

## **Knutepunkt and Nordic Live Role-playing : A crash course**

So, it's your first time to Knutepunkt. Or you've been here several times, but still have trouble figuring out those weird Finns, Danes, Norwegians or Swedes. This article is a quick introduction to the Knutepunkt event and the many traditions grouped together as "Nordic larp".

### **For the complete foreigner: Geography & Language**

Scandinavia proper is the peninsula on which most of Norway and Sweden is situated. The "Scandinavian Countries" are Norway, Sweden and Denmark. The "Nordic Countries" are the Scandinavian countries, Finland, Iceland and the autonomous regions of Åland, Greenland and the Faroe Isles. These countries are closely connected through geography, culture, history and politics. Long before the EU came about, one could travel between the Nordic countries without a passport.

The "Nordic larp scene" (more on that later) includes Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark and increasingly some neighbouring LARP scenes - most notably in north-western Russia and Estonia. There are reportedly larpers on Iceland, but there has as yet been no contact between these and larpers in the other Nordic countries.

The Nordic countries have tiny populations – ranging from Sweden's 8 million citizens to Iceland's 300.000. However, while there are no hard statistics to prove this assertion, an exceptionally high percentage of the population seems to be involved in live role-playing. The popularity of larp has recently made it a feature of "common knowledge", so that a Swedish journalist may refer to something unrelated as "larp-like", Finnish TV produces a teen soap opera about fantasy larpers, and a Norwegian professor of theatre history routinely ends his course by mentioning larp as the "new theatre".

The languages of Norway, Denmark and Sweden are mutually intelligible – mere dialects of each other. Finnish is a Finno-Ugric language, entirely different from the Scandinavian languages but related to Hungarian, Estonian and possibly to Turkish, Mongolian and Korean. In theory, all Finns learn Swedish at school – in practice few Finns, outside of the Swedish-speaking minority, are fluent in the language.

Because of the Finns, English is the common language of Knutepunkt conferences and the books published in connection to them. The non-Nordic reader should, however, keep in mind that there are some differences between the Nordic and Anglo-American uses of English when talking about larp. Most importantly, we treat "larp" as a word in its own right, not an acronym (L.A.R.P.), and it is spelt lower-case. This is follows from our use of the word in our native language: "laiv" (no), "lajv" (se), "live" (dk) and "larp" (fi). The British understanding of "larp" vs. "freeform" does not match the Nordic use of "larp" and "freeform" - most UK freeforms would be considered Nordic "larps". The US division into "theatre style" and "combat style" larps is never used in the Nordic countries – indeed, it makes very little sense to the Nordics as most Nordic larps combine "combat style" mechanics with "theatre style" dramaturgy.

## **Knutepunkt: the meeting-place of Nordic larpers.**

The first Knutepunkt conference was held in Oslo, Norway, in 1997. It was, for its time, a fairly unusual event gathering larpers from all the Nordic countries to *talk* about larp rather than play it. Since then, Knutepunkt has been held annually, rotating between the Nordic countries, and each year being named in the language of the host country. So it is “Knutepunkt” in Norwegian, “Knutpunkt” in Swedish, “Knudepunkt” in Danish and “Solmukohta” in Finnish. The meaning is the same: literally, “the point of a knot”, a nodal point, a meeting place.

Knutepunkts are very diverse events, shifting from the atmosphere of an academic conference to the mood of a crazy surrealist larp. Networking, partying, lectures, discussions and entertainment have always been core components of Knutepunkt. In recent years, Knutepunkts have been accompanied by the publication of a book featuring theory and articles, the occasional small larp, and the “a week in..” prelude where foreign visitors are invited to come a week earlier to role-play, socialize and tourist their way around the host city and its nightlife.

There is no real “Knutepunkt” organisation, only tradition. When it's time for a particular country to host a Knutepunkt, an organising committee pops up out of nowhere. Sometimes, two committees pop up simultaneously and they resolve between themselves how to do it. The “host organisation” of Knutepunkt varies from country to country and year to year. As does the size, ambition and themes of the conference. Extras, such as the book, the “week in..” programme, mini-larps, “Knutepunkt on-line”, are not essential ingredients of a Knutepunkt but good ideas that may or may not be maintained from year to year. This system is not perfect, as occasional heated discussions within and between organising committees have shown, but any alternative (say, creating a pan-Nordic Knutepunkt organisation) is bound to be even more controversial.

