

On the Edge of Reality: Reality Fiction in 'Sanningen om Marika'

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ABSTRACT

The Alternate Reality Game genre inspires a mode of play in which the participants choose to act as if the game world was real. Jane McGonigal has argued that one of the most attractive features of an ARG is the 'Pinnocchio' effect: at the same time that the players deeply long to believe in them, it is in reality impossible to believe in them for real.

In this article, we study "Sanningen om Marika", a game production where fact and fiction was blurred in a way that made some participants believe that the production was reality rather than fiction, whereas other participants found the production deeply engaging. We discuss the different participant interpretations of the production and how it affected the players' mode of engagement. We also outline some of the design choices that caused the effect.

Author Keywords

Alternate Reality Game, Role-Play, Study, Reality Fiction, Pervasive Game

INTRODUCTION

The Alternate Reality Games (ARG) slogan 'this is not a game' [8] indicates a range of games that pretend to be reality; a hidden truth beyond the reality we live in on a daily basis. This approach has sometimes been met with concern. Is there a risk that the players will become too obsessed with the game story? Will they engross to the level where they start to believe it to be true?

In [9], Jane McGonigal claims that in practice, this does not happen. Instead, ARG participants play at make-believe, but maintain a clear secondary framework and are deeply aware of the fact that they are feigning belief. This is generated by a 'Pinnocchio' effect: at the same time that the players deeply long to believe in the fiction, they are aware that it is fabricated.

However attractive this theory is, it relies on the assumption that the game succeeds in creating a fictional context that cannot be mistaken for real. But it can. Several online hoaxes have initially been mistaken for real, and

conversely, real events are sometimes suspected to be fabricated by the ARG gamers' community¹.

In this paper, we investigate a game production, which failed in creating a clear fictional context. In *Sanningen om Marika* [2], (Eng. *The Truth About Marika*), some but not all participants believed the fictional context to be real. We sketch some of the factors that contributed to this and discuss what effect the confusion had on the participants' perception of the production. We tell a story about a game that at the same time was confusing and misleading, but also deeply engaging for the truly engaged players.

BACKGROUND

The ARG genre [3] emerged right after the turn of the century and uses media to play with reality. It inspires a mode of play in which the participants choose to act (primarily through writing styles in online forums) as if the game world was real. Jane McGonigal [9] describes this play mode as performing belief: the players are not deceived by the game world but deliberately choose to pretend to believe that the game world is real. According to McGonigal [8] an ARG is

"an interactive drama played out in online and real spaces, taking place over several weeks or months, in which dozens, hundreds or thousands of players come together online, form collaborative social networks, and work together to solve a mystery or problem ...that would be absolutely impossible to solve alone".

An ARG uses techniques such as faked websites, phone calls from game characters, and staged events in the real world to create a fictive game story that looks and feels very much like reality, and invites the participants to take active part in this story. Through relying on real-world

¹ Sometimes, reality just becomes a bit too similar to an ARG. Check out Aaron Delwiche contemplating Cyberdyne Inc, <http://delwiche.livejournal.com/77547.html>.

historic facts, rumors, and events within the game story, an ARG can become an immensely rich experience.

The main inspiration for *Sanningen om Marika* (*SOM*) was the television show *ReGenesis*, a Canadian production that was combined with an ARG. Originally broadcasted in Canada it has since also been syndicated for European and American (USA) television audiences. *SOM* was also inspired by the tradition of immersive role-play fostered in the Nordic countries within the live action role-playing (larp) community [11]. The basic approach of Nordic larp is to confine the players to a carefully staged environment, educate them (in advance) to play their character roles, and leave them to interact with each other and the environment during the game. There are few formal rules and the players stay in fiction continuously, unlike American larp Lancaster [7] reports. Recently, several Nordic larps have been staged in urban environments, outside the closed-off larp environment. *SOM* was designed as a follow-up to two pervasive larp productions *Prosopopeia Bardo 1: Där vi föll* and *Prosopopeia Bardo 2: Momentum* [4,5,10,13]. These were highly successful in creating an intense, emotional and politically challenging game experience staged in the physical world, but they did so only for a few recruited participants. In *SOM*, the artistic director wished to take this experience to a large audience.

