

## Post Panopticon

*Analysing live-action role-playing has always been problematic. The subjectivity of every experience makes the personal reflection a lame weapon for an analysis. We need to find new ways of writing about the phenomenon. Any attempt to go farther than a diary from character/player perspective or “the food was very bad” is welcome.*

This article is an attempt to use and introduce post-structuralism as a tool for looking at role-playing. It is about how signs and symbols are used and created. It is about positions and perspectives. It is about power.

The post-structural theory has been developed in many scientific fields. Some examples are Foucault's historian writings on social thoughts, Barthes' analysis of media, Lacan's neopschoanalysis and Derrida's philosophy of signs. It has also been a crucial element in contemporary feminist theory underlined by writers like Weedon.

I will use the poststructuralist approach to deconstruct the Norwegian contemporary scenario *Panopticornp*, by Irene Tanke.<sup>1</sup> I will read the “text” *Panopticornp*, and view it as a frame for the interaction. *Panopticornp* was a story about an international advertising agency. Real life agencies like *Panopticornp* work with the production of meaning in the media environment and everyday life. The scenario made great use of language to construct identities, divisions and the illusion of something different than everyday life. The conscious way of creating the frames for this scenario made it one of the most interesting and dangerous events in the year 2003.

### Taking the Job

The participants of *Panopticornp* enrolled as the employees of a multinational corporation with the same name as the event itself. The registration for the event was an on-line employment form for people going to the newly started *Panopticornp* Oslo Unit. This way of enlisting brought the fiction close to “the real world” and challenged the traditional agreement of live-action role-playing to never let fiction and reality meet. The participants were put in the position of a character, but without the context of the enactment.

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<sup>1</sup> *Panopticornp* was played in Oslo, Norway between the 17th – 20th of July in 2003. The genre of the game was contemporary political realism. There were circa 30 participants. The game was arranged by Irene Tanke, Jared Elgvin, Eirik Fatland, Kaisa Lindahl, Cath Røsselund, Espen Nodeland, Rune Haugen, Trine Lindahl and Erling Rognli.

Only one thing was given to the participants in printed media: The corporate dictionary, CorpDic. The contents of this folder framed the whole event, putting focus on certain perspectives while marginalizing others. It presented dozens of concepts, transforming language and the usage of it:

CorpSpeak – The ‘slang’ of Corpers. Since CorpSpeak embodies PanoptiCorps CorpFil and organisational structure, mastering CorpSpeak is not just a question of ‘fitting in’ but a measure of ones understanding of how PanoptiCorp works. (PanoptiCorp CorpDic, 2002)

Language is a way of positioning. The dictionary most certainly structured the character interpretation and expression in certain patterns. In most role-playing events, the organisers define and state an agreement with terms and rules that everybody must obey. As a participant one can chose to accept those terms, or just avoid signing up for the event. This is very important in order to make the medium function. But participants must be conscious about that they are surrendering a lot of power to the organisers. Sometimes the organisers define the participants’ life conditions for days.

## Living the Job

CorpFil – The Corporate Philosophy of PanoptiCorp. Reflected in our way of life and work. The core of our CorpFil is that optimum (NexSec) CreaProd is achieved through the creation of functional MemeFields within horizontal, competitive, organisational structures. Because of our emphasis on MemeFields over formal structure, CorpSpeak is not just ‘office slang’ but an embodiment of our corporate identity. (CorpDic)

Abandoning one’s own language transforms one’s way of thinking, which is a method for immersing into the character and the surrounding setting. All the characters at PanoptiCorp had clearly defined roles, different classes and functions at the agency. Those roles had new concepts attached to them; carders, dozers, spotters, divers, suits and more. The participants did not have any pre-understanding of these words, which made it possible for the organisers to maintain total control of the definitions.

The PanoptiCorp unit was the life of the characters. They ate at the agency, they slept at the agency and they even shagged at the agency. During the days of the event the PanoptiCorp agency was the one and only reality for both participants and their characters.

The agency had new concepts for the relation to time. “Now” was never good enough. The characters strived for being “NexSec”, trying to guess their way towards the next upcoming hot ideas, brands or persons. Saying something that became interpreted as “LasSec” ruined one’s social status for hours or even days.

Since PanoptiCorp was a contemporary, realistic scenario, there was an unexplored possibility to let “real people” without characters enter the event, without even knowing that it was a fiction. Would this be an offensive act, degenerating their

reality, or would it be an invitation to take part in our reality? I still wait for scenarios with the courage to explore these possibilities.

## Decentralized Hierarchy

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (Michel Foucault, Panopticism)

The panopticon theory, which inspired the name of the event, was written by Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century. Imagine panopticon as a cylinder with prison cells all around. The cells have one open wall, only covered with bars, as transparent as the fourth wall of a theatre stage. In the middle of the cylinder there is a tower with windows black as sunglasses. From the tower, all prisoners can be watched. The people in the tower cannot look at all prisoners at the same time, but the prisoners do not now when they are under surveillance, only the fact that they are. PanoptiCorp was somewhat different.

