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Author(s): Pöllänen, Sonja; Arjoranta, Jonne

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‘Whose were those feelings?’ Affect and likenessing in *Halat hisar* live action role-playing game

Sonja Pöllänen

University of Eastern Finland, Finland

Jonne Arjoranta

University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Abstract

Halat hisar was a live action role-playing game (larp) organized in Finland in 2016. *Halat hisar*'s ambition as a larp was to mirror the current situation in Palestine. In larps, participants take on different roles and improvise without the presence of an audience. Larps offer a place where emotions and affectivities are transmitted through the embodiment of characters. Larps offer forms of *likenessing*, which create new affective states for the players. We conclude that larps can be powerful tools for portraying political alternatives of actual events, and they can serve a role in raising awareness. Larps offer a productive context for studying subjectivities where the focus is on affective relationalities because larps place the participants in social positions where they take up roles that might be inaccessible to them in everyday life. Larps offer a window to visit other ‘world-lines’ – and other ways of living.

Keywords

affect, affective tonality, larp (live action role-playing game), likeness, likenessing, role-playing

[T]he purpose of the game is to mirror the current situation of Palestine in Finland and give the players a picture of everyday life under occupation.

(*Halat hisar*, 2017)

Corresponding author:

Jonne Arjoranta, University of Jyväskylä, PO Box 35, Jyväskylä, 40014, Finland.

Email: jonne.arjoranta@jyu.fi

Halat hisar was a live action role-playing game (larp) organized twice in Finland, in 2013 and in 2016. Our approach to studying *Halat hisar* builds on non-representational approaches (Thrift, 2007). We dive into the world of the false and imaginary to see how an experience such as a larp can give participants an opportunity to experience situations and cultures unknown to them. This article builds upon previous work on role-playing games (e.g. Bowman, 2010) and affect theory (e.g. Gregg and Seigworth, 2010), situating itself in the cultural studies of the sensorial and affective. *Halat hisar* larp was co-written by three Finnish and four Palestinian larp writers, and the second version (Kangas, AbdulKarim et al., 2016) was updated by mostly the same designers. Conceptually, the versions are similar, and the differences are related to details. Our analysis focuses on the 2016 version of the larp. *Halat hisar* combined the current Palestinian political situation with the Finnish cultural context. It dealt with themes of occupation, power and nationalism. *Halat hisar* placed the Palestinian political situation in a fictional occupied Finland, where most of Finland was controlled by a fictional Ugric people.

As a form of play, larping is an activity where a group of people embody characters and play in an imaginary setting. They do this by dressing up, talking, moving, and making decisions as their character during play. Larp differs from theatre because it is not performed for an audience. The larp was organized as a one-day workshop and two days of play. It had 35 Finnish-speaking and 10 non-Finnish-speaking participants, with additional players taking on the roles of soldiers and other supporting roles. The events of the larp took place on a University of Helsinki campus, but the larp was actually played in Mikkeli, Finland. The participants played students, faculty members, reporters, human rights' workers, and other people trapped on a campus when a curfew begins. The curfew gave a plausible explanation for why none of the characters could leave the site.

Our research focus is on the interest that the humanities today have for different sensorial approaches (see e.g. Bull et al., 2006; Howes, 2005; Järviluoma, forthcoming; Järviluoma and Vikman, 2013: 646; Littler, 2016: 5) and the desire to look beyond the preference for only the visual or representational. In the field of broader game studies there are approaches that study the political and affective dimensions of digital games (see e.g. Ash, 2010; Shaw and Warf, 2009). Brian Massumi's (2011: 82) terms 'occurrent arts' or 'arts of experience' are also useful for us. We assert that a larp can be an example of an 'occurrent art' and a 'technique of existence', along with such things as speaking, writing, rituals, diagrams, dance, vision, music, and language (Massumi, 2011: 123, 131–2, 141–2, 146, 160, 173). However, Massumi distinguishes between art and games, arguing: 'when you close [the connective potential] down too much, you make it a game [as opposed to art]' (Massumi, 2011: 77). Massumi's rather normative stance seems to be mainly aimed at digital games. Our approach to studying *Halat hisar* builds on non-representational approaches (Thrift, 2007), and therefore, we did not study what *Halat hisar* represents. Instead, we propose to look at the larp through a lens that can help us capture the types of affective attunements that this kind of event can evoke.