THE “SANNINGEN OM MARIKA” PRODUCTION

Sanningen om Marika was designed as an ARG with a drama series as a central component. The game activities were organized akin to a Nordic larp, with the goal that players and organizers would co-create an illusion of a consistent game world. The story world was inherited from *Prosopopeia I* and *II* and some characters and fictive organizations were re-used in *SOM*.

An innovative production

Swedish Television (SVT) was the legally responsible publisher, and produced the drama series and some of the web sites. The game part was commissioned to the company P, a small games entertainer focusing on participatory culture. The TV series was aired five Sundays in October and November 2007, and the ARG ran from July and ended at the same time as the TV series.

In many ways *SOM* was a unique attempt at pervasive entertainment. The television series and the game parts were co-produced in an integrated manner, starting already with the treatment written during the spring of 2006. In March 2008, it was awarded an international Emmy Award for best interactive television service.

Production parts

Sanningen om Marika spanned several media types. The creators called it a “participation drama”, indicating the intent to get the audience to actively participate in the story line. The core components were the TV series, a current affairs debate program recorded weekly, and a website called *Conspirare*. The TV series provided a hub for the storyline and offered passive spectating. The *Conspirare*



Figure 1: Screen shot from the SVT site from *Sanningen om Marika*.

website provided a hub for online participation and consisted of a forum, a chat, and a blog.

The TV debate formed the third core component, and provided a means to connect the fictional drama series (recorded a year in advance) to the ongoing game. It pretended to be a live current affairs debate² but was in reality recorded a day before being aired. *ReGenesis* used a podcast to achieve something of the same effect.

Most participants also came in contact with two other websites: the official web site for the TV series and debate located with SVT, and a fictional secret society³ *Ordo Serpentis*. The latter site was used to organize real world game participation. The participants were encouraged to enlist in the organization, which would send them on different missions and tasks in order to rise in rank. The production also included on-line puzzles and participatory events in the real world as well as in an on-line virtual world *Entropia*⁴.

Two Layers of Fiction

The fictional universe in *Sanningen om Marika* was deliberately kept very close to the real facts behind the production. It was communicated primarily through the *Conspirare* website and the TV debate. The ‘fictionalised reality’ storyline depicted in Figure 2 was originally published on *Conspirare* as the ‘real story’ behind the TV series, and describes how the *Conspirare* webmaster “Adrijanna” searches for her childhood “Maria” who has disappeared. Adrijanna suspects, and also deeply mistrusts,

² The debate was publicised as a live broadcasting in the TV guide, and the illusion was furthered by fake live phone calls and a running banner with fake viewer SMS commenting on the debate.

³ *ReGenesis* also featured a secret organisation. Indeed, secret organisations seem to be legion in ARG.

⁴ *Entropia Universe* is a massively multiplayer online virtual universe. As with all other game activities, the *Entropia* events were written into the storyline in a way that made it possible to interpret them as reality.

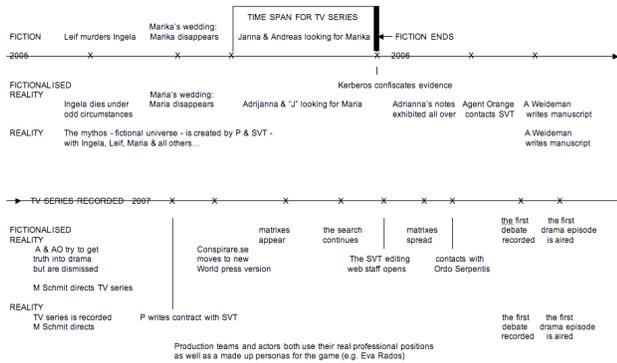


Figure 2: Time line for the *SOM* production and the fiction and fictionalised reality. The fiction and fictionalised reality timelines were presented as ‘fiction’ and ‘reality’ at the *Conspirare* blog in October 2007. Real timeline added by authors.

an underground organisation *Ordo Serpentis* to be responsible for the disappearance. As part of her search, she has created the *Conspirare* site and also put up posters of her missing friend around her home city.

According to the ‘fictionalized reality’, SVT originally contacted Adrijanna as part of the research for a new drama series on missing people. This drama series forms the ‘fiction’ layer in Figure 2 and lies very close to what Adrijanna claims had happened to the ‘real’ Maria. The fictionalized reality forms the backstory of the ARG. An actress playing Adrijanna started to tour Sweden in July 2007 with the message that the upcoming TV series was based on her life story, and that Maria really had disappeared.