## **For Knutepunkt newcomers: Knutepunkt Traditions**

- ⌘ Opening and closing debates: an irregular tradition, dating back to the very first Knutepunkt, where all participants are expected to voice their opinion on a specific question – usually the theme of this year's KP. An ice-breaker and a collaborative tool.
- ⌘ Hot Discussion of the Year. Whether it is “art or entertainment”, “gender and live role-playing” or “to immerse or to act” - Knutepunkts usually offer a forum for the most-discussed topic of the year.
- ⌘ Elge Larssons lecture: Elge Larsson, Swedish larps “elder statesman”, annually holds a very popular lecture involving a variety of ingredients from high-flying philosophy to teddybears.
- ⌘ “Ricki Lake show”. Though officially discontinued, organiser Joc Koljonen keeps getting nagged to host the famous larp version of the American TV show. The “speculative larps” panel and the musical about larpers have been recent substitutes.
- ⌘ Opening ceremony. This varies in style, and is generally held to reflect the mentality of the host country – from pompous ceremony with many drums and much symbolic tying of knots (Norway) over jolly welcomes and cheers to y'all! (Denmark) through lengthy Recitations of the Conference Rules & Regulations (Sweden) and short to-the-point-and-not-at-all-like-Sweden (Finland).

- ⌘ Heavy Theory of the Year. Authors of the most difficult Knutebook articles usually hold lectures or seminars where their ideas can be discussed and are explained in plainer English.
- ⌘ Workshops. Make a Bronze Age costume. Drama exercises. Larp and musicals. Workshops are practical get-togethers, with a higher degree of active participation than lectures.
- ⌘ LARP presentations: Retrospective summaries of key larps held during the last year. A what-we-did-and-how-it-worked for organisers, and a nostalgic occasion for players.
- ⌘ Shameless plugs: aggressive PR on the part of next years ambitious larp events. Organisers can be very creative in seducing potential players - promo parties, screenings of film trailers and hijacking other events are not unheard of.
- ⌘ The LARP fashion show: Showcasing larp costumes on the catwalk, often with theatrical flair and without the depressed anorectic models who make mainstream fashion shows so dull.
- ⌘ The Finnish bar: An infamous opportunity to consume all your tax-free vodka, in a motorist setting. Usually appears in countries with restrictive alcohol policies, situated right outside of the conference area and the power/responsibility of the organisers.
- ⌘ The Banquette: Don a fine costume, enjoy fine wine and dining, get annoyed with the overwhelming amount of unsolicited not-always-to-the-point speeches that no toastmaster has ever had the power to stop.
- ⌘ The new issue of “Panclou”. “Panclou”, which irreverently mixes hard theory, debate and gossip, is the longest-running Nordic larp zine. Issues are usually published at Knutepunkt, and sold for a pittance to support the bar tab of the editors.
- ⌘ The Norwegian Ritual. Commemorating the legendary “ritualgate scandal” of Knutpunkt-98, there is usually a ritual around midnight between Saturday and Sunday. What a “ritual” is and how it is carried out varies from year to year, but the aim is usually to provoke as many people as possible, sometimes by being provocatively un-provocative.
- ⌘ The Helicopter Workshop. A male pride workshop. 'Nuff said.

### **The Nordic larp styles - similarities:**

The idea of live role-playing reached the Nordic countries in the early 80s, but it was not until the early 90s that we could speak of a “tradition”, “style” and “community” of larpers. While each country invented their larp style independently, they soon got in touch with each other and ideas, players and even larps crossed borders. After Knutepunkt appeared, Nordic integration got a lot tighter and it became possible to speak of a “Nordic scene”.

Despite Nordic integration, most larp activity is focused on the regional level. It's still possible to find a Norwegian group of larpers that do not know that there is larp in the other Nordic countries. On the other hand, they would also be ignorant of the fact that the cool magic system they adopted from a neighbouring group was originally invented in Sweden.

It is perhaps because of the interconnectedness of these countries, or perhaps because of the cultural similarities, that larp in the Nordic countries has developed a number of similar characteristics. These characteristics also make Nordic larp radically different from larp in most other countries, although Israeli larp and some Australian / British “freeforms” are much of the same, and French, Russian and some German-language larps have similarities.