***Halat hisar* as a Nordic larp**

Larps are a descendant of other forms of role-playing. Role-playing games are a form of entertainment and art usually traced to the first version of *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974;

see Peterson, 2012 for a fuller genealogy). Originally, role-playing games were an offshoot of table-top wargaming, which has affected the usual themes of earlier role-playing games. In the ensuing decades, many forms of role-playing have diverged from these roots and experimented with different themes, styles and approaches.

Halat hisar was created in the style of a Nordic larp. This tradition is common but not exclusive to the Nordic countries (Stenros and Montola, 2010). A Nordic larp borrows methods from the performative arts and often focuses on political issues (see Deutsch, 2015). For example, *System Danmarc* (2005) focused on the Danish social security system and *Panopticon* (2003 and 2013) was a satirical portrayal of an advertising agency.

Role-playing games have been the subject of academic research since Fine (1983) investigated *Dungeons & Dragons* players in the late 1970s. Since then, role-playing game studies have been formulated as part of different disciplines, with researchers examining them, for example, as performing arts (Mackay, 2001).

Larps have also been researched before from multiple perspectives and disciplines. Studies have looked into, for example, community building (Woo, 2012), fantasy (Seregina, 2018), and using larps as a pedagogical tool (Torner, 2016; also Bowman, 2010, includes all three aspects). Seregina (2018) has previously studied larps in the Finnish context, exploring the topic of fantasy using ethnographic and art-based methods. The most comprehensive source for role-playing game studies is *Role-playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations* (Zagal and Deterding, 2018). Both role-playing games and larps have been studied as part of the field of game studies, where they are sometimes used as counter-examples of the tendency of this field to focus on digital games (e.g. Stenros and Waern, 2011).

Both role-playing games and larps have communities that theorize the activities, for example in the Knutepunkt (e.g. Alfvång et al., 2001) and Wyrddcon (e.g. Eagar, 2010) conference series. It is common for participants in the larp community also to take part in the academic discourse, bringing community insights to academia, and vice versa. For example, the concept of ‘bleed’ has been developed in the larp community and adopted to the academic discourse. It refers to the mixing of players’ and characters’ emotions (Montola, 2010). It happens when ‘thoughts, feelings, physical state, and relationship dynamics of the player [affect] the character and vice versa’ (Bowman, 2013: 5). As we later show in the analysis, bleed is central to some of the affective experiences *Halat hisar*’s players experienced.

The political dimension of larp is also acknowledged by the larp community (e.g. Kangas, 2015; Kangas, Loponen et al., 2016; Söderberg, 2013). In the wider game studies field the political dimension of games is also well recognized (e.g. Bogost, 2005; Kelly, 2015; Möring and Leino, 2016; Neys and Jansz, 2010; Robinson, 2015; Sterczewski, 2016). Although our focus in this article is not the political dimension as such, we build upon this understanding of larps as a potentially political medium to better understand *Halat hisar*.

Moreover, there have been previous materialist approaches to role-playing games, focusing on things like costumes, props and books (e.g. Bienia, 2016; Jara, 2013; Torner and Jones, 2014). Furthermore, there are affective approaches to games within the broader game studies field. These approaches deal with, for example, virtual spaces and affectivity (Ash, 2010; Shaw and Warf, 2009), materiality (Apperley and Jayemanne, 2012), and developing a Deleuzian theory for video games (Cremin, 2016).

The earlier run of *Halat hisar* (2013) was studied by Englund (2014). She writes that larps could be ‘a tool to help people imagine a future in peace’ (Englund, 2014: 45). Our analysis focuses less on how larps could be used and more on what happens when one is used, but agrees with Englund’s (2014) conclusion.

Affect and likenessing

The focus on affect theory has for decades been diverse and varied (Gibbs, 2010: 188; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010: 6–7). The critique that ‘the affective turn’ sometimes receives is that it is seen as obscure and cumbersome (Bell, 2003), as West-centric (Navaro, 2017), and as lacking a general theory (e.g. Clough and Halley, 2007; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010; Koivunen, 2001). However, it is important to remember that affect theory finds its strength from the need to look beyond representationally focused normativities and general theories.