Participants could sign up on the web site *Conspirare* to help Adrijanna search for Maria. They hunted clues both on the Internet and in the physical world. A week before the TV series started, participants uncovered the *Ordo Serpentis* web site and started infiltrating the secret society.

According to the ‘fictionalised reality’, SVT had at this time started to suspect that there might have been a grain of truth to Adrijanna’s story. To address the controversy, they publicly announced that a current affairs debate program would accompany the television series, in which the affair would be discussed.

This debate was recorded only one day in advance of the airing and aired weekly directly after the drama series. The construction enabled its producer to pick up on the progression of the ARG. Player-generated photos and videos were shown in the program. The debate was authentically staged, and some actors were recruited to ‘play themselves’ in their professional roles e.g. as a psychologist, forensic dentist or even as a police spokesperson. A side plot that became very important was the *Kerberos* surveillance company opposing the investigations done by Adrijanna and the *Conspirare* team.



Figure 3: Screen shot from the *Conspirare* website.

It was very realistic: the company had a logotype and a website that had been up and running for several years (as it was originally created for the Prosopopeia productions), and live actors played guardsmen from the company driving a white company van - also featured in the drama series!

Fiction Markers

Sanningen om Marika did not aim to uphold a full ‘magician’s curtain’ – rather, it was quite easy to expose the game as a game. Many web sites were provided with explicit disclaimers starting out ‘*This website is part of a fictional production*’ (see figure 4). These popup windows would appear the first two times a player first visited the site or after a period of absence from the site. Similar wordings were also used in the participant agreements when players signed up at *Conspirare* and *Ordo Serpentis*. It was also exposed as a game several times over by perceptive viewers that did not participate in the game. This happened both at *Conspirare* and at the SVT discussion forum, and the proof put forward was rather convincing.

Modes of participation

The *SOM* production offered several tiers of participation [1]. The simplest mode was merely watching the TV series. The TV debate, on the other hand, was much more dependent on the game activities, and would be confusing to almost any spectator who did not look further into the web content.

Online activities were primarily organized through *Conspirare*. The SVT versus Adrijanna conflict was clearly visible online, as the SVT and *Conspirare* websites told their ‘version of the truth’. The TV viewer who surfed for more information would normally first hit on the SVT site, and then continue to *Conspirare*. Some online activities and events took place in the virtual world *Entropia*.

Physical game activities were organized in two different ways. *Conspirare* was used to invite to and organise larger events (e.g. the demonstration outside SVT’s premises in Gothenburg), and *Ordo Serpentis* focused on self-organised



Figure 4. The pop-up warning message at *Conspirare*.⁵

play in smaller groups. Mission documentation (video and photos) was uploaded to *Flickr* or *YouTube* and announced on *Conspirare*. Participants could also submit their documentation to SVT.

PLAYER EXPERIENCE STUDY

As part of a player experience study of *SOM*, we have looked into the perception of the production as truth or fiction. The discussion below is based on several sources of information: an online survey, several semi-structured in-depth participant interviews, and a small follow-up email study. We have also collected material from online forums and chat sessions, some of which is quoted below. Before going into our observations, we first discuss who participated in the survey and interviews.

The Online Survey – Overall Statistics

The web survey was posted on the SVT web site four days before the game ended, and on *Conspirare* on the very last runtime day, and closed on December 13th 2007. In total 385 participants responded, of which 229 answered the survey at the SVT web site and 156 at *conspirare.se*. The answers are combined in this article.

Most of the respondents were active participants. Figure 5 shows their activity levels. A majority of the respondents watched the television series and the debate weekly, and 70% of the respondents also were active at the *Conspirare* web site at least once a week. Christy Dena⁶ has reported similar findings for *ReGenesis*. Only 14 respondents had been active at *Conspirare* or *Ordo Serpentis* less than once

⁵ Translation: “Warning: Conspirare is part of a fictional creation. Opinions expressed here do not always reflect opinions of P or SVT. Random similarities with real people are sometimes pure coincidental. Participation is on your own risk and under your own responsibility. Conspirare has only one rule – pretend that it is real. You participate through following the blog, watching the movie clips, and discussing in the forum. The search will lead you out on the Internet and out on the streets of your own city. Click on OK to show that you have understood this.”

