

Danish larp by numbers

By Morten Gade

Abstract

This article gives an overview of the little empirical data about larp in Denmark 2004. There are two data sources: (1) a survey conducted with Danish children in the summer of 2004, and (2) the data from the calendar of the Danish larp portal, Liveforum. Finally, the article deals with the discrepancy between the two sources.

Introduction

Over the last couple of years, there have been many attempts to guess the number of Danish larpers. In the last three or four years, I have heard numbers ranging from two to three thousand and up more than 50 thousand. It has been a frustration not to have a reliable figure, especially when contacting the "outside world", such as press and public institutions.

However, this summer the Danish Society for Nature Conservation (DSNC) supplied us our very first reliable, quantitative data. It is a thorough analysis of how children between the ages of 10 and 14 use nature (Gallup, 2004a). The background for the survey was, that DSNC had little knowledge of children's relationship with nature. Hence, the survey asked questions such as "How often are you out in nature?" and "What did you use nature for, the last time you visited nature?" (Bandmann & Thaning, 2004).

One of the activities which were deemed relevant by DSNC was 'role-playing'. Thus, role-playing was a possible answer along such topics as horseback riding, bicycling, doing sports, building campfires and bathing. Although there is no definition of role-playing in the survey, the children are asked if they role-played 'in nature' for the last month, so in our terms, the children were asked if they larped. <2>

Let us not hide it any longer: The results were thrilling. According to the survey, 8% of the children had participated in role-playing events in nature during the last month (Gallup, 2004b: 3). That means that 27.000 children aged 10-14 role-played (i.e. larped) in July 2004! <3> As the Danish National Larp Organisation (for short: LLR) stated in a press release, there are more Danish kids larping than playing e.g. basketball.

Also, the survey did not just provide us with a total number. We now also have indications about children's attitude towards role-playing:

- 11% of the children state that larping is one of their five favourite nature activities (Gallup, 2004b: 4).
- The study also showed that Danish children think there should be allocated more room for larping in the Danish nature: 22% apparently think that we could use more room (Gallup, 2004b: 22) – even if most of them did not actually role-play themselves.

Furthermore, the survey tells us that 5% of the children larped the last time they were 'out in the nature' (Gallup, 2004b: 28).

So, where are all these kids?

One question remained to be answered though. Where do all these kids go to larp?

The obvious source of information would be the Danish larp calendar at www.liveforum.dk. The calendar is close to complete and entails all major Danish larps on the regular larp scene <4>. Here, I will go through the parts of the data which is reliable, also the parts which are not related to the numbers of players.

The database shows that in 2004 189 larp related events were held in Denmark. Approximately half of of the larps are chapters in various campaigns and there also a few conferences in the calendar.

LiveForum's current calendar system has existed since early 2001 and our data shows that the number of events is stable:

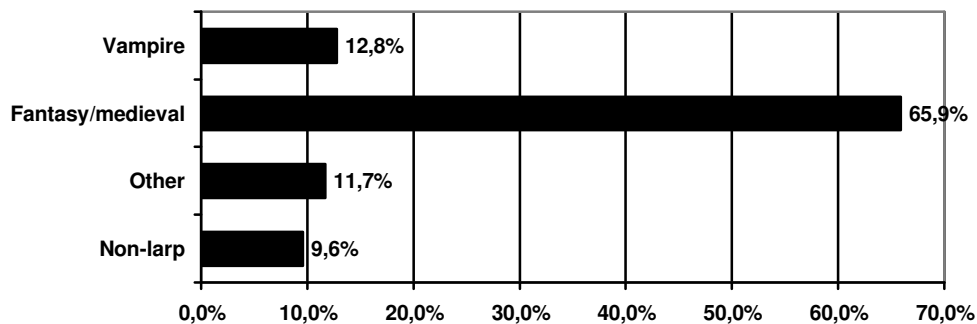
2002: 184 events
2003: 174 events
2004: 189 events

The LiveForum data also allows us to count together the number of players. Overall, the 189 larps in 2004 accounted for approximately 30.000 players. This can only tell us how many times Danes involved themselves in larp experiences, not how many larpers there are, as we have no data on the frequency, e.g. how many times a year the average larper plays. Also, the data is based on information from the organisers of the larps.

