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## THE PEACEMAKER, LARP GAME WITH A POLITICAL AGENDA

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**Abstract:** LARP and LARP game research in Slovakia has not become widespread among Slovak theatre and film theorists. Aside from the presentation of research results, the paper *The Peacemaker, LARP Game with a Political Agenda*, introduces the reader to the LARP phenomenon and LARP games. A component part of our research was organising *The Peacemaker (Mierotvorca)* LARP game. The game was developed in the form of peacekeeping talks on Ukraine crisis. The players who were randomly selected as reputable citizens were asked to decide on the manner in which the war in Ukraine was to be resolved. The play is documented by using the LARP blueprint method, which was used for the first time in collection of papers *Do larp – Documentary Writings for KP2011*, which was an output of Knudepunkt 2011 LARP conference. In our research we observed the differences between the player's expectations before the game was started and the style in which the player eventually played the character assigned. The differences between the playing of the character and expectations are viewed in the light of game design. Our aim was to establish how character assignment by players' expectations affected the LARP game and what differences there were in playing the game by LARPer with different levels of experience. In accordance with the set objective we opted for a qualitative observation method that facilitated the observation of individuals directly involved in LARPing. Although on several occasions references were made to psychological or sociological literature, it was not an ambition of this paper to carry out a psychological or sociological experiment. Our research materials are composed of *The Peacemaker* LARP game, game materials, organisers' notes and outputs from the registration form. The final part of our paper provides an analysis of the materials with respect to game design, whereby special focus is on the mismatch between the players' expectations and the observed style of playing. (Böckmann, 2003). It was established that the majority of players wrongly anticipated their style of playing. In conclusion, the author encloses the outcomes of peacekeeping talks from the individual rounds of *The Peacemaker* LARP game.

**Keywords:** LARP, LARP game, Böckmann's three way model, *The Peacemaker* (2015), game design, larp blueprint

A brief introduction to the LARP phenomenon proves useful since LARP and LARP games are not widespread among Slovak theatre and film theorists. Norwegian LARP theorist Petter Bøckman explains the word in LARP dictionary as: "an abbreviation of Live Action Role-Play, a form of role-play where the participants (termed players) take on fictive personalities (called roles or characters) and act out their interaction in a predefined, fictive setting"<sup>1</sup>. Theatre professionals need not find the definition satisfactory. Their question about the difference between LARP and

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<sup>1</sup> BØCKMAN, Petter. *Dictionary*. In GADE, Morten, THORUP, Line, SANDER, Mikkel (eds.). *As Larp Grows Up*. Knudepunkt, 2003. Entry Larp, p. 177.

the theatre is legitimate. In a theatrical production the participants (actors) also take on fictive personalities and act out their interaction in a predefined, largely fictive setting. The difference, as opposed to a conventional perception of the theatre, is set out in the brackets of Bøckman's definition. LARP participants are not actors, they are players and, as opposed to actors, they play their game for themselves rather than the audiences.

In the second part of the definition Bøckman makes the difference even more visible by adding: "Though the form may have some use in psycho-therapy and the setting may be virtually anything, most larping is done for fun..." It makes mention of the fun of game participants rather than the fun of the audiences. LARP games do not need the presence of the spectators. Most often, they make do with players and organisers (game designers).<sup>2</sup>

The relationship between the LARP game concept and LARP concept is similar to that between a theatrical production and the theatre. While LARP and the theatre represent the form, LARP game and a theatrical production refer to a concrete performative piece which utilises this particular form.

The author researches LARP and LARP games in Slovak setting. A component part of the research was organising the LARP game *Mierotvorca* (*The Peacemaker*, 2015). The players were to act in a fictitious world based on the well-known geopolitical connections and the only thing that made it different from real-life were game situation and task assignment. The organisation and creative team members were the author of the paper and set designer Michal Lošonský. The objective of our partial research was to identify the expectations of players prior to starting a politically themed LARP game covering current events and the style in which the game was subsequently played. The intent of the game was to enrich a public discourse with an element of sympathy for someone whose opinion is different from that of the player, i.e. for the assigned character.

In our research we observed the differences between the player's expectations prior to starting the game and the style in which the player eventually rendered the character assigned. The differences between the playing of the character and expectations are viewed in the light of game design. Our aim was to establish how character assignment by players' expectations affected the LARP game and what differences there were in playing the game by LARPers with different levels of experience. In accordance with the set objective we opted for a qualitative observation method that facilitated the observation of individuals directly involved in LARPing. Although on several occasions references were made to psychological or sociological literature, it was not an ambition of this paper to carry out a psychological or sociological experiment.

In our previous research<sup>3</sup> it was stated that "the game can be documented based on its preparation (...) and subsequent experience rather than its course", because each player creates a different part of the game's story and the whole is visible neither

<sup>2</sup> LARP organisers and players view the presence of audiences in a variety of ways. In certain LARP games (jeepform) the presence of the audience is required, however, in most cases organisers try to avoid them for players' convenience.