Although affect scholars like Massumi (2011: 152–3) take the Spinozan stand, with affect being pre-personal and ‘fleeting’, it is not impossible to translate affects into categories that are as identifiable, generally recognizable and narratively codable as emotions are. Emotions, affects and feelings are all interconnected and thus there is a risk of writing about affectivities in a way that reduces or narrows them down to certain emotions. This said, emotions and feelings are always inside the affective experience (Hesmondhalgh, 2013: 13). The standpoint we take on affect is not strictly Massumian; we take the Spinozan affect and Massumian concepts as our starting point. It sees things, humans, events, or other entities and tonalities as able to affect and to be affected (Deleuze, 1980; Massumi, 1987: xvii; Shouse, 2005). More specifically, we focus on certain affective tonalities, that express an event’s feel or ‘mood’ (Whitehead, 1967: 245–6) through player experience. Affect is what gives intensity to experiences.

For Massumi, the ‘translation’ of the affective dimension of an event into emotion happens through the existence of multiple vitality affects that resonate in the event, giving it a certain intensity or intensities. Massumi takes the term ‘vitality affect’ from Daniel Stern (1985: 53) who emphasizes that such affects are dynamic ‘activation contours’ that bring affective communication alive in different events. A pause or a change of tone in a conversation is an example of this kind of activation contour.

Likenessing in our article means ‘the activity to put on someone else’s shoes’ (cf. Langer, 1953; Massumi, 2011; Powell, 2015: 530). It is a concept that helps us better explain and understand *Halat hisar*’s affective vitality through player experiences. Likenessing does not necessarily have to deal with similarity or someone becoming the same as me. It has to do with the relationship we create between people, things and events: connections that are created *in between* things or entities. It has to do with our desire and capacity to understand things in connection to ourselves. On the other hand, likenessing can be seen as a form of power, appropriation and manipulation, sometimes even a form of ‘fun making’ such as mimicry. Empathy could be an end result of this kind of relationship. However, in this article we are looking into how affective theory (certain affective tonalities) and likenessing as an activity work out in reading our data, rather than what is born in those relationships.

During the larp the more invisible or amodal levels of likenessing may appear in things involved with an amodal rhythm and structure similar to something else. ‘Amodal’ refers to not being tied to a specific sense modality (Massumi, 2011:125), hence, the moments of transfer between different sense modalities are in focus. For example, singing along to a song and dancing to it both share the same rhythm even if they differ in sense modalities (Massumi, 2011: 125).

Likenessing can also be sensual and concrete. In *Halat hisar* it is first found between the larp and the real-life conflict; this larp resembles the Palestinian situation, although it does not directly represent the situation. Notwithstanding, in order to better communicate life under occupation, *Halat hisar* also portrayed some representational elements from everyday life under occupation. These elements included flags, songs, soldiers, acts of terror, and so on, that reflect the complexity of a real-life conflict. The players had to re-imagine the conflict based on these limited elements and participate in both recreating the conflict and in creating the likeness between the portrayal and the thing it mimicked.

We argue that larps offer a productive context for studying affectiveness and likenessing because larps place the participants in social positions where they have to become aware of situations unfamiliar to them and to take up roles that are inaccessible to them in everyday life. Larps offer the player the experience of becoming someone else. They offer an intersecting window to visit other ‘world-lines’ (Massumi, 2011; Michotte, 1963) – other situations, cultures and ways of living.

Data collection and methodology

Both researchers participated in *Halat hisar*, and our decision to study the larp came afterwards. We used three main sources of data for our analysis:

1. Our personal experiences of participating in *Halat hisar*. The authors have over three decades of combined experience of participating in larps, which helps us understand and contextualize our experiences.
2. Nine debriefs that were written by participants in the larp. Debriefs are texts written by larp participants to reflect on their experiences during the larp. These debriefs are sometimes shared, but their main purpose is personal reflection. The debriefs were given to us by the participants in the larp. We also included our own debriefs in the data set. These were written before the decision to research *Halat hisar*. One debrief was written in Finnish; the rest were written in English.
3. Nine comments written in a closed Facebook group by larp participants. These comments were used because their content and purpose was similar to the debriefs.

We received written permission from the participants to use the debriefs and Facebook comments for research purposes. In order to anonymize the participants, we have replaced the character and player names with common Finnish names. We have edited the quotations slightly for clarity and brevity, and, in some cases, translated the original Finnish text into English.

