Nordic Erotic Larp: Designing for Sexual Playfulness

Abstract: Erotic larp is an emerging trend in the Nordic countries. Sexuality and socio-dramatic play have been combined in numerous ways in the past; what is new about this concentration of erotic embodied adult pretend play is that it is emerging from a culture of reflexive, critical, and bespoke design, as a tradition of art games. By studying 25 design abstracts of Nordic art larps from the last decade, this article seeks not only to map, classify, organize, and understand the phenomena of erotic larp design, but to discuss how norms of sexuality are reflected in the Nordic larp community through looking at how sexuality is thematised, described, signalled, and designed. The analysis in this article is rooted in game studies and informed by sexuality studies. In the design abstracts, we uncover how sexuality is thematised by the designers and signalled to the players, as well as how larp rules, mechanics, and expectations are designed for erotic role-play interactions. The article shows that a Nordic tradition of larps with design for erotic and sexual play has emerged during the 2010s, how new larp mechanics scaffold erotic role-play in ways that give room for sexual arousal through layered alibis, and that these form of larps are inclusive of people of marginalised genders and sexualities, as well as of sexual kinks. The discussion also addresses the tension between liberation and oppression of sexuality in erotic larp design, as well as tensions around player agency and compelling game mechanics.

Keywords: Role-play, larp, sexual arousal, design, design abstract, Nordic larp, sex in games, queer games, alibi, make-believe oppression Nordic larp, marketing

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1. INTRODUCTION

> His tongue slid slowly up his stepbrother's neck.
>
> *– I don't understand why I'm doing this… It is like there is something wrong with this place.*
>
> There was a small pause in his movements and a scared look in his eyes as he stared longingly at his stepbrother's body. Then he continued almost like something was forcing him… (*House of Craving*)

In larps, players live in imaginary worlds for hours or days at a time, embodying fictional characters, creating meaningful experiences and narratives in interaction with other players. These players may engage in erotic and amorous play, in-character, in different ways (Brown and Stenros 2018). The opening quote is part of the *design abstract* of the larp *House of Craving*. This is a way for the designers to show what kind of stories they envision for their players, enabling the potential player to make informed choices about participating (Edland, Pedersen and Gyldenstrøm 2021).

This article addresses the design of make-believe sex in live action role-playing games. The goal of this research is to map Nordic *erotic larp design*: What is regarded as erotic, who is invited to play, how is the erotic brought into play? We address these questions through a study of a decade's worth of design abstracts.

An interesting artistic tradition of erotic larps has been emerging in the Nordics during the last decade, as discussed in this article; some have eroticism as the main theme, while other designs offer possibilities for erotic pretend play even if that is not the main focus of the design. Larps in the Nordic tradition tend to be reflexive and critical, reflecting and

commenting on the world around them (see e.g. Stenros and Montola 2010; Kangas, Loponen and Särkijärvi 2016; Pettersson 2014; 2021) and feature bespoke design, building each work as a coherent, self-sustained whole (Koljonen et.al. 2019). These Nordic larps with erotic design are discussed here as a specific tradition of *art games*: "actual games – analog, digital, or both – that are developed by individuals or small teams of independent game designers, and tend to have noncommercial or even anti-commercialist philosophies behind them" (Ensslin 2014, p 4; see also Sharp 2015). This article seeks not only to understand the phenomena of erotic larp design, but to discuss how norms of sexuality are reflected in the Nordic larp community through looking at how sexuality is thematised, described, signalled, and designed.

Rooted in game studies and sexuality studies, this study maps, organizes, and analyses the design elements that foster and regulate erotic play and sexual arousal at larps through a review of 25 design abstracts published as larp websites. Play is here recognized as being meaningful in itself, not only as a vehicle for an external goal. These design abstracts will be approached as literary–ludic texts (Ensslin 2014).

The article will show that a Nordic erotic larp tradition has emerged during the 2010s, and that this tradition is quite inclusive of people of marginalised genders and sexualities, as well as of sexual kinks (fetishes, BDSM). Larps discussed are either clearly positioned as erotic in their design abstract or they include sexuality/eroticism as a theme/component in the design abstract, and they have a way to play out sexual content. The numerous ways in which design abstracts communicate simulation mechanics for erotic play are mapped and analysed, uncovering how there is a tension at the heart of erotic larp design abstracts: Larps with erotic design are simultaneously transgressive, adult, emotionally heavy, even shocking; and they are also rulebound, safe to play, mindful of safety, repeatedly re-negotiated, and it is always possible to exit playing. The article describes plural erotic play practices designed for consenting adults; some of the content is transgressive, for example relating to play on sexual violence and oppression. Sometimes the setting of the larp does not read as erotic, and just parts of the larp have sexual content. Finally, the article does not pass judgement on the erotic larps designs, but describes the emerging field.

The article opens with a background discussion of amorous and erotic role-play, then explains the data and methods used. The Results section explains how the design abstracts discuss larps with erotic themes, what game mechanics are used to safely role-play sexual content, and how erotic larp has been designed to be inclusive regarding sexuality, gender, and relationship structures, while paying less attention to inclusivity regarding other marginalized people. This is followed by a discussion of the emerging erotic Nordic larping, the tension between oppression and liberation, the limits of inclusivity, and how alibi is used to enable transgressive play.

2. BACKGROUND

Amorous and erotic role-play has a history in and out of larp. Sexuality and socio-dramatic play have been combined in multiple ways; there are numerous traditions for these hybrids, from digital single-player role-playing games to games used in sexual education, and from BDSM group play to erotic and non-erotic larp (see Grasmo 2019; 2020). Furthermore, larp is part of a wider field of immersive play, from immersive theatre to virtual reality, where erotic subject matter is explored. This article looks specifically at *embodied erotic role-play*, focusing on co-located physical play between players enacting characters in a coherent shared fictional

setting that invokes sensual and sexual themes.[1] The focus is on the design: how the erotic in larps is signalled, and how role-play is guided through metatechniques for simulating or representing erotic activity. In larps, sexual activity is nearly always simulated to some degree. While erotic role-play can be entirely participant-defined (as in Brown 2015) – such as player's own erotic fantasies, inter-player attraction, the adrenalin rush felt when scared – this article is concerned with sexual play as encouraged by larp design.

3. THE EROTIC HISTORY OF NORDIC LARP

Larping started to emerge around the Nordic countries during the 1980s (Harviainen et al. 2018). Sexual themes have been incorporated in larps in the Nordics at least since the early 1990s. To understand the background of the development of contemporary Nordic larp, it is useful to look at the different methods for representing sexual and amorous interactions that have been used over the years. An early account of the methods used to portray sex in Norwegian larps in the 1990s comes from Hanne Grasmo:

> Sex may be simulated on many levels: . . . saying "Now I am doing this to you." The most common is to use massage for intercourse [or] to close the door and let the sex sounds escape out . . . It will be most real if sex is simulated with making out, moans and dry-humping, but with clothes on. Most larpers don't do that. (Grasmo 1998, 69, translated by the author).

Larp mechanics at the time were often designed to avoid sexual arousal, due to safety concerns and shame, to the point that even cuddling or holding hands in a sexual manner was quite taboo (Wieslander 2004). Even so, there were exemptions, such as the Norwegian *Moiras Vev* (2003) the Finnish kinky larp-series *Pehomydin* (Harviainen 2010) and the Swedish *Hamlet* (2003). *Hamlet* also included non-simulated sexual content (see Koljonen 2004; Bergström 2010). Johanna Koljonen (2004) described *Hamlet* as a sealed space akin to a swingers' club; her concern was the lack of structured debriefing after the larp, not the sex.

Historically, erotic play in larps has mostly been sporadic, with the role-play activity in the center, "without the games delving too deeply into only the sexual aspects" (Harviainen 2010). Even so, while erotic play was scarce, the theme of sexuality was early on identified as a typical theme in Nordic larp (Stenros and Montola 2010, 22-23).

During the 2010s, as this article will show, larps with erotic themes have been growing in number. The para-academic discussion in the Nordic larp tradition about erotic larping has also increased. Articles, panel discussions, and workshops presented at Nordic Knutepunkt conferences have shifted from barely talking about sexual play in larps at all (2001–2012), and how to simulate amorous situations in a way that allows participants to distinguish between player and character (Wieslander 2004, see also Waern and Stenros 2015 about amorous role-play), to "how to play erotic larps" (Edland and Fischer 2020), "creating more bleed" (Anderson and Meland 2020), "be aroused in character" (Grasmo 2020) and "portray sexual content in your design" (Lindegren 2019).

Although there are more erotic scenes in larps, and more larps with mainly erotic

1 Neighbouring areas can be found, on one side, in descriptive and mediated online erotic role-play (Brown 2015) that has similar character constructs, rules, and expectations of fictional coherence; and on another side in BDSM (bondage-discipline/dominance-submission/sado-masochism) group-play (Frank 2013; Weiss 2011; Harviainen 2011) that also has roles and fictional setting, but where the emphasis is more on the unmediated shared sexual activity.

themes, embodied erotic role-play and arousal has not been addressed in research. This is indicative of game studies more generally where discussion of sex has been called "immature" (Harviainen, Brown and Suominen 2016), and is often limited to online games. Furthermore, sexuality is often sidelined as "deviant" behaviour. It has been shown that larps inspired by sadomasochism and exploring kink themes are numerous (Sihvonen and Harviainen 2020), and that there are clear connections between larp and BDSM in relation to immersion, embodiment, and power redistribution (Harviainen 2003; 2011), as well as the creating of fictional role-play activity for erotic pleasure (Mosher 1980).

This article centers on embodied erotic role-play, and the investigation focuses on the designed methods for expressing sexual content and for adjusting the level of embodied eroticism in play. Embodied erotic role-play is defined as sexual content played out in a corporal manner, while immersed into a character in a shared fiction. In earlier research there has been discussion of *amorous role-play* (Brown and Stenros 2018), and Jaakko Stenros (2013) has divided larp sex mechanics into four categories:

- *establishing events*, where the players verbally agree what happened between them,
- *outcome resolution systems*, for instance with rolling dice ("did I manage to force you?" "did I got an STD"?),
- *expressive and symbolic methods*, where the bodies are interacting in some ways but it might be abstract (massaging shoulders), and
- *adjusting to the level of sexuality* – where the action is party sexual or erotic (but for instance fondling instead of intercourse, or whipping lightly instead of real pain).

The first two categories of amorous role-play, establishing events and outcome resolution, fall outside the scope of embodied erotic role-play, and of this study. Note that this tighter delimitation does not exclude methods that are solitary; role-play can happen both between bodies and within the individual body, and both may evoke sexual arousal.

4. PLAYING WITH OPPRESSION

A key theme in Nordic erotic larp design, as will become apparent later, is the tension between liberation and oppression. Generally, negative, oppressive, or abusive content is common in sexual fantasies (Morin 2012; see also Von 2020). Indeed, sexual play can be transgressive of norms. Transgression can function as raising arousal (Apter 1991; Morin 2012; see also Frank 2013) and deepening engagement (see Masek and Stenros 2021), and the play activity of larp is recognized and treated by the design and the community as bracketed from reality. There is some safety in playing with dark themes. Of course, larp is not "not-real," but actions carried out while larping can have a different meaning in comparison to the same actions performed out of larp (Stenros and Montola 2019).

In order to play around liberation, oppression is needed. Larp is *inter-immersive* (Stenros and MacDonald 2020; Pohjola 2004): a player does not just pretend that they are their character, they also pretend that everyone else is a character. There are no prisoners without jailors, no freedom fighters without oppressors. Oppression is needed structurally to address themes of liberation, but it can also function as raising arousal. When it comes to non-normative sexual desires and interactions in role-play, the erotic landscape is more complex to navigate: To role-play negative sexual transgressions, like violence, torture, and rape, may be meaningful (Montola 2010; see also Rivers 2020), but not necessarily pleasurable or erotic.

But for some it is: Role-playing a prisoner abused by a guard can be a meaningful exploration of societal power structures, but it can also be a kink, a fetish, or sexual preference. When for instance a larp is about dominance and submission, it may signal eroticism for some players, while others are more interested in impactful emotional play, without any sexual arousal.[2] The societal norms that lead to shame and oppression of sexual pleasure, both on individual and societal level, might be questioned and transformed (Bowman and Hugaas 2019) through erotic larp, but shame and inequality can as well be used as triggers for strong emotional impact which may consolidate power imbalances (Weiss 2011).