<sup>3</sup> Refer to MOŠKO, Matej. *Performatívna sekvencia larpovej hry*. (Performative Sequence of Larp Plays.) In *Slovenské divadlo*. Vol. 62, No. 3 (2014), pp. 355–356.



Interim voting during the streamlined version of LARP game at Slavcon 2015 festival. Photo by Matej Moško.

for the observer nor any player. The question that crops up is what method of the preparation recording and subsequent experience should be applied to a game that is not observable as a whole.

The compilers of *Do larp – Documentary Writings for KP2011*<sup>4</sup> were faced with a similar question. At Knutpunkt 2010 conference<sup>5</sup> they raised a discussion on the ways in which LARP games can be documented and posed a question whether such documentation was needed. Alongside these endeavours the biggest and best known publication listing LARP games has been written. In the work entitled *Nordic larp*<sup>6</sup>, Jaako Stenros and Markus Montola gathered material to thirty LARP games from various European countries, covering 1994 – 2010 period.<sup>7</sup> Although descriptions in the book are consistent, the authors, by describing individual LARP games, map out especially the development of Nordic LARP games.

To that end, the editors of *Do larp* (the publication is an outcome of Knudepunkt 2011) asked the organisers of selected LARP games to develop documentation to their

<sup>4</sup> Refer to ANDRESEN, Lars, NIELSON, Charles Bo, CARNOBELLI, Luisa Carbonelli, Heebøll-Christensen, Jesper, Oscilowski, Marie (eds.). *Do Larp – Documentary Writings from KP2011*. Copenhagen : Rollespilsakademiet, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> A series of conferences most frequently entitled as Knutepunkt (Norwegian, meeting point) annually changes its name depending on the Scandinavian country hosting the event: Norway – Knutepunkt, Sweden – Knutpunkt, Finland – Solmukohta, Denmark – Knudepunkt.

<sup>6</sup> STERNOS, Jaako, MONTOLA, Markus. *Nordic Larp*. Stockholm : Fëa Livia, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Although the term Nordic Larp is not perceived geographically, there is no single Slovak or Czech LARP game described in the book.

games<sup>8</sup>. The goal was clear: the game recording should facilitate game re-run/re-play. Further to previous discussions, the editors developed an open method of recording LARP games. Their LARP blueprint method lies in the description of a LARP game as a story of its creation, whereby narration contains a description of the LARP game design, organisation and evaluation.<sup>9</sup> *The Nordic Larp Yearbook*<sup>10</sup> is a good evidence of LARP blueprints gaining popularity in the Scandinavian countries. In terms of the content and the method, the book follows up on *Do larp* collection of papers. Therefore, we have decided to use the LARP blueprint for the recording of *The Peacemaker*.

### The Peacemaker LARP blueprint

The goal of *The Peacemaker* LARP game was to gamify the ongoing discourse on Ukraine crisis by having individual players represent characters with whom they need not identify themselves opinionwise. Kevin Werbach and Dan Hunter write: "... the players (in internal gamification) are already part of a defined community: the company. (...) They share reference points, such as corporate culture and desire for advancement and status within the organisation."<sup>11</sup> When designing *The Peacemaker*, the organisers based themselves on the fact that the players shared reference points in that they lived in Slovakia, they were knowledgeable of the social situation and shared the status of the citizens of the Slovak Republic. Their understanding of the crisis in Ukraine reflected the common points of departure mentioned above.

In the event players agreed to join the game, the initial assumption was that they would have to confront their own opinions with those of the characters they were given to play. A second level of confrontation were the opinions of other characters with whom the players had greater affinity. It was expected that the experience of inner and outer confrontations could be enriching for the player and it could even mean that his/her initial view of the Ukraine crisis could change.

The game situation was chosen so as to bring it as close as possible to the events in Ukraine in early 2015. As it was not expected of the players to have an in-depth knowledge of the crisis (players were aware of the fact that this was a game in the first place and not real life peacekeeping talks), only the most known events were mentioned in the game documentation. The game world was based on the political situation in eastern part of Ukraine after the declaration of independence of the Donetsk People's Republic (7 April 2014) and of the Luhansk People's Republic (27 April 2014) and after the declaration of ceasefire (Minsk II, 11 February 2015), which was not observed (the grounds for which truce was not observed and the party violating the truce were not given).