Take away the tower, so the prisoners can see each other, and give the prisoners reason (shorter sentence for example) to report on each other – then you have PanoptiCorp. The corporation had a flat structure, with no bosses or certain demands from owners (except profit, of course). There was no board of directors. Still, the characters were strictly put in a dynamic but hierarchic order. This was visualised through the HotNot-system:

HotNot – The standard PanoptiCorp system of rating performance, HotNot votes occur at least daily at any Unit. Unlike the rating systems of more LasSec agencies, where the Human Resources director performs the rating, PanoptiCorps HotNot is democratic, giving all co-workers an equal vote in HotNot ratings. (CorpDic)

Depending on your status in the hotnot, you were assigned different roles on projects of different importance. It visualized the current hierarchies within the agency. It is evident that the repression that used to originate from the top of the hierarchy can actually be distributed and shared by all.



## An Illusion of Power?

Live-action role-playing is generally far more democratic than most other media. It decentralizes the power of stimuli creation, breaking down the traditional mass communicational idea of a few producers sending stimuli to many consumers. But since live-action role-playing claims to be an anti-authoritarian medium it is very important to be aware what kinds of power structures are created. One should not be content with the conclusion that the medial structures are far more democratic than TV. Exactly what are the functions and positions of organisers, writers, participants and others in relation to the project?

One authoritarian position is stated in *The Manifesto of the Turku School* by Mike Pohjola:

The role-playing game is the game masters creation, to which he lets the player enter. The game world is the game master's, the scenario is the game master's, the characters (being a part of the game world) are the game master's. The players' part is to get inside their character's head in the situation where the game begins and by eläytyminen try to simulate it's actions. (Pohjola 1999)

The turkuists consider the organiser to be an artist in a very modernist sense of the word. The organiser is a genius and God. The participants should be grateful that they are allowed into the brilliant artistic work that the organiser has set up. The participants are the puppets of a content puppet master. This approach is honest, but hardly desirable. I want to consider live-action role-playing as a fellow-creating process. The organiser must be ready to lose control of the event.

Another view is represented by the Norwegian manifesto *Dogma 99*, written by Eirik Fatland and Lars Wingård. They claim that the organisers should not in any way manipulate or direct the story:

5. After the event has begun, the playwrights are not allowed to influence it. [...] As organisers take control during a LARP, the players become passive. This leads to players learning to expect organiser control, even demanding it. Only a LARP entirely without organiser influence will place the real initiative in the hands of players, where it belongs. As we learn how to make LARPs work independent of organiser control and influence, it will become possible to develop more constructive and activating methods of organiser interaction. (Fatland & Wingård 1999)

Participants will never be free from the control of the organisers, but they should be aware of when and how they are manipulated. *Dogma 99* wants to give the power over the event to the participants. But the organiser still defines the themes and agendas. The participants have freedom, but only within the framework defined by the organisers.

There is a difference between control before and after the event has begun. If the organisers are communicative and give input during the enactment, they become part of the process. If they only set the frames, they do not partake in the development of the actual event. I prefer organisers that dare to be fellow-creators of their own event. And

I prefer to be participating in setting the frames of an event, even if my only function during the enactment is to play my character.

The participants of live-action role-playing events are often denied the possibility to partake in the designing of the milieu, rule system and dramaturgy of an event. Panopticon took this even further. The participants became deeply manipulated by the clever organisers as they gave away their language and thus their thoughts. After just a day many participants were thinking like binary machines: hot/not, lassec/nexsec, upcard/downcard, always judging co-workers as effective or worthless. It took weeks for me to erase the thinking of dividing people into useful or non-useful out of my mind.

This is not a matter of morals. The organisers of Panopticon made their point very clear. It was a brilliant mind-fuck and an indispensable learning experience. Unfortunately the structures of Panopticon are not just fiction, they are real. Dr. Meredith Belbin is one of the profilers in the teamwork company that bears his name:

Over the years many people have been interested in the team role theory expounded in my book *Management Teams Why They Succeed or Fail* first printed in 1981. More and more jobs involve people working together and here the roles individuals play are very important. With our new online version of team role feedback, we aim to give individuals a fuller insight into their own behaviour in the workplace by taking account of how they are seen by others. The reports include advice on developing a personal management style suited to your team role profile. (Belbin, on his website.)

This is scary. Role-playing could be a great defence against the assigning of roles from the surroundings, but only if we are not blind to our own processes. Participants should be part of the pre-process. Organisers should partake in the story. Both participants and organisers should refuse *their* assigned roles as participants or organisers.

## Games

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