Similarly, playing with *non-normative sexuality and genders*[3] can also have a double function. On the one hand, they serve as meaningful reflections of players' out-of-game sexual and gender identities. On the other hand, such depictions also function to fuel exploration, and enable fluid sexuality and erotic (inter)actions – and they can function as a trigger for oppression.

5. THE TENSION OF SEXUAL ROLE-PLAY

According to Susanna Paasonen (2018) *pleasure* is the key purpose of both sex and play (see also Medico 2019). Sexual play is a pleasurable and playful activity, rather than goal oriented. This view is common in playfulness research, emphasising spontaneity, curiosity, willingness to engage, and zest for variation (Masek and Stenros 2021). Play is seen as a site for openness and exploration.

In discourse about larps and role-playing games the bracketed *non-real reality* and the *non-consequentiality* of play is valued highly (see Masek and Stenros 2021). Larp discourse underlines the separation of the player and the character, and also the fictionality and boundedness of the play (e.g., Lukka 2014; Bowman 2018; Sihvonen 1997). Consequences are not denied, but they are seen as negotiable (see also Caillois 1958; Juul 2005). Play is idealised as safe and disconnected from everyday life. This is one aspect of the *magic circle of play* (Huizinga 1938; Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Stenros 2014), a socially recognized boundary and a metaphor for the bounded play space. These are also common views in playfulness research, emphasising engagement with reality that is knowingly false and without an expected outcome (Masek and Stenros 2021).

Toni Sihvonen (1997) has described the *role-play agreement*, which is a social contract that enables larping: the participants are not supposed to draw conclusions about the players based on the characters, or vice versa. While the player and the character inhabit the same body, they are socially treated as separate. This polite fiction allows a participant to play the villain and do reprehensible things without facing social condemnation. The character (and the fictional setting) is an *alibi* for the player, something that enables and allows the player to transgress what is acceptable out-of-game (Montola and Holopainen 2012; also Stenros 2013; Stenros and Bowman 2018; Deterding 2017).

Alibi can enable players to engage in embodied erotic role-play and allow them to playfully and pleasurably explore identities and concepts of sexuality in society (see Paasonen 2018); to give room for emotional impactful or complex experiences (Koulu 2020); to "step

2 Playing on oppressive subject matter may or may not be erotic for the player. Correspondingly, playing erotic scenes as a character may or may not be erotic for the player. This article concentrates on the design; player studies are needed to find out what playing these scenes is like.

3 We use this term to refer to all non-conforming genders and sexual identities beyond the binary, monogamy, heteronormativity, including categories and concepts such as queer, lesbian, homosexual, trans, non-binary, poly.

inside the shoes of another" (Bowman 2015); and possibly even to explore and transform themselves (Bowman and Hugaas 2019; also Kontula 2021; Beltrán 2021). On the other hand, since the fictional character also works as an alibi to bypass the hindrances of society (Montola 2010; also Frank 2013), it might be used as an excuse for unethical behaviour (Brown 2021; see also Bowman 2013; Harder 2021).[4]

Simultaneously, from sexology we know that play-acting a character can allow playing with sexual content, while sexual *desires* sometimes can be the alibi for engaging in role-play (Kontula 2021). Here role-play is in service of arousal. Indeed, when sexual arousal moves between player and character, the polite fiction of the player/character division unravels and the dynamic between player and character is crucial to investigate when it comes to erotic larp. These two literatures—the literature of sexual play and the literature of larp play—are at odds. Arousal and the pleasure of sexual play cut through from the character to the player sharing the same body.

While this separation of the player and the character is socially, culturally, and contextually useful, there are numerous concepts larp studies uses to bridge these disconnected parts. For example, *bleed* (Boss 2007; see also Montola and Holopainen 2012; Bowman 2013) is a concept used to describe the flow of emotions between the player and the character—and a method to mend the gap between the two. They are still conceived of as separate, the physical states of the player affecting the character and vice versa (Montola 2010). Bowman (2013; 2018) calls it "the spillover" from one to the other. Alibi and bleed are elaborated and designed to establish an understanding of "constructed safety" (Waern 2015) for the player. When arousal bleeds from the character to the player (or in the other direction), the boundedness of play is threatened. Sexual arousal is a complex phenomenon (Morin 1996/2012; Komisaruk et al. 2006; Kontula 2021) that can be regard as an emotion, consisting of three subcomponents: feelings, expressions, and physiological states (Järvelä et al. 2016; see also Panksepp and Biven 2012). Following this, the sexual play in embodied erotic role-play can be designed to be physically expressed, give emotional experience, and eventually give a sexually aroused physical state. Sexual arousal in a player portraying a character can manifest as one or more of these subcomponents: In that sense, sexual arousal is just like other emotions players regularly experience in larps, such as fear, sorrow, or happiness. However, culturally navigating arousal may be more stigmatized (Medico 2019; Kontula 2021), and engaging in make-believe sexual emotions will in many cases be transgressive (Stenros and Bowman 2018).

Of course, the sexual emotions of the player may or may not correspond to those of the character in the fiction. There are numerous traditions in navigating the mapping between the player and the character. It is possible to just perform an emotion, without feeling it. However, in Nordic larp, immersion into character is a norm (Harviainen et al. 2018); ideally the emotions of the character are also present in the player. "Immersion" has been described in many ways, for example, as "the psychological experience of heightened attention while participating in a fictional game reality by enacting a role" (Bowman 2018), and "the subjective feeling of becoming one's character and temporarily forgetting oneself" (Järvelä 2019). Here we follow Simo Järvelä (2019) who conceives of immersion as an attention process in the brain: We are ourselves and the character simultaneously. When we experience things in the body – even when we know them to be fictional – it affects the mind (Järvelä and Lankoski 2012). Interestingly, sexologists have described sexual arousal also as an attention process

4 An early critique of the concept of alibi described how designers may reproduce unwanted patriarchal norms and suppression structures from society, forming bodily memories without players observing this (Gerge and Widing 2006; see also Weiss 2011).

(Medico 2019), and erotic role-play in a relationship as enhancing this process (Kontula 2021).

This is what is at stake in erotic larp design: How to ensure that the playing is seen as safe enough (its consequences are negotiable) with a distinction between the player and the character, the fictional worlds and the everyday life, while simultaneously allowing for sexual arousal and playful sexual exploration.

6. METHOD

A larp is a collaborative embodied role-play performance, where the designers create the foundation, and the player-participants embody and bring to life the fiction, the stories, and the characters of the designed larp. Once larpwrights have created the *design* of the larp, they need to recruit the player-participants. Today this is commonly done through a webpage. This webpage is the prime interface between the designers and the possible player. The central elements of the larp and its design can be read and understood through this site: It contains a distillation of the fiction (themes, setting, genre, story elements), the structure (number of players, length, temporal ordering) and production details (where, when, how to sign-up/casting, what is included in the price). We call this document the *design abstract* of the larp, an invitation to the larp which summarises the theme, story, and visions for the larp as well as production details. Since the sign-ups often are posted a long time before the actual larp event, it may ignite the imagination process and preparations for the players many months before the larp starts.

Most Nordic larp design abstracts will explain how the larp will be played, the play style the designers aim for, what will be provided in workshops, metatechniques, character creation and player support. In larps that aim for transparency, there can also be links to full character descriptions, or even the whole larp script (e.g., Groth and Grasmo and Edland 2021). The design abstract communicates the vision of the designers to potential players, to other designers, and to the larp playing and designing community. It also functions as a recruitment tool for players; in practice this often means that potential participants can sign-up for the larp through the webpage.[5]

To explore how larp design guides embodied erotic role-play, we have analysed 25 design abstracts of Nordic larps with erotic or sexual content, from the time period 2011–2021 (see Appendix A, Table 1). The larps lasted from four hours to five days, and had 10 to 130 participants. A few of the design abstracts had only a single page with an invitation (3 larps), but commonly there are a multitude of pages. In the data corpus there are also included design abstracts with access to full larp scripts with workshop design, background stories, full character descriptions, play mechanics, and other design elements (5 larps).

In order to identify larps with an explicit goal to include or focus on erotic themes, designers and players were asked directly in three domain-relevant Facebook-groups: "How many Nordic Erotic Larps have been run the last decade?" A total of 39 people participated in the discussion, and they suggested 32 different larps. Six further larps the authors were aware of were added to the corpus, and their designers were contacted directly.[6]

5 The design abstracts are a kind of *paratext* (Genette and Macksey 1997), texts around and about the primary text of the runtime of the larp. However, they are integral to the creation of the larp, and do not have a clear analogue in literature, but can be read as literary–ludic texts as in video games (Ensslin 2014).

6 Three erotic larps planned for 2021 (*The Future is Straight, Pleasing Women*, and *Redemption: Salvation through Sin)* were announced too late in 2021 to be included in the analysis, but are discussed in the overview.

The included larps needed to fulfil two requirements: As the focus of this study is in understanding erotic and sexual design, the selected larps had to mention sexuality or eroticism in the design abstract as an element, and had to feature a physical and specified method for playing out sexual scenes. Larps with less than 10 players or lasting less than four hours were excluded from data gathering as the focus is here on larps and not larp-like erotic role-play scenarios. However, this means most festival larps and chamber larps were also excluded.[7] Only larps played out in the Nordic countries or designed by Nordic designers were included. The delimitations are done to limit the scope for the research, and make it possible to discuss larps that are more alike. All of the larps are made within the Nordic Larp tradition (Stenros and Montola 2010). English language larps are likely overrepresented in the data due to queries in English language contexts. However, it seems that larps with erotic content often do target international audiences and are played in English. In total nine suggested larps were excluded from the data set as not fitting the criteria.

The included design abstracts were coded and analysed. If the larp websites were no longer electronically accessible, they are not included in the review, except in four cases where electronically-published larp scripts were available. With full larp scripts, only selected parts were coded. For some larps we have contacted the designers for more information, especially about workshop scripts and mechanics for erotic play.

The qualitative textual analysis is done with a thematic approach, with a mix of data-driven development of categories and predefined categories. The reading of the design abstracts is informed by a literary–ludic approach; in Astrid Ensslin's *Literary Gaming* (2014) she proposes a way of understanding digital art games with both playerly and readerly characteristics that is useful also for understanding analog Nordic larps, even when we just read the text and imagine how it is meant to be played. She places different games on a *literary–ludic spectrum* (p. 43) in which interactive drama is placed as the middle ground, meaning that we will look for both the literary (narrative, story, characters) and the ludic (game mechanics, design choices) to understand how these larps deal with sexuality, sexual pleasure, and sexual oppression. The visual content on the websites was not systematically analysed, and it is only referenced when it obviously adds value to the literary–ludic text analysis.

Both authors of the article have been part of the scene they study since it coalesced some 25 years ago. Both also work against the stigma related to sex and adult play in academia and activism. One author co-designed two of the larps in the data corpus. These larps, *Just a little Lovin'* and *Kink and Coffee*, were designed years ago, not as a researcher but as artistic works. They are not research *through* design, but research *after* design (Wilson 2012, 36-38).

7. RESULTS

The number of international Nordic style larps with explicit sexual content has grown considerably in the last years. Table 1 includes the long scenarios designed and played in the Nordic countries and/or by Nordic designers during the last decade that this study discovered. In this chapter we present the results of our analysis on these 25 design abstracts. The analysis is divided into three parts: signalling eroticism, mechanics for erotic larping, and non-normative amorous play.

7 Researchers in the field of emotions have shown that a higher number of participants do impact the emotions to different degrees and infuse the inter-immersion process (Järvelä et al. 2016). Furthermore, in a group with 10 persons or more, there will be more of an audience (other than first person) for erotic scenes, and players without intimate knowledge of each other will interact.

7.1 Signalling Eroticism

The design abstracts clearly communicate if the larp has an erotic theme or sexual content. The erotic theme is signalled in a way that enables a player to make informed decisions about participating, and manages players' expectations. We divide sexual content into the following categories, as a product of analysis of the coded data: explanatory texts (descriptions), visual content (imagery), and fictional text pieces (prose). These are sometimes supported by character descriptions (characters), content descriptions or warnings (ingredients), and by explaining how sexual scenes will be played out (mechanics).

