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Juhana Pettersson – Artist of Experience

Jaakko Stenros

Juhana Pettersson has been creating larps for over two decades, in nine countries, with numerous collaborators. While being at the forefront of this new form of expression, Pettersson has been thinking about his craft, following other designers' work, documenting his works, and publishing his insights. He is a fascinating larp artist, but in the context of this book it is even more important that he is a prolific writer.

As is common, perhaps even necessary, in art and culture today, Pettersson works in numerous fields. He has created over twenty larps. He has written three novels, one non-fiction book, and has edited three collections of roleplaying scenarios or articles. He has published four tabletop role-playing games, and was a major contributor in the latest version of *Vampire: The Masquerade*. He was the editor-in-chief of a roleplaying game magazine, *Roolipelaaja*, and the producer of a television show, *Tilt*, dealing with digital games. He has worked as a game and film critic, journalist, and has contributed to digital games.

While Pettersson continues to work in a number of fields, he feels that he has four distinct areas of creative work: running tabletop roleplaying games, creating larps, designing tabletop roleplaying games, and writing novels. In his view, running tabletop roleplaying games and designing them for publication are very different creative tasks. People who concentrate on just one field get good younger, Pettersson has wryly noted. He feels that he mastered running roleplaying games around 2008 (with the *Tuliunikko 2* campaign), larps in 2015 with *Täydellinen ihminen*, and roleplaying game publications in 2016 with *Tšernobyl, rakastettuni* (published in English as *Chernobyl Mon Amour*). These were the points where he shifted from instinct to reflected skill and knowledge.

This book collects Juhana Pettersson's articles concerning larps and larp design. It brings together over twenty articles published in various books and other media, together with nine new pieces. In these articles he reflects on the larps he has created and played, and they document his evolving thinking on larp. This foreword sets out to provide a bit of background and context for these writings. First, there is a short biography, followed by a discussion of the central themes of his writing.

Biography

Pettersson was born in 1980, in Helsinki, Finland. He comes from a big family of artists and cultural workers. His mother, Arja Pettersson, is a celebrated director of circus and dance theater, and his father Eero Pettersson was an architect. Pettersson has often said that he grew up in a circus. This is not a reference to his five siblings, but is literally true; his mother's dance and circus company Hurjaruuth toured Finland in the 1980s and early 1990s. Young Juhana was often in tow, as the company was performing in all kinds of culture centers around the country, before settling in the old Cable Factory building in Helsinki in 1993.

Pettersson went to primary school in Kruununhaka and Kaisaniemi, in the center of Helsinki. He started roleplaying in 1990, in the fourth grade, after one of his classmates received the recently translated *Dungeons & Dragons* as a present. The friend started running a game, then Pettersson's new stepfather ran a game for Juhana and his brother. However, quite soon Pettersson started running his own games and has done so ever since.

Having grown up surrounded by artists and cultural laborers, the expressive potential of roleplaying games seemed obvious to Pettersson from an early age. He remembers lecturing his mother on the artistic merits of roleplaying games when he was fifteen. She proclaimed that all this roleplaying would never amount to anything.

Pettersson's maternal grandmother Rauha S. Virtanen was supportive of his interest in roleplaying. She purchased numerous roleplaying game source books for him during his teens. As an award-winning author of beloved novels for teens, she felt that there are far worse things to get swept up in than "English language literature" (sourcebooks for *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, mostly). This support was very important and meaningful to Pettersson, and later he would dedicate his very first book, the non-fiction book about tabletop roleplaying games *Roolipelimanifesti* (2005), to his grandmother.

After the mandatory nine years of basic education he got into Kallion lukio, a prestigious senior high school that has a history of being a stepping stone for authors, actors, pop stars, politicians, and other creative laborers. At this point Pettersson had his tabletop roleplaying crew, and he had also started larping. The first larp he participated in was part of the long-running *Vampire* chronicle *Helsingin Camarilla*. Pettersson had recently become obsessed with the World of Darkness and its vampire and werewolf games. He was below the age limit of sixteen, but somehow still managed to participate. In a few years he became one of the narrators (i.e. organizers and designers) of the larp series. He also started running his own larps – the first of which was staged, in secret, in Kallion lukio in 1998.

After the matriculation exam Pettersson opted out of the mandatory military service and instead chose civil service, spending the year in Valkoinen Sali, working for the culture bureau of the city of Helsinki. He has later felt that this was a complete waste of time. Then he studied English philology at the University of Helsinki, but after a few years he effectively dropped out. During this time, he became more involved in activism and started writing and working with video.

In 2003 Pettersson moved to Lille, France, to attend a two-year program at art school Studio national des arts contemporains le Fresnoy. This was a formative experience for Pettersson. He was living abroad for the first time, growing as an artist, reflecting on self-understanding, and learning to grasp the artworld as an artist. The school had a very international student body and learning intercultural communication and "being international" was key – even if the city of Lille, "the Cleveland of France", did not impress Pettersson.

