Manifesto*, 1999.

Everybody knows that there are punks in Tokyo and Rome, in Helsinki and in provincial German towns, yet the myth of the Englishness of Punk is celebrated with the Union Jack, with Euro-English jargon and with a deep hatred of the royalties in Buckingham palace - wherever the punk would happen to live.

For Nordic Larp it is the Scandinavian region, Finland and Iceland, that is mistaken as an essential ingredient of Nordic Style larping. It would however be impossible to point out what difference it makes whether a larp is staged in Bavaria or in Turku, in Minnesota or in Peru. It also makes no difference whether the larpers themselves are proper Finns or Swedes or if they stem from another part of the world. There is a larp tourism nowadays that mixes and merges participants. There are also Nordic Larps in Palestine as one can read on nordiclarp.org¹² and the question must be posed whether we have Nordic Larp in Palestine there, or Palestinian Larp by Nordic players here. However one might turn it, it seems to make no sense to identify a subculture by the territory the founding fathers have been roaming in.



Figure 4 – The oppressor’s camp in front of Helsinki’s main railway station. Screenshot from the visual material for Piiritystila – State of Siege – Halht Hisar. Montage by Joel Sammallahti, 2013

12. In August of 2012 the Larp “Till Death Do us Part” was organized as a cooperation between Norwegian and Palestinian larp designers. It was the first bigger Palestinian larp project and since then many projects happened in connection to the emerging Palestinian larp community. The latest addition is “Piiritystila – Halht Hisar”, a Palestinian-Finnish larp. <http://nordiclarp.org/tag/palestine/>

5 – Fashion. It is certainly true that the Nordic Larp community is hardly uniform in the fashion they follow. The Wild West look of “Once upon a Time” (July to August 2005) differed completely from the pseudo medieval “Trenne Byar” (July 1994) or the enclosed space opera of “Carolus Rex” (November 1999). The fashion that Larpers subscribe to is functional as it serves to support roles in the role playing game. On the other hand the costume is a projection surface for individual fantasies and dreams. In this respect it reaches beyond functionality. Larpers are sensitive to dresses, robes, make-up and hairstyle as any subculture is, but the driving force for their sensitivity seems to differ from what motivates punks or Hell’s Angels to dress up – and it also differs from the motivation of the futurists to dress up.

Angela McRobbie argues that punk fashion is driven by “creative defiance” (McRobbie 1999, p. 136). Dylan Clark speaks of “calculated anger” and the “potency through an ability to shock and dismay” (Clark 2003, p.2, p.1). This is hardly the main objective for Larpers to dress up. Also, Larpers can not be subsumed under one specific dress code. As has been mentioned above the codes range from medieval to futuristic. This is not different to fans or band members from The Clash differing in visual appearance from those of Siouxsie and the Banshees and the latter again differing from those of My Chemical Romance. The subcultural framing of identity is wide enough in both cases - Nordic Larpers and Punks - to cater for a wide range of sub-styles. All of these sub-groups have something in common, that links amongst the various stylistic variations. But even though the consistency within the sub-groupings is strong and the differences amongst them are obvious there is a feeling to belong to the same metaverse. It makes therefore sense to describe the whole of Nordic Larpers as a subculture and not only those who subscribe to a sci-fi, medieval or fairy-tale aesthetic within the Larp community.

6 – Conclusion. In other words: specific subsections of the whole of playing humans, like Nordic Larpers, might be described as a gaming-subculture with shared codes and conventions about behaviour, jargon, music, dress, food and other aspects of life. What they attain is a temporary identity that is often constituted via strong opposition against the symbolic violence of a dominant group like the Anglo-American role playing community. The Larpers’ identity does however not manifest itself as a habitus in the way Bourdieu would describe an embodied adaption to a lasting scheme of regulations and conventions (Bourdieu 1993). The arrangements that Larpers agree to may last for a day, a weekend, or a week at the longest. They attain a weekend-habitus, which is to say: not a habitus at all. The mode of transformation from a standard citizen to a spectacular follower of Larp-fashion is rather related to the carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1984) than to habitus. For a limited time the larpers attain a high level of identification with the group, a canon of do’s and don’ts, and a methodological – if not a philosophical and ethical superstructure that keeps the group together. It is possible to conceive this superstructure as the constituent for a subcultural cohesion amongst Nordic Larpers. It is however impossible to call the whole of gamers a subculture within digital cultures, because gamers differ not only in one of the before mentioned aspects of social identity. Their multiplicity of jargons, musical preferences, dress codes or lack of such, social status and different political positions makes them a completely incoherent bunch and therefore unfit for constituting a subculture.

The initial proposition of this article, that tangible and non-tangible assets of fashion, music and avant-garde rhetoric, code of honour, cryptic messages, and some kind of in-group sociality would qualify Nordic Larpers

as a subculture has to be put into perspective vis-à-vis the “classical subcultures” (Clark 2003, p.1), i.e., pre-1970s subcultures, whom David Clark sees as equipped with the potential for social change. These subcultures – early punk included here – that preceded the decline and commercialisation of punk, differ from the new subcultures like the ones of Nordic Larpers. As has been shown above the new subcultures share aspects of style, rhetorics, values and attitudes with the classical subcultures, but they differ in their relation to fashion and to their quest for social change. Beyond that Nordic Larpers lack continuity in their efforts to provoke, shock and dismay, and do therefore neither own habitus nor a potential for change – despite all of the formal similarities that exist between Nordic Larpers and punks, futurists and other 20th century avant-gardes.

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