7.2 Descriptions

Larp website descriptions clearly outline erotic, extreme, and otherwise emotional impactful play, while balancing that with clear statements that play will take place in a safe manner, with respect for others, and usually also in an inclusive and queer-friendly way (see also Sihvonen and Stenros 2019). Indeed, every one of the larps in the dataset tried to strike a balance between igniting players' playful sexual fantasies while simultaneously assuring them that a larp is totally safe. The player can, the sites assure, always opt-out, tap-out, negotiate off-game, or de-escalate.

> Follow My Lead is a non-verbal larp about kink exploration and kink negotiation that gives participants the alibi and tools to artistically play with submission and domination . . . This experience can be deeply emotional, sensual and transformational. Negotiation, consent and safety are paramount. (*Follow My Lead*)

Most larps in the dataset outline how sexual content is supposed to be played out. Sometimes the descriptions take the form of invitations, such as this one from *Inside Hamlet*: "All genders, sexualities and bodies are invited to act wicked and be beautiful at this larp. During play you are likely to become witness to nudity, public displays of affection and sexuality, simulated but realistic-looking sex, and violence." It is not worded as a content warning, but as an invitation to erotic play, as well as an instruction for players to view others as attractive.

Almost identical formulations appear at *Libertines*, *House of Craving*, *The Forbidden History*, *Baphomet*, and *3 AM Forever*, reflecting what seems to be an emerging norm in Nordic larp culture: framing these larps as accessible and inclusive, but also explicit and transgressive. The trend of erotic larp is evolving, and they reference not just films, literature, and music as inspiration, but also other well-known larps: "Libertines is inspired by several other larps, . . . like *St. Croix* as well as larps like *Baphomet* with its . . . physical and decadent style" (*Libertines*).

A key function of the design abstract is to work as an advertisement in attracting the players, but also to do expectation management: what kind of actions will take place at the larp. In order to attract the right player group, it is common to include a requirement for the minimum comfort level needed for participation:

> be able to hug a stranger tightly and maybe kiss them on the mouth. But whether gentle intimacy, portrayed lust or pretend violence, you will always have full control of your own body and of the story you are telling. You always choose who to touch and control who touches you. (*House of Craving*)

Of course, just the name of the larp (e.g. *Screwing the Crew, Kink and Coffee, Libertines, Disgraceful Proposals*) or the setting (e.g. brothel, occult possession, "Vintage era," lawless jail) can inspire larpers looking for erotic content to sign-up, according to their personal tastes in role-play. However, larp websites have become more explicit and clear in their communication of erotic play during the period investigated. The website of *Kapo* (2011) was much more coy than the more recent larps, when it read: "Players will be introduced to an environment of bizarre social norms and values." Some of the newest larps in the corpus include an affirming attitude to breaking norms:

> [The larp] is a delightful high-octane nonsense, a silly romp into decadent flirting and sensuality in a carnivalistic light hearted adult fairytale. It is set in a rococo punk reality with magic and meringue and frivolous frolicking, it is explicitly queer and intentionally totally camp. (*Disgraceful Proposals*)[8]

This description explicitly explains how the larp is meant to be carnivalistic, and thereby gives room for sexual content as part of the game.

7.3 Imagery

Photographs, drawing, video, and other *imagery* is used on the websites to further signal erotic content. Specifically creating drawings (e.g., *Libertines*, *Spellbound*) or photographs (e.g., *Vedergällningen*, *Asylen*, *Kapo*) for the websites is common. For example, *Finding Tom*, a larp exploring the life and works of Tom of Finland, uses a drawing (Figure 1) made by one of the designers to communicate that in this larp the concept of Tom's Men (masc leather gay men) is meant to include all bodies and genders. Evocative images can let the players envision scenes they want to play (as discussed by Paisley 2021), but they also help players make the choice of not participating, as in the case of the rather extreme and abusive scenes displayed from *Kapo*, *Asylen*, and *Gården* (Figure 2).

In addition to bespoke images created to advertise and communicate the vision of a larp, it is common to use thematically relevant pictures from other sources (e.g. *Nocturne*) as well as existing artwork that evokes eroticism (e.g. *Baphomet, Pan*). The most honest depiction of the larp is communicated with pictures from an earlier run of the larp (e.g. *Inside Hamlet, The Forbidden History*, and *A Nice Evening with the Family*). *Just a Little Lovin'* has been run so many times that there are galleries of photos online for potential participants to browse (Figure 3). Video is also sometimes used. Both *End of the Line* and *Kapo* had a trailer specifically made to advertise the larp. The *Kapo* video displayed much more clearly the possibilities for (heteronormative) sexual content in the larp, in comparison to the website texts.

7.4 Ingredients

It is increasingly common that larp websites contain "an ingredient list." This is a list of elements that the playing of the larp will contain. While ingredient lists have been partially inspired by trigger and content warnings, this more neutral and descriptive ingredient formulation

8 The international run of *Disgraceful Proposals* was cancelled due to Covid-19 after the sign-up. However, versions of the larp have been run twice in Finnish previously and the larp will be run again soon.

seems much more common.[9] Here is a partial ingredient list from the larp *Baphomet*, which is advertised with the themes of terror, lust, desire, power, and loss of control:

- Possession, which means non-consensual character actions. . .
- Sensual and sexual play across genders
- Alcohol
- Bathing in dark water
- Erotic relationships
- Bullying
- Very physical play, including theatre style sex simulation (dry humping)
- Violent outbursts, face slapping
- Nakedness
- Play on abortion and impregnation . . . (*Baphomet*)[10]

In the larps explored for this article there is no uniform idea of what counts as an ingredient that should be described. An ingredient list is a relatively open form of description. In our data corpus, ingredients relating to erotic larping can include:

- *themes*, such as "romance and forbidden affairs" (*The Forbidden History*), "explore magic, seduction and the battle for free will" (*Spellbound*), "questions about monogamy, open relationships and sexual relations" (*Screwing the Crew*),
- *examples of play*, such as "lightly touching hands, arms and shoulders of all other present players, and to lead a blindfolded person, and to be led" (*Follow My Lead*), and "[h]omosexual sex, homosexual history, homosexual men, homosexual love, cruising, . . . discrimination" (*Finding Tom*), and
- *instructions for erotic play-style*: "nudity, public displays of affection and sexuality, or simulated but realistic-looking sex" (*Inside Hamlet, Pan, Baphomet*), "Play with other people like they were exotic animals: touch, turn, poke, measure and smell them. Try to teach them tricks" (one of many decadence suggestions for *Disgraceful Proposals*) and "Physicality and debauchery" (*Libertines*). "You have to be able to accept other players' limits for play on real sex and violence." (*Gården*, translated by the authors).

Many larps in the dataset feature oppressive and disgusting content – such as historical slavery (*St. Croix*), institutional abuse (*Kapo, Gården, Asylen*), incest (*A Nice Evening, Inside Hamlet, House of Craving*), and rape (*Vedergällningen, St. Croix, Asylen*). Larp designers may or may not describe their larps as erotic when they feature abuse or sexual violence. However, players who are into BDSM or extreme play may read or experience such content as erotic. For these players a content warning (a part of the *ingredient*) for extreme play can also be a clue for sexual content. Sometimes the warning is written in the form of a paragraph:

> At interrogations you can expect to be pressured psychologically and physically, though of course within your own limits. The game itself is about losing [sic] yourself

9 The concept of an *ingredient list* was pioneered by the larp designer Karin Edman, who wanted to include all of the ingredients of the larp: Food, sleep and locations, not only warnings and content.

10 Note that actions are non-consensual for characters, not for the players.

> and your humanity and might have heavy emotional effects. (*Kapo*)

Often abusive content is flagged on the website: "Abuse of power and authority, both social and physical." (*Nocturne*); ". . . experience vulnerability, helplessness, abuse and violence" (*Asylen*, translated by the author); and "Mind control of character" (*House of Craving*, *3 AM Forever*, *Pan*, *Baphomet*). Similarly, topics are regarded as taboo, heavy, or potentially triggering, such as "topics like patriarchy, power, . . . sex, infidelity and pedophilia" (*A Nice Evening with the Family*). Sometimes ingredient lists also communicate limits very explicitly: "In-game racism: Yes. Off-game racism or joking about the theme: No" (*St. Croix*, website, translated by the author).[11]

Playing on dark themes does not mean trivialising the issues being explored – unless one considers play to be inherently trivial or trivialising (see Sutton-Smith 1997). However, play on oppression and violence targeting marginalised people has been criticised as having the potential to be akin to dark tourism and as contributing to marginalisation, while also having a potential for increasing shared narratives and understanding of marginalisation (Leonard, Janjetovic and Usman 2020). The design abstracts attempt to allow potential players to self-select if they feel comfortable participating.

7.5 Prose

The design abstracts in the sample include diegetic content to different degrees. Fictional text, *prose*, is used to set the mood (setting, genre, time period, character persona). For example, "Gården," a correctional institution in a dystopian future where (gender and sexuality) norm breakers are forcefully sent, is evoked with prose:

> . . . right, you know her from earlier, lived together it says here. Were you actually sexually involved? Well, then you have seen her naked before, so what are you staring at, really? My colleague is going to do a body visitation, for safety measures, to ensure she doesn't bring any object that may hurt him, or you, or herself. Just keep staring, this will be nice . . . (*Gården*, translated by the author)

11 The design abstract of *St. Croix* did not position the larp as an erotic one, but as an attempt to address the forgotten history of Denmark-Norway as a colonial power:

> St. Croix is a larp that aims to explore how people adjust to extreme living conditions. Finding hope amidst injustice. How we excuse treating other people as less than human. How easily the abnormal becomes normal - "just the way it is." But also how love, joy and pride are kept alive. Staying human in an inhumane society.
>
> The role of the Scandinavian countries in the transatlantic slave trade is less known and well-documented than that of USA and the UK. The larp is set in the Danish-Norwegian Colony of St. Croix in the Danish West Indies, Caribbean. (*St. Croix*)

The larp is included in this dataset as it features sexual encounters, both voluntary and abusive, and has mechanics of playing them out. According to its design abstract, *St. Croix* is not a destination for people to role-play their erotic racialized fantasies for sexual pleasure. While such events exist (e.g., Weiss 2012), we are not aware of such events in the Nordic larp tradition. To make scenes featuring sexuality less erotic, the designers forbade "dry humping" at the larp and insisted on the use of abstracting method for playing on sexual content. Scarfs were used to signal character ethnicity. To enhance safety, all scenes with violence or sex required the players to go off-game and negotiate. Whether we can find racial iconography, "treating race as both a technology of domination and a technology of pleasure" (Nash 2014) within Nordic erotic larp design needs further studies to entangle.

This can be read both as an abusive situation or an erotic situation. When the websites use prose, they intentionally leave room for player interpretations.

There is also clear and explicit sexuality-affirming prose: The website of the hunter-gatherer larp *KoiKoi* contains a "cultural compendium," a repository of stories told by and for Ankoi (the people). Some of these stories that praise love and sex:

> Some only have one lover. Which
> is simple.
> Some have more than one. Which
> is not simple.
> Love is a wroth kwath
> I knew a wom who had three
> lovers. But one lover did not want
> her to be with the two others. He
> said they were lazy lovers and
> only thought of themselves.
> When wom heard this, she said to the two:
> "Your faces have been lost
> I will not be with you." (*KoiKoi*, translated by the designer Eirik Fatland)

Since *KoiKoi* had a universe with norms very different from our own regarding sexuality, gender, family, and time, to tell a story instead of providing descriptions or instructions may have more impact.

7.6 Characters

Another way of fostering a shared understanding of the fictional world is through *characters*. How the sexual content is unveiled through characters differs, but most include both desires and relations. This is how the character descriptions in *Screwing the Crew* go right to the core of the theme – sex in poly-relations:

> A has wanted an open relationship for a while, mostly because C has made it sound attractive. B has been sceptical, but when B finally gave in, it's (s)he who gets laid and not A. A might not have had too much sex during the years which is why (s)he wanted the open relationship, but is shy and insecure and doesn't really know how to score. It's no secret that X is B's lover.
>
> A: "I'm just more picky, that's all!"
>
> B: "It's not my fault (s)he doesn't get laid. It was his/her idea." (*Screwing the Crew; access to character descriptions on the web page*)

It is common to include short descriptions of all the characters in the design abstract. This fosters transparency and enables players to choose their favourite characters to play (e.g., *Just a Little Lovin'*, *Kink* and *Coffee*, *Nocturne*, *Inside Hamlet*, *Vedergällningen*). The descriptions are concise:

> Holly: Member of the Indigo house co-housing family. A modern-day priestess of Dionysus, in her home there is enough for everyone: sex, wine, food, passion, and drama. . . (*Just a Little Lovin'*)

By prioritising among the characters, a player can influence what kind of play they are in for. The characters, as the key interface into the larp for a player, vary as players are different. The "Völva" Svanlaug Warydottir is not for the faint-of-heart:

> Lover of Thorve and Hrefna. Making eyes at Ingirun. Svanlaug loves the extreme temperatures and to switch between them. Hot stones on her body, playing with flames or rolling around in the snow. (*Vedergällningen*)

At the same time, players reading about Svanlaug will probably understand that sexuality in this larp is something positive, queer, and physical. Comparably, at *Inside Hamlet*, the sexuality of the characters is as depraved as the rest of the story: Lydia, the mother of Bassani, who conspired and killed her husband, is described as manipulative, very dangerous, and enjoying an incestuous relationship with her son. Some larps also let all players read the full versions of all characters by linking to a Google folder, going for full transparency, but this usually happens later in the process and these full characters are seldom part of the design abstract.