We also draw upon multiple secondary data sources:

1. Photographs (n = 310) taken by Tuomas Puikkonen during the larp.
2. Material published by the designers of *Halat hisar*, including background material shared on their website, character descriptions, and play instructions.
3. An anonymous player survey (n = 38) conducted by Markus Montola after the larp. In addition to biographical questions, the survey contained 89 Likert-scale questions about participant experiences of *Halat hisar* and three questions about how the participants prepared for the larp.

The photographs and background material on *Halat hisar* were published publicly and permission to use the photos in our article was obtained from the photographer Tuomas Puikkonen. We received the player survey from Markus Montola. Permission to use it for research was secured when he collected the survey from players. Before publication, all participants in *Halat hisar* were given access to the research manuscript to ensure that we did not make mistakes in analysing data collected from them.

We used multi-layered data to obtain a more detailed sense of the phenomenon under study. This allowed us to confirm our impressions by comparing them to other sources of data. Because our most important sources of data were textual, close reading the debriefs was an important step in making sense of it. We focused primarily on the textual data and used the photographs to better understand the situations being described.

The research follows an approach similar to thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012), but our themes are drawn from the affective tonalities that are in focus. Our data was first coded into the affective tonalities and then analysed in more detail in light of those affective tonalities. We named the four affective tonalities *hopelessness*, *powerlessness*, *fearfulness*, and *togetherness*. These are not the only ‘moods’ and we do not claim they represent the event in full; however they serve as tools to capture and write something about this ‘community’, which is the work of cultural studies and ethnography in general (Venäläinen et al., 2020: 229). This analysis was done by both researchers, and when uncertainties in coding were encountered, they were solved by discussing the issue until a mutual understanding was reached. We did not do a quantitative analysis of the player survey, but used the results from it to confirm the results obtained from other sources of data.

The findings are presented in the next section, focusing first on hopelessness and powerlessness and then on fearfulness and togetherness.

Affective tonalities of hopelessness and powerlessness

All my clothes were wet. I could feel the cold water running down my back all the way down to my shoes. I was sure I would get sick. (Player 8)

The person in the quote above was standing in a checkpoint queue, and the larp was about to start. It was a cold and rainy day in May, perhaps +15°C, and to enter the larp, the players needed to go through a checkpoint and confront soldiers checking their passports. Some of the participants stood in the rain for more than an hour. One by one, they

approached a checkpoint where soldiers used any excuse possible to turn them back or humiliate them. This happened also to the player whose quote started this section:

It was my turn. They grabbed my ID. Threw my bag on the ground, opened it, and humiliated me. When I got down to save my belongings from the muddy ground, they were watching me from behind and laughed [. . .]

I got up. Felt like I wanted to vomit. [. . .] My brain was still switching to game mode. Silently I got rid of Sanna [Player's name], and Taina [Character's name] stepped in.

The sense of powerlessness in front of the degrading soldiers, in the pouring rain and with her possessions on the muddy ground prompted Sanna to enter her character Taina and leave her own self behind. She writes how she wanted to vomit; the insult not only affected her character, it also affected the player since she was still in the process of becoming her character. This liminal phase of being in between places can also participate in the creation of the sensation of 'feeling sick'. This is an example of bleed, where the player's and character's emotions mix together.

Another situation where powerlessness and hopelessness were present was when one of the students was shot. Some of the characters in the larp were members of staff at the University of Helsinki. Despite their position of relative power, they felt as if they had failed to protect the students from the soldiers:

Feeling hopeless: there was nothing to appeal to in order to right the wrongs we experienced. When the characters called an ambulance to help a wounded character, the soldiers held up the ambulance so long that the person who had been wounded had already died. There was no help from the outside world. My character, part of the university staff, couldn't even help her own students. (Player 1)

Even though players knew that things could not be otherwise – *Halat hisar* was designed to proceed in a certain way – it did not stop them from feeling guilty, hopeless, and powerless. This double existence offers a good standpoint from which to compare the players' experience and their characters' experience. One player reflected exactly on this distinction in their debrief:

As a player and as a character, I felt that I had personally failed to stop atrocities. [. . .] As a player, I understand that this was not true, since this course of events was carefully designed by the game masters and necessary for the game. (Player 1)

Hopelessness as an affective tonality was vividly present after one of the students was shot, since the characters realized that they could actually die that day. After the shooting, there was a curfew, and the characters were locked inside the main building. Characters with more experience of resistance gave other characters instructions on how to passively and non-violently resist the soldiers by forming a human knot. The physical closeness and collective touching seen in Figure 1 is potentially affective: the person wearing glasses is holding a leg and has her other hand wrapped around another student. She is, at the same time, protecting herself and, by belonging to the same body mass,



Figure 1. Characters tangled up in a human knot so that the soldiers would have a harder time removing any single person.

