

# Lobbying for the Dead

## *Vampire larp at the European Parliament*

Juhana Pettersson

### *Abstract*

Organizing the first ever larp played partially at the European Parliament gave the opportunity to explore design concepts such as indexical larp, where the fiction of the larp corresponds to actual reality as closely as possible.



*The last scene of the larp was played in a cultural center called Beursshouwburg, recently the location of the Feminist Curse Night event. Photo: Tuomas Puikkonen, in-game*

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### *Introduction*

On 24th November 2017, the actual elected real-life Members of the European Parliament Miapetra Kumpula-Natri and Julia Reda sat in a meeting room at the European Parliament in Brussels and listened to arguments from lobbying organizations such as the European Security Forum and the Eichel Group. The subject of the day was a proposed piece of EU legislation called ETIAS, The European Travel Information and Authorisation System.

It's a similar mechanism to the U.S. ESTA, and requires travelers to the EU to register in advance so that their information can be checked against multiple databases.

While the MEPs and the law were real, the lobbyists were not: They were participating in a larp called *Parliament of Shadows*, based on the tabletop roleplaying game *Vampire: the Masquerade*. The MEPs played themselves in a larp seeking to bring reality and fiction as close as possible in the world of vampire lobbying.

### *The Aesthetics of Reality*

The *World of Darkness* is a fictional setting shared by roleplaying games such as *Vampire: the Masquerade* and *Werewolf: the Apocalypse*. The core idea is that the *World of Darkness* is much like our world, except vampires, werewolves and other beings skulk in the shadows unbeknownst to us. The concept that the fictional world and the real world strongly resemble each other is built into the setting.

For *Parliament of Shadows*, we chose a corner of this world rarely visited in any of the previously published *World of Darkness* material: High level EU politics. All player characters were professional lobbyists, and the larp started with them doing what lobbyists do: Going to the European Parliament, pitching ideas, sitting in meetings.

One member of our core team, Maria Pettersson, works at the European Parliament as a political advisor. She designed and ran the segment of the larp that took place inside the Parliament building. This segment involved two actual MEPs, half a dozen NPC players, and assistants recruited among people who work at the Parliament. At maximum complexity, it involved six simultaneous scenes ranging from the tunnels under the Parliament building to the Plenary Hall (the space they use for full sessions of the Parliament).

The Parliament segment also presented new challenges to larp organizing because of the highly bureaucratic environment. In some cases, issues such as whether a door could be open or closed required extensive negotiation.

In *Vampire: the Masquerade*, ancient and powerful vampires seek to influence the mortal world and shape it to their purposes. The current owners of the franchise, the Swedish company White Wolf Entertainment, have favored an explicitly political understanding of these genre elements. The vision of our larp was in line with this policy, and allowed us to link actual, real policies and goals into the supernatural setting of the *World of Darkness* in a natural way. This way, our ancient vampires were not only seeking to control the fate of humanity in the abstract, but also on the level of concrete, actual policy.

### *Indexical*

“360 degrees” is a common aesthetic idea in Nordic larp. It’s defined as larp where the visual surface matches that of the fiction. So if the larp is set in a spaceship, the venue is made to look like a spaceship. Ideally, you could turn around 360 degrees (hence the name) and not see anything that would break the illusion. From this perspective, what we did in *Parliament of Shadows* goes beyond 360 aesthetics and into an unusual level of larp fidelity.

The characters are lobbyists working to influence European politics, so one of our venues is the actual European Parliament. The characters are working to influence a real law and actual MEPs participate as supporting characters, playing themselves. When the characters go for cocktails, the venue is one that hosts parties held by real lobbying companies all the time.

The larp doesn’t only seek to imitate the fiction on the level of visual surface, but to replace it with reality whenever possible. One player commented that this was the first larp he’d ever been to that required security clearance for all participants. It was necessary to get the players into the Parliament building.

We call this style indexical larp, where the world of the fiction and the real milieu of the larp correspond indexically, that is one to one, as much as possible.

The two earlier *World of Darkness* larps organized by the same production company responsible for *Parliament of Shadows*, Participation Design Agency, also attempted to be as indexical as possible, although in a less dramatic way. The vampire techno party larp *End of the Line* always took place in the same venue in-game and off-game, whether in Helsinki, New Orleans or Berlin.