What genres are these 189 larp events divided into? When an organiser registers in the database, he or she has free text to describe the genre of larp. In the following I have gone through the dataset and divided them into the following genres:

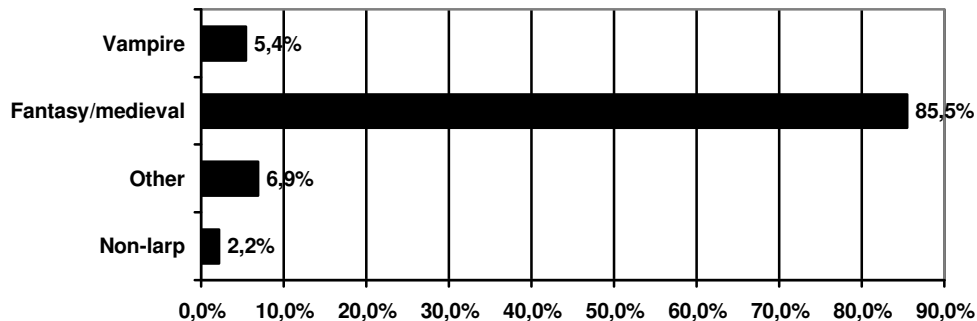
- Fantasy/medieval (including high fantasy, dark fantasy, war larps)
- Vampire
- Other larps (including submarines, alternate reality and much more)
- Conferences and other non-larp activity (including various assemblies and parties)

As figure 1 shows there is a very big majority of fantasy/medieval games in Denmark:



<caption>Figure 1: Larps in Denmark, genres 2004 (percent) (n: 189)</caption>

Two in three larp events in Denmark are fantasy or medieval. But is that also the case for the 30.000 players? To find out, I crosschecked the number of participants for the different larps with the above genres. The results can hardly come to any surprise:

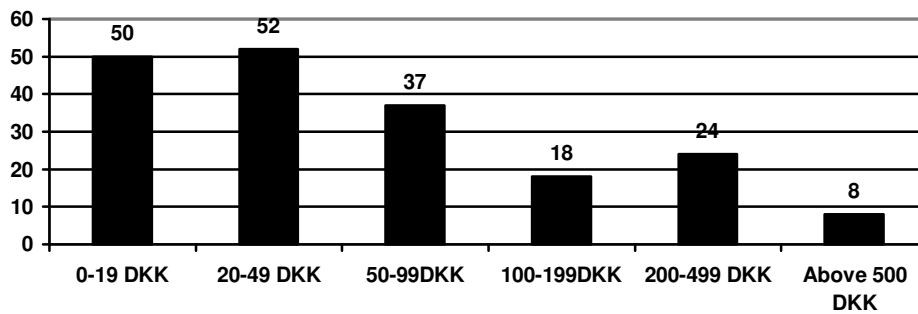


<caption>Figure 2: Players in Denmark, genres 2004 (percent) (n: 30.500)</caption>

The Danish larp scene is – as the above statistics clearly demonstrate – dominated by large fantasy and medieval games and campaigns, especially during the summertime. There are no signs of this changing,

as the fantasy wave generated by popular movies such as Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter has created a huge demand for fantasy-inspired larp.

Finally, the database can give us reliable information on how much the participants pay to be involved in Danish larp. When studying these statistics, it is important to notice how a lot of campaigns in Denmark are low cost compared to stand-alone larps. <5>. Hence, 50 of the 189 larp events targeted Danish players in 2004 had a price tag below 20 DKK (approx. 3 euro), while only 8 were priced above 500 DKK (approx. 70 euros)



<caption>Figure 3: Prices for Danish larps 2004, absolute figures (n: 189)</caption>

What happened to the 27.000 kids in July?

The data above can of course be flawed as they are entirely based on the information given from the organisers themselves. The calendar is basically an advertising tool for the organisers, and this means that there may be some problems with the reliability of their information. Furthermore, there can be other reasons for the data to be flawed. Let us dig in deeper on one of the months, July. This was the month where the DSNC survey showed that 27.000 kids ages 10 to 14 larped. According to the calendar, 25 events took place in July 2004 (LiveForum 2004). However, three of the events are set in Norway and Sweden, one of the events was actually a party, one was a con and another one was cancelled. The remaining 19 larps could not possibly have 27.000 children participating, could they?