<sup>8</sup> Refer to ANDRESEN, Lars, NIELSEN, Charles Bo, CARNOBELLI, Luisa Carbonelli, Heebøll-Christensen, Jesper, Oscilowski, Marie (eds.). *Do Larp – Documentary Writings from KP2011*. Copenhagen : Rollespilsakademiet, 2011, pp. 6–9.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Refer to NIELSEN, Charles Bo, RASTEED Claus. *The Nordic Larp Yearbook 2014*. Copenhagen: Rollespilsakademiet, 2015. In the collection of papers, the authors retroactively describe games organised in 2014. There is no mention of a Slovak LARP game, however, there are two Czech LARP games mentioned: sci-fi LARP game Moon (Martin Buchtík and Jindřich Mašek) and the game Skoro Rassvet (Tomáš Hampejs) inspired by the Russian 19th century literature, especially Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Yesenin and Gogol.

<sup>11</sup> WERBACH, Kevin, HUNTER, Dan. *For the win: How Game Thinking Can Revolutionize Your Business*. [Kindle version] Philadelphia, PA : Wharton Digital Press, 2012. Chapter 1, Section 1, Paragraph 4.



One group in the second full version of the game holds talks in the garden. Photo by Matej Moško.

Throughout the game the organisers kept breaking news on background events, whereby some of them were based on less-known facts and some were sheer fiction. The players were asked to take note of the latest news and to treat them as real irrespective of their plausability. Later it turned out that not all players, for different reasons, were ready to comply with the request.

In the game, players were asked to play the roles of individuals randomly selected by a fictitious organisation MIER (PEACE)<sup>12</sup>, to develop a peacekeeping strategy. The game situation did not deliberately follow the actual crisis action procedures or a real course of peace talks. The players were to act in an alternative world in which standard procedures failed to work. Individual characters were asked to take part in a project which was to resolve the crisis in an unusual way. Prior to starting the game, the players received an electronic invitation to talks on the future of Europe. In the invitation the organisers turned to the character, not the player:

Dear Peacemaker,

We are very thankful to you for having consented to taking up the position of peackemaker in our Peacemaker project. Our future will be equally thankful to you. Please find enclosed detailed information on your role and a brief rundown of the events in Ukraine that preceded the current state of affairs.

We are convinced that together we shall contribute to making the 21st century a century of peace. Please, turn up at the meeting on time, so as not to keep other peacemakers waiting. Given the fact that the venue and the nature of talks are con-

<sup>12</sup> We, of course, did not inform the players of the fact that MIER was a fictitious organisation.



fidential and not accessible to the public on security grounds and your participation in the project is anonymous, you are kindly asked not to inform the media or other non-interested parties of your involvement in the project.<sup>13</sup>

The invitation contained the place and time of the Peacemaker project roll out and also a caution that carrying weapons of any kind was strictly prohibited. The invitation came complete with an enclosure containing a brief rundown of the events that resulted in the current state of affairs in Ukraine. The overview started by runoff elections in Ukraine, in December 2004, won by the pro-western oriented opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko over his pro-Russia rival Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich. It ends with a comment that the current situation, when Peacemakers are holding their talks, does not dramatically differ from the situation at the outbreak of the conflict in April 2014, despite agreed truce and cease fire. The time span of the games observation was from March to June 2015.

When designing the game the organisers took special care not to evaluate ongoing events or to give preferential treatment to the involved fighting or inactive parties. Their ambition was not to persuade the players on whose side justice stands. When characters were designed and assigned, it was pivotal to have the parties to the conflict evenly distributed among the players. The game was designed for eight to twelve players, whereby there was an identical number of players in each opposing side of the conflict. Alongside characters with clear-cut views there were also characters who were instructed to maintain a detached (neutral) position toward the parties involved in the conflict.

Each player was distributed basic information on his/her character written on a single sheet of paper. The information was distributed among the players roughly thirty minutes before the game was started. The fact that players had not been distributed their character sheets several days earlier was to prevent an asymmetric situation when a player would have been more knowledgeable than others owing to researching on the crisis from the point of view of his character. In order to help players become acquainted with their respective characters in thirty minutes, the information in their character sheets were broken down into four parts:

1. Who you are.
2. How you present yourself to others.
3. What your attitude to war is.
4. What you know about other peacemakers.

The stories of the majority of characters had one thing in common. The characters became peacemakers by random casting of lots from among the reputable citizens of European countries, similarly to the selection of the members of a court jury under the US legal system. The characters deliberately bore no resemblance to real politicians. For instance, among those making appearance at the peace talks, were the mother/father of a separatist soldier, a young owner of a software company or a university professor with a strictly neutral position toward the fighting parties (Table 1).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> MOŠKO, Matej. Pozvánka k hre Mierotvorca (Invitation to Peacemaker.) In *Poznámky k hre Mierotvorca* (Notes to Peacemaker game), 2015.