Source: Photo by Tuomas Puikkonen.

protecting the other individuals of the same human knot, not clearly knowing where the other ends or where some other person begins

Players who played faculty members wrote how they felt useless when trying to protect the students they felt should have been under their protection:

The students are sitting on the floor and clinging to each other, so that no one can be taken. I and other faculty members try to stop the soldiers from provoking them more, but our efforts are useless. The students sing and cry and more people are taken. It feels like the world is ending. (Player 1)

The hierarchies of the ones who are supposed to protect and the ones who are to be protected were reinforced through attacks that hit the youngest and the most powerless, increasing the feeling of powerlessness of the university staff members. The same experience of knowing what could be done but accepting that one is powerless to do this seemed to affect many of the players:

She could have stood up. But the teargas, batons, and rifles of the soldiers were clearly seen. The UDF soldiers would still have taken Kalevi, and Maria could have gotten killed, captured, or abused in any desperate act to save him. (Player 4)

The experience of being powerless in the face of sudden military violence is not something that most players coming from privileged positions encounter in their everyday

lives, so coming face to face with those situations forced them to evaluate their reactions to injustice. One of the players reflected on the relation between the seemingly random acts of violence they encountered during the larp and violence outside it:

Also, it was an important part of the scene that people were chosen unfairly, that also the innocent were taken, and many of those involved were not. That's how real violence is. (Player 5)

At least in this player's experience, the utter randomness of being the target of violence or not is a defining feature of real violence, probably referring to the experiences of the Palestinian people that *Halat hisar* draws inspiration from. They did not see the soldiers' acts of violence as systematic actions pursuing some specific goal, but instead, the actions appeared arbitrary.

The effect of larps on understanding oppression is highly dependent on the context. Kasper and Leipoldt (2016: 60) found that Syrian activists did not welcome political themes in their larps, because their everyday experiences were 'overshadowed by a feeling of helplessness and powerlessness' and they preferred escapist themes in their larps. For them a larp was 'more valuable as a tool to cope with dramatic and traumatic experiences' (Kasper and Leipoldt, 2016: 60). Players of *Halat hisar* chose to participate in a larp exploring exactly those feelings of 'helplessness and powerlessness'.

The relation between the character and the player seemed to have affective force. For example, one player reflects on the affectiveness of a situation where his friend had been just killed by the soldiers (Figure 2):



Figure 2. The chaotic aftermath of a protest after one of the protesters was shot by a soldier. Source: Photo by Tuomas Puikkonen.

The thought of that moment still makes me shiver. So, whose were those feelings? It could not have been my character's emotions, as he did not know what would happen. And it was not my emotions either, as I knew it was all just a larp. It was the bleed between the two that made it such an emotional moment. (Player 3)

The question the player asks is at the core of in-betweenness. The simulative nature of larps and the double existence of a player and a character challenges the difference between what is true and what is false, and demonstrates what Massumi (2011: 121) calls the 'power of the false' (cf. Baudrillard, 1988). Although *Halat hisar* was a fictional performance, it was real for the players; they were living the event through their bodies and through their lives. The bleed between the player and the character created a form of likenessing, or what Anna Gibbs (2010) would call mimetic communication. Through living a character's life and the embodiment of their experience, this mimetic communication 'comprises information in the pre-cybernetic sense: it represents the organization or communication of relationships [. . .] through temporary captures of form by way of mimesis' (Gibbs, 2010: 194).

It was in the relationship in between the character and player where the bleed happened. This made the players experience new affective states in a similar way as when watching films. The difference is that all the players' senses and body were part of the event. In other words the question 'Whose were those feelings?' landed in the 'no man's land' of the *just-was* and the *about-to-be* (Powell, 2015) of character and player awakened by the bleed, positioning the emotions and affects in between both essences of this double existence. This sensation of hopelessness, enhanced with multi-layered sensations of the character and the player, can make it confusing to know who is in charge of the feelings. It might also make one feel more helpless in the situation because the grief of losing somebody is felt on more than one level of existence. This player was not alone in struggling with emotions awoken by bleed. One of the players portraying a Uralian soldier wrote that the worst thing for them was to realize how it became increasingly easy to dehumanize others and act cruelly.

