

# Play is Political

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The 77:th wealthiest country in the world is Norrath<sup>1</sup>. If you have never heard about the place and can't find it in the atlas, you are forgiven. It does not exist on the face of Earth. Norrath is the name of the land in *Everquest*, an Internet-based roleplaying game (also known as MUD, Multiple User Dialogue) and owned by Sony. Nevertheless, by estimating the worth of all imaginary treasures in *Everquest* that are bought and sold for real dollars by the players, Norrath would be ranked in-between Russia and Bulgaria on World Bank GNP index. An average Bulgarian citizen generates more economic values if he spend an hour playing *Everquest*, than he does by working an hour in his country.<sup>2</sup> Norrath demonstrates that play is not a fun pastime anymore. Culture in post-modern capitalism has economic value and is therefor a potential field for political struggle. (Jameson, 1991). Jeremy Rifkin goes so far as to state: "Play is becoming as important in the cultural economy as work was in the industrial economy." (p. 263, 2000). As such, play deserves a serious examination. I wish to place live roleplaying in this context, in an analysis influenced by situationist thought.<sup>3</sup>

## Live Roleplaying is a counterculture

Music/style-based youth cultures are commonly interpreted as resistance identities. (Hebdige 1979). Even when the subculture itself expresses no political conviction, academics analyse them in a social context and conscribe to them an (often unconscious) agenda. This perspective is curiously lacking when live roleplaying is discussed. The attention given to music/style-based subcultures by 'the outside', might correspond to its economic importance to the culture industry. The negligence and absence of academic discourse on live roleplaying, on the other hand, would owe to it not being recuperated<sup>4</sup> by economic forces. To put it more poignantly, it is the successful resistance that has prevented live roleplaying from being acknowledged as a resistance identity! Hence the media coverage of roleplaying has predominantly been hostile,<sup>5</sup> following the well-known pattern of folk devils and moral panic (Cohen 1972). Like other 'alternative' subcultures that are not defined by any political program, "the struggles are at once economic, political, and cultural - and hence they are biopolitical struggles, struggles over the form of life. They are constituent struggles, creating new public spaces and new forms of community." (p.56, Hardt and Negri, 2000). Roleplaying can be recognised as a struggle only when set against the dominant society, from which it has emerged. Like its music/style-based counterparts, roleplaying is mushrooming in the wake of youth unemployment and the expansion of higher education, i.e. - in the absence of wage labour relation.<sup>6</sup> Abundance of spare time is the starting point for all contemporary subcultures. Desire leads these bodies to enlarge the condition for their own well-being, labour-free time, and thus to renounce the work ethic and the stigmatisation of non-work, on which social order is founded. Though itself outside the sphere of direct production, the subculture is inbedded in a social fabric that has been invaded by the logic of rationalisation, efficiency, production. Every personal relation, cultural expression and reflective thought, are captured in the circulation of degraded wage labour and passive consumption. At its core, roleplaying is a reaction against this intensified commodification.<sup>7</sup> This definition should be understood in its widest sense, it is not a revolt against concrete institutions, but an emotional, unarticulated response to the everyday boredom and plasticity of life, - the alienation of existence. It fundamentally differs from the activism of social movements, who subvert advertising, attack billboards and reclaim social space (Klein, 2000). Roleplaying could be said to reclaim social time. It objects quietly by devoting itself to un-alienated creativity for its own sake.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Guardian Weekly*, 28 Mars 2002

<sup>2</sup> The practice of collecting treasure in-game and selling them to other players, known as farming, has developed into a business venture. *LA Times* ( 20 April, 2000) interviews a player 'Ebaid' who made \$6000 in a month and now envisions to hire students to play for him for wage: "We could have a sweatshop of online gaming, he gushed. I'm not joking. This could be very profitable." (article available at <http://www.kanga.nu/archives/MUD-Dev-L/2000Q2/msg00498.php>)

<sup>3</sup> The ideology of live roleplaying has been highlighted by recent political live arrangements (*Amerika, Europe, OB7, Futuredrome*). However, my interest lies in the politics embedded in the medium rather than in the message, implicit to live roleplaying in general.

<sup>4</sup> The term recuperation was used by the Situationists to describe how adversary movements are incorporated by dominant society.