<sup>14</sup> MOŠKO, Matej. Poznámky organizátorov k postavám. (Úryvky z informačných hárkov k postavám.) (Organisers' notes to characters. [Excerpts from information sheets to characters.]) In *Poznámky k hre Mie-*

Table 1: Group A	Group B
<p><b>1. Parent (U):</b> "You hate war, because the life of your son, who voluntarily fights for Ukraine, is daily put at risk. You want your son back as quickly as possible, but you realise that your son is a traitor under the laws of your country. If there's to be peace, the issue what becomes of the soldiers and volunteers who have fought in the war must also be addressed."</p>	<p><b>A. Avenger (R):</b> "War was a natural outcome of the situation. Ukraine has refused to peacefully resolve ethnic issues and rejected Donetsk referendum. It's correct that Russians uphold the will of the people in this way. In this sense you understand the son who fights for separatists. But voluntarily you would've never joined the fight."</p>
<p><b>2. Arms industry representative (N):</b> "Although you realise that people die in wars and, of course, you regret that, but if they're foolish enough to fight with each other, they don't deserve anything better. The company sells weapons mostly to Ukrainians. This is a complex issue largely due to the EU's rejection of arms supplies to Ukraine. However, Russians were not interested in your arms and so you have devised a way of selling arms to other countries around. War isn't your personal concern. It's just business."</p>	<p><b>B. Businessman (U):</b> "There's nothing you can change about the fact that you profit from warfare. It's a fact and thanks to war people have come to understand that alternative energy sources are cheaper, cleaner and more reliable... But what will happen once the war is over? The crisis keeps people aware of gas or crude oil issues. Maybe, if it continued a little longer, alternative energy sources would become a natural option."</p>
<p><b>3. Spy (O):</b> "You work as an investigative journalist and though your main focus isn't international situation, you've learnt about the Peacemaker project much earlier than other participants have. You've started an investigation and although it wasn't very successful, you've been approached with an interesting offer. One of your informants promised you a position in the Peacemaker project in return for insider information."</p>	<p><b>C. Native (U):</b> "You hate war, you hate Putin, you hate those brainless idiots shooting at people. And you hate even more those who do it for money. Of course, you support Ukraine and you'd love to put separatists up against the wall. If they like Russia so much, why haven't they moved there."</p>
<p><b>4. Emigrant (R):</b> "War isn't a good solution for Donetsk problems. Those idiots can carry on shooting at each other for ten more years and it'll resolve nothing. Ukraine should cede the territory to Russia and everything will be OK. If local Ukrainians don't like it, let them move elsewhere."</p>	<p><b>D. Philosopher (N):</b> "There should be no war. Nowhere, never and not under any circumstances. If Ukrainians wish to fight for the patch of land, they're just as foolish as Putin. The easiest solution is to give the separatists at least five years to live on their own and afterwards have them join a country they find more attractive. Why complicate things with weapons?"</p>

rotvorca. 2015. Character names and information in brackets were only available to organisers, not players. We give them to help the reader find his/her way through the game described. The abbreviation in brackets indicates the party supported by the character at the beginning of the game: U – Ukraine, R – Russia, N – neutral stance, O – Other (the character is interested in Peacemaker project rather than the conflict). The opinions in direct speech need not correspond to the opinions of players or game organisers. They are the opinions of fictitious characters created solely for the purpose of Peacemaker game.

<p><b>5. Volunteer (R):</b> "Ukrainians didn't get it that Russians in Donetsk don't want to share a common state with them any more and war was bound to come. Sure, if the conflict can be resolved in other way than war, you'll agree. But you won't yield a step until the independent Donetsk People's Republic has been formally recognised. At any cost."</p>	<p><b>E. Dramaturge (O):</b> "War isn't a prime concern for you. All you want is use it for your Peacemaker project. You've been working on it too long not to realise that all that counts is a dramatic conflict. The spectators must be intrigued by what's going on in the room. You'll change your stance only to have the conflict evolve in the possibly most interesting way."</p>
<p><b>6. Blogger (U):</b> "First, the Russians annexed Krym and now they're trying to gain control over Donetsk and Luhansk. The Peacemaker project is a life-changing chance for you. It'll make your presence felt and your name will enter history. It will be you negotiating peace in Ukraine and saving the world from expansive Russia. You'll be a new Churchill or Woodrow Wilson."</p>	<p><b>F. Conspirator (R):</b> "Krym belonged to Russia. In fact, all Ukrainians are Slavs. Who but an open Russian soul could be a better leader to the Slavs? He, who procrastinates when resolute action is needed, is a coward and traitor. Ukrainians deserve a slap in the face. Once you're done with your commitments here you'll voluntarily join up with the separatists."</p>

Save for three characters everyone else was to present himself/herself in a plausible way to others. The only exception were characters whose task was to conceal their identity because they had not gone through a regular random selection procedure and in *The Peacemaker* project they represented various interest groups (3. The Spy, 2. The arms industry representative, E. Dramaturge). Their goal in the game, as opposed to other players, was not to bring peace to Ukraine but rather to divulge or keep covert a conspiracy behind MIER organisation, or to block the reaching of an agreement in peace negotiations in the interest of the arms industry. During the game, the characters (and character No. 5 Volunteer) got hold of a children's pistol to intimidate the others or to oust them from the game after having played the game for some time. To avoid the characters from being eliminated from the game too early, the weapons were only distributed when the game was half way through.

