



**Some people play tennis,
I shoot my friends.**

Interview with Norman Saarsoo
design

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What is it that you do?

It's called airsoft. Many people know what paintball is, it's played everywhere and companies and other places have it as a free time activity, but much less is known about airsoft. The difference is that paintball guns look like some futuristic star wars-gadgets, they don't look like real guns, and the war itself and the shooting distance is not comparable to airsoft guns. So basically airsoft is a battle simulation.

You can do it in different places; indoors, old abandoned houses, warehouses, old military bases etc. Here in Estonia we have a lot of these old soviet slammers.

The guns are exact copies of real guns, they weight exactly the same, no matter what type of gun you compare. Even the denseness of the bullets, like how many bullets it shoots at a time.

So it's basically as the real thing?

Yes, it is almost as real, the only difference is that it shoots little plastic bullets. But of course they are not like the ones you can buy from every toy store, these guns are quite expensive. And if you want to know how hard they shoot... well if you compare it with a real gun, then they shoot 10 times softer. The shooting speed is 100 m/sec.

Doesn't it hurt when a bullet hits you?

Yes it does, sure. But bruises and blood clots are a usual thing. The protection gear is really important, eyes are the most important things. If a bullet hits your ear or hand then a little bruise is expected.

Where do you get the equipment?

There are special stores. You can buy stuff from the Internet and there is also a store on Kaupmehe street called Hobby Style.

Most of the guns are manufactured in Japan. Airsoft began in japan, where most of the weird stuff is born. And by now it has developed quite far.

How did you start?

I heard it from Märt (a friend). Märt and I have been interested in military stuff before, since we were young, when we were kids we obviously all played cops and criminals. And guns have always seemed interesting. When I read I always read historic literature, WW2 etc, so interest for guns was from before and this is one of the best outputs, to take it to a real life level. The connections are found through the Internet.

Like special forums?

Yes exactly, from forums. The Hobby Style store has a forum, I think at least 90% of the estonians who are into this game read that forum, and also write there.

Can everybody join these groups/shooting parties or must I be able to name at least 50 war movies?

Everyone is welcomed, actually they try to take it more to crowds and also to have a parallel to paintball. It's possible to rent the equipment. Even when british bachelors come to have a paintball party. I actually attended a finnish bachelor party because they wanted to have more people, so through that store they gathered a gang of people who would play against them. It was Estonia vs Finland, a little rumble, it was a nice sunday... sunny day.

Have you seen a girl play this?

Yes, yes I have. Most of the players are young. The youngest are even under age, around 14-15. But it is not allowed to sell guns to under 18, except with a parental approval. Underage kids can only come with their parents and then incidentally their daddies also join the game.

But the kid can also play alone?

Yes, but it is necessary to have a written parental approval, It's also for caution. For example in Estonia there was a city combat in an old police house. One russian team player got hit from really close, and probably his mouth was opened because the bullet hit his tooth and he lost half of his front tooth then.

Accidents can always happen, but it is tried to keep the risk minimal. In international battles every country has validated rules by their airsoft association.

Like cars are pimped up it is also done with guns. You change the springs, pistons etc.

Why would you need a better spring?

It increases the shooting speed of the bullet.

What are the rules of the game and what is the goal of the game?

Every battle can be different. Like just to eliminate the other team or you to have to save a hostage. It's a role play basically. It's half sports and also about tactics, war tactics.

There are no limits what the scenario is for that specific battle. There are a lot of combats that last for several days.

In USA there are battles where 3000 - 4000 people are playing at the same time, in which armored cars, aircrafts etc are included, it's the craziest thing.

In one abandoned city they rented helicopters from the US army and lots of people are somehow connected to the military or are soldiers themselves. In Estonia they have used the defense army armored cars, but actually this is not an information for the public. These machines belong to the government.

There are no limits, it's played by kids and also by professional soldiers. In Estonia there are some players who have been to Afghanistan and Iraq, they are professional soldiers.

You can play it with 2-3 people in the woods or more extreme as in USA, where they had hired actors to play civil people. The game took place in a little Saudi Arabian village and the theme was rescuing hostages. They had copters, armors etc.

So it is only for your own fun not like a training for a real war. Is it just about the adrenaline rush?

Well these games are for your own fun. But I know that in Estonia an army battalion bought officially for their battalion money a bunch of airsoft-guns for training, because they are replicas, they weight the same and look exactly the same as real guns.

Usually when you guys play, how many of you are there?

It is usually a bit less than 20 people, but every year there are a couple of bigger games. You have for example a short battle where you have to conquer a building or whatever and there is a thing called mil sim games, which is a military simulation. It presumes that the participants have full equipment; food for 2 days, communication equipment, first aid equipment etc. Just like every real infantry guy has when staying in the woods. With its real weight to make it even more realistic.

Some games must have certain rules, written by somebody?

Yes, these games are organized by different clubs, everybody who plays it is in a club there are these little circles of people who play together in bigger games.

This is the strange thing that I am actually not in any club.

How can you play if you aren't in a club?

If you go with somebody then on the spot they just divide people into teams and it's no problem. The S-Quad has 7 members and they also practice on weekdays every week. They bought walkie talkies and they have a full team work going on.

Do the teams have their own symbolics or a logo or something?

Usually they have a little coat of arms or a logo, you wear it on your shoulder. They try to have the same kind of uniform, with the same blots and patterns, so that you can recognize the team. This is like an unwritten rule. It's just beautiful, like in the army, everyone looks the same.

Have Märt and you both been to the army?

Neither of us was accepted. Märt really didn't want to go, I wanted to. But because I have some different traumas they told me I'm not suitable.

Is it that you are trying to fill some void? That's why you guys still want to chase other guys in the woods?