Horribly easy. [. . .] I noticed in real time how my brain started to work its way towards something I hated.

[If] I play similar characters in the future, I will carry this experience with me, and I will never look at real soldiers with same eyes. Anyone can be turned into a monster if a person chooses to let [the monster] in. I know how it feels now, and I'll tame mine. (Soldier player 1)

Therefore, it seems that experiencing injustice is not the only way to gain an understanding of the dynamics of dehumanization and oppression. Perhaps even more powerfully, this player realized how their position of power in a structure of oppression 'turned [them] into a monster'. This could be seen as this player's personal realization of the 'banality of evil' – how inhuman situations make committing atrocities easier (Arendt, 2006).

Occupied territories of fearfulness and togetherness

Love and relationships are themes portrayed in larps. Relationships such as Maria's and Juhani's can function as a shelter in larps that portray intimidating themes:

She would help Juhani to free Finland with the means that she had and would gain at the university. She would never have been accepted there if it hadn't been for Juhani's help. They would win this war together. Maria knew that Juhani would always be there for her, and she decided to always be there for him. (Player 4)

Relationships were a central source of comfort for the characters during the hardships they encountered in *Halat hisar*. However, they were also a source of fear and worry: loved ones were taken away and abused, with no way for the characters to stop that. The feeling of fearfulness was real, and even though actual violence was never used, the simulation resulted in affect:

Kalevi had come back from interrogations in an awful state. Some of his ribs were broken and Olavi told Maria that Kalevi could have internal bleeding. He could be in a critical state. We would have to watch his breathing. Olavi did not say what to do if it got worse. Maria thought she knew why. (Player 4)

The 'affective tonality' of fearfulness (Massumi, 2011: 113) through experiencing terror in a larp is similar to real political terror. However, a larp also includes the knowledge of the play frame and the security that the situation will end, and the players can go back to their everyday lives. This means that players have the possibility of later reflecting on their experiences from the safety of their everyday lives. The affective experiences during the larp provide an opportunity to see political terror in a new light.

The players also experienced togetherness, at least partially, because of the vitality of the terror. This was especially connected to religious and nationalistic experiences. The Party of Christ was the second largest political party, and religion was a major source of comfort for many of the characters. Prayer and religious hymns gave many of the Finnish characters something to share, and the feeling of unity with other characters trapped in the campus area. Sometimes, this extended uneasily across other lines of separation:

An Ugriic man is praying next to me. I guess he is a reporter or something. The same man accused me yesterday of causing what happened on campus. Him praying here now is difficult for me. He is one of them. He is not a soldier, but he is Ugriic. (Player 4)

However, religion was also a divisive force. Not all characters agreed with the radical and violent tactics of the Party of Christ. Others struggled with the exclusionary elements of the religion, such as homophobia. This created dissonance in some players who had intended to portray those values in the larp but found it hard to do so:

Our [Pan-Nordic Liberation Front] group had a closet lesbian couple, but it was very difficult to play a mildly homophobic default attitude. I was planning to use a classical expression [a slur relating to sexuality] for all kinds of unpleasant people, but I simply forgot, because it was not central to the character. (Player 5)

Nationalism was the second powerful force that pushed characters apart and pulled them together. Identification as a Finn was important for many of the characters. This was also a point of symbolic violence: the Ugriic occupiers refused to recognize the existence of a

Finnish people, identifying them instead as part of the Nordic people. This made all symbols of Finnishness important tools for building togetherness. Nationalistic messages were used to confront the violent soldiers when direct confrontation was impossible:

We practise singing the national anthem and other nationalistic songs. I'm vaguely familiar with them, but they have never been meaningful to me. The first time I got a sense of meaning was when we were sitting in the middle of the main building, hands locked so that we formed a large human knot, so no one person could be taken away. [. . .] The songs symbolized something that was still our own, something we could hold onto even when we are being dragged away by force. (Player 2)

One of the songs that was sung was the *Finlandia* hymn by Jean Sibelius. Both hearing and singing the song functioned as a tool for the players to narrate their longing for freedom and wish to stop the atrocities. The intersectionality of this song gave the participants something familiar, yet gave the song a new function. The lyrics of the song end with rising against an oppressor and 'banishing slavery'. Originally, the song was part of a narrative of the creation of Finland in a time when Finland was still under Russian rule. The last part of the song is also known as 'Finland awakens' and echoes themes central to *Halat hisar*: independence, oppression and resistance.