The settings and the themes for the larps, and to what extent they are erotic vary, but the design abstracts clearly favour transparency. As one of the criteria for inclusion in the dataset was signalling that a larp has sexual content, this is not surprising, and it is possible that there are larps with erotic play that do not signal this as part of the design abstract. Even so, there is a wealth of larps where the players are not going to be surprised with erotic or oppressive content as its presence is clearly signaled in the five ways discussed so far: description, imagery, ingredient lists, prose, and characters. The sixth category, game mechanics, requires a longer discussion.

7.7 Mechanics for Erotic Larping

> There will be extensive preparations onsite before we start playing, where we will workshop culture, relations, playing techniques, and hopefully create trust between the players. (*St. Croix*)

During the last three decades, a wide selection of larp mechanics have been developed in the Nordic tradition (Koljonen 2019). These play mechanics and simulation methods are often described in the design abstracts and then rehearsed in workshops lasting from one hour to a whole day before the runtime of the larp begins.[12] This section reviews larp mechanics

12 At times the mechanics for portraying erotic interactions are not fully outlined in the design abstract, but explained only in handouts to the players or in the pre-larp workshop -- and possibly later described in a documentary article about the larp or a published larp script. When mechanics are not described on the website, we have used other methods to find out how they worked (publications, contacting the organizers). At times the design abstracts explicitly move the details of mechanics to the workshop:

> We have a rule about sexual scenes and violent scenes. Those involved must go "off game" to negotiate before playing it. . .This applies to playing on sex with and without consent, violence with sexual content and other kinds of violence. We will provide meta techniques that we hope will make people feel safe . . . We will explain

designed to regulate and simulate erotic encounters in-game, giving players control over their experience and expression while strengthening the alibi to address sexual themes in a ludic manner. How the erotic interactions and the sexual expressions are designed can show how sexual playfulness, pleasure, liberation, and oppression are dealt with, and give indications about norms for shame and sexual arousal for the player-character.

Numerous mechanics for playing out amorous, erotic, and sexual content in larps were found in the dataset, enabling us to construct a new typology of sex mechanics currently in use in erotic larp design. The following five categories (see Table 2) are based on the earlier typologies discussed in the Background section, but adapted, updated, and expanded based on the current data. The first category is *agreeing* on diegetic narrative. We regard this here as erotic story-telling and it is not in focus in this article, even though it might be a part of some of the mechanics in use. The next two are enabling embodied erotic role-play through design: *abstracting* sexual expressions and *adjusting* sexual play level. We also have two new categories:

1) *calibrating* player-to-player interactions (includes negotiations in- and off-game and (de-escalating), and
2) *compelling* mechanics that push or pull players into erotic play, often diegetically against the character's will.

This last category is different from the others, since it deals directly with creating alibi for engaging in sexual content, not on how to portray it. The categories are analytical; in practice larp designs can and do employ mechanics from multiple categories.

Before diving deeper into the categories, it is important to note that in this review of contemporary larps, all of them include opting-out solutions. Players are always able to step out of the scene and stop playing, to momentarily stop in-character interaction between players, or stop the larp as a whole. These rules are typically implemented by non-diegetic stop words, safe words, or hand signals, but are in a few examples included in the in-game story world. The archetypal formulation of this design ideal is *The Law of Two Feet*:

> If at any time during the game you find yourself in a position where you are neither entertained nor contributing, use your two feet, leave the game. (*Kapo*)

A common way to establish safety around intimate and other aspects of role-play is to include ways to momentarily stop in-character interaction between players. These rules are typically implemented by non-diegetic stop words, but are in a few examples included in the in-game story world. One such example is the "Korrigeringshandboken" (*Asylen*), another the diegetic safety poster in the game *Kink* and *Coffee*, which implements safety words both in- and out of game.

* * * * *

and practise this during the workshop. Sexual scenes will not be played out with so-called theatre sex/dry humping. (*St. Croix*, translated by the authors).

Table 2: Erotic Role-Play Mechanics: A typology of game mechanics for sexual content in larps, for interpreting erotic larp design.

EMBODIED EROTIC ROLE-PLAY:

1. *Abstracting* sexual content and play

- Focus on expressiveness of amorous activities.
- The body of the player expresses their character's emotions and erotic actions in a visual but not realistic way, sometimes with props. The action is not traditionally
erotic, but acts as an expressive or symbolic replacement for erotic action.
- Examples of games that are abstracting embodied erotic role-play: *Roxanne*, *St. Croix*, *KoiKoi*, *A Nice Evening*, *Finding Tom*, *Vadergällingen (intercourse)*, *Future is Straight*.

2. *Adjusting* sexual play intensity

- Focus on controlled feelings of sexual arousal.
- The sex mechanics adjust the level of expressed sexuality down, while keeping the
erotic content realistic. The adjustment is guided by the larp design, not active
negotiation between players. It allows for mirroring (toned down) real erotic scenes, while prohibits actual sexual interaction.
- Examples of games that feature adjusting embodied erotic role-play: *Kapo*, *Just a Little Lovin'*, *Forbidden History*, *End of the Line*, *Vadergällingen* (*BDSM*), *Libertines*.

3. *Calibrating* player-to-player dynamics and its meaning

- Focus on player agency in negotiating sexual states.
- Players, both diegetically and non-diegetically, negotiate what they want to engage in with a specific co-player at a specific moment, and what does it express of their characters. The sex mechanics in this group include escalating/de-escalating and all kinds of negotiations in- and off-game. In very few cases the players are allowed to calibrate up to engagement in "real sex."
- Examples of games that feature calibrated embodied erotic role-play: *Inside Hamlet*, *Just a Little Lovin'*, *Kink & Coffee*, *Pan*, *3AM Forever*, *Redemption*, *Pleasing Women*.

4. *Compelling* erotic engagement

- Focus on alibi for playing out sexual content.
- The game mechanics push players to play out sexual content. Through characters with

dominating powers, possession mechanics, or scripted scenes, the player-characters are pushed and pulled into erotic scenes. Often the only way to refuse compelled erotic larping, is to exit the scene (sometimes this means stopping role-playing for a while). This gives a strong alibi for playing out (transgressive) sexual content. Compelling mechanics are combined with other types of mechanics for erotic play.

- Examples of games that compel erotic engagement: *Baphomet*, *House of Craving*, *Pan*, *Follow My Lead* (scripted scenes), *Redemption*.

STORY-TELLING EROTIC ROLE-PLAY:

***5. Agreeing* on diegetic narrative.**

- Focus is on the story, not embodied experience or performance.
- The players go out of the larp to decide what happens. The narrative is either just verbally agreed on, or helped by outcome resolution systems (like using dice). It can also be a monologue that decides the story of one of the characters in the scene.
-
- Examples of games that include story-telling erotic role-play: *A Nice Evening*, *Screwing the Crew* (monologue), *Just a Little Lovin'* (monologue).

* * * * *

7.8 Abstracting Erotic Play

When a sex mechanic has an *abstracting* function, it might not visually look like an erotic interaction, but the design may still give room for immersion into sexual emotions. The mechanics used for abstraction of sexual expression makes the playstyle expressive, stylized, thematically appropriate, or immersive. For example, *Finding Tom* uses balloon-animal balloons as expressive and humorous phalluses.

In the non-verbal short-form larps *Follow My Lead*, *Roxanne*, and *Spellbound*, abstracted action is the only way to conduct sexual expressions. Here is an example of a thoroughly specified, but not necessarily erotic, game mechanic:

> When the Undergrounders bind a human, they also use a ribbon for this. When bound a human must obey the leading of their Undergrounder. Each Undergrounder has three ribbons and can therefore bind three different humans, or perhaps bind the same human several times, to underline the severity of the binding. To bind a human the Undergrounder must get the human to either: – Dance with them, – Eat or drink their food or wine, or – Accept a gift. (*Spellbound*)

Some long-form larps also use abstract, yet physical, ways of representing sexual scenes. For example, in *St. Croix*, a historical larp about Danish slave-owners in the Caribbean, the most powerful character holds another in a neck-grip from behind, while silently counting to 10 (in the tempo chosen), then pushes the subordinate to the ground (Stamnestrø 2018). The mechanic highlights power dynamics over the erotic, due to the theme of the larp.

An early and influential method for abstracting sex mechanic is Ars Amandi (Brown and Stenros 2018), developed for *Mellan himmel och hav* (2003, not part of the dataset):

> The core of the Ars Amandi method involves limiting the body area that the players touch and use in physical interaction to hands, arms, shoulders . . . and the neck . . . In some instances the interaction has been restricted to only include hands and arms. Touching the permitted areas, combined with eye contact and breath and moans constitutes the A to Z of Ars Amandi. (Wieslander 2014)

A few larps in our sample (e.g. *Screwing the Crew*) still used it. Also, as it is relatively well known, it can be introduced to a larp by players during a workshop (e.g. in *Kapo*, see Nordic Larp Wiki 2019).

Ars Amandi has also been modified in ways that suit a larp better. The closest to the original design, to cater for intimacy and sensuality, was seen in the four-gendered alternative world of *Reborn* (2018), where it is called "soulsex," and includes closed eyes, touching of the face, and kissing. An example of more significant modifications is found in the hunter-gatherer larp *KoiKoi* (2014), where Ars Amandi was extended into a rhythmic sound and harmony ritual (Eirik Fatland, email to the designer, August 19, 2021). Rituals for (sex) magic and sexual arousal were also used in *Vedergällningen* and *Spellbound*.

The abstracting mechanics used for portraying power, pain, and dominance vary from symbolic (e.g. *Spellbound*) to more corporeal (e.g., *Finding Tom*) – obviously always with the possibility to opt out. Even when the narrative does not have clear "top" and "bottom" characters (as in BDSM), the power-play may be present in the method used for acting out sexual content. In the onsite player handout for *A Nice Evening with the Family*, a larp built on classic Nordic bourgeois theatre plays like *Hedda Gabler* and the Danish movie *Festen*, it is explicitly stated that sex in this larp is about power, potency, and control. The in-game technique, inspired by *Ars Amandi*, emphasises the theme and refers to "dominant" and "submissive" even if this game is not about BDSM:

> With the dominant on top and the submissive lying down you are both allowed to use your hands . . . on the other player's hands and lower arms. You should not touch anywhere else. These touches can be gentle, or rough, ecstatic or bored, etc.
> The dominant character then sets the tone by uttering a word or a short sentence . . . This is met with a word from the submissive. You then take turns sharing words that represent your character's state of mind during the act. (*A Nice Evening with the Family*)

Even if the method is more abstractive when it comes to portraying sexual intercourse, it may be viewed as an adjusting mechanic for erotic power-play, designed for both physical interactions and strong emotions. For example, touching hands while looking another in the eyes and breathing heavily, as in *Ars Amandi*, is physical and can be emotional but it is abstract compared to actual lovemaking. The categories discussed here are analytical; in practice the mechanics can be understood in multiple categories. For example, using props as phalluses can be abstract (as with balloons in *Finding Tom*), or adjusting (placing a dildo near one's crotch in *Just a Little Lovin'*).