The class started with thirty students and a few were kicked out every six months. Pettersson stayed to the end and before graduation created hybrid pieces such as circus performance incorporating body art and live video *Bouffe c'que j'te donne* (2004) and sublime activist porn video installation *Beauté désincarnée* (2005). Pettersson did not make larp art at le Fresnoy, but he did recruit new tabletop roleplaying groups among the art students. His first love in roleplaying games had been *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*. That had given way to *Vampire: The Masquerade* and the rest of the World of Darkness. Now he rebelled against existing settings, decreed that all rule systems are terrible and created his tabletop roleplaying games and larps from scratch. He also wrote the polemic *Roolipelimanifesti* during his time in France.

After returning to Helsinki in 2005 Pettersson resumed creating larps and other roleplaying games while making a living as a freelance journalist. He wrote for the largest newspaper in the Nordics, *Helsingin sanomat*, was the editor-in-chief of the roleplaying game lifestyle magazine *Roolipelaaja* (2007-2009) and the producer of video game television program *Tilt* (2009-2015).

In 2007 Juhana married Maria Pettersson (née Pitkänen). She has worked in journalism and politics, having served as the editor-in-chief of a number of respected Finnish papers (*Ylioppilaslehti*, *City*, *Journalist*). They went on a honeymoon to North Korea, under false pretenses, as both of them are journalists – and thus

barred from entering the country on a tourist visa. Since then they have travelled extensively. Maria is also a tabletop game master and larp designer, and the couple has collaborated a few larps. Maria's work in the European parliament also took the couple to Brussels in 2016 where they lived for a few years. This is when Juhana Pettersson made the decision to concentrate on his artistic practice, and since then he has been working full time as a game designer and a writer.

Key Themes

Juhana Pettersson, the larp creator, is a collaborator at heart. He has worked with a number of other artists, singling out Bjarke Pedersen and Mike Pohjola as the most important and influential ones as he has worked with them the most. He has noted that he learns best when working with others, in new surroundings. However, Juhana Pettersson, the writer, as seen in this collection, tends to work alone. He dives into new areas, with collaborators and guides, and then retreats to mull over the results in solitude.

Pettersson has been writing on larp for almost two decades; indeed, he is the most prolific author on Nordic Larp. During this time his artistic practice, thinking, and writing have developed greatly. However, there are certain themes that run through much of his written work. The three strongest themes are roleplaying as the art of experience, using larp to reflect and comment on the real world, and dismissal of the focus on stories.

The first English language venue to publish Pettersson's writing was *RPG.net*. He started a column there titled "No Good" in 2002. Over a period of three years Pettersson published 21 columns on tabletop roleplaying games, larps, and the convention culture around them. His writings often sparked debates as his Nordic background and artistic contextualizing of roleplaying were at odds with the Anglo-American discourse that was hegemonic on the site.

Simultaneously, in the Nordic community approaching larp as a valid form of expression was becoming more commonplace. A key part of this has been developing and documenting the discourse around larp. First the discussion took place at the annual live Knutepunkt convention, larp afterparties, online forums, and fanzines. However, it fast became apparent that just as larp as a form of expression is ephemeral, so are these discussions. Each year the discussion threatened to start at the same point. To address this, an annual book was created where key conversations and arguments were written down. As the books were written in English, and also published online, they enabled people from around the world, and also from neighboring fields, to have a window into the Nordic larp scene.

Pettersson jumped at this opportunity to participate in the discussion. Since the second book, *As Larp grows Up*, in 2003 he has published at least one essay in almost all of the the annual book. His columns were also published in the Nordic larp zine *panclou*.

It is possible to see Pettersson's key themes developing in the early articles on *RPG.net* and Knutebooks. He sees the player experience in a larp as primary, and questions the hegemonic notions of story, narrative, and immersion. Furthermore, he has known that larp and roleplaying are forms of art since the beginning of his writing. 20 years ago, echoing Pettersson's mother's dismissal of her son's teenage activities, it was not uncommon to see larp as 'less than', as merely play, merely games, merely a hobby. Pettersson has been at the forefront of the art larp movement from its emergence around the turn of the Millennium – and this unwavering belief in larp and its possibilities has enabled him to think and see the possibilities of larp when others were still struggling with the shame and stigma attached to this form of expression. The internalized nerd shame connected to roleplaying so common especially in the American discourse around roleplaying is anathema to Pettersson. He has never doubted the expressive and artistic potential of roleplaying.

Pettersson's very first English language column, "Live-action in the world of reality" was published on *RPG.net* at the end of July 2002. In it he talks about larping in the real world through two examples, visiting the religious mega gathering Suvisaurat as a journalist, and infiltrating a NATO air force base in Kleine Brogel, Belgium, as an activist. Pettersson explicitly expresses that he is interested in the experience, not the social interaction, the character, or the plot. He sees the character as an interface into the experience. Pettersson writes:

This means that live-action roleplaying may be likened to any situation where I adopt a role to provide context in an unfamiliar situation. At the core of such situations lie unfamiliar social contexts that force the assumption of such a role. If these situations are clearly defined departures from routine life, they may be highly larplike.