⁶ <http://www.christydena.com/online-essays/arg-stats/>

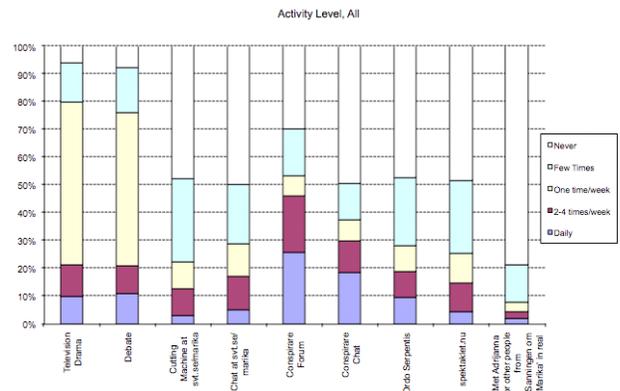


Figure 5: Activity levels, all survey participants.

a week. Given that about 400 persons were active at *Conspirare*, we assume that the respondents in our study are fairly representative for the active participants.

The production seems to have attracted a fairly gender-balanced audience; of the participants that responded to the gender question, 147 were women and 97 men. 74% of the respondents (259 persons) were between 17 to 36 years old.

The Interviews – Methods and Respondents

The main aim of the post game interview sessions was to gather qualitative reports about the participants’ game experience and understand how they interpreted the production. The forms for the interviews varied; most were carried out as phone interviews but some were done face to face. All interviews were taped. In all, thirteen persons were interviewed; six men and seven women.

BELIEF IN THE FICTIONALISED REALITY

During the post game chat at *Conspirare* it became clear to us that some participants had, up to then, believed in the fictionalised reality. The observation was confirmed by the online survey, where we included the question “How did you perceive *Sanningen om Marika*?” The answer options were (only one could be selected):

- I did not think that it was real (29%)
- I thought that it was real (30%)
- I pretended that it was real (24%)
- I make no distinction between truth and fiction (17%)

The preferred answer from the designers would have been answer option three, ‘I pretended that it was real’. Instead, the most commonly selected answer alternative was ‘I thought that it was real’.

Experiencing *Sanningen om Marika* as reality

In total, 77 survey respondents answered that they thought that *SOM* was real. Several of these participants commented

that they had believed the debate series to be real until they started to surf the web⁷:

"It surprised me that the tabloids did not post this in huge print on their front pages, there must have been others than me who did not look for information on the Internet, and that thought that it was true but too strange to be true (the debate after the TV drama). Too many questions after the last debate and the strange fact that this was not in the newspaper headlines directed me to the SVT web page." (Survey comment)

"My approach to things is rather critical, the first time I saw the drama I did not understand the way it was constructed but the debate evoked some suspicions so I checked the web pages that the debate discussed. And then I happened to see the popup on the SVT site for Sanningen om Marika..." (Survey comment, shortened)

Some people felt cheated when the fiction was exposed at the last day of the game.

"BLOODY DISGUSTING LIARS"

(Survey comment)

"In spite of the information at SVT's homepage I do not think it was crystal clear that it was only a game. I was sceptical all along but several friends were sure it was real and will probably become very disappointed when they find out."

(Interview quote)

Other participants also found it especially problematic that the 'lie' was presented in public service television.

"A game that gives itself out as being real in Sweden's only public service channel is bloody dangerous. Give people an alternative and a chance to understand it is not."

(Survey comment)

Some survey respondents felt confused, however they also learned something important from being confused.

"Nothing else on TV has had a stronger influence on me than this. I felt totally absorbed by Sanningen om Marika. And I still don't know what attitude I am to take to it. Once I thought I could separate reality from fiction but have realized this border is blurred and I am even more confused now. I do not know what attitude I am to take to anything anymore."

(Survey comment)

"Is it really possible to separate games from reality, do we have to?"

(Survey comment)

A few survey participants seemed to still believe that the production was real, even while answering the survey.

"If it had not been for the series and the collaboration with SVT I don't think Maria would have come forward." (Survey comment)

"[...]interesting, sensational and good that it is taken up, that it gets television time. [The fact] that all other media shut their eyes I think is terribly alarming"

(Survey comment)

There is only one rule: Pretend that it is real

The surprising responses to the survey led us to do a follow-up survey. This survey focused on how the participants had interpreted the tagline "Pretend that it is real". The survey, done by e-mail, was sent to all survey respondents that had approved e-mail contact. It was formulated as an open question, and let the respondents answer in their own words. The survey was sent out to 100 persons and 20 persons responded.

