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 ‘Pinnochio’ 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 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 ways that the production was understood by its participants and how it affected the player’s mode of engagement. We also outline some of the design choices that brought about 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 that they maintain a clear secondary framework and are deeply aware of the fact that they are feigning belief. This is generated by a ‘Pinnochio’ effect: at the same time that the players deeply long to believe in the fiction, it is always clear to them 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 in reality, this will not always be true. Several online hoaxes have initially been mistaken for real, and conversely, real events are sometimes mistaken as fabricated by the ARG gamer’s community1.

In this paper, we investigate a 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. In this paper, we aim to sketch some of the factors that contributed to this and discuss what effect the confusion had on the actual play activity and 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 as a way to play with reality through media. 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

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1 Such as the … discussed at … (REF to blog)
historic facts, rumours, 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.

Sanningen om Marika was also inspired by a tradition of immersive role-play fostered in the Nordic countries within the Live Action Role-playing (larp) community [11]. The basic approach of a 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, fully in character, for the duration of the game. There are few formal rules in this form of larp and the players stay in character continuously, unlike American larp as reported by Lancaster [7]. Recently, several Nordic larp have been staged outside the closed-off environment, and been taken to the streets. 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]. The Prosopopeia larp were highly successful in creating an intense, emotional and politically challenging game experience staged in the real world, but it 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 organisers 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) commissioned the production, and SVT produced the drama series and some of the web sites. The game part was commissioned to the company P, a small company in Stockholm 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 TV series and the game were co-produced in an integrated manner, starting already with the treatment written during the spring of 2006. In March 2008, Sanningen om Marika was awarded an international interactive Emmy Award for best 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 TV debate program recorded weekly, and a website called Consiprare. The TV series provided a hub for the storyline and offered passive spectating. The Consiprare 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, which was recorded and aired weekly directly after the drama series. This program provided the central means to connect the fictional drama series (recorded a year in advance) to the ongoing game. It pretended to be a live debate but was in reality was recorded a day before it was 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 society Ordo Serpenti. The latter site was used to organize real world participation in the game. The participants were encouraged to enlist in the society, which would send them on different missions and tasks in order to rise in rank within the society. The production also included on-line puzzles, scheduled events in the real world as well as in an on-line virtual world Entropia.

Two Layers of Fiction
The fictional universe in Sanningen om Marika was deliberately kept very close to the real background story of the production. It was communicated primarily through the Consiprare website and the TV debate. The “fictionalised

2 The debate was publicised as a livesending in the TV guide, and the illusion was furthered by fake phone-in 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.
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 that by an underground organisation Ordo Serpentis that Adrijanna mistrusts. As part of her search, she has created the Conspirare site and also posted 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 claimed had happened to the ‘real’ Maria. The fictionalized reality forms the backstory of the ARG. An actor playing Adrijanna started to tour Sweden in July 2007 with the message that the upcoming TV series was based on her true life story, and that Maria really had disappeared.

To participate, the participants signed up on the web site Conspirare to help Adrijanna in her search for Maria. They hunted clues both on the Internet and in the real world. One week before the TV series started, the participants uncovered the Ordo Serpentis web site and could start to infiltrate the secret society.

The role of the debate was to connect the drama series to the ARG. According to the ‘fictionalised reality’, svt has started to suspect that there might be a grain of truth to Adrijanna’s story. To address the controversy, they publicly announced that a debate program in which this issue would be discussed would accompany the TV series.

The debate was recorded only one day in advance of the airing, which enabled its producer to pick up on the progression of the ARG, show player-generated photos and videos as part of the show, etc. It was authentically staged, and some actors were recruited to ‘play themselves’ in their official role e.g. as a psychologist, forensic dentist or even as a police spokesperson.

Figure 3: Screen shot from the Conspirare website.

A side plot that became very important was the Kerberos surveillance company that opposed the investigations done by Adrijanna and the Conspirare team. This side plot was very realistic: the company had a logotype and a fake 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 - that also featured in the drama series!

Modes of participation

The SOM production offered several tiers of participation [1]. The simplest mode was to merely watch 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.

Game activities in the real world were organised in two different ways. Conspirare was used to invite to and organise larger events (such as a final demonstration outside the TV building in Gothenburg) and the Entropia events. Ordo Serpentis focused on self-organised play in smaller groups. When participants signed up to become part of this secret society, they were asked to form sub teams and to carry out the missions together. Mission documentation (video and photos) was uploaded to Flickr or YouTube and announced on Conspirare. Participants could also submit their documentation to SVT, who would put it on their web site and select some of it to show in the debate program.
Figure 4. The pop-up warning message at Conspirare.