<sup>5</sup> Attempts has been made to blame suicides and even murder on roleplaying. The recent and brutal murdering of Marcus Norén was connected in media to his engagement in vampire live. Shortly after the police arrested two suspects and disclaimed any linkages between Noréns death and his hobby. (in Swedish: *Expressen*, 2 January 2003)

<sup>6</sup> Both work and the joy of working (its craftsmanship) is eliminated by automation. Non-work subsistence requires that some of the wealth generated in ever-more efficient industries is politically redistributed through general welfare systems. This might explain why Scandinavian countries has a particularly flourishing live roleplaying community.

<sup>7</sup> This process in has been nicknamed 'colonisation of culture' (Mosco, 1996).

## **Fantasy is real**

My proposition that roleplaying is a political project will certainly meet objection. Roleplaying strives to leave reality for a fantasy, and could easily be disregarded as escapist. Such an observer would look upon roleplayers as a generation that has lost faith in changing their shared environment (to constitute themselves as a collective, political subject). Instead they turn inward to imaginary utopias. This note is probably correct, what is misgiving though is to equate imaginary with irrelevant. The first step to change the world is to imagine a different one.<sup>8</sup> The fact that globalisation has deprived peoples sense of control over their destiny and ability to comprehend their situation, has given fantasy and play a certain urgency. "Unlike the social world, the rules of play are voluntarily adopted for they delimit the space within which the player can exercise control over meanings and events. [...] This voluntary adoption of player-chosen roles within player-chosen rules is liberating in that it inverts the process of social subjection." (p.236, Fiske, 1987). In the same spirit, Jeremy Rifkin holds that: "Mature play is also the antidote to the unbridled exercise of institutional power, be it political or commercial in nature". (2000, p.263).

Reality and fantasy cannot be easily separated in a post-modern environment were cybernetics, simulation and virtual reality merge and transforms the planet. The function of Disneyland, Baudrillard exclaims, is to uphold the illusion of the real, to make us think that reality starts outside the gates of the theme park, while in truth 'reality' is just as simulated as Disneyland. Roleplaying is on the same playingfield as Disneyland in this respect. However, rather than covering-up the vacancy of reality, a strophe by Guy Debord calls for a different interpretation: "In a world that *really* has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood." (p.14). Roleplay-carnivals could be therapy to come to terms with the loss of reality, in a strategy of 'it-takes-a-thief-to-catch-one'.<sup>9</sup>

This therapy-strategy becomes clearer if we focus on the roles instead of the world that are simulated in a live roleplaying event. In post-modernity our self is as questioned as our surrounding. Were fixed classes and ranks once marked repression, today the permanent reshuffling of positions and life expectations, are means to generate insecurity and subjection. Maybe, by playing with roles of her own choosing, the individual can embrace instability, taking control instead of being subjugated by it.

To assume different roles, and observe how the clothes, the setting, and the responses of others, make the pretended identity and the pretended emotions believable to oneself, is an eye-opener. That is exactly how our own 'authentic' person<sup>10</sup> is crafted, according to a school of thought known as constructivism (ed Gergen, Davis, 1985). Feminists and Queer theory has extended these insights, and concluded that categories in society taken for granted (genus, sexuality) are outcome of social conflict and inbedded with powerrelations. To challenge the powerstructure (white, heterosexual, male, bourgeois) queer activism advocates to play with and transcend social roles and identities.

Play is the evasion of social rules enforced in the real world, John Fiske argues, and therefor play is threatening to established order. The degree to which roleplaying is attacked, or for that matter, is actively ignored and trivialised, could be taken as a measure of its potency. What is changed when playing is the players themselves. Whatever norms, narratives and collective aspirations that are temporarily summoned during an event, follows with the participators out to the 'real' world, and is sustained by the community between the events.

## **Live, art and entertainment** <sup>11</sup>

Live roleplaying is created in communication between equals. The illusion does not exist in the mind of the individual (as with narcotic hallucinations), but in the expressions and language between individuals. It is in this sense live roleplaying is genuinely collective, and by necessity, all parts involved in it must be active and participating. These characteristics, collective, participating and a dialogue relationship, set live roleplaying apart from play on offer in culture industry. Commodified leisure are characterised by separation, passivity, and monologue form, because the medium must allow a third party to exercise control over it (in order to extract payment).<sup>12</sup> Control is instituted by the separation of user and producer, reader and author, that closes a (labour-) process into a (consumer-) product. "Authors are the product of an economic system, not the product of creative minds" (p.123, Halbert, 1999).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The defensive slogan chosen by ATTAC; "*Another world is possible*", suggests that resignation has reached a point where just considering alternatives, is a step forward.