7.9 Adjusting the Level of Sexual Intensity

Several of the larps in the dataset use bespoke metatechniques for playing sexual content to tie in with the theme, setting, and play style of the larp. Mechanics meant to *adjust* the level of intensity and physical interaction, usually to lower it, are common (see also Stenros 2013). This kind of design renders the play style less abstractive, more sexual, and possibly more immersive. A particularly widespread simulation technique is called either *theatre style* or *dry humping*. While interpretations of "theatre style sex" vary, usually this means a visually recognizable dry humping with clothes that may or may not involve physical contact. The sexual intensity is adjusted so that no nudity or actual penetration take place, and the individual players can adjust the physicality so genitals do or do not come in touch through their clothes. In some larps, methods of acting out sex are just named shortly in the sign-up, with no elaboration: "very physical play, including theatre style sex simulation 'dry humping'" (*Pan*). Both mutual and loving erotic scenes, as well as sexual transgression, can be played out with this technique. *Just a Little Lovin'* included a detailed, non-heteronormative bespoke method for sex: *the phallus method*. This was a way to make sexual play fit narratively with the overarching theme, and its focus on male gay sexuality:

> Find one (or more) phallus. At least one of the participants must have a phallus. It can also be a stick, a candle or a vegetable, if you cannot get hold of one of the in-game props. . . Keep your clothes on. Have a phallus ready.
>
> a. The phallus is gender-free, everyone can use one. The prop . . . symbolizes sexual assertiveness and penetrative sex in one form or another. It will simulate hetero sex and lesbian sex as well as gay sex. . .
> b. Before you start, be aware of what kind of emotions you wish your character to explore in the scene.
> c. The sex scene shall be as visual and emotional real as possible.
> d. And even if your character is not having fun, you should! . . . End the scene: [by reciting an] "Inner Monologue" [out loud]. (*Just a Little Lovin'*)

Säädyttömiä Aikeita used an optional seashell method, inspired by the phallus method, but modified to be less oriented towards male sexuality and also more abstract (Teerilahti 2021). Mechanics of adjusting can be close to out-of-game erotic interaction, and the player–character physical experience and emotions can be indistinguishable. The *inner monologue* from the character mentioned above means verbalising thoughts out loud, words the other player(s) can hear, but not the characters. This is not to foster agreement on the narrative, but a metatechnique to focus back on the fictional character and narrative – and simulate the intimacy created in sex. Another way to stress the performative aspect is to invite audience to a sex scene as in *House of Craving*, where if the player tells someone "I need some alone time," it is an invitation to watch a masturbation scene (Koulu 2020). Clothes are on while "masturbating" is performed.

Out of the 25 larps with sexual themes, two (*Gården* and *Asylen*) were open to physical interaction with genitals and other erogenous zones, but even those included a choice of adjusting the level of sexual intensity to pretend-play instead of "real sex."[13]

13 *Baphomet*, *Pan,* and *Inside Hamlet* hint towards it, e.g. "Participants are allowed to take physical interactions of a sensual nature – flirting, touching, kissing and so on – as far as they mutually choose." (*Inside Hamlet*).

The eight larps that include BDSM scenes also provide adjustment when it comes to a combination of playing out pain or bondage (e.g., stipulate that all binding should be escapable). It is common that within the same larp, players can choose between levels provided by the larp design (e.g., in *Just a Little Lovin'* using the phallus on their arm or close to genitals), or even an in-built part of the mechanics, like the simulation levels one is supposed to whisper in the other's ear before a BDSM session is started:

1. **SiM (simulating):** Faked pain, theatrical sex without much body contact, and simulated bondage without real knots.

2. **Semi-SiM:** Some pain (with exaggeration through acting), simulated sex with clothes on, easily escapable bondage.

3. **Realistic (but some SiM):** Close to a real level of pain, simulated sex with pants on, bondage with knots (still with exaggeration through acting). (*Kink* and *Coffee*)

This means that there is a combination of adjustment (different designer established levels of interaction) and negotiation (players choosing during runtime how to play).

7.10 Calibrating Player-to-Player Dynamics

To decide their common limits for play and intimacy, players may calibrate before or during an erotic larp scene, as exhibited by several larps in the dataset. Calibrating the player–to-player dynamics influences what the players physically engage in and what happens between the characters. This is a specific type of sexual mechanic for larps, which has not been included in typologies before. In recent years there has been increasing discussion about in-game playstyle calibration between players. According to Johanna Koljonen, mechanics for playstyle calibration

> allow players to fluidly keep a scene in line with everyone's personal boundaries, while telling very nuanced stories together even on difficult topics. Depending on the content of your larp, calibration may be needed for physical consent (what can happen with my body), narrative consent (what kinds of stories can I participate in at this time), and playstyle intensity (what kinds of behaviours can I be part of or subjected to at this time). (Koljonen 2020)

Another way to think about this is to consider what is acceptable for the player and what is acceptable for the character, how the magic circle is drawn between the two, and how to keep the play within everyone's personal boundaries. Calibrating the player–to-player dynamic takes into account that the player and the character are the same.

The methods for negotiation and aftercare align with earlier research (Stenros 2013; also Grasmo 2019): Nordic larps have incorporated methods from BDSM subcultures (Sihvonen and Harviainen 2020) to increase senses of safety and security, while acknowledging sexual arousal as a factor. Our data again confirms this finding.

In *End of the Line* (2016) sexuality was negotiated in advance and represented by a range of methods, ranging from verbal descriptions to dry-humping. *Just a Little Lovin'* (2011) has mandatory negotiating before every erotic scene. Larps from the company Participation

Design Agency (*Pan*, *Baphomet*, *Inside Hamlet*, *3 AM Forever*, see PDA 2021) use theatre style sex as default, and include escalation/de-escalating methods and tapping-out (like in wrestling matches) for physical interaction and sexual content. The escalation and de-escalation methods are diegetic: *Inside Hamlet* uses the code-word "rotten" to invite more intensity to (sexual) action, while "pure" is used to signal de-escalation. From 2019 on, *Baphomet* has used scratching to invite escalation. The calibrating mechanics are motivated "to enable us to interact fluidly and respectfully" and "continuously negotiate" (*Inside Hamlet*), and it is mandatory to workshop the three interaction methods pre-game:

1. **Stepping it up!** You use a distinct code phrase to signal that you would like to step up the intensity of play directed at you.
2. **Taking the offer.** When someone uses the code phrase you're getting an invitation to increase the level of intensity. If you are NOT comfortable with stepping up you decline by shaking your head and continue playing as before.
3. **Tapping out.** If someone comes on too strong in their play, just tap them twice, as gently or roughly as is needed to get their attention. . . any participant can choose to leave the situation. (*Inside Hamlet*)

Calibrating between players while being in character is a newer method developed for larps with erotic content, while negotiating off-game before the larp or before a scene have a longer history in Nordic larp (see Grasmo 1998).

7.11 Compelling Erotic Engagement

A multitude of mechanics and designs are developed for Nordic larps to safely engage players in erotic larping. In what seems like a contrast, some larps push players to play out sexual content. The *compelling mechanics* are not described in erotic larping typology before; by designing characters with dominating powers, possession mechanics, specific spaces for erotic play, or loosely scripted scenes, the player-characters are pushed and pulled into erotic scenes.

Power play, or loss of control, is obviously a common theme in BDSM role-play, but it is often also a focus in larps which enable erotic larping. In this data corpus we find domination done by therapists (*Asylen*); officers (*Gården*); slave owners and gentry (*St. Croix*, *Inside Hamlet*, *Libertines*); supernatural beings (*End of the Line*, *Spellbound*, *3 AM Forever*); ghosts (*House of Craving*); gods and demons (*Pan*, *Baphomet*, *Vedergällningen*); elders (*Kapo*, *Vedergällningen*, *The Forbidden History*); computer/invisible guards (*Kapo*); and BDSM practitioners (*Just a Little Lovin'*, *Kink and Coffee*, *Follow My Lead*).

> We demand from our players that you feel comfortable around the vision and setting of this event. You will experience vulnerability, loss of control, abuse and violence. (*Asylen, translated by author)*

Larp mechanics are used to compel in-game sex scenes, both nice and perverted ones, although there is often a connection to oppressive themes. In connection to compelling mechanics, the design abstracts stress not only the use of opt-out mechanics but also the players' responsibility in this: "You need to feel confident in use of stop words and maintain a good communication with your co-players." (*Asylen*, similar in *Gården*, *translated by author*)

While mechanics for compelling erotic content have precursors in larp design (for example, as love potions, see Grasmo 1998), they seem to have entered larp design discourse when the possession mechanic was introduced for *Pan* in 2013:

> A big part of PAN is the possession mechanic. Your character will be possessed by the aspects of the Great God Pan. These aspects are lust, desire, pleasure and selfish indulgence; gluttony, sleep, sex, passion, closeness, control, curiosity, the twisted, and the weird. (*Pan*, similar text also in *Baphomet*)

When a player receives the necklace of the Pan or Baphomet, they are possessed, and they can command every player-character around them. Similarly, in *House of Craving*, half of the players play ghosts who have the power to physically force the living characters into twisted erotic encounters: "A house that will make them enact its perverted fantasies" (*House of Craving*), and the other players are told to obey.

Finally, player-characters may be compelled into erotic larping by loosely scripted scenes (*Roxanne*, *Spellbound*, *Follow My lead*, *Finding Tom*). This method implies a break out-of-game where the runtime gamemasters of the larp instruct what is going to happen in next scene, for instance engaging in anonymous sex in a dark park (*Finding Tom*) or for all humans to be bound by the Undergrounders (*Spellbound*).

In the four groups of mechanics for erotic larping studied, the aim is for the player to feel safe and free to consent to erotic action, even if the compelling mechanics may imply stepping out of the game for a while, if the player do not consent. For more immersive or erotic playstyles, the larp designs include negotiation and calibration, in-game and off-game. In addition to the safety mechanics embedded in sex mechanics there is a wide range of other safety measures. Some larps present several pages of rules, mechanics, and precautions, not only for erotic and sexual play, but to ensure the wellbeing of all players in all kinds of interactions. These fall outside the frame of this article, and are not discussed here.

7.12 Non-Normative Amorous Play and Queer Design

Our dataset strongly shows that larp scenarios have become more inclusive and representative regarding genders, sexualities, non-monogamy, and kink, just during one decade (cf. Stenros 2021; see also Stenros and Sihvonen 2019; Sihvonen and Harviainen 2020). This chapter is divided to inclusivity for *sexual orientation*, *gender*, *kink*, and *relationship structure*, even if these often overlap.

Many larps in the data corpus set out to signal inclusiveness. There are different strategies in how to openly communicate this. One way is to replace heteronormative language with more neutral terminology and, for example, not to mention either sexual orientation or gender identity ("(s)he", "Tom/Tracey", "their spouse").[14] A different path is to be explicitly open: "You as a participant can choose the sexual preference and gender identity of your character. The characters will be adjusted to your preferences." (*Baphomet*)

The design abstract for *Vedergällningen* is particularly clear as it explicitly calls out for "[h]eavy lesbian representation" in order to challenge the norms of both sexuality and gender. Portrayal of the Völva characters is clearly instructed:

14 Note that open language or gender-neutral design can imply extra affective labour for queer players (Stenros and Sihvonen 2019).

> Sexual lust makes you whole and strong. Sexual rituals strengthen the group, and yourself . . . The sexual norm is being non-monogamous, love is normally reserved for other women or alternative genders. Men are of occasional use for sexual pleasure, and for breeding . . . Völvas are encouraged to find their own sexual paths . . . (*Vedergällningen*)

Every Völva is given a specific kink in their character (e.g. blood-play, strangulation, ice/fire-play, drowning), so this is a larp that communicates inclusivity both in kink, gender, and relationship-structure.

7.13 Sexual Orientations

All larps in the dataset are receptive to queer play, queer players, and/or queer characters. Only five larps clearly position themselves as hetero-leaning, meaning that the narrative and the promotion material are framed as heteronormative. Even these larps may include gay men or lesbians among their characters; *A Nice Evening with the Family* has the token queer couple (as was more common in earlier larp design, see Sihvonen and Stenros 2019). *Roxanne* is playable for every gender and couples can be of any combination, but the only mention of coupling on the website is heteronormative: "He wants you. She wants me. The thought strikes like lightning. The dance, the body, closeness." On the other hand, even if the narrative of the larp *Gården* portrays a society with strong binary norms, it can be read as critique or an interesting normative background, and the narrative for each character may be very queer.[15]

As many as half of the larps in our sample clearly signal that they are inclusive when it comes to sexual orientation and gender. This is a significant change that has taken place during a decade. Some of the larps are explicitly queer in that they center on queer people, queer aesthetics, or queer themes (e.g., *Vedergällningen*, *Disgraceful Proposals*, *Finding Tom*) or they stage runs of the larp centering on queer people (*Screwing the Crew* all male/female runs). Sometimes erotic larps do not even give players a change to escape the gayness: ". . . if you as a male larper have no interest in playing a gay or bisexual character this might not be the game for you. We expect . . . physical intimacy between many of the characters." (*Just a Little Lovin'*). Indeed, some designers use queer content (as for instance the opening quote of this article) as a litmus test (Pedersen in Edland, Pedersen and Gyldenstrøm 2021); players who have a problem with queer sexuality on the website probably will not enjoy the larp and should not sign up.