Fictionality 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. All web sites were provided with explicit disclaimers starting out ‘This website is part of a fictional production...’ (see figure F). These popup windows would appear every time 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. The game 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.

PLAYER EXPERIENCE STUDY
As part of a player experience study of Sanningen om Marika, we have looked into the perception of SOM as truth or fiction. The discussion below is based on several sources of information: an online survey, several interviews with participants, 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 On-line Survey – Overall Statistics
The web survey was posted on the SVT web site four days before the game ended, and on Conspirare at the last day of the game. It was closed on December 13th 2007. A total of 385 participants responded to the survey, 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 of the survey were active participants. Figure 4 shows their activity levels. We can see that a majority of the respondents watched the television series and the debate every week, and that 70% of the respondents also were active at the Conspirare web site at least once a week. Christy Dena has reported similar findings for ReGenesis. Only 14 of the respondents had been active at Conspirare or Ordo Serpentis less than once a week. Given that about 400 persons were active at Conspirare, we can assume that the respondents in our study are fairly representative for the active participants.

74% of the respondents (259 persons) were between 17 to 36 years old. 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.

From their reported level of activity (Figure 5) we can see that the survey respondents represent rather active participants.

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 the participants made sense of 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, of which six were men and seven women.

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5 The full text reads in translation: “Warning: Conspirare is part of a fictional creation. The opinions expressed here do not always reflect the opinions of P or SVT. Random similarities with real people are sometimes pure coincidental. You participate 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, watch the movie clips, and discuss 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/
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 include 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 web:

“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 IT, 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)

Several survey participants also found it especially problematic that the ‘lie’ was presented in public service TV.

“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, but also that they 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)

THE EFFECTS
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. There should have been a fat info page somewhere that you would be recommended to read from the beginning, where it was more obvious than now the case, 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 not have to get confused.[..]...This also disturbed the game experience the most.”
(Survey comment)

7 All interview and survey comments are translated from Swedish.
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 would have thought it to be a bit unpleasant sometimes. Everything both felt real and unreal. Some things were realistic while others were unrealistic. It made me confused that the ‘dog’ car for example was owned by P productions and that Adrijanna was employed there.

(Interview quote)

WHAT MADE THE PRODUCTION CONFUSING?
Sanningen om Marika created what we can call a ‘Orson Welles’ 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 of SOM.

Double Layers of Fiction
The double layers of fiction contributed, as the ‘fictionalised reality’ appeared as distinctly truer than the dramatised fiction. The fictionalised reality lay extremely close to the real back story of the production and relied on real 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 that understood that SOM was partly fictional it was hard to tell exactly which parts were fictional.

There is only one rule: Play as if it was real
As discussed previously, SOM did not maintain a full illusion. Instead of creating a full illusion, 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 of 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 forum participants noted down the registration number of the Kerberos car and traced its owner through the Swedish car directory. He copied the full data record into the forum, including the fact that it was owned by P, the production company where Adrijanna also worked. The moderator removed this information 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 thread was locked by the moderator.

For the experienced ARG participant, it is not difficult to read this as a (somewhat clumsy) off-game marker; the real world knowledge about who owns this car is declared as not belonging to the game. These kinds of delimitations of the game occur frequently at the forums, and work as ludic markers as well as game boundaries. However, they are not understandable unless you already have subscribed to the basic rule of the game: to “act as if it was real”. A participant who had missed this instruction would just find discussions like this one 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 pop-up 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 is 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.

“...That 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 text popup disclaimer, many were prone to trust the social agreement. The problem was that this social agreement was formed by people who were already pretending. The Conspirare forum and chat systems were populated by people who had accepted the “pretend that it is real” rule and who were collectively co-creating the fictional world. By consequence, these people found all explicit discussion of it as fictional to be 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 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 online 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)

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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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<tr>
<td>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.</td>
<td>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.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I know that TV4 [another TV channel], or rather, the production company that makes their low quality TV programs, for example make cuts¹⁰ 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?</td>
<td>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.</td>
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Figure 6. Excerpts from the post-game chat at the SVT site.

“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 that Sanningen om Marika who understood the rule ‘pretend that it is real’. 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 contribute 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 that requires participants to push their personal boundaries only should do so within a clear ‘magic circle’. Else, the participants will find it hard to create the mental distance to the in-game activities that is required to allow them to reflect on the game:

“I am a larper and for me the Marika project is one huge larp. Everything screams larp, from

¹⁰The 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.
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 uncommonly 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 likely as possible for the players to pretend that they don’t see the cage.” (McGonical 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 TV 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 peaking behind the curtain’ [8]. The ARG players may not wish to see the machinery exposed; but the Nordic larps 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 participants and newcomers which 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 University

REFERENCES


11 www.mobile-life.org


LUDOGRAPHY