The largest groups of respondents, of whom many had larp experience, interpreted the slogan as a game rule and a ludic marker indicating the production's fictional nature. Most of them liked the rule and even found it reassuring, since it reminded them of "it is only a game".

"I understood it as a game rule. If you join you have to pretend it is real to expand your game experience."

(e-mail comment)

"In the beginning I thought it was reality, so I got a bit shocked when these messages appeared but then I accepted it I guess"

(e-mail comment)

A fairly large group viewed the rule as a version of the popup disclaimers. They primarily considered them to be avoidance from SVT's side to take responsibility and thus reacted quite negatively towards it.

"I interpreted the instruction as a way for the production company and SVT to acquit themselves of responsibility"

(e-mail comment)

"As a defense from SVT, and most of the time quite disturbing"

(e-mail comment)

Others entirely missed the message. Most of these respondents remained positive towards the experience; this is however most likely a study effect, as the people who were negative towards the production in the first survey did not offer their e-mail addresses.

⁷ All interview and survey comments are translated from Swedish.

The fourth reaction was the most interesting one: one of rejection. These respondents saw the instruction as well as the disclaimers, but still decided – or wanted - to believe that the production was real.

“I don’t know how I understood the instruction really. Even if it said so it felt very real. I have my own experiences of unreliable authority persons. I used it [the instruction] in the wrong way. I felt very bad until I understood that it was a fiction due to my life experiences. I think I wanted it to be true and that something would happen to the authority apparatus, at the same time I was disappointed that it was not true because I would like Sweden to wake up ...[...].and see that everything is not as good as they think”

(e-mail comment)

“...Frankly speaking, I really thought it to be true and still believe that “the others” exist...”

(e-mail comment)

These reactions seem to be triggered primarily by the political (and perhaps also by the mystical/occult) content. It indicates that some of the participants were less interested in what was “true” in some objective and pre-existing sense, and more interested in *creating a new truth* within (and as a result of) the game.

Effects on the Experience

The blurring of fact and fiction harmed the game experience also for the participants that understood the fictional nature of the production.

“a pity that so much energy has to be put on discussing if it was real or a game”

(Survey comment)

“I think it is awful with everyone that thought it was real and feel deceived now. To start with there should have been a fat info page somewhere that you would be recommended to read ... that all was a game and that the most important part of the game was to pretend it was real. I would like to see a more thorough review of the ARG idea and how it works so that people did not have to get confused...[.]...This also disturbed the game experience the most.”

(Survey comment)

The less active participants were sometimes ‘scared away’ by the fact that they did not fully understand what was factual and fictional.

“If all was ‘fake’ (which I have understood) then I think it to be a bit unpleasant sometimes. Everything both felt real and unreal. Some things were realistic while others were unrealistic.”

(Interview quote)

WHAT MADE THE PRODUCTION CONFUSING?

The production created what we call a ‘Orson Welles’⁸ effect: despite multiple explicit disclaimers, some participants seem to have believed that the fictional context was real. There were several design features that contributed to making it hard to understand the fictional nature.

Double Layers of Fiction

The double layers of fiction contributed, as the ‘fictionalised reality’ appeared as distinctly verier than the dramatised fiction. The fictionalised reality relied on facts whenever possible. When fans dug up facts that potentially could have denied the fiction, these were often accommodated into the back story. This meant that even for those understanding that *SOM* was partly fictional it was hard to tell exactly *which* parts were fictional and which were real.

Perception on the Game Rule: Pretend that it is real

As discussed previously, *SOM* did not maintain a full illusion. Instead, the companies had created a simple slogan and game rule for the production: “*There is only one rule: pretend that it is real*”. This slogan, which is inspired by the ARG approach to pretence play, was previously used in the *Prosopopeia* productions. The SVT web site published this slogan as a sub header to the title.

The most notable effect of the rule was that (apart from the popup disclaimers) all content on *Conspirare* and the SVT web site was kept strictly ‘in fiction’. This extended to the forum and chat discussions at *Conspirare*, which were heavily moderated so that all player discussions about the game as a game were deleted or at least suppressed.