**Scenography:** A lot of Nordic larps place a high emphasis on scenography, to the point where medieval villages are built for fantasy larps and professional theatre scenographers design the stage for arthaus larps. Sweden is the most scenery-obsessed country in this regard.

**Costume:** Costume design and sewing is, especially in Sweden and Norway, seen as an indispensable part of live role-playing. It is not unusual for players to work for months, even hand-sewing, on a proper costume for a mere four days of play. Once again, the Swedes are the leading extremists.

**Minimal game mechanics:** Nordic larps in general use none or very simple, unobtrusive, game mechanics. The honour system – whereby players trust each other to improvise appropriately rather than resort to rules – is the basis of most larps, even though some use simple guidelines for things like combat and magic. A “rules-heavy” larp in the Nordic countries would be classified as “rules-light” in many other countries.

**Little combat:** Puzzle-solving, diplomatic intrigue, human events (a marriage, a funeral, village life) and atmosphere tend to take precedence over the fighting that seems to dominate larps many other places. “Boffer” weapons, made with latex, are often brought to larps but rarely used. The last-day battle or the nightly raids of enemies are used as adrenaline kicks in some, not all, larps.

**Persistent role-playing:** At almost all Nordic larps, players are expected to play their character without interruption from beginning to end. This means that even sleep is in-character. Real-life talk (“out-of-character” or “off-game”) is usually explicitly prohibited by organisers, a prohibition enforced by the general consensus of larpers.

**Genre:** Fantasy is the dominant genre of Nordic larps, as a majority of larps are held in a fantasy, often Tolkienesque, setting. There are, however, so many exceptions to this rule that these days you may easily encounter a Nordic larper who has never attended a fantasy larp. “Historical” larps are a good number two, some of these are very similar to fantasy except that “The Holy Roman Empire” replaces “the Kingdom of Arbograd”, while others are strict re-creations of the look, feel, mentality and society of a chosen historical epoch ranging from the Bronze Age to the 1970's.

There are two notable exceptions to these characteristics – one is larps based on the commercial system “Vampire : the Masquerade” from White Wolf Publishing, which tend to be similar to such larps everywhere though often played with home-made rules. The other is the growing movement of “Arthaus Larps” - more on that below.

## **Nordic larp styles - differences**

Despite all these common characteristics, there are also some major differences between the ways larps are played and organised in the Nordic countries. Awareness of these differences will make it easier to understand the other Knutepunkt-participants.

A significant difference is in duration. A “normal” Norwegian or Swedish larp is between a weekend and a week long, anything shorter would be a “mini-larp” or a “short larp”. In Finland and Denmark, the “normal larp” lasts from four to twelve hours, and thereby can be played during a day. This difference in format has led the countries to develop different playing styles – the short format encourages intensity, speed, drama while the long format encourages brooding, daily life, resting in character, and developing complex stories over time. There are plenty of tales like those of the Danish larpers going to Norway and exhausting themselves before the Norwegians had even gotten into character, and likewise of Norwegian larpers going to Denmark, seeing the larp end just as they had finally built their camp. Another difference worthy of notice is that everything is bigger in Sweden. A “big” Swedish larp could hold 250-1000 players, a “big” Norwegian or Danish larp about 100-200, a “big” Finnish larp even fewer (Timo “Dragonbane” Multameki's blockbuster larps being a notable exception).

The mixture of genres and age groups varies from country to country, as does the size of the live role-playing community. An extremely unscientific estimate puts the number of larpers in the Nordic countries as follows: Sweden, 10.000. Denmark: 5.000. Finland: 3000. Norway: 2000. Norway has the oldest average larpers, with few participants below the age of 20 (if we exclude the children of adult larpers), Denmark probably the youngest - with many in their early teens, thanks to a tradition of holding “Junior larps”. Gender and larp is always a hot issue at Knutepunkts, so it might help to know that the larp communities of Sweden and Norway has about 40% women, 60% men, Denmark significantly fewer women, and that male larpers recently became a threatened minority in Finnish larp. Gender amongst organisers and leaders in larp communities is an even hotter issue, and it has been noted that Norway has many more female organisers and leaders than the other countries, and that most larp theorists are guys.