<sup>9</sup> Judging from another comment by Baudrillard, he might have endorsed this second reading of live roleplaying: "[...] It would be interesting to see whether the repressive apparatus would not react more violently to a simulated holdup than to a real holdup. [...] Transgression and violence are less serious because they only contest the *distribution* of the real. Simulation is infinitely more dangerous, because it always leaves open to supposition that, above and beyond its object, *law and order themselves might be nothing but simulation*." (p20, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> The word person comes from *persona*, which was the masks worn by actors in greek tragedis (In Swedish, see Tiina Rosenberg, Byxbegär, 2000)

<sup>11</sup> I have earlier developed these thoughts in Swedish roleplaying fanzine, *AlterEgo*, available in pdf at [alterego.sverok.net.pdf12](http://alterego.sverok.net.pdf12)

<sup>12</sup> "Spectators are linked only by a one-way relationship to the very center that maintains their isolation from one another." (p.22, Debord, 1999)

<sup>13</sup> The clash between participation and passivity is elegantly illustrated in Jim Ward, Lucasfilm's vice president for marketing, comment on too enthusiastic Star Wars fans: "We've been very clear all along on where we draw the line. We love our fans. We want them to have fun. But if in fact somebody is using our characters to create a

The institutionalisation of a 'division of leisure', into professionals and spectators, is not, however, limited to cheap commercial amusements. Specialisation is generalised and diffused to every corner of adult life, and nowhere is its presence felt heavier than in 'high art'. To mystify this productive relation, high art flatters itself with the idea of the artistic genius. (Bourdieu, 1989) Such notions are hardly credible in a collective artform like live roleplaying, involving hundreds or thousands of creators in an active, open-ended process. The radical amateurism of the roleplaying community challenges a 'high art' notion; that some have been touched by 'the Gift' to be artistic - and others have not. Roland Barthes thesis about 'the death of the author' (Barthes, 1997), has usually been applied when contrasting traditional artforms with internet. "Whereas a printed book is linear, bound, and fixed, hypertexts is associational and potentially boundaryless. A printed book is exclusive in nature and autonomous in form. Hypertext, however, is inclusive in nature and relational in form." (p.206, Rifkin, 2000) It is peculiar that characteristics novel to virtual reality is reappearing in roleplaying, entirely non-digital, but emerging at the same stage in history.

### **Commodification of live**

Will live roleplaying be commodified? To tell if this is a likely route and how it would change live roleplaying, we are helped in comparing the characteristics between different game forms. Digital roleplaying is exceptional in that its driven by industry, while traditional and live roleplaying are driven by its participants. It is more common that industry dominates in competitive game-forms, like trading card and miniature-figure wargames, where there is a clear objective - to win. Market circulation can favourably be hiked on to contest and powergaming, because the gamers are pitched into buying more equipment than the other in their mutual desire, to gain respect from his peer by beating him. Roleplaying, where dialogue has disbanded any distinctive winner/losers, short-circuits this process.<sup>14</sup>

It is for this reason I believe that live roleplaying, with its present structure and norms, cannot sustain a mass market. Nevertheless, I'm positive that live roleplaying will attract commercial interests, following the same pattern that has evolved in the hacker community. Hacker and roleplayer identity have in common that they are activity-based and devote themselves to un-alienated creativity. Curiously, both have been interchangeably condemned as morally dangerous or trivialised as a freak folly. The difference is that, while playing, the hackers has ended up with a by-product with gigantic economic values - code.<sup>15</sup> The free sharing and pooling of creativity in a community has proved to be a superior model for developing software, compared to paid, in-house labour. Technical successes, GNU/Linux over Windows to mention the most publicised case, has attracted multinational firms (IBM, Netscape, Oracle), to invest millions of dollar in the hacker community.<sup>16</sup> The attitude of Lucasfilm belongs to the past, increasingly fans and volunteers will be manipulated to promote or even produce for companies. Parallels can be found in all walks of life, street fashion and music, film, computergames; more often than not, the ideas spring from marginalised subcultures than from advertising departments. Creativity and innovation is central in a cultural economy, but these assets are hard to foster in alienated wage-labour. Hence communities become a leading producer in the future.