The most common way of including queer elements in a larp is by including queer characters. Including queer characters in contemporary larps is easy. When a larp is set in a historical period, at a time when contemporary queer identities would be ahistorical, it is still possible to find ways to include those characters, as was done in *Vedergällningen*, *Inside Hamlet*, and *Libertines*.

> There will be characters of a diverse set of sexualities present at Libertines. In 1795, sexual identity as such was not a concept – sexuality was something you did . . . That means that judging someone over their sexuality was not really a thing. There are acts that are frowned upon, but they will not be very relevant at the larp . . .." (*Libertines*)

15 This is particularly true for the queer larp *The Future is Straight* (2021), about a gay conversion camp.

Just a Little Lovin' (2011) and *Finding Tom* (2021) are both stories about homosexual men, but include other identities. The former tells the story of how HIV/AIDS hit the gay community in the 1980s: "How gay is this larp? . . . pretty gay but not exclusively so…" (*Just a Little Lovin'*). *Finding Tom* is a scenario created to commemorate the artist and gay leather man Tom of Finland, and states that "Every adult is welcome to take part in this story regardless of their gender or sexual identity. Anyone can find Tom." (*Finding Tom*)

When the larps have couple sign-up (e.g. *Pan* 2013, *Baphomet* 2015, *Roxanne*), it is up to the players to form queer or hetero couples. The queerness need not be coded into the character (either by being designed as queer or by letting the player choose), but can have a queer-inclusive narrative. Pan, the deity that possesses characters both in *Pan* (2013) and *Baphomet* (2015) "doesn't care who they are interacting with, as long as there is passion and drive. Pan is inherently queer, ignoring norms, personal sexual identity and morals" (*Pan*). The possession game mechanic, also found in *House of Craving*, strongly encourages erotic interaction outside of heteronormativity.

7.14 Gender Inclusion

This section discusses characters of non-normative gender, inclusion of more than two genders in the fiction, and whether players are allowed to play characters of any gender. The two common ways of addressing gender are to either connect the gender of the character to the gender identity of the player (*Nocturne*, *Asylen*), or to disconnect the two so that players can choose the gender of their characters (e.g. *Libertines*, *Finding Tom*, *Reborn*). Playing a character that has a different gender from the player is called *crossplay*. The term "your identified gender" and/or the phrasing "every gender is welcome" are included in all design abstracts since 2015 in the dataset, showing that the larp designers are aware of genders outside the cis-norm.

The genders of the characters are addressed in multiple ways. For example, *House of Craving* explicitly "strive[s] for a balanced representation of various gender identities" and thus has two out of 24 characters written as non-binary. At *The Forbidden History*'s sign-up, the players can choose between their gender as female, male, non-binary, or other (with explanation field). In the non-verbal scenarios (*Spellbound*, *Follow My Lead*) gender is not mentioned in characters nor fictions, and are eventually up to players imagination. *Inside Hamlet* and *Kink* and *Coffee* have both gendered characters (in the latter also non-binary characters) and characters whose gender is up to the player.

Two of the erotic larp designs reinvent gender. In *KoiKoi* (2014) children were gender-free, and choose their gendered ritual when they grow up, either as man, wom, or the third gender "nuk." *Reborn* (2014) created soul-genders built on the four elements:

> The ideal case is to only be attracted to the "soul-opposite" gender of your own. . . : Water – Fire. Earth – Air. This means that polyamorous groups with several different genders involved are common, even if the ideal might be one with only two genders in the group. (*Reborn*)

7.15 Kinky Variations

> Follow My Lead is a non-verbal larp about kink exploration and kink negotiation that gives participants the alibi and tools to artistically play with submission and

domination. (*Follow My Lead*)

Erotic larps engage with kink[16] in several ways. Again, there are characters that have defined kinks, larps that explore kinky themes, and larps featuring kink-related locations. For example, both *Kink* and *Coffee* and *Follow My Lead* are set at a BDSM-club, *Just a Little Lovin'* includes a dark room, and in *Vedergällningen* all the völvas are kinky.

In other scenarios, playing transgressive scenes of domination (e.g., *Spellbound*, *End of the Line*, *3 AM Forever*, *Kapo*), sexual abuse (e.g. *Libertines*, *Asylen*, *St. Croix*), and punishment (e.g. *Gården*, *St. Croix)* may be regarded as kink-inclusive play, but they may also strengthen the view of kink-practice as deviant behavior. Kinks mentioned in the larps' design abstracts include sadomasochism, puppy-play, pony-play, restraints, drowning/waterboarding, humiliation, leather fetish, foot fetish, crossdressing, scarification, strangulation, sacrificing ritual, whipping, bondage, tantra, diaper, wetsex, soft touch domination, sex with objects, master and slave, group sex, and anonymous sex.

There are also sexual practices depicted in larps with erotic content that we label as extreme role-playing. If, for instance, sexual violence is part of the fictional world, that is not kink-play, but violence. However, if some characters engage in "rape-play" as part of their sexuality, then it is regarded as kink. This distinction, however, is not always clear in the design abstracts.

7.16 Open Relationships

Finally, erotic larp designs portray sexual encounters and relationships between more than two people. The norm of the committed relationship between two people is challenged, for example, through characters described to be in open relationships (e.g. *Just a Little Lovin'*, *Kink and Coffee*, *KoiKoi*, *3 AM Forever*, *Disgraceful Proposals*), but also through mentions of threesomes, swinger clubs, and group sex. Furthermore, *Screwing the Crew*, *Vedergällningen*, and *Reborn* were specifically designed around polyamorous relationship structures, while cult settings (e.g. *End of the Line*, *Pan*, *Baphomet*, and *House of Craving*) open up for wild sex and orgies.

This sample of larps shows few examples of exclusive heteronormativity, and a broad inclusiveness regarding non-normative sexual orientation, gender, sexual preferences, and relationship structure. A significant change in larp content, themes, and player preferences has taken place during the last decade.

8. DISCUSSION

Numerous Nordic larps have sexual content, and the trend is getting stronger. The 25 different erotic larps and larps with sexual content under scrutiny have been run approximately 100 times altogether, and roughly half of these runs have been produced since 2017. In total more than 50 Nordic designers have been part of creating larps for embodied erotic role-play over the last ten years. In their article about intimacy and trust in larps, Waern and Stenros wrote in 2015: "Playing on physical intimacy and sex is less common, both in the sense that fewer larps include any way to represent physical intimacy and that in most that do, players still tend not to play extensively on sex." This study shows that much has changed over the course of just

16 Kink is understood as both as non-conformative and as "sexual deviance" as Ariane Cruz (2016) explains in an affirmative manner in her *Politics of Perversion*.

six years when it comes to playing out intimate scenes. Even if many larps still do not include erotic themes or a specific way to enact sex, themes of sex and intimacy have become more accepted, erotic larps have become established, and ways to enact sex are a more integral part of the larp designs.

Erotic larp design in our data corpus invite players to play with sexual arousal but without relief: no orgasms, no fondling of genitals or sexual penetrative action. The design, as shown in the design abstracts, is meant to bracket and steer erotic interaction, most of the time containing and taming it. Even so, the norms related to erotic conduct seem to be individualized (see Weiss 2011): It is up to each player individually where the limits go, instead of common rules of play for all. Ultimately, the players are instructed to calibrate and negotiate how intimate the erotic content will be played out – sometimes up to and including unsimulated sex. This implies that an erotic larp both can be an arena for players to explore their sexual identities as well as erotic emotions, and can also be regarded as sexual play in itself (see Paasonen 2018).

The mechanics available to represent sexual acts have also expanded and become more physical. Simultaneously, the clear separation between player and character has become increasingly challenged (e.g. Järvelä 2019), so the need for other and/or stronger alibis for play seems present. In recent years, in addition to a rise of erotic larp, there has been stronger influence from liberal, queer, and kinky designers and players, fostering an understanding of sexuality as more queer and more playful than the traditional and backward-looking heterosexual procreation of fantasy larps 10–20 years ago.

In this discussion, we address two themes that emerge from reading the design abstracts as literary–ludic texts. First, we notice that the tension between the separation of the player and the character and the simultaneous arousal of both remains an issue, especially as players can individually carefully craft and calibrate their erotic play experiences to suit their desires. Larps have definitely become more sex-positive in their varied portrayals and mechanics, yet we must question the signalling in the design abstract, as many larps seem to have structures to remove player agency through compelling mechanics. Second, we need to address the inclusivity of these larps. Who can participate in these larps? The design abstracts are written in an inclusive manner, yet there are structures in place that put limits on this inclusion. The design abstracts also encourage self-selection on part of potential players – signalling that these larps are not, in fact, for everyone.

8.1 Layers of Alibi

In the Background section we identified that there is a tension at the core of erotic larp design: Separating the player and the character is key in constructing the alibi for play; yet sexual arousal, a key driver in an erotic larp, viscerally underlines that the player and the character are the same body. It seems that the structure of the alibi for play is different here.

First of all, the design abstracts in our dataset present erotic larping as a serious playful adult activity, that is a well-produced and worthwhile pastime.[17] It is possible to see the

17 Playing, even without a sexual component, threatens the adult responsible identity, and novel and improvisational free play is a potential source of embarrassment for adults (Deterding 2017). Larping is an activity that in many social contexts is seen as particularly embarrassing as it contains pretend play, acting "as if." While rarely openly ridiculed in the Nordic context today, it is still a significantly less established form of adult play than, say, playing digital games or *tennis*. Furthermore, sexual play may evoke embarrassment by itself, and even shame (Kontula 2021; see also Frank 2013; Stenros and Bowman 2018).

discussion relating to framing larp as art (e.g. Stenros 2010a) as part of the struggle for alibi. Engaging in art is a possible alibi for adult play. This is an attempt to render participation in (erotic) larps as a worthwhile endeavour.

Second, while the player–character division is questioned, it is still an aspect of alibi creation together with the overall narrative and fictional context. Erotic larp designs often employ *thick characters*, where a character's history, interests, sexuality, and relations are outlined. This creates a stronger alibi for playing out erotic content than when players create the characters themselves, or the characters are very similar to the players (aka *thin characters*). The alibi logic here follows the roleplay agreement: "It was not me, it was the character someone else created." Even when players choose characters based on short descriptions, it is the long description that provides alibi.

Third, larp design also works to strengthen alibi in numerous ways. *Spatial design* can enable erotic play by providing spaces for where sexual or erotic events can take place. These spaces can be diegetic (such as dark room, interrogation room, ritual space) or non-diegetic (black box, "kink zone"). Sometimes these spaces stack fiction upon fiction and expect characters to play a specific functional erotic role (e.g., interrogator, sex worker, cruiser). Using *narrative design* to strengthen alibi was also very common in the dataset. A significant number of larps with erotic content are played out in the frame of horror, domination, religion, or with the power of gods or demons. Being possessed or dominated by "unnatural forces" provides a special strong alibi for the players. Game mechanics can also be used in a compelling way. Domination especially is a common tool. In *Vedergällingen* it was directly written into the character relationships, whereas in *Pan* and *Baphomet* whoever wears "the necklace of Pan" must be obeyed. This third group we have discussed as compelling mechanics: pushing, strongly encouraging, or forcing characters to engage in erotic and sexual acts.

Since none of these moves fully solve the tension between distance from character and the arousal of the player, erotic larp design seems to use several layers of alibi to enable engaging in erotic scenes. Some alibi-strengthening structures work through *increasing agency* (f.i. calibrating mechanics), by enabling and empowering the player to participate; negotiate and calibrate play; use sexual mechanics; choose a role; enter a specific space; etc. Other alibi-strengthening structures work through *limiting agency*, compelling a player/character to act in a certain way because of the mechanics. This is where oppressive themes and power structures come in: Playing on being oppressed gives a stronger alibi for playing on sexual themes.[18] We call this stacking of enabling transgressive play while restricting player action *double alibi.* It can be compared to *consensual non-consent*, a concept that is found in BDSM subcultures (Ley 2020), because the players agree to bracket their agency. The only way to escape play activity is to quit playing. The function of this double alibi is to uphold the division between the player and the character, to hide the real-life desires by being playfully forced from outside.