One player wrote how this song suddenly made sense to them during this moment of violence and lack of freedom. The conceptual comprehension linked the words and sounds of this song, the player, and the context, to the same rhythm and experience of what the song was originally about:

The nationalism I learnt during the larp was the nationalism of the powerless. A symbol of resistance against oppression. It can be used to [exclude], but it can also give hope in a situation where hope is nowhere to be seen. Instead of silencing, it gives a voice. (Player 2)

Because *Halat hisar* borrowed from Finnish culture in addition to the political context of Palestine, it produced things that did not resemble the Palestinian situation. For example, the affective experience of the *Finlandia* hymn requires both experience of oppression and knowledge of Finnish culture. However, this experience is not exclusive to the Finnish context, especially since the melody from the *Finlandia* hymn is also used for other songs, like 'Gweddi Dros Gymru', one of the national songs of Wales.

However, nationalism is, by nature, exclusionary. The kind of Finland people were striving for in the larp was not irrelevant. For example, the biggest political party, the Social Democratic Liberation Party, was focused on working together with the occupiers to improve living conditions for the Finnish people. The second largest party, the Party of Christ, wanted to use violent methods to create a Finland based on Christian values. In contrast to both, the Pan-Nordic Liberation Front rejected Finnish nationalism in favour of pan-Nordic nationalism. All these groups were striving for a better life for the Finnish people, but their vision of that life was radically different. This manifested in interpersonal relationships, for example, when some characters were seen to deviate from shared ideals:

Now, at the breakfast table, Antero said that a traitor shall die. Maria feared that Antero may have decided to take her life. She told Kalevi about this fear later. She still trusted Kalevi. (Player 4)

These different ideas of Finnishness were partially drawn from the fictional context, so they included elements related to the Palestinian political context. However, they also drew from elements familiar to the Finnish players in their everyday lives. The fictional context forced them to confront their own ideas of Finnishness. For example, one player wrote how their character's prejudices reflected their own prejudices:

Looking now from the outside of the game, it's completely obvious that Tapani saw Helena as Finnish because she fit his idea of Finnishness. And that's because [Helena's player] fits my idea of Finnishness – by which I mean that racist gut feeling of how Finns look, talk, and act that I'll probably never be completely rid of.

So, I ended up playing a character who was completely blind to his own racist preconceptions of who qualifies as a Finn. Not because I made a conscious decision to do so, but because I managed to forget that I have those same preconceptions as well. (Player 6)

This was not the only way experiences outside *Halat hisar* bled into the experiences of the players during the larp. Another player reflected on the actions taken during the larp and how these actions related to what they would do outside the larp context:

Before the larp properly started, we practised demonstrating. [. . .] During that demonstration and the one that later followed, I yelled things that I would not have voiced outside that context: 'Finland for the Finns!' and 'Get the fuck out of Finland!' In the Finland I know and grew up in, these words are used to silence. (Player 2)

In *Halat hisar* those expressions acquired a meaning different from the everyday use in Finland: the words were used to demand freedom and to empower the oppressed (Figure 3 presents the demonstration in question).

The fearfulness as an affective tonality was present every time the soldiers were in sight. The soldiers were cruel, shouting insults dehumanizing the characters. It did not matter if the gun was fake or the teargas water, the players used these objects as stimuli and felt fearful in front of objects that they would have feared if the objects had been real. At the same time, the mass of protesters and their bodies, their shouting, and their mobility created a strong link of togetherness.