Even though Danish summer fantasy larps tend to be rather big, they do not have over 1.000 participants on an average basis. Rather, many children larp through institutions, schools and youth schools. The kind of larps played here are quite distinct from the larps usually played in Denmark and also, the organisers do not always have contact to the traditional larp scene of Denmark. For children in Denmark, larp has become a game or sport that can be compared to other activities, such as football or scouts. Of course this offers both challenges and possibilities.

It would be interesting to do extensive research on the two larp scenes, especially on qualitative differences between them. Also, it would be interesting to map out how the two scenes interact and what potential there is for stimulating this interaction and hence make better larps in institutions that can also be used for learning. For more on this, see *Rollespil for børn og voksne* which is written by larpers but targeted teachers and other educators (Andersen & Raasted, 2004).

How many of the kids did participate in larps organised by the traditional larp scene? My calculations based on the LiveForum data show that the 19 larps in July can account for somewhere between 3.000 and 6.000 participants. A lot of these participants are obviously not kids, but a lot older and some will probably participate in more than one larp in July. So in the age group of 10-14, the traditional larp scene can only account for a very little part of the larping actually done.

Conclusions: The public perception of larp

If we trust the data from the DSNC survey, there are at least five or six times as many children larping through schools and institutions as there are through the traditional larp scene. Among other things, that has great significance for the public perception of larp.

In Denmark, larp has become something you know what is. In a recent number of the fanzine *Rollespilleren*, the zine documented that larp has been used as an element in stand-up comedy, tv commercials and radio satire. People have a pretty good idea of what role-playing and larp is. In fact, it is

actually the same thing in the public perception. Usually larp is coined as role-playing, whereas traditional tabletop role-playing has disappeared from the media (at least compared to the massive coverage of larp).

The only problem is, that their image of larp does not correspond with the way, we like to think of ourselves. In the media and other popular sources, larp is generally regarded as children's play – and larp is always based in fantasy- or medieval settings. I would argue that this is because the main frame of reference for the public consists of the larps conducted in the institutional larp scene, which are in general entertainment for kids.

Notes

<1> Danmarks Naturfredningsforening, www.dn.dk.

<2> In the Danish public, larp is generally termed role-playing, and traditional table-top role-playing is hardly ever mentioned.

<3> The survey interviewed 1.026 children, a representative group. On the number "8%" there is an uncertainty of +/- 1.66% at a 95% significance level. Translated into common English, that is between 21.500 and 32.700 active players aged 10-14.

<4> Many thanks to my fellow editor Rasmus Luckow-Nielsen for help with data acquisition. All of the data in the following is data from the LiveForum databases and is not accessible for the public. The data in the calendar is not necessarily correct, nor completely accurate, hence flaws have been edited by the author of this article.

<5> If there are different prices for members and non-members of a certain organisation, I have used the price for non-members.

Litterature

Andersen & Raasted (2004): *Rollespil for børn og voksne*. København: Frydenlund.

Bandmann & Thaning (2004): "Verdens største legeplads" in *Natur og Miljø*, nr 3, 2004, http://www.dn.dk/graphics/DN/DNs_arbejde/Skoletjenesten/boernognatur/undersogelse_artikel.pdf, accessed 30.10.04.

Gallup (2004a): *Børn og Natur*. http://www.dn.dk/graphics/DN/DNs_arbejde/Skoletjenesten/boernognatur/undersogelse_rapport.pdf, accessed 30.10.04.

Gallup (2004b): *Børn og Natur. Baggrundsmateriale*. http://www.dn.dk/graphics/DN/DNs_arbejde/Skoletjenesten/boernognatur/undersogelse_baggrundsmateriale.pdf, accessed 30.10.04.

Liveforum (2004): *Kalender. Juli 2004*. <http://www.liveforum.dk/calendar/index.php?mode=next&nextmonth=1091138400>, accessed 30.10.04.

The Author

In 1997 a hooded teen with an axe came to Morten's front door. The teen asked Morten if he would like to go beat up kids in the forest. Morten came along and the rest is – as they say – history. Since then he has organized eight larps and larp conferences in varying sizes and genres. Also, he was a co-editor of the 2003 Knudepunkt book and is the editor of the major Danish larp portal, www.liveforum.dk. Morten is 24 years old, Master of Business Administration and Communications from University of Roskilde, Denmark and works as a communications consultant.