Roleplaying the Future of Surveillance

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INTRODUCTION
This paper presents and evaluates the use of a live-action role-playing game (larp) to explore ethical questions raised by the use of machine vision technologies. The larp, *Sivilisasjonens venterom*, debuted at the University Museum of Bergen, Norway in November 2021 and explored themes related to surveillance, while also experimenting with the use of roleplaying as both research tool and research communication. What data does a larp provide researchers, and what can it communicate to the players? This paper presents observations on how players approached the situation differently, and the learning outcomes of the process.

Pervasive surveillance has become possible in ways that were unimaginable a couple of decades ago. This means that the general population is frequently required to make ethical choices about new technologies with a societal impact. The goal of *Sivilisasjonens venterom* was to put participants in simulated (role-played) situations where they needed to make ethical choices about how to use or respond to machine vision technologies so as to develop a practical ethical awareness – *phronesis*, in Aristotelian terms: a "judgement about how to respond best to specific choices in specific situations" (Ess 2013, xxxv). For example, while some players were disciplined and obeyed the system, others resisted, and others gamed its weaknesses for their own advantage.

The larp
The larp was set in a post-apocalyptic future, in a 'waiting room' for refugees applying for citizenship in one of the few remaining stable city-states simply known as he Civilization. The Civilization is run by an AI known as the Intelligence, which is an expression of the sum of all the opinions and interests of the citizens. In the Civilization, the primary civic duty is to make oneself visible and understandable to the Intelligence's surveillance technologies, so that it will be able to make the best possible decisions for the common good. This is achieved through constant

surveillance and (self) reporting through an app designed for *Sivilisasjonens venterom*.

Forty players took on the roles of refugees seeking to become citizens of the Civilization and evaluators working to help the intelligence assess which people should be admitted to the city-state. The larp integrated actual machine vision technologies into its design by using video surveillance, facial recognition, and emotion recognition as parts of the interfaces and game mechanics that the players interacted with. Experienced larp designers worked with researchers to develop the larp, using their many years of experience and previous larps about refugees such as *The Asylum Seekers*, *Europa*, *The Quota* and others as reference.

Larp as performance as research

Originating from role-playing games, larps are often organized for entertainment purposes, but it is not uncommon to find more experimental or conceptual designs developed as artistic, educational or even political experiences, especially in Nordic countries. Larping, and especially the Nordic larp, has been used for purposes ranging from the fulfillment of personal desires (Pettersson, 2008) and the production of powerful moral experiences (Hopeametsä, 2008; Bjørkelo and Jørgensen, 2018) to school teaching (Hyltoft, 2008) and the creation of autonomous spaces outside capitalist society (Widing, 2008). Among these, the design of larps for education (a sub-genre known as edu-larp) has generated a prolific body of academic research, and an industry of professional creators and consultants has flourished (Bowman & Standiford, 2015). As these different applications prove, the social and interactional possibilities offered by larps are also a promising avenue for scholarly research, particularly in the human and social sciences. Emma Leigh Waldron (2014) has proposed that live-action role playing can be used as "Performance-as-Research" by combining the ephemerality of experiential engagement and self-reflective documentation. *Sivilisasjonens venterom* builds upon this emerging genre of research larps, also using experiences from the experimental research larp "The Asylum Seekers" (Bjørkelo and Jørgensen 2018), which explored ideas of discomfort and transgressive realism (Bjørkelo 2019) in play.

Nordic larp is an established genre of larping with a "strong emphasis on collaboration and collective creation, unobtrusive rules, as well as a rich variety of play styles and settings sometimes including heavy themes" (Nordiclarp.org; Stenros 2010). This emphasis on the collective and on mutual trust is particularly well-suited for collaborative research processes with players (Jørgensen 2012). *Sivilisasjonens venterom* allows us to explore participants experiences ofsurveillance as uncomfortable or disturbing, how far they are willing to go, and how the proposed democracy of the surveillance state is received.

There is a tradition within larp design and research in the Nordic countries to discuss the ways in which play situations can influence and inform those who take part in them. Notions such as 'bleed' (Montola 2010), which describes how emotions and experiences played out in a larp influence the players, and vice versa, have become foundations on which meaningful play experiences are designed. Likewise, play-external seriousness (Jørgensen 2014) has been offered as a descriptor of how experiences in play can reflect on important issues outside of play, giving the players a way to think of these issues.

Drawing on the authors' participation in the design of the larp in various roles (as organizers, designers, participants and observers), this paper combines self-reflexive analysis of the conceptual work and design process with ethnographic observations of the event itself and subsequent discussions among participants to outline the potential of larping as a research method, particularly as it pertains to discussions of the social impact of surveillance technologies.

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