Another difference is in the autonomy of larp scenes. In Finland, live role-playing and tabletop role-playing are for the most part viewed as two sides of the same coin, and most people participate in both. In Norway, larp is mostly viewed as an entirely separate activity which overlaps only somewhat with tabletop role-playing. Sweden and Denmark fall between these two poles, though are generally closer to the Norwegian position. This difference is visible in the bias of Knutepunkt organisers and writers. Thus, the Danish Knudebook - “As larp grows up” was explicitly about live role-playing while the Finnish one - “Beyond role and play” was about live and tabletop both, and the 2004 Solmukohta was a “conference on role-playing with an emphasis on larp” while the other countries have held larp-only conferences.

## **Nordic arthaus larps**

A frequent topic of conversation at knutepunkts - arthaus larps are Nordic larps, and

usually adhere to same basics as the mainstream (persistent role-playing, zero-rules etc). But in genre, role-playing approach and overall goal, Nordic arthaus larps differ from the “mainstream” on a number of points:

- ∞ Events often set in in non-genre milieus without anything supernatural or futuristic going on.
- ∞ The incorporation of moral and/or political themes into larps.
- ∞ A conscious blurring of the distinctions between larp, art and theatre.
- ∞ Increasing support from the institutions of established art forms, in the form of recognition, collaborative projects and the funding to match it.
- ∞ A strong focus on actually being the character (character immersion), at the expense of "just fun and games", physical comforts, and (possibly) sanity.
- ∞ Larp design principles increasingly grounded in theory and/or ideology.
- ∞ Experimentation being a must: an arthaus larp needs to be substantially different from previous larps to attract players.

The Nordic arthaus movement transcends national borders (it's far more common for an arthaus larp to have international participants) and has in the past been associated with the Knutepunkt conferences, though there is an effort to make Knutepunkt more open to “mainstream” (i.e. non-arthaus) larping. Still, quite a lot of the larps referred to in Knutepunkt books and discussions are such arthaus larps – and not necessarily representative of the majority of Nordic larps nor something that most Nordic role-players concern themselves with. There is, however, no absolute separation between “arthaus” and “mainstream”. Most Nordic arthaus larpers also participate actively in the mainstream role-playing of their home countries.

The word “Nordic arthaus larp” is one I invented for this article. It is not in common use, but you may hear references to “artistic larps”, “progressive larps”, “experimental larps”, “indrama” and “weird larps” meaning basically the same. The experimental nature of most arthaus larps are the main reason they often get conflated with larp theory: experimental larps supply a lot of valuable data for theoretical comparison.

## Organisation and culture

The organisation of larps and larpers are very different in the four countries, and the sub-culture of live role-players is equally diverse. The following is a summary of some of the main cultural, organisational and economic structures of the four countries. But, just as when it comes to larp styles, it should be kept in mind that there are exceptions to every rule, and that something that is generally true of Sweden may be entirely untrue of larpers from a specific town.

In **Sweden**, the national gaming organisation SVEROK, which channels government funds to various game-related activities, is a large and powerful factor in the community. Larp organisations abound, some strictly for the purpose of organising larp while others strictly for the purpose of organising players. Recurring player groups are a unique feature of Swedish Fantasy larp – organised groups of players who play a similar group of characters (orcs, elves, soldiers etc.) at different larps. Swedish arthaus larp has

recently been successful in co-operating with established art institutions, most notably Riksteatern, the national theatre. While the importance of government funding in Swedish larps is often exaggerated (SVEROK funds are rarely a significant source of income for a larp), some arthaus larps could not have been made without arts funding or the resources of the “big culture” institutions. SVEROK funds, while not very significant for larp projects, have contributed greatly to the back-bone of organisations, clubhouses, role-playing locations and fanzines. The magazine “Fëa” and a host of websites enables communication between Swedish larpers, although Swedens huge larp scene is notably more fragmented than those of the other countries.