A useful way of understanding erotic larp is as what Cindy Poremba (2007) calls *brink play*. In brink play, framing an activity as play is used as an alibi to be able to do things that would otherwise violate social norms. In brink play, norms are bent and played with, but not broken. Erotic larp is playful, but it is meant to feel real: It is located on the brink. However,

18 It is interesting to juxtapose this with sex therapist Jack Morin's (1996) work. According to him, the four cornerstones of eroticism are: longing and anticipation, breaking taboos, searching for power, and overcoming ambivalence. Interestingly, all four straddle the line between attraction and obstacles, as do larps (and games as well). Basically, we want something, but if for some reason it's not easily had, we find ourselves wanting it more.

remaining on that brink, developing a whole tradition of works there, requires ongoing work to uphold alibi.

8.2 LIMITS OF INCLUSION

During the past decade Nordic erotic larps have proliferated, and non-normative amorous play has become a common part of the design of larps. According to design abstracts, Nordic erotic larps have been quite inclusive of players with marginalized genders and sexualities. This is a recent development; for example, queer or gay themes were extremely rare before *Just a Little Lovin'* that premiered in 2011 (Stenros 2021).[19] The sexual play available in Nordic erotic larps is plural; heteronormativity is rejected.

That said, anthropologist Margot Weiss' (2011) work on the rise and popularity of pansexual BDSM-communities in the San Francisco as a result of neo-liberal consumer-culture resonates with Nordic erotic larp. Weiss discusses how "just play" and liberating role-play may be excuses for upholding inequality, and questions the eroticizing of suppression and torture. Furthermore, there are significant similarities between the communities she studies and how larps frame liberal inclusion of every identity, signalling being totally safe, while simultaneously playing with inequality, the individualisation of norms, and the making of the self (Foucault in Weiss 2011). To participate in a larp, a potential participant needs to learn the skills to participate, but even more importantly, they need money. Many of the Nordic larps that feature erotic design (like *Inside Hamlet*, *Pan*, *Just a Little Lovin'*, *The Forbidden History*, *Libertines*, *A Nice Evening with the Family*) are clearly priced for a select, privileged group of people: professional, liberal, middle-class, with enough money and ability to join.[20] This is a similar demographic to the one Weiss studied in San Francisco. While subsidized tickets to erotic larps exist, and do help economic accessibility, participating is still costly.

Stories of marginalised people can be played out to foster empathy and understanding (Smith 2017), but also as identity tourism (Nakamura 1995). Furthermore, it is possible to do so in an erotic way. While the player base in Nordic countries is diverse in many ways, it is predominately white, meaning that addressing experiences of racialized people carries a particular risk of trivialization or "toxic embodiment" as Nakamura (2020) names the 21th century game-industry reframing of VR as virtuous and providing "racial empathy." Even if the design abstracts clearly signal inclusiveness of "all bodies," most larps in our data make no mention of ethnicity at all, effectively discriminating through absence (Trammell 2018). As Aaron Trammell (2020) reminds us, play is not just about pleasure, but also about pain and evoking and remembering painful emotions. Racism continues to be a part of the fabric of our societies, and we need to discuss how it also exists in erotic larp and how it differs from erotic role-play within BDSM cultures (cf. Cruz 2016). Thus while Nordic erotic larps have become much more inclusive during the past decade, there are still limits to be removed in the future.

Finally, it should be noted that the very subject matter of some of these larps, eroticism

19 The obvious trailblazer was *Mellan himmel och hav* (2003), where all characters were one of three new genders, the normative relationship structure contained four people, and all characters were, from the point of view of our world, queer (see Stenros 2010b). However, in its time *Mellan himmel och hav* was an anomaly.

20 Note that there are also shorter larps playable in a few hours, in which one can participate at festivals, or even stage by oneself. The larps selected for the dataset in this article are all at least four hours long. Thus the situation is not quite as bad as this data corpus would suggest. Still, participation in a larp reviewed here requires paying the participation fee (100–500 Euros for a weekend) and travel, time away from work, and producing a costume and possible props.

in connection to oppression particularly, can render them inaccessible to some players. For example, people who face oppression regularly as members of a marginalized groups, people who have ancestral roots in enslavement, or people who have experiences of abuse or sexual violence may very well conclude that these kinds of larp are not for them and never will be. Indeed, the design abstracts are built to enable players to make informed decisions if a larp is for them – which clearly means that these larps are not for everyone. This underlines the importance of transparency in communicating the themes and other ingredients of a larp.

9. CONCLUSIONS

A clear tradition of Nordic erotic larps is emerging; significantly more larps in the international, contemporary scene deal with sexual themes and erotic content than just 6–7 years ago. The design of these larps cater for erotic and sexual play-styles, in addition to immersive play. Sexual arousal is no longer taboo, even if it is strongly bracketed and seldom proceeds to orgasmic experiences or real lovemaking. Larps with erotic design provide numerous layers of alibi to allow for participation, even as the character-player division, which has historically served as the foundation of the alibi, has been questioned. Design abstracts of larps communicate clearly and transparently the erotic content of the kind of play the larp aims for, with ingredient lists and content warnings, as well as prose vignettes, thematic illustrations, and character descriptions.

Erotic larps are inclusive of people of and themes relating to marginalised genders and sexualities. This has been a remarkable shift during the past decade. Erotic larps also contain a multitude of kinks woven into and played out in the fiction. Representations of non-monogamy are common. However, the cost of participation is quite high, meaning that economic accessibility remains an issue. Furthermore, while Nordic erotic larps are inclusive of different genders and sexualities, in the future more work is needed to improve inclusivity: Whose stories and fantasies are being explored in erotic larps? Who is able to participate in these larps?

Larps with erotic content typically send simultaneously two different messages: The larp is going to be adult, emotionally heavy, possibly shocking, and will include transgressive play. Concurrently, the larp designers assure the players that the larp is safe to play, there are rules, safety teams, pre-play negotiations, and always the possible to cut a scene or leave play. Numerous mechanics are available to play erotic larps; in this article they are divided to methods for abstracting erotic play, adjusting the level of sexual intensity, calibrating the player-to-player dynamic, and compelling erotic engagement.

The design abstracts of larps surveyed in this article promise that structured erotic role-playing games in fictional worlds are safe and exciting, and provide the players possibilities for exploring sexual identities and emotions. The next step in understanding embodied erotic role-play is to move from the design abstracts to the embodied practice. What do players do, what emotions and experiences are created? How do erotic larps relate to BDSM practice? What happens in and between the bodies of the players and characters – and what does it all mean to them? How can recreational erotic larping be leveraged for sexual well-being and transformative personal or educational change?

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APPENDIX A

Table 1: Overview of Nordic Erotic Larps 2011–2021

Larps with erotic or sexual content themes, with mechanics for playing such scenes out, designed to be played for more than four hours, and playable for 10 participants or more. Some of these larps are re-runned, and the webpages become updated and revised.

FI = Finland,
SW = Sweden,
DK = Denmark,
NO = Norway,
AU=Austria,
FR= France,
GE = Germany,
PL = Poland,
US = United States,
UK = United Kingdom,
UKR= Ukraine.

Larp runs are marked as sold out if thus indicated on the website.

Title	Premiere/ Published	Web site, accessed	Short description	Sexual play mechanics	Ticket cost, length	Runs	Designers	Other notes
3 AM Forever	2020 (FI), postponed to 2022	https://www.wildhuntlarp.com/3-am-forever 14.7.22	Contemporary party with magical faeries who take the power from the humans to make them dance forever.	Theatre style. Possession.	€59–99, 5 hours	(FI) 2020 (postponed), (NO) 2021 (postponed) (sold out) (DKx2) 2022	Bjarke Pedersen and Juhana Pettersson (Participation Design Agency)	At the time of writing *3 AM Forever* has been postponed three times due to the pandemic, but two runs were finally played August 2022.
A Nice Evening with the Family	2018 (SW)	https://aniceevening.se/ 4.3.2020	Bourgeois family drama, built around Winterberg's film *Festen* and several Nordic theatre plays.	Shag mechanic (top sit on the bottom). Black box. Off-game negotiations.	€290, 3 nights	(SWx2) 2018, (SWx2) 2019 (sold out)	Anna Westerling and Anders Hultman	The larp was originally staged four times in 2007; the 2018 version was significantly redesigned.
***Asylen* (Eng. Asylum)**	2019 (SW)	http://www.lajvet.se/asylen/ 15.8.2021	Near-future dystopian asylum for those who are queer (who are regarded as mentally ill).	Character's limits in questionnaire. BDSM/sex action simulation. General rules: variant of *Ars Amandi*.	€130, 2 nights	(SW) 2019	Caroline Sjöwall	
Baphomet	2015 (DK)	https://www.pantrilogy.com/baphomet 25.2. 2020	"Vintage" suicide cult with possession and erotic decadence.	Theatre style. Possession. Rituals. Escalating/de-escalating: scratching/tap-out. BDSM simulation (and eventually real).	€140 (2015), €295–485 (2020), 3 nights	(DKx2) 2015 (DKx2) 2019, (DKx2) 2020 (sold out)	Linda Udby and Bjarke Pedersen with Johanna Koljonen	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp. Sign-up as couples.
Disgraceful Proposals	2020 (FI))	https://disgracefulproposals.wordpress.com/ 28.2.2020	Punk rococo, queer historically-inspired hedonism.	Sex performed with objects, not each other. Physical play with no genitals (Finnish earlier runs: "Sea Shell" built on Phallus method.)	€69–110, 1 night	(FI) 2020 (postponed) (FI) 2022	Tonja Goldblatt, Vili von Nissinen, Kirsi Oesch, and Nina Teerilahti (Kimera Artist Collective)	Erotic themes are central to the design in this larp. International and redesigned version of the larp *Säädyttömiä aikeita*, (FI) 2017, (FI) 2018. Postponed due to pandemic, scheduled to be played in 2022.
End of the Line	2016 (FI)	http://solmukohta.org/uploads/AWiF/	Contemporary vampires, in White Wolf's World of Darkness.	Fade to black. Variants of different abstracting methods.	€25, 7 hours	(FI) 2016, (GEx2) 2017, (US) 2017	Bjarke Pedersen, Juhana Pettersson, and Martin Ericsson for White Wolf	

		EndOfTheLine-intro.pdf 1.3.2020						
Finding Tom / Tomia etsimässä	2020 (FI)	https://findingtom.wordpress.com / 10.8.2021	Art larp about Tom of Finland, and the history of gay men in Finland.	Simulated by variants of theatre sex, touching hands or balloons.	€15, 5 hours	(FIx5) 2020, (SW) 2021, (NO) 2021	Nina Mutik and Vili von Nissinen	Larp premiered as part of Tom of Finland jubileum. Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.
Follow My Lead	2019 (US)	Published in 2020 in *Honey & Hot Wax* collection.	Non-verbal, about consent, BDSM and fetish, at a kink club.	Blindfolds. BDSM negotiations. Characters have representational kinks.	Free - 10 4 hours (2020)	(US) test runs. 2019, published 2020, (NO) 2020, (FI) 2022	Susanne	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.
***Gården* (Eng. *The Farm*)**	2017 (SW)	http://www.lajvet.se/garden/ 5.3.2020	Near-future treatment and torture to become a better human. Satire of two-gendered society.	*Traumarommet* (like a black box). Diegetic rulebook. Sex and BDSM real and simulated.	Free - €100 1 night	(SW) 2017	Caroline Sjöwall and Karl Alfredsson	
House of Craving	2019 (DK)	https://www.houseofcraving.com/ 28.2.2020.	Erotic (teenage) horror larp: The house ghosts will steer your taboo actions. First you play the family, then you play the same ghosts in the next run.	Theatre style. Ghost dominance/possession. (BDSM real and simulated.) Pre-scripted erotic scenes.	€495 2 nights	(DKx6) 2019 (Sold out), (DKx6) 2022	Tor Kjetil Edland, Danny Wilson, and Bjarke Pedersen	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp. Adaptation of a freeform role-play with the same name.
Inside Hamlet	2015 (DK)	https://www.insidehamlet.com/ 28.2.2020.	Shakespeare's play adapted for 100 larpers in Elsinore castle, vintage decadence and descent into madness.	Theatre style. Escalating/de-escalating. Diegetic code words for invitation/tapping out – calibrating in-game	€400 (2018 version) 2 nights	(DK) 2015, 2017, 2018 (sold out)	Bjarke Pedersen, Martin Ericsson, Johanna Koljonen, and Simon Svensson. (Participation Design Agency)	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.
Just a Little Lovin'	2011 (NO)	http://just-a-little-lovin.blogspot.com/ 25.2.2020.	Gay larp about desire, friendship, and fear of death, on three consecutive 4th of July celebrations. Explores the HIV/AIDS epidemic and surviving cancer.	Phallus method, including Feather and Inner monologue. Theatre style. BDSM simulated. Black box. Off-game negotiations.	€275 (2019), 5 nights	(NO) 2011, (SW) 2012, (DK) 2013, 2015, short version 2020 (FR) 2016, 2021 (US) 2017, (FI), 2018, (UK) 2019, (FR) 2022	Tor Kjetil Edland and Hanne Grasmo	Larp script published as a book in 2021. Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.
Kapo	2011 (DK)	https://kapolarp.dk / 4.3.2020	Near-future prison camp, where the prisoners rule themselves. Extreme play, sound/light disturbance, interrogations.	*Ars Amandi*. Theatre-style rape and domination/submission. Black box.	€35 for a 24 hour ticket (could play for 12, 24 or 48 hours)	(DK) 2011	Anders Berner, Jakob Hedegaard, Kim Holm, Juliana Mikkelsen, Peter Munthe-Kaas, Frederik Nylev, and Rasmus Petersen	