Players needed to extend their own subjectivity in unfamiliar directions when entering, becoming and leaving their character and the game world. Letting one reality go and being just oneself again can make the normal reattuning of oneself feel different. Furthermore, one can suffer from mixed feelings and reactions where one's body is already living the after-larp everyday life, while some of the thoughts and feelings are still at the imaginary campus in Helsinki. One player reflected on their experience after the larp:

I found myself in a strange state of half reality. I was sitting at Copenhagen Airport, and everything should be normal. But it wasn't, I flinched at a cookbook. I got angry at a sticker that said 'Turku'. I tensed at every security announcement, even though it was only the ever-repeating message of not leaving your baggage unattended. My body was in the privileged reality that I can call my normal life, but my thoughts were still at Helsinki University. (Player 7)



Figure 3. Students and soldiers confront each other during a demonstration.
Source: Photo by Tuomas Puikkonen.

The events during *Halat hisar* coloured this player's experiences afterwards, painting everyday events in a different light. This player's experience was not unique; according to the player survey, two-thirds of the players read news about Palestine and Israel in a different light after *Halat hisar*. Over half of the players reported that participation in *Halat hisar* influenced their political opinions. At least for this player, the dual existence of being a character in *Halat hisar* and himself in Copenhagen Airport was central for this change in perspective.

Conclusions

Halat hisar was an international larp that built bridges between cultures, ideas, worlds, and ways of being. We have analysed the larp through four affective tonalities – *hopelessness*, *powerlessness*, *fearfulness*, and *togetherness* – that we feel articulate and translate some of the event's affective moods and player experiences to the reader. At the same time, we have studied what forms of likenessing happen in situations such as larp, where individuals try on different roles and behaviour that might be unfamiliar or inaccessible to them in their everyday life. The players were enlightened through their bodies the same way as 'when reading fiction produces new affect states in us, which change not only our body chemistry, but also our attitudes and ideas' (Gibbs, 2010: 194). These states can raise affective responses such as sympathy and empathy.

The idea behind *Halat hisar* was to give an idea of what a life under occupation might feel like. 'Playing in a larp about occupation will not tell you exactly how it feels like to be a Palestinian. But it will give you tools to better understand the experiences of others'

(*Halat hisar*, 2013). We want to emphasize that we do not argue that participating in *Halat hisar* would have given the participants access to the experience of being a Palestinian living in an occupied country. However, larps can be considered a tool for learning about different situations and cultures, and about oneself in confrontation with current events. As Turkington (2016: 94) writes, ‘larp is a practice of rehearsing difference’. Larps offer collectively created spaces of communication, where processes of becoming someone else are intentionally presented.

Larp is not a tool suitable for political education in all contexts. Kasper and Leipoldt (2016: 59) state that ‘the opportunity to identify larp as a tool to change political agendas is born out of a rather stable political situation, not one that undergoes transformation and significant changes (such as in conflict and war zones)’. Similarly, Harviainen (2016: 122) highlights that people participating in a political larp are probably not neutral bystanders, but people wanting to explore those specific political themes from the perspective presented by the larp. He cautions that larps easily devolve into one-sided propaganda. Writing specifically about *Halat hisar* (2013), he warns that among other problems the ‘heightened level of drama typical to larps [. . .] bring such games close to the border of becoming propaganda – at which point the message can be perceived as decidedly one-sided and thus unrealistic’ (Harviainen, 2016: 121). It is also possible to see this kind of larping as appropriating other’s misery for entertainment purposes. In this case the worry is somewhat lessened by the fact that Palestinian larpers were part of the design and production process (cf. Whyte et al., 2011).

This does not mean that larps cannot work as a political medium. In the post-larp survey, most respondents did not think that ‘the larp portrayed the situation in Palestine in a black-and-white manner’ (60%). This should be taken with some caution, since this is exactly the kind of self-selected group Harviainen discusses. Nevertheless, most of the respondents thought that the larp ‘gave [them] valuable new insight on nationalism’ (71%) and ‘participation in *Halat hisar* influenced [their] political opinions’ (58%). Fiction can affect our understanding of our political reality, and larps do that by using embodied and affective means.

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Author biographies

Sonja Pöllänen is a PhD student at the University of Eastern Finland, working as a project researcher in an ERC project SENSOTRA. The project aims at producing new understandings of the changes in people's sensory environmental relationships. Her research interests are in anthropology of the senses and affect theory.

Jonne Arjoranta holds a doctoral degree in digital culture from the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. He specializes in philosophical hermeneutics, game studies and internet cultures. He has published, for example, in *Game Studies*, *Games and Culture* and the *International Journal of Role-Playing*. More information: <https://jonne.arjoranta.fi>