An example of this occurred when one of the participants made a note of the registration number of the *Kerberos* car during an event, and in the Swedish car directory traced its owner: the company P, Adrijanna’s employer. He pasted the information in a forum post, but the moderator removed this it from the blog entry, ending it with

*“Moderated some boring dead-end information
/The moderator”*

The next discussion entry (from another participant) emphasised that this discussion went outside the boundary of the game:

“Not worth digging further into, in other words”

After this entry the moderator locked the thread.

For the experienced ARG participant, it is not difficult to read this as a (somewhat clumsy) off-game marker; the real

⁸ The *War of the Worlds* was aired on October 30, 1938, directed and narrated by Orson Welles. Its first part consisted of a series of simulated news bulletins, which suggested to some listeners that an actual Martian invasion was in progress. Multiple explicit disclaimers bracketed the show, both before and during the actual airing [3].

world knowledge about who owns this car is declared as not belonging to the game. These kinds of delimitations of the game occurred frequently at the forum, and worked as ludic markers as well as game boundaries. However, they were not understandable unless you already had subscribed to the basic rule of the game: to “*pretend that it is real*”. A participant who had missed this instruction would just find similar discussions confusing.

At one point the disclaimer popup was discussed at *Conspirare* and (as the discussion was kept ‘in fiction’) explicitly denied. When one participant asked about the popup and what it meant, one of the moderators replied:

“In conjunction with the airing of the SVT series we moved Conspirare to the web server at SVT to be able to handle all traffic that was expected to come our way. We were then forced to put in a disclaimer. Disregard it; it has nothing to do with our cause.”

Again, for the experienced ARG participant it was not difficult to read this as an off-game marker. However, the less experienced participants most likely read it face value.

Several of the active participants that liked the game would have liked to have an off-game forum.

“...[T]hat you all the time have a ‘safe zone’, a place/possibility for players to reach producers and talk ‘outside’ the game, on occasions that a player feels it gets to troublesome and so on.”

(Survey comment)

It seems that some participants trusted the social agreement more than the explicit disclaimers. This is not entirely surprising, as the *Conspirare* site was vibrantly alive with reports of live events, discussions, and emotional responses to Adrijanna’s blog entries. Faced with this and the one impersonal and dry popup disclaimer text, many were prone to trust the social agreement. The problem was that people who were already pretending formed this social agreement. People who had accepted the “*pretend that it is real*” rule and who were collectively co-creating the fictional world populated the *Conspirare* forum and chat systems. By consequence, these people found all explicit discussion of its fictional features ruining their creation. For participants that had missed or mistrusted the disclaimer, this collective agreement became an effective block that hindered them from understanding the true nature of the production.

“At Conspirare you should not have said that svt said it was a game and that Conspirare said it was the truth. You have cheated people. Many [people] have used a lot of time and money to try to help in finding Maria in reality. Are you going to compensate them?”

(Survey comment)

MEDIA CRITICISM AND BRINK GAMING

The blurring of fact and fiction in *SOM* was intentional. As truth and fiction were deliberately blurred in the current affairs debate and no disclaimer was aired in conjunction with the debate, we suspect that the production team intended to leave the person who *only* watched TV in doubt as to what was factual and what was fictional. However, with the stress on disclaimers at the web sites and the fact that SVT had a discussion up at its forum which exposed the game, we are led to believe that SVT wanted people to understand the fictional nature of the production rather quickly by just investigating a bit deeper.

The intention seems to have been one of media criticism: SVT intended to raise awareness about that no media can be trusted straight off. This intention was expressed quite clearly in the chat at SVT immediately after the final show was aired (see Figure 6).

The production company P had a slightly different goal. In the terminology of Cindy Poremba [12], *Sanningen om Marika* was a ‘brink game’, a game in which the activities are so real that it cannot fully be considered to be just a game. The brink effect was created through the combination of the alternate game aesthetics, the emphasis on ‘pushing your personal boundaries’ inspiring participants to do things they might want to do but never would have done otherwise, and the lack of off-game. Most participants who embraced the fictional nature of *SOM* felt empowered by the game:

We are The Others, that’s it. Let’s hope that now more people understand that.”

(Survey comment)

“By helping and taking part many more ways have become open now. The world is bigger than you think, that you have been taught, right?”