Almost invariably all character sheets in Part Four (What you know about other peacemakers) contained information that all people met for the first time. The organisers were well aware that if the players were asked to abandon their own political views for the sake of the game and to defend views that opposed their own,<sup>15</sup> a safe environment had to be created first. Therefore, players were allowed to deindividualise themselves while playing their characters and to experience relative anonymity.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Players were informed that the characters they would be playing might have views that opposed their own. They, too, were reminded that everything what was going on and their own action were part of the game and it would not affect the solution to the Ukrainian crisis. A decision whether the player would or would not advocate the opinions of the assigned character was exclusively at the player's discretion. Prior to the game and after it was over, the organisers did not inquire about the player's opinion of the Ukrainian events and the assignment of characters was in no way based on the player's opinions or position.

<sup>16</sup> ORAVCOVÁ, Jitka. *Sociálna psychológia*. Banská Bystrica : Univerzita Mateja Bela, 2004, p. 207. "A phenomenon referred to as deindividuation occurs in a group, and it literally means that as person moves into a group he/she loses individual identity, is one of many and especially certain elements of his/her individuality are not longer functional, while other gain prominence. Deindividuation is connected with the experiencing of relative anonymity (being a member of a group makes me unidentifiable as an individual), with the feeling of liberation from social control (inevitable observance of norms)."





One group in the first full version of the game holds talks in a small room with a battened window. Photo by Michal Lošonský.

To that end, individual characters were not given names but rather letters and numbers (depending on the working group in which the character was included). After the game was started players were distributed their game costumes, i.e. white and grey printed T-shirts. Each T-shirt contained a stylised head of a different animal. The names of animals served as the names of characters. The anonymity of characters was achieved in this fashion and players could deindividualise themselves and incarnate in a character with whom they (might have) disagreed. Initially, the organisers were contemplating the use of facial masks, but eventually the idea was turned down for practical reasons. T-shirts worked as name tags which helped to significantly speed up the introductory part during which the players tried to figure out characters' names.

The last important question before the game was started concerned the space in which it was to take place. Initially, designers were thinking of a smaller theatrical space in which game atmosphere would be created by illumination and projection. The idea was discounted when office space was found. They did not have to create an atmosphere of covert peace negotiations because a family house converted to office space already had that setting. In addition, a nearby building of a non-aligned embassy protected by cameras contributed to the atmosphere.

### Data collection

Given the fact that the LARP game also pursued research goals, it was essential to get certain important information from players. Therefore, there were three supplementary questions in the registration form to help identify whether players had any

prior experience with larping, what their goal of preference in the game was and what character they would want to play (Tables 2-4<sup>17</sup>).

<b>Table 2, Question 1: What do you know about LARP?</b>	<b>No. of replies</b>
I do not know what it is.	2
I have heard aboutLARPs but I have never played one.	7
I have larped, but I do not do it often.	1
I am a regular larper.	7
<b>Table 3, Question 2: In the game I want to...</b>	<b>No. of replies</b>
win.	6
have a good time and enjoy the atmosphere.	12
experience and create challenging situations.	9
<b>Table 4, Question 3: In The Peacemaker LARP I want to be playing...</b>	<b>No. of replies</b>
an intellectual, who has long had a clear understanding of the matter. [*] <sup>1</sup>	8
an individual who is undecided on which particular side he/she stands [*]	3
an altruist who desires to contribute to world peace [**]	8
an emotionally unstable individual ready for anything [**]	5
“for the sake of defeat” and other peculiarities. [***]	4

The players could only choose from pre-printed answers and as for Question No. 2 they could choose no more than two answers and in Question No. 3 as many as three. The registration form was only completed by players who joined in the game. The collated replies provide an overview of the players’ game experience, of their expectations and goals prior to commencing the game.

Answers to Question No. 1 (What does LARP acronym stand for?) were intended to cover all relevant combinations of answers to two sub-questions: “Do you know what LARP is?” and “Have you LARPed?” The option: “I don’t know LARPs but I’ve played some” was deliberately excluded from the formulation. Although such a situation is possible, it is unlikely for a player who knows nothing about LARP, to be aware that he/she is playing a LARP. Such an answer would be misleading in the registration form.

Answers to Question No. 2 (In the game I want to...) are a restatement of the grouping of players by Petter Bøckman’s Three-Way Model.<sup>18</sup> The answer “to win” corresponds to players with a gamist style, the answer “to have a good time and

<sup>17</sup> MOŠKO, Matej. *Mierotvorca | Si lepši ako?* At <http://mier.ideamaker.sk>. [Quotation 20 October 2015].