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In the Berlin urban larp *Enlightenment in Blood*, all venues were similarly the same in-game and off-game. The nightclub was the same nightclub, just with vampires.

However, the indexicality of *End of the Line* and *Enlightenment in Blood* was more a question of convenience than a central aesthetic tenet. In those larps, it was easier to keep things real. In *Parliament of Shadows*, we used indexicality to an aggressive degree, including the use of real EU legal text and real Parliament workers to complement the physical surroundings.



*A participant who works at the Parliament and played herself in the larp. Photo: Tuomas Puikkonen, in-game*

### *Into the Breach*

The concept of indexicality also came into play in our collaboration with the Finnish Cultural Institute for the Benelux. The Cultural Institute is an official organization tasked with facilitating Finnish culture in the Benelux countries. They agreed to support us in an unorthodox way: By lending their facilities and personnel to us for a scene.

All the player characters were blood-addicted mortals who served distant, ancient vampires. We wanted to build a strong contrast between the daytime world of lobbying and politics and the nighttime world of blood and terror inhabited by the vampires. To this end, we created a Brussels vampire scene

with supporting players. They held a perpetual, degenerate party at an extravagant hotel suite the player characters could visit.

The idea behind Brussels vampire society was that this was the city where ancient vampires sent their progeny to learn politics. So basically, the local vampires were all ultra-privileged scions of the high and mighty. We called these wastrel vampires, powerful fools who spent their time playing cruel games with each other, and whoever happened to walk through the door.

One of these characters had decided to continue his mortal career in the arts by making a film that would also reveal the existence of the vampires to humanity. One of the tasks of a lobbying group called the European Cultural Council was to look after the Masquerade, the rule that keeps vampires hidden. They gained information that suggested that the Finnish Cultural Institute for the Benelux was funding a movie that would expose vampire secrets.

Armed with this information, the characters went to the actual, real Cultural Institute to meet with the people who in real life also made this type of funding decisions and attempted to dissuade them from the project.

In addition to creating cool scenes, these parts of the larp had an additional goal of showcasing larp to people who didn't have experience with it. Since larp is best understood by trying, we felt that it was a good idea to create an opportunity for people who work in cultural institutions to experience it from the inside.

### *Involve the People*

There's an activist slogan that goes "Nothing about us without us". This can also function as a larp design idea. Simply put, what happens when you involve the people larp is about in the creation of the larp?

In the case of the *Parliament of Shadows*, our milieu is the world of politics and lobbying in the European Union. This world was also part of our organizing team. We had people who worked at the European Parliament and people who worked as lobbyists.

The idea here is twofold. First, involving the people brings a higher level of fidelity and realism to the project. Second, it means that in some way, you have to face the people the larp is about. This is not the same as taking an uncritical

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stance. It just means that whatever you say, you're going to say directly to those you're talking about. It brings accountability to the process of larp design.

In the case of *Parliament of Shadows*, this method of involving the people wasn't used in a particularly dramatic manner. It came naturally from the idea of indexical larp. In the case of this larp, involving the people made our take on EU politics infinitely more nuanced than it otherwise could have been. It also directly gave us the option to organize the larp at all, since it was dependent on the access provided by Maria Pettersson.

However, in others larps, this same method has been used in a more political way. Two of the organizers of *Parliament of Shadows* also worked on the Palestinian-Finnish larp *Halat hisar*. In *Halat hisar*, the larp was about the Palestinian political situation transposed onto Finnish alternative history. The team making the larp had Finnish and Palestinian members. Making that larp, we felt it was important that the Palestinian experience be represented in the process from the start of the design to the larp itself.

### *Playing with Somebody Else's Toys*

Working with an established setting like the *World of Darkness* and *Vampire: the Masquerade* has advantages and disadvantages. The biggest advantage is informational. The players can be assumed to know the basics of the setting already, so they don't need to be explained in as much detail as they otherwise would. Since the amount of information players can digest is limited, this means that informational real estate is freed up for other purposes.

Not all of our players were familiar with the *World of Darkness* and for some, this was their first larp. Their lack of *World of Darkness* experience didn't hinder their play, but the fact that most participants had it provided the larp with a collective informational advantage.