(Survey comment)

We believe that this experience was available only for people who understood the fictional nature of the main storyline, and adopted the ‘pretend that it is real’ instruction as an invitation to role-play. These players were able to immerse in pretence play, but also to appreciate that some of their activities were real. The reaction was a stronger version of the Pinocchio effect [8]; one where you as a player actually contributed to blow life into Pinocchio and make him a real boy.

All participants did not fully agree with this approach. One experienced larper remarked that a larp, which requires participants to push their personal boundaries only should do so within a clear ‘magical circle’. Else, the participants will find it hard to create the mental distance to the in-game activities required to allow them to reflect on the game.

Question:	Isn't there a risk that people stop paying their TV license now that you show these kind of things? Some people will probably feel that they do not want to contribute economically to a system where you do not know what is true and what is false.
Answer:	Maybe it also means that others start to pay their license. We want everyone to question what they see and hear and not just accept all claims as truth.
Question:	I know that TV4, or rather, the production company that makes their low quality TV programs, for example make cuts ⁹ in their material that is they change and manipulate and fool their viewers that way. I know this because I have been exposed to it. So what is real and what is not?
Answer:	What is real is more of a philosophical question. One should always be perceptive to all one sees and make a habit of always questioning its truth.

Figure 6. Excerpts from the post-game chat at the SVT site.

“I am a larper and for me the Marika project is one huge larp. Everything screams larp, from aesthetics to issues you discuss with the only difference that larps commonly problematize much more than the Marika project does. It is hard to create the mental distance needed to naturally meta think around your experiences and let them get important in your own life when Marika is so integrated in reality and where the borders are so indistinct. I don't like sharp larps though but in the Marika project it has been exceptionally clear how important it is to put up borders for the fiction. They have messed up both the discussion about ethics and what to learn just through this borderless concept.”

(Survey comment)

CONCLUSION

In her article on the Pinocchio effect, McGonigal writes:

“...the central goal of successful immersive game design is to communicate to players that a cage is in place, while making it as easy and

⁹ The participant refers to the subliminal pictures put in the drama series by the SVT member of staff called “klipparen” (the cutter). This was part of the fiction.

likely as possible for the players to pretend that they don't see the cage.” (McGonigal 2003b)

Sanningen om Marika did not achieve this effect, and as discussed above we do not believe that the producers intended it to. SVT wanted *SOM* to be deliberately confusing to television viewers, and P wanted to create a brink game experience.

However, we believe that neither SVT nor P intended any of the active participants to believe in the fictionalized reality. The fact that this still seems to have happened was an effect of importing a set of design ideals from the *Prosopopeia* [4,5] series: a fictionalized reality that lay close to the real game background, the game rule ‘pretend that it's real’, and the lack of an organized forum for off-game discussions.

Albeit there are similarities between the ARG ideal of players ‘performing belief’ and the larp ideal of character immersion into a role, the differences are larger than they might seem. The Nordic larp ideal of full immersion into a story world [6] is not equivalent to the ARG ideal of ‘not peeking behind the curtain’ [8]. The ARG players may not wish to see the machinery exposed; but the Nordic larpers actively contribute to the machinery. This works well in a closed production where the participants sign up for participation and learn to know each other before the game. In an open production where anyone can join without much preparations, the collective agreement to stay in fiction can work as a strong “reality marker”.

The authors of this report believe that the effect was both unfortunate and unethical. It was unfortunate because it made some potential participants afraid to participate, and created unnecessary conflicts between players and newcomers which in turn harmed the game experience for the players. It was unethical because it made some participants engage in a mission that they believed to be serious, and then made them very disappointed when it was not.

Most likely, the problem was closely related to the lack of off-game forums. These participants did not trust the disclaimers but the social agreement among players and organisers, which means that they most likely would have trusted the discussions in an off-game space.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Christopher Sandberg (the company P) and Daniel Lägersten (SVT) for their constructive comments and feedback on early drafts of the article. We are grateful to Christy Dena who directed us towards hardcore data on *ReGenesis*. The authors wish to thank the crews at SVT and P for their patience with us in constantly asking questions. We are also in debt to all participants and other people who took part in our interviews, wrote diaries for us, and answered our questionnaires.

The project was carried out within the Mobile Life Centre at Stockholm University¹⁰.

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¹⁰ www.mobile-life.org