<sup>18</sup> The gamist focuses on a successful resolution of game situations. The basic goal of a gamist is to solve a puzzle, track down the murderer, defeat the enemy. The dramatist focuses on the story and plots. He creates them and moves them forward through his/her action, to make the story and its conclusion as interesting as possible for other players. The last category of players is the immersionist. The immersionist with this style of playing typically values “becoming the role” and seeks a deep immersion in the game world. In the game, such a player can even completely disregard the story line or conflict resolution. He/she is happy to experience the character’s emotions. Refer to BØCKMAN, Petter. 2003. The Three-Way Model : Revision of the Threefold Model. In GADE, Morten, THORUP, Line, SANDER, Mikkel (ed.). *As Larp Grows Up*. Copenhagen : Knudepunkt, 2003, pp. 12–16.

enjoy the atmosphere” corresponds to immersionist players and “to experience and create challenging situations” to dramatist players. Bøckman claims that no player type exists in its pure form. The players were asked to choose no more than two answers. The assumption was that the answers picked by players were not to determine game playing. However, thanks to the information on how the player perceived his/her style of playing or, what his/her idea of entertainment during larping was, the organisers assigned such characters to players that best suited their preferred style of playing. Although the answer in the registration form need not have directly affected the style of playing, it affected the character a player was assigned to say the least.

As for Question No. 3, answers were intended to cover individual game characters. After predefined stances and the background and stories of individual characters were abstracted, there remained four different character types. The option “to play for the sake of defeat and other peculiarities” was to help identify which of the players were willing to waive the option of “winning” for the sake of immersion or the story. Another grouping of these options by game experience (asterisks) was intended to guide the players in understanding the exacting nature of playing individual characters depending on their game skills. Apparently, it was three asterisks for which none of the players without any prior larping experience ticked off the option “to play for the sake of defeat and other peculiarities”.

In total, seventeen answers from two rounds of play of *The Peacemaker* have been gathered in our research. The first one was played at Slavcon 2015 festival. This is an annual festival of history, mythology, sci-fi, fantasy and games. This is a natural environment for the players of sci-fi games and fantasy LARPs. The second one was played in office premises for which *Peacemaker* had been designed. Prior to these two games there had been a trial game played for which registration was not public and players were invited by organisers on an individual basis. Although there are no answers available to the individual questions from the registration form, the proportion between experienced and inexperienced players in this game was similar to that of the subsequent two games.

In addition to the data from the registration forms, the organisers kept taking detailed notes throughout the individual stages of the game preparation, course and outcome. The notes covered the modifications made between the games, the manner in which individual players approached their characters and the feedback after the game was over. Peacekeeping proposals drafted by peacemakers and all text material to the game constitute part of the game documentation.

### **Course of the game and outcome of negotiations**

Before playing the games in a modified office space, the organisers split the characters into two working groups, whereby three principles were applied which remained hidden from players:

1. Both groups had to be roughly of the same size.
2. The representation of the opposing sides of the conflict had to be proportionate even in the smaller group, which applied to the entire game.
3. If feasible, in both groups, there should have been both experienced LARPists and beginners.



Joint talks after bringing both groups together. Photo by Michal Lošonský.

Once the characters were assigned to the players and the introductory organisational and gaming instructions disclosed, players were asked to leave for the space in which the first stage of the game was to be played, i.e. the drafting of the peace-keeping plan. Each group was aware of the existence of the other working group. However, they knew nothing about the conditions under which the other group was playing and the key according to which characters were assigned to groups. Once Group B (characters designated by letters) was taken to a dark basement, one player with a pro-Russian character (Conspirator F) asked a rhetorical question whether the space of the Americans was any nicer. At that time he knew nothing about having characters with other than just pro-Russian views in his group.

Players were distributed game T-shirts in their game space which facilitated anonymous communication amongst themselves and identification with their respective working group. Characters in Group B wore grey T-shirts and characters in Group A put on white T-shirts. The crucial difference between the first and the second office games was their game space. While in the first game, Group A played in a modern meeting room with a long table and Group B in a basement area with a single battened window, in the second game, Group A was sent to the basement (without windows) and Group B started off the game in a garden on a sunny day.

The difference of settings was expected to have a crucial impact on the speed in which players coped with their tasks. This assumption was not established. The players reached agreement just once in the first part of the game, i.e. in the first game, in Group A (meeting room). In a group of four composed of two neutral characters and two characters with strong views a coalition of two neutral characters around the Ukrainian character was created which outvoted the separatist with strong views on



Players were distributed maps of Ukraine, Europe and of afflicted areas. Photo by Michal Ložonský.

all points. Aside from this case in all other groups the characters agreed, after two hours of talks and argumentation that they could not agree on anything. They went to the negotiation without a group agenda. The agreement in the first part of the game was only a recommended goal for the group rather than the goal of the game assigned to the individual players in the group.