Kink & Coffee	2012 (NO)	Published 2014 in *Larps from the Factory.*	Introduction night at a BDSM club, where a religious polygamous family shows up.	Freeze and show fantasy (Kink zone). BDSM adjustment: SiM-levels. Diegetic poster with rules. Action cards for play.	€0-10, 5 hours	(NO) 2012, Published 2013, (SW) 2014, (AU) 2014, (UKRx3) 2018	Hanne Grasmo	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.
KoiKoi	2014 (NO)	http://koikoilaiv.org/ 5.3.2020	Hunter-gatherer larp with three genders, lots of rituals, also for sex.	Love-making ritual with eye-gazing, sound-(dis)harmony and rhythm-making. Rituals.	€65-90, 3 nights	(NO) 2014	Eirik Fatland, Margrete Raaum, Trine Lise Lindahl, and Tor Kjetil Edland	
Libertines	2018 (PL)	http://libertines.atropos.se/ 1.3.2020	In 1795, libertines gathered for a secret party, where a lot is at stake. They have norms outside society.	Theatre style. Behind closed doors.	€300–500, 3 nights	(PL) 2019, 2020	Simon Svensson and Julia Greip (Atropos)	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.
Nocturne	2019 (NO)	https://struensee.wixsite.com/nocturne 2.3.2020	Brothel in US Civil War, soldiers and sex workers trapped in same place.	Representation technique for sexual action, no dry humping. Off-game negotiations.	€140, 2 nights	(NO) 2019	Adrian Angelico and Anne Marie Stamnestrø	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.
Pan	2013 (DK)	https://www.pantrilogy.com/pan 28.2.2020.	Contemporary couples-therapy weekend, where Pan possesses people. Horror (and desires) from within.	Theatre style. Possession by object, everybody must follow orders from the possessed one.	€445 (2020), 3 nights	(DK) 2013, (NO) 2014, (FI) 2015, (DKx2) 2020	Linda Udby and Bjarke Pedersen	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.
Pleasing Women	2021 (SW)	http://pleasingwomen.atropos.se/ 25.8.2021	British upper-class finishing school for young women in 1910. A story about young women discovering friendship, love, intimacy, and desire, in a reserved society.	Theatre style, cuddling.	€250–370, 3 nights	(SWx2) 2021, postponed to (SWx2) 2022	Julia Greip and Siri Sandquist, with Atropos	Postponed to 2022 Not included in analysis, published too late. One mixed run (all play women), one female player run.
Redemption: Salvation Through Sin	2021 (FI)	http://nordicrpg.fi/redemption/ 24.11.21	Historically-inspired cult of sinners set in Russia 1913.	Dry humping/theatre style. "The Hand" (between you and the body). Slow escalation with saying what you will do.	€350, 3 nights	(FIx2) 2021 (sold out)	Maria Pettersson and Juhana Pettersson	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp. Not included in analysis, published too late.
Reborn	2018 (SW)	https://reborn.atropos.se / 1.9.2021 and Society document - google doc 15.9.21	Near-future reinventing of gender and relationships, dissolution of the body and the ego. A kind of spiritual closed society.	*Ars Amandi* as "soul sex." How your body looks does not matter – it is the spirits who are having sex. Versus taboo "body sex."	€100, 2 nights	(SW) 2018	Atropos team, inspired by Kajsa Seinegård.	Remake of *Livsgäld* (2014).
Roxanne	2015 (DK)	https://the-smoke.org/programme-placeholder/roxanne/ 28.2.2020	Sad love stories between sex workers and their customers. Emotions danced out between acts.	Dancing/miming emotions. Theatre style. Spotlight for wanting sexual action.	Included in conference fee, 4 hours	(DK) 2015, 2016 (NO) 2018, (UK) 2020	Nicolai Strøm Steffensen and Rasmus Teilmann	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.

		(working)						
Screwing the Crew	2010 (NO)	Published in 2014 in *Larps from the Factory*.	Contemporary circle of friends where all are more or less polyamorous.	*Ars Amandi*. Inner monologue, not just for sex.	Free, 4–6 hours	(NO) 2010, (SW) 2011, Published 2013 (NO) 2016, 2018, 2019	Elin Nilsen and Trine Lise Lindahl	
***Screwing the Crew*, queer edition**	2017 (NO)	Sign up form 5.8.2021	All-female and all-male runs of the larp with a circle of friends where all are more or less polyamorous.	*Ars Amandi*, inner monologue, not just for sex.	€10, 4–5 hours	(NOx2) 2017	Elin Nilsen, Trine Lise Lindahl, and Tor Kjetil Edland	Same larp design as regular *Screwing the Crew*.
Spellbound / Bjergtaget	2015 (DK),	spellbound-scenariotext.pdf 2.3.2020	Underworlders bind humans from the village, non-verbal and with masks.	Dance as communication and erotic encounter. Bonding (dominance).	Included in conference fee, 4–5 hours	(DK) 2015, (NO) 2017, (NO/SW) 2018, (DK) 2019	Maria and Jeppe Bergman Hamming	2018 English edition larp script published for Black Box Horsens festival.
St. Croix	2015 (NO)	https://sverigeunionen.wixsite.com/sankt-croix 28.2.2020	Danish–Norwegian slave-colony in the Caribbean; about building a community while oppressed. Included abuse of slaves and subordinates.	Off-game negotiation mandatory for sex and/or violence. Abuse and dominance sex abstracted with neck grip and counting.	€165-200	(NO) 2015, (NO) 2018	Anne Marie Stamnestrø and Adrian Voje	
The Future Is Straight	2021 (DK)	https://straightfuturelarp.com/ 18.8.21	Gay convention therapy camp in a sex-positive but heteronormative and binary alternative society. Satirical.	Different sex technique for queer and straight intimacy. Involved looking down, turning back to each other, holding hands. Masturbation technique: rubbing your own hands.	€250–330 4 nights	(DKx2) 2021 (sold out)	Karete Jacobsen Meland, Tor Kjetil Edland, and Anna Emilie Groth, based on an idea by Cleo Kai Hatting	Not included in analysis, published too late. Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.
The Forbidden History	2018 (PL)	https://theforbiddenhistory.info/ 4.3.2020	1980s private college with secret societies, who engage in sexual, ritual, and BDSM acts.	Theatre style. Rituals. Players asked in sign up if wanting play on sex, romance, BDSM.	€370–700 4 nights.	(PL) 2018, (sold out), (PL) 2021 (sold out), upcoming (PL) 2023 (waiting list)	Simon Svensson, Julia Greip, Jonaya Kemper, Agata Swistak, Linnéa Fredin, Kjell Hedgard Hugaas, and Freja Gyldenstrøm (Atropos)	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.
Vedergällningen – Viking horror larp	2019 (SW)	https://vedergallningen.wordpress.com/ 29.2.2020.	Viking horror larp centred around women (Völvas) and nonbinary people, where stranded Vikings land. Thralls that are owned, sexual rituals, all Völvas have their kink.	Shag mechanic (top sit on top of bottom). Rituals. Fetish and Dominance/submission, BDSM simulated: Theatre style, pre-planned scenes, escalations.	€100 3 nights	(SW) 2019, (SW) 2020 (postponed twice) (SW) 2022	Karin Edman and team	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.

APPENDIX B

Promotional images for Nordic erotic larps.

Figure 1: Mood-setting image for *Finding Tom* by Nina Mutik. The picture evokes the style of the artist Tom of Finland, but in a gender-inclusive way.

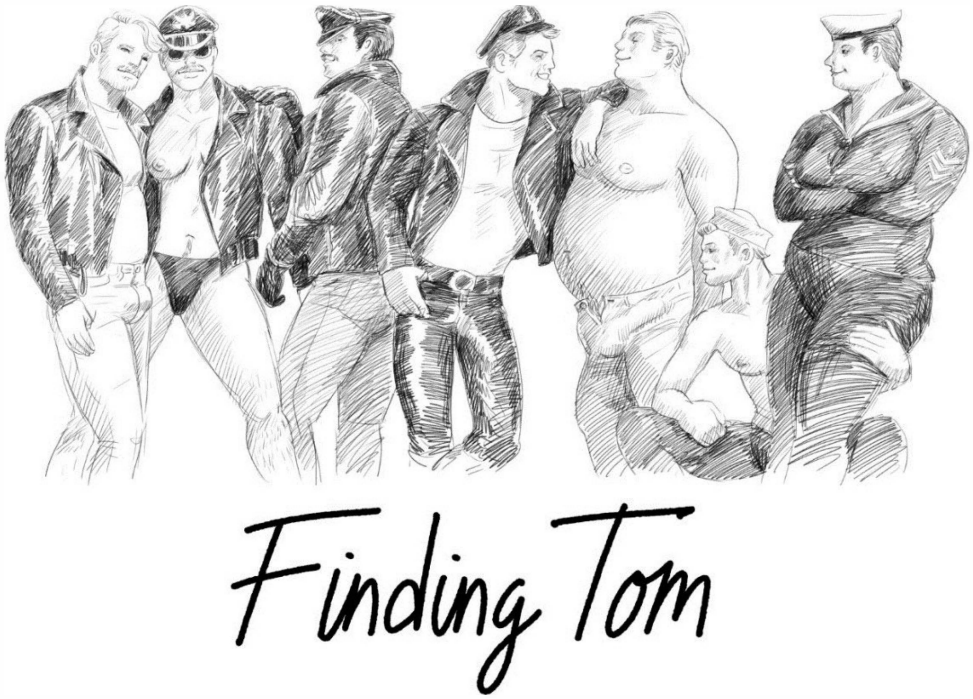

Figure 2: An illustration accompanying the playstyle for *Gården*. Photograph by Karl Alfredsson.

Figure 3: Documentary photograph from the UK run of *Just a Little Lovin'* by Oliver Facey. The picture shows the physical playstyle and queer characters of the larp.

Hanne Grasmo is a Norwegian sociologist, larp designer, educator, and writer. She authored the first book about Nordic larp in 1998, *Laiv – Levende rollespill*, co-founded the *Knutepunkt* larp conference, and co-designed the world-touring larp *Just a Little Lovin`*; the larp script book was published in 2021. Grasmo was Head of National LGBT Knowledge Centre, and now serves as the Head of Pedagogical Sexology committee of the Norwegian Sexology association (NFKS). She is currently employed as Doctoral Researcher at Tampere University, Centre of Excellency in Game Culture Studies, doing her PhD on role-play and sexual arousal.

Jaakko Stenros (PhD) is a University Lecturer in Game Studies working at the Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies at Tampere University. He has published ten books and over 90 articles and reports, and has taught game studies for well over a decade. Stenros studies play and games, his research interests include norm-defying play, role-playing, queer play, game rules, and playfulness. University of Turku has awarded Stenros the Title of Docent in 2019 in Game and Play Studies.