**Finland's** national organisation, SuoLi, deals with larp only and does not at present receive or distribute government grants. The magazine “Larppaaja”, the SuoLi mailing list, and the larp.fi website serve as a platform of communication, in addition to the annual gaming festival “RopeCon” which attracts a lot of larpers. Membership organisations do not play a significant role in Finnish larp, but loyalty to organiser troupes and campaign larps do. Finnish role-playing theory is notable for the fact that there's a lot of it, and that some of it's authors are academics who actually work with related fields of research. The Hypermedia Lab at the University of Tampere and the academic conferences held in connection to RopeCon and Solmukohta have served to develop and promote Finnish role-playing theory. While Finnish larp in general does not receive government, some Finnish organisers have excelled at finding business sponsors for larps.

**Norway's** larpers are kept informed and in touch with each other through the laiv.org website and web forum, and local events like the “larpers beer on Wednesdays”. There is no umbrella organisation representing larpers and significant opposition to the idea of forming one. N4F/Hyperion, a SVEROK-style organisation, has made some not entirely successful attempts to woo larpers, as has the National Amateur Theatre organisation. In recent years – networks, organiser troupes and specialised sub-contractors (like “Gaffa Express” who deal with larp logistics) have replaced more traditional membership organisations, and a number of larger projects (like the medieval village outside of Trondheim or the larp tent depot in Oslo) have been made with the backing of ad-hoc organisations and/or networks of troupes, organisations and individuals. The venerable Oslo organisation “Ravn” remains active and receives some cultural funding that is distributed to larp projects. The state lottery-funded “Frifond” has in recent years made it a priority to support larps financially under the “Theatre” category, and is now the largest external contributor of larp funding.

**Denmark** has a central web portal, liveforum.dk, moulded on laiv.org and doubling as a web magazine. Recently the organisation LLR was founded to obtain and distribute government grants, and to publish the magazine “rollespilleren” (“the role-player”). Membership organisations are a key feature of Danish larp, organising players and serving as a host organisation of larps. A notable feature of Danish larp is a clear distinction between “adult” and “young” (or “junior”) larp cultures, caused by frequent events held for children and teenagers by adult organisers, who go elsewhere for their own player experiences. The rumours you've heard of enormous boffer sword battles in poor costume are about the young larp culture, not the adult one.

The notions of a larp “elite” and “elitists” got thrown around a lot at earlier Knutepunkts, but are troublesome as they mean different things in different countries. In Sweden “elitist” was a nasty accusation against some people who in the early 90s argued for higher quality of costumes and dramatics. Most of those accused angrily rejected the label and a few said “so what?”. In Finland, “elitist” was a nasty accusation to begin with, but some of those accused chose to co-opt the term and called themselves “elitists”. The term sometimes referred to an older generation who were active organising larps for a younger generation. In Denmark, some people began referring to themselves as “the elite” and argued for “elitism” as a positive thing. In Norway, the words have mostly been used when talking about the culture of foreign larpers. “You are an elitist” can be a compliment to some Danes, a statement of fact to some Finns, and an insult to most others. This is, after all, the egalitarian Nordic countries we're talking about. “You are a member of the elite” is somewhat less loaded, but exactly what this elite is, who are members of it, and whether it's a bad or a neutral thing, seems to vary from person to person and Knutepunkt to Knutepunkt.

Some other words to beware of: “Arrangers” means organisers, and is a mistranslation of Scandinavian “arrangør”. “Rules”, “Letters” and “Kompendium” are different names for the written texts of world description and pre-larp information sent to players before the larp. A Danish “scenario” can be a larp.

Both “Role-play” and “Role-playing game” translate to roughly the same word in the Scandinavian languages : “rollespill”(no/dk)/”rollspel”(se). “Spill” can mean both “play”, as in “skuespill” (lit. “spill for view” - acting, theatre) or “spille gitar” (play the guitar) and “game” as in “brettspill” (lit. “board spill”, board game). Most Scandinavians rarely talking about larps as “games” in English, as “spill” in our larps isn't all that game-like. Instead of “a game” you may hear “a larp”, “an event”, “a role-playing session” etc. The Finns do not seem to have the same discomfort, though whether this is for linguistic, theoretical or ideological reasons is not clear. In the Nordic use of English to talk about larp, “a larp” refers to a single event, not a system or series.

If, at Knutepunkt, we approach each other with the understanding that there are differences between the ways we larp, and the ways we talk about larping, we have the best foundation possible for getting to know each other and learning from each other. And that, through everything from heavy-theory debates to informal socializing, is what the festival is really about. Happy Knutepunkt!

#### **Author description:**

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