In the first part of the game interpersonal relations were created between the characters which determined hierarchy within the group. An interesting phenomenon was that despite the fact that internal hierarchy was not very visible in the first part. Once the groups merged in the second part of the game, one or two players in each group were more active and became the spokespersons of their group of peacemakers. This happened irrespective of the character which the player, acting as a spokesperson, played and this was true even when the players in the group had not agreed on any concerted action in the first part of the game. Psychological and sociological grounds for some players being more assertive than others in a confrontation of groups cannot be satisfactorily analysed here. For the purposes of our research it will suffice to state that placing oneself in position of a spokesperson or leader partly followed from the player's personality and partly from the situation in a group.<sup>19</sup>

The conditions under which the game was played at *Slavcon* 2015 festival (Bratislava, 22 – 24 May 2015) were very different. There was only one common space available and playtime was cut from four hours to two. In order to make most of group

<sup>19</sup> Refer to HAINS, Sarah C., HOGG, Michael A., DUCK Julie M. Self-Categorization and Leadership: Effects of Group Prototypicality and Leader Stereotypicality. In LEVINE, John M., MORELAND, Richard L. *Small Groups : Key Readings*. New York : Psychology Press, 2006. pp. 383–384.



dynamics, the maximum number of players was reduced from twelve to eight and all players started off in one common room and they had two hours to agree on a common peacekeeping proposal. The game streamlined version started off at a moment when the full “office space” version was to proceed from part one to part two.

In the first game the players had a break between the first and the second parts of the game. In subsequent games negotiations in the first and the second stages were divided into thirty-minute blocks with compulsory five-minute breaks in between, to allow for a private conversation of characters. At the beginning of thirty-minute blocks the individual groups were briefed on the events in Ukraine and distributed additional materials to characters. Global news were picked depending on the course of negotiations, to enhance their potential to affect game situations.

The global news was announced in various ways across different games, from public notice of the event, through the distribution of sheets of paper containing the news text to all players, down to communicating the news to only one player who had to decide how the news would be treated. The last method of breaking the news proved the best. When the news was distributed among the players simultaneously, most of the time they would be no longer interested in it and continued arguing in line with their character. However, once the news was disclosed to only one player, he/she would use it in his/her argumentation. Oftentimes, the player would modify it to serve the character’s cause.

Personal news (events relating to the family or the company, information on *The Peacemaker* project and personal letters from the representatives of fighting parties) was exclusively communicated to the players whom it concerned. It should be noted that more experienced players responded to these events and in challenging situations communicated the change to other players.<sup>20</sup> Thus, new game situations were created and it turned out that these players were closer to a dramatic style of playing (according to Bøckman) than players who indicated in the registration form that they wished to experience and create challenging situations. In four cases less experienced players (had no prior experience with larping) had opted for a dramatic approach to the game. However, when they received a personal message (in two cases about the death of their own son on the battlefield, A: Avenger), the news was not reflected in playing their character in any visible way.<sup>21</sup>

As soon as eight to twelve players with different game experience were seated together in one meeting room, the more eloquent players took the initiative and the biggest space in the game, irrespective of the fact whether it was the second part of the full “office” game version or the full length of the streamlined game version. In

<sup>20</sup> An example is an experienced player assigned the pro-Russian character who is a proponent of conspiracy theories (F: Conspirator) in the game played at Slavcon 2015. The moment he received “trusted” information that the project could only be a very well-thought reality show, he began to boycott the negotiations and even voted for the accession of Ukraine to NATO. In the registration form the player picked only one option: “To have a good time and enjoy the atmosphere,” which is connected with immersionist style (refer to notes).

<sup>21</sup> If we are to generalise facts we strictly have to base ourselves on what we have observed and subsequently recorded. It could not be established if a player decided to render his/her character using introvert style or that he/she would not let his/her character be affected by the news. The player could have enjoyed playing his/her character, however, he/she did not directly affect game situations. Therefore, this is interesting especially in cases when the players picked the option: “I want to create and experience challenging situations.”



In the first game, there was no strict time limit for breaks. Players engaged in a private conversation during cigarette breaks. Photo by Michal Lošonský.

all observed games in the common part some players hardly uttered a word. During debriefing, these players invariably argued that they said nothing because they were not sure if they could assert themselves with eloquent players next to them, or that there was an advocate of their character's opinions present in the room and therefore, had no need to join in the debate and share their opinion. In one case the player could not at all identify herself with the character she played and therefore she did not intervene in the game.