It is possible that commercial interests will engage live roleplaying for its production, while marketing the result to an 'outside'. In the case of hackers, corporate involvement has led to increasing tensions within the community, as social norms are re-negotiated and the unpaid labour of the many are taken advantage of by a few. In response to this threat, the *Free Software Foundation* has developed 'General Public License', an intellectual rights license that better accommodates collective production.<sup>17</sup> Live roleplaying has not been confronted with these issues, yet, since the activity leaves few end-products that can be exploited. Paradoxically, it could have been Futuredrome leading the way, despite its 'progressive' agitation and good intentions. It was massive, focusing on the instalments rather than roleplaying, it was expensive while less demanding on preparational work, but most significantly, a film was recorded at the site. Consequently, the roleplayers had to sign over their intellectual rights over the film which they had prepared, participated, and paid for.

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story unto itself, that's not in the spirit of what we think fandom is about. Fandom is about celebrating the story the way it is." (Quoted in [www.poppolitics.org](http://www.poppolitics.org), accessed 2002-06-24, Alana Kumbier)

<sup>14</sup> As we know, social hierarchy is not absent in live roleplaying. Respect is sought by showing acting skills, proving a knack for organisation, or crafting equipment. With commercialisation, a subtle shift from appreciating the craft behind making a thing to the thing itself (in essence: the amount of money by which it was purchased) must take place.

<sup>15</sup> I have written more on hackers in *Copyleft vs. Copyright - A Marxist Critique*, published by *FirstMonday*, ([www.firstmonday.dk](http://www.firstmonday.dk), 1 mars 2002)

<sup>16</sup> Even Microsoft, that has been hostile to free software and called it 'un-american', are forced to experiment with it because the economic advantage is so strong. Craig Mundie, Senior Vice President of Advanced Strategies at Microsoft, give tribute to the economic clout of collectives: "Having a sense of community is a good thing. It's one thing we've watched with interest. [...] The more of that we can foster in our community, the better." ([www.freeos.com/articles/4372](http://www.freeos.com/articles/4372), accessed 2002-06-20).

<sup>17</sup> GNP is jokingly called copyleft - all rights reversed. "Copyleft uses copyright law, but flips it over to serve the opposite purpose: instead of a means of privatising software, it becomes a means of keeping software free"; (Richard Stallman, in ed. DiBona, Ockman *et al.*, 1999, p. 59. *Free Software Foundation* can be found at [www.gnu.org](http://www.gnu.org))

### **Live at the crossroad**

If games can accumulate economic power on parity with countries (and a country of 77:th rang is a force with armies, capable at least to threaten number 76), the gaming community will be under pressure to conform to dominant, commercial and institutional, structures. A decision is forced upon the subculture.

Any movement towards commercialisation is tied to the ageing of its participants (that no longer are provided for by state funding and generous parents). The promise to make a living from live roleplaying becomes an attractive 'individual escape strategy' from the alternative, facing the labour market. Unfortunately, by simple maths, live roleplaying can only sustain a tiny fraction of the movement, since the rest has to support those few with their purchases. There is nothing 'morally wrong' about such aspirations, but if they are generalised into being the response of the whole towards outside pressure, then the escape route is illusionary even to the minority. There exist no individual flight, simply because you cant be the community all by yourself. The communal and social spirit, for which we sought to stay in the first place, deteriorates into a contractual relationship, and live roleplaying becomes a market like any other. Play becomes work.

If we wish to be part of this bubbling creative, exciting 'meltingpot', we must first of all work to preserve it intact in its whole. The only way to achieve this is one route so removed from our belief system, that it hardly enters the mind. We have to start making political demands, (constitute a collective political subject), in alliance with others, to liberate more free time for everyone to enjoy. Reducing the working day is an obvious demand, but even minor reforms (improving student grants, generous social benefits, funding to cultural projects), will have an immediate effect as more people are freed from market constraints to contribute to the community. Revolution is to dare this thought.

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