Part of it is this and also the adrenaline you get. Every second there is a chance to get hit, that's why it's good that the guns shoot painfully enough that there is that risk moment. If you would shoot with a paintball gun there would be no nervous tension.

You know it's really intense, if you know that behind every corner there might be someone who wants to shoot you. It's about adrenaline and danger. There are all kinds of guns. You can buy the most simple gun and well of course automatic guns are the most common ones, but there are also snipers, machine guns, grenades, grenade throwers. Basically the variety is huge.

What happens when you get hit?

If you get hit, you die immediately. You raise your hands and gun and leave the battlefield.

If you get shot, is it possible to hide the pain and pretend you didn't get hit?

This is the most common question. If you get hit in a paintball game you immediately have a mark on your clothes. Airsoft is the game of honor and honesty. Of course there are moments where emotions are too high and people try to win at any cost. There are moments when somebody pretends to be Rambo by running through the battlefield, and you see that you hit that person, but then he claims not to be hit.

What does a grenade do?

When you have a grenade thrower and you attach it under the automatic gun it just shoots a huge amount of bullets at once and they fly in a wider area.

People also make their own grenades. You need a cracker and an empty toilet paper roll. You put the cracker inside and fill the surrounding with dried peas, close it with a tape. These are the crackers that have brimstone attached so you can light it instantly with a match.

Guys have even built cotter pins to their grenades. One of the coolest battles I have attended was a battle between Estonia and Russia, with 50 people.

Was it only called that way or was it really Estonians versus Russians?

They were really Russians, Russians who live in Estonia, and who really are active players. They attend battles in Russia and they are really good players. There is no anger or anything. It's just easier for Russians to be in the same team, otherwise being in an Estonian team there might be language barriers, it's just easier to have it this way.

That particular game was very friendly, but it looked like a real war. We had smoke bombs and grenades and five store houses with old office rooms and furniture. Some stairways were blocked with furniture. Grenades were flying and there was smoke everywhere and you were constantly deaf from the explosions, bullets were flying. It felt as real as possible.

Sometimes we dive from the roofs, just for fun. Now we are thinking that when we do these city battle games, when there is a hostage situation, then half of the team would attack from the bottom of the building and the other half would jump in from the windows, just to take the game to another level.

The diving with a rope. Is this also part of the game or this is another thing?

This is another thing. It's just for fun. It's basically just training.

Near Aegviidu there is an old house where you can easily attach a rope on the roof, we train there. Training on how to dive with a gun, because when you reach the window you have to be ready to kill everybody inside. You dive headfirst. There's special diving equipment, it's called rappelling. It's used by military commandos, and we have kind of taken it over. It has developed into a second hobby for us. In Estonia we are one of the few who are doing it right now.

You can make your own grenades and buy some guns from some stores. Do you also order them online? Are they expensive?

They are expensive, and you can order them online. The best guns are all ordered online. The shipping costs are quite high, so we usually gather a certain amount of people and then order a bunch of guns at the same time, so the shipping costs are divided equally.

Let's say that you want to start playing the game. You get the clothes from a second hand store or any cheap place, then a gun with a battery and a battery charger, and also protective glasses. The basic start equipment. But let's say you will get a machine gun, which makes more sense and is better, then it costs around € 450-510. So yes, it's quite expensive.

Do you have to pay to participate?

You just gather a bunch of people through forums. There are always some enthusiasts who will do the organizing and then on the spot we divide ourselves into teams and have little easy battles.

Do you want to advertise yourselves or is it more like a closed circle?

It's promoted so there would be as much people exercising it as possible. Maybe someone who comes to check it out will get so interested that he/she will start training.

When we have these battles that last for several days, where all the full equipment is needed, then it's necessary to have experience and skills. Usually then there are no first timers.

Those games have only certain teams who attend?

Yes, and some games are with invitations only. Those are the bigger games with armored cars etc. Then rookies are not welcomed.

Is there also an audience?

You know, it's kind of difficult to be an audience there because it's usually in the forest or some other big area that may at least be a couple of square kilometers. And sometimes you drive with a vehicle or you have to cross a river with a boat, like in a real war. It would be quite difficult to observe this game.

Bigger games always have a photographer, homepage www.hobby-style.ee for photos.

The game is popular in USA, Finland, Russia. In Scandinavia there are huge games. But in England it is forbidden.

Why?

I think it's because the guns are exact replicas of real guns. And there has been a lot of robberies where people use those airsoft guns. That's why the government decided to forbid it. There have been many protests against this decision. I don't know what the latest news are, if it's legalized now or not.

In USA there is a law that you can sell and own these guns only when the top of the barrel is covered with a red plastic topping. In Estonia we don't have that law, but there is a law that when you are not playing at the moment or you are transporting the gun, then you have to have a red bucket on top of the barrel, but it is actually not a law... it's rather made by the association.

Are there any laws about the game in Estonia?

The only thing is that you are not allowed to walk in public with a gun. If you transport it, then the gun is supposed to be in a bag.

It's not allowed to wear military clothes that have the exact same pattern as the army. Not Estonian military pattern and not police clothes.

Once Märt and I didn't get a car to go to the games so we went in a trolley bus. We didn't even have special bags for the guns and we were fully equipped, so people looked really strange at us on the streets.

Nobody actually said anything?

Luckily no. Luckily there was no police, the fine would have been quite big.

About the thing you said that in the USA they had tanks. Can you buy them?

Those were armored cars to be exact. Those were rented. They have no ammo at all, they just drove around and transported people.

There were military hummers, where real guns from the roofs had been replaced with airsoft machine guns. The battle took place in a desert in Utah. This battle seemed unbelievable, with helicopters etc.

Crazy what stuff is going on in the world.

That's what I also thought, and what it must have cost!



A workshop with Joshua Trees and
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