Two of Pettersson's themes are visible here. He is interested in the experience, not story or character, but what it feels like to inhabit the work and the world. He is connecting larp to concrete real world issues, politics and religion. Larp cultures, like much of popular culture, are filled with genre works that while wonderful escapist entertainment, have a decidedly weak connection to the real world. Pettersson's works tend to be rooted in the contemporary world.

Much of this early writing is couched in bravado. Pettersson was somewhat aware of this – he refers to himself and his friends as "city-bred brats" in his first "No Good" – but it is clear that some of the dismissive statements he made about safety, political correctness, and other creators read differently after twenty years. A young author coming from the periphery, challenging authority figures and hegemonic truths can write in a different tone than an established auteur. Furthermore, the context has changed dramatically; the larp discourse today is international and delicate, whereas the early columns were written in a small bubble before Pettersson had moved abroad, rooted in a privileged background from a relatively homogenous and safe Finland.

Pettersson's early writings use strong language and originate in visceral experiences. His short essay "Fumble Role", published in *panclou #7*, is a typical example. He writes: "There are things you are supposed to do in a larp: *Be your character. Live like he would. Look like him. Respect and follow the vision of the creator of the game.* I usually fail on all counts." Pettersson questions the larp design and playing ideals around immersion based on his own experience. At this moment in time he also rejects all genre works, cutting ties with his love of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* and *Vampire: The Masquerade*: "Cyberpunk, vampire or fantasy: the moment I notice the first genre convention, the game loses its individuality, and the respect afforded unique creations." The article is perhaps more pose than analysis, but it is rooted in self-reflection. Over the years Pettersson's thinking and writing have become more nuanced, but even these early texts are fascinating as they are rooted in brutal honesty. His instincts led him to interesting questions he would spend decades mulling over.

In 2004 he published a piece called "The Battle against Primitivism" in the Knutebook *Beyond Role and Play*, where he attacks the idea of using role-playing games, larp included, to tell stories. It is here that Pettersson's writing and thinking catch up to his instincts and anecdotes. The opening of the article is still quite strong today:

A hundred years ago, film producers often made their movies by placing a fixed camera in front of a theatre play. Looking at such a film now is horrible. It barely seems like cinema at all. A good movie can have theatre sets and a fixed camera, but a full use of the medium requires editing, a moving camera, close-ups, postproduction and all the other innovations that have been made since the time of Lumière. Stories are to role-playing as theatre is to cinema. As long as the endless talk about narratives continues, the camera will never move.

Here, Pettersson declared war on stories in larp. This hostility towards stories in larp is one of his key tenets. By moving the story to the periphery, he can center on the player experience. The events of a larp may produce a narrative when recounted to others, but that happens after the event and is something that humans do naturally. There is no magic in it. It is the ephemeral moment of play that feels like something, that is the experience – and it need not make narrative sense. This rejection of a central story is at the heart of Pettersson's design philosophy: Larps have events that can be narrativized, but the core building block is the character as an interface into interesting experiences. "The player experience is the only relevant thing," Pettersson writes in this article. Two year later he defined larp as *the art of experience* in the title of another article.

Over the years, as Pettersson continues to refine his thinking on larp and his design practice, he returns to these three themes. First and foremost, roleplaying in general and larp specifically, is for him a form of art. At the heart of this artform sits experience. He is interested in designing this experience and in understanding how that design takes place. He has experimented with different tools and changed his mind about them over the years. He has experimented with immersion, minimalism, symbolism, genre conventions, player expectations, and many others. He has investigated different design and play traditions and strived to understand them, but the centering of experience has not changed.

Secondly, Pettersson continues to use larp reflect and comment on the real world. While his works are sometimes conceptual, like the infamous flour larp *Luminescence*, and he has made peace with using genre elements after rejecting them – to the point of coining the term *necessary zombie*, and creating three official *Vampire: The Masquerade* larps – his work is always about the real world. Often Pettersson's works are about rendering the world visible in a way that may seem overly political or sexual, but his works never reflect what is not already here.

Thirdly, Pettersson continues to see stories as uninteresting diversions. He concedes that if we define a story as "a coherent sequence of events", then larps do indeed have them. But that is a very low bar. Humans are great at narrativizing events, but that does not mean pre-existing, larpwright created stories are at the center of a larp, and he continues to be miffed by such talk. He maintains that by focusing on the experience, we can create much more interesting larps.

How to read

In his last "No Good" column, Pettersson writes about his upcoming, first book, *Roolipelimanifesti*. He explains that he "propagandize[s] for art and ambition, community and pride." He also gives instruction on how to use his writings:

When David Mamet writes a book called *On Directing Film* (one of my great sources of inspiration for this book, incidentally), do you hear Coppola crying "He can't tell me how to direct my movies"? You don't. When I see someone expound their views on how roleplaying, or cinema, or art, should be made, I use and assimilate what I find interesting and useful and discard the rest. I suggest you do the same.

This reading instruction still holds, fifteen years later. In this book Pettesson explains what he thinks about larps as an art form, how he makes larps, and most importantly, why he makes them that way.

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