Players who aspired to win *The Peacemaker* LARP game were in a special situation.<sup>22</sup> Given the nature of the game design, no player could win the game, so these players were assigned characters whose goal was not to arrange a peace agreement (3. The Spy, 2. The arms industry representative, E. Dramaturge). In one case the female player was assigned the character of a pro-Russian conspirator. He did not have a big chance to meet her game goals (and neither did any other character who was primarily interested in war conflict), however, once the information was disclosed to her that the project was just a reality show, she had a chance to discredit and discontinue the negotiations. Ironically, the female player did not capitalise on the information even when another player (3. Spy), shortly before the final voting, declared that in the project he was a stooge journalist who wanted to divulge that *The Peacemaker* project was just a scam. Interestingly, the two players stated in the registration form that their goal was to win *The Peacemaker* game.

<sup>22</sup> The impossibility to win a game (to bring peace to Ukraine) does not mean the impossibility to meet the character's game goals. Players who opted for "winning" the game were assigned such characters for whom bringing peace to Ukraine was not a game goal they wanted to meet.

## Conclusion

It is extremely difficult to establish the extent to which players managed or failed to suppress their own stances and uphold exclusively the stances of their characters. Since in each game a balanced representation of the individual parties to the conflict had to be observed, it was not feasible to assign the characters in such a way as to have all players play either counter to their own opinions or in accordance with them. Therefore, we did not map out the political views of individual players prior to starting the game. Only debriefing revealed that the extent of the capacity to suppress one's own stance was not revealed to game experience. There were both experienced and inexperienced players who enjoyed playing a character with views different from their own. In both experienced and inexperienced players it was demonstrated that their own views and knowledge utterly suppressed the game situation and, in fact, they turned back on their characters for the sake of argumentation in line with their personal beliefs.

If the phenomenon is viewed within the context of Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938), we would come to a conclusion that the players either cheated or spoiled the game: "The player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a 'spoil-sport'. The spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle."<sup>23</sup> If, however, spoiling the game is defined as a conscious leaving the LARP game world (Huizinga's magic circle) and the false player as someone who modifies the rules to make his/her character win, we will come to a conclusion that the players did nothing of that. Their position of a player simply gave way to their position of a human being. Here, however, we would be leaving game design and entering the contentious realm of ethics.

With respect to game design it was much more interesting to find that *The Peacemaker* LARP game which was based on real political events and connections revealed a marked mismatch between the players' judgement of the game goal they preferred and the style in which they eventually LARPed. The question: "Which type of player am I?" was not posed directly. Instead, we asked the player how he/she wished to enjoy a LARP game. It was revealed that players were unable to make a prior correct judgement of the style of LARPing they would use. However, it should be noted that research results take account of just one LARP game situated in the present. This finding is, therefore, only an interesting starting proposition for a continued research of role-playing games from the point of view of game design and theatre science.

Postscriptum: The goal of *The Peacemaker* project was not bringing peace to Ukraine. This could only be a goal of the characters played by the players of the LARP game. The outcome of peace negotiations did not represent the views of players or, apparently, the solution of Ukraine crisis. Despite that the reader will find enclosed the outcome of the negotiations in all three games, as recorded by players (with numbering, indents or track changes).

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<sup>23</sup> HUIZINGA, Johan. *Homo ludens*. London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949, p. 11.

The first game (full version) | 22 March 2015:

- The withdrawal of troops (except UN peacekeeping forces) from disputed territories (Donetsk, Luhansk, Krym), immediate capitulation, preservation of territorial integrity and launching the autonomy talks.
- With the autonomy talks in progress, disputed territories shall administer their affairs independently (except for security issues).
- Exchange of captives.
- General pardon for third-country combatants who are not considered part of the formal military forces.
- Suspension of Ukraine's membership in NATO pending conflict resolution.<sup>24</sup>
- Referendum on independence.
- The Security Council creation, with one member from the Ukrainian armed forces, one member from the separatist armed forces and one UN member.

Slavcon 2015 (streamlined game) | 24 May 2015:

1. Ukraine remains a Member State of NATO.<sup>25</sup>  
In favour: 7, Against: 0
2. Support to the central government of Ukraine by Western allies.  
In favour: 6, Against: 1
3. Ukraine's integration in the European Union and Schengen area conditioned by a referendum.  
In favour: 6, Against: 1

The third game (full version) | 14 June 2015:

We, ~~the people mandated by MIER organisation~~, the undersigned, make the following proposals to the resolution of Ukraine crisis:

- Sending mediators and a team of independent experts facilitating the resolution of the post-war situation to join parallel truce talks with the leaders of the interested parties.
- Enforcing capitulation on both sides of the conflict with a pledge of holding a referendum on the status of Donetsk and Luhansk regions.
- UN Security Council, by employing its tools, oversees that ceasefire is observed, ~~or, if appropriate, force is employed~~.
- Creation of a permanent UN mission in the territory.
- The subject of the referendum is future territorial arrangement of the region binding on all parties to the conflict and on the international community.

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Translated by Mária Švecová

<sup>24</sup> During the game, the players received a global information that in a fast-track procedure Ukraine acceded to NATO.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.