Disadvantages arise especially when the larp attempts to develop the setting in a new direction or create something that's not in the style of previous works. Since the player already knows the setting, they assume that everything follows that template. If the larp seeks to do something unusual, these deviations need to be worked through with the players. In the case of *Parliament of Shadows*, we provided all players with information on how we'd be using the *World of Darkness*, so that they could adjust their vision of it accordingly.

However, problems can arise when there's an informational discrepancy between players. If all players encounter our take on the ghouls, for example, they accept that ghouls are now like this. However, as was the case, if the player doesn't encounter our version of Pentex (an evil corporation) but instead only hears about, they'll picture it in their minds according to the standard template. This is natural: The whole point of using an established setting is to have that standard template in the head of the player.

This means that the Pentex of those characters who participated in the Pentex scenes fit with our interpretation and our larger framework of the larp. We chose to use Pentex as an element in the larp because they provided us with an agenda that would be interesting from the standpoint of political lobbying.

The majority of the players were not present in the initial Pentex scenes. This meant that when they heard that Pentex was present in the larp, their mental imagery came from the sources they knew: Vampire's sister roleplaying game *Werewolf: the Apocalypse*. This led to a confusing situation where players who met Pentex were happy with it, and players who didn't were unhappy, because they felt Pentex was tonally inconsistent with the rest of the larp.

This is a problem created by using a pre-existing setting in a specific way. In many larps, the larp is the only source of setting information available, so the organizers can assume that they control what's true in the larp's world and what isn't. In a larp based on a shared setting this is not the case: Players have pre-existing ideas. These ideas can be used effectively, but they can also lead to problems, especially in a larp where it's important to set a specific tone.

### *A Tight Agenda*

The indexical approach to larp informed the way *Parliament of Shadows* was structured. When a real-life lobbyist comes to Brussels, they book meetings, attend cocktail parties, go to dinners. Their schedule is packed.

Taking the real-life template of a lobbyist's schedule, we organized the larp around a similarly tight masterplan built around pre-arranged events the characters had on their planners. This way, we knew where the players were going to be at any given time, and could move things along quickly. Although we had a very large number of locations in Brussels, many of them existed only for an hour or two before the characters moved on to the next venue.

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*Lobbyists for European intelligence agencies hiding under the table of a translator's booth to eavesdrop on a meeting. Photo: Tuomas Puikkonen, in-game*

This method also allowed us to splinter the larp into small groups experiencing their individual scenes at the same time in different locations. Bjarke Pedersen from our core team compared *Parliament of Shadows* to the Danish concept of 700% larp. In a 700% larp, one or two players experience a highly choreographed rollercoaster of an urban larp which often involved dozens of supporting players. Although our larp had 20 players, its structural concept was similar to 700% because of its predictability and reliance on pre-planned scenes.

Another structural predecessor was the final larp of the *Baltic Warriors* tour organized in the summer of 2015. All the previous *Baltic Warriors* larps consisted of a single location, but the finale was an urban game in which politicians, lobbyists and activists worked on issues of eutrophication in the Baltic Sea.

Here are some examples of the types of scenes characters could go through in *Parliament of Shadows*: Hide under the table in a translator's booth in a meeting hall at the Parliament to eavesdrop on a secret meeting. Meet the vampire Prince of Brussels in a suite in the art nouveau style Hotel Metropole. Embrace the Spiral worshiped by the Black Spiral Dancer tribe of werewolves in a dank Brussels forest as a prerequisite to a lobbying deal for the Pentex corporation.



Look over the city from the top of the Arc de Triomphe. Imbibe vampire blood from a suspect ziplock bag in a dirty bar toilet.

Indeed, the larp's schedule was so packed that allowing the players enough time for socializing became a concern at one point of the design process.

*Claimed by Larp*

After 2017, the Plenary Hall of the European Parliament is now a place where larp has happened. One of the goals of *Parliament of Shadows* was very consciously to take larp into places it has never been before, both physically, conceptually and socially. For many of the politicians and Parliament workers, it was their first experience with larp as an artform. (It was also the first time my mother tried larp, in a small supporting role.)

Our hope is that it can be used to bring new legitimacy to larp as an artform. After all, every day the Members of Parliament bring cultural events such as concerts and film screenings to the European Parliament. It was high time that one of these events was a larp.

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