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It's Good to Be King

There's no need to be disenfranchised. Just start your own nation.

By Alex Blumberg

The king of Talossa lives with his father and sister in the house where he grew up, a turn-of-the-century Tudor on a tree-lined street of professors' homes near the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee campus. The ruler sits in the only room with lights on, a cramped study off the kitchen. Heaps of paper - magazines, notebooks, computer printouts, books - spill over every available surface. World War II histories and *Babylon 5* videos crowd the bookshelves. Bulging file boxes encroach from the walls. But a clutter-repellent force field seems to surround a small, relatively tidy patch at the room's center. A computer on a prefab rolling desk dominates this haven of visible floor, in front of which the king swivels back and forth in a desk chair - the office's only seat.

"This is pretty much where it all happens," he says, his arms outspread. "The command center, I guess you could say." From this computer, he rules over 60 kindred souls who join him in simulating life as Talossans. The spot he sits in is, if you look at things through his eyes, a portal to an alternate universe.

King Robert Ben Madison, 34, wears an outfit more functional than magisterial - black button-down shirt, wrinkle-resistant slacks, leather shoes with rubber soles. A sandy beard and owl glasses adorn his round, youthful face. His voice is confident and warm, though clipped with a slightly obsessive precision. He bears little resemblance to a monarch; his confined office makes a shoddy throne room.

But appearances have never bothered Madison. In fact, his gift has always been seeing things that, strictly speaking, don't exist. This gift first allowed him, at age 14, to proclaim his bedroom a sovereign nation called Talossa, from a Finnish word meaning "inside the house." And this gift, 20 years later, keeps him at the spiritual core of the vast and tricky entity that Talossa (www.talossa.com) has become.

Until a more precise term comes along, one might as well call Talossa a micronation. Micronations, also known as counternations and ephemeral states, consist of one or more people united by the desire to form and/or inhabit an independent country of their own making. All micronations have governments, laws, and customs; the main distinguishing factor is whether their citizens want to establish a physical home country and seek international recognition, or whether, as is the case with Talossa, they're happy just to pretend.

The principality of Freedonia (www.freedonia.org), an earnest collective of secessionist superlibertarians based in Boston, falls into the first category. Its monarch, Babson College student Prince John I, and his handful of fellow citizens seek a small spot on the globe where they can practice their brand of ultra-free-market capitalism. But they face a typical problem: There really isn't a corner of the world that wants to be ruled by a band of skinny college students quoting *Atlas Shrugged*. Prefab islands, remote areas of Africa, and partially submerged Pacific atolls have been proposed as solutions to this dilemma; Prince John I considered purchasing an artificial floating island from an associate in the floating-dock business for about \$5 million. To fill their treasury, the Freedonians have minted their own line of currency to exchange for US dollars, but for now, Freedonia's impoverished capital continues to be Prince John I's Boston residence.

Most micronations in the first category - those with serious secessionist tendencies - want independence based on some political principle, but some, like the principality of New Utopia (www.new-utopia.com), a proposed chain of constructed islands in the international waters west of the Cayman Islands, have been accused of harboring more insidious purposes. The country's founder, Howard Turney, aka Prince Lazarus Long, recently ran afoul of the Securities Exchange Commission for selling citizenship "bonds" over the Web for \$1,500 a pop. The SEC claims he's operating a classic securities swindle - with only a coral reef in his name. Turney, however, firmly maintains his intention to build the archipelago paradise once he raises enough cash.

Micronations in the second category don't want actual nationhood. Some claim physical territory - the family farm, a square foot of Scottish fen, the bottom of the ocean, or, in Talossa's case, the east side of Milwaukee plus a chunk of Antarctica and a small island off the coast of France - but none would actually take power even if it were offered to them. Most feature a founder with the requisite lofty title, and almost all make their home, in one form or another, on the Web.

Some are simply jokes, like fantasy author S. P. Somtow's Zoe Katholika Church (www.primenet.com/~somtow/zoe.html), an imaginary Catholic-inflected theocracy that boasts "All of the spectacle, but none of the guilt." Other micronations are little more than psychotic delusions coded in clumsy HTML. For example, "HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS King Dr. h.c. mult. Eric de Marré, M.A.," ruler of the kingdom of Zaire (not the African nation - it's a long story: members.tripod.com/~Honorable/index.htm), banned the following people from seeking citizenship in his fictional world: Fidel Castro, Jiang Zemin, and Pol Pot.

An entire subcategory of micronations owes its existence to adolescent alienation. These empires of angst betray themselves in one of two ways - either with hackneyed origin myths, usually involving benevolent sultans and distant tropical seas, or with paranoid rants against authority punctuated by proclamations of universal domination and reprinted Rage Against the Machine lyrics. Though almost all teen kingdoms claim legions of subjects, more often than not, populace, ruler, and disaffected youth are one and the same. The Kingdom of Triparia (www.triparia.cx), founded in 1998, is a classic of the genre: 17 citizens, with fancy titles and a penchant for posting overintellectualized bulletin-board messages, united in an act of collective imagination.

What about Talossa? It clearly fits into the role-playing category. Like many other micronations, it began with a lonely kid. But where most realms ruled by pimply-faced princes collapse when their founders grow up, Talossa has flourished. King Robert and his subjects are content with their dual citizenship - and against a generally shoddy micronational backdrop of poor grammar, downed links, and

digitized Polaroids, Talossa stands in stark relief.

Talossans, it must be said, have it pretty good. They enjoy a body of law stretching back two decades, plus four political parties, an online journal, local holidays, and a flag. "And it isn't just some Web graphic," Madison says. "It's a real flag made of fabric. You can put it on a pole and it'll flap in the breeze."

Talossans also claim their own wholly invented language. The kingdom's print dictionary - 28,000 entries on double-sided, triple-columned pages in 8-point type - outweighs most city phone books. A faux etymology traces the language's origins to a 5th-century sect of Latin-speaking North African Berbers. The first line of the Lord's Prayer reads, "Ar Phatreu, qi isch à çéu, sanctificaðuâ estadra Tù nhôminau." A Talossan requires just one word to say "love at first sight." The language came into being with 18 irregular verbs.

The Talossan government is basically a benign oligarchy with a functioning legislature consisting of an upper house, the Senäts, and a lower house, the Cosâ. It meets monthly via the Web. (Once a year, Talossans residing in or journeying to Milwaukee gather in person for TalossaFest, which includes a daylong legislative discussion called the "living Cosâ.") Voting results are published online monthly in *The Clark*, the Talossan equivalent of the *Federal Register*. All *Clarks* are bound together into a thick volume called *L'Anuntziâ dels Legeux*, the official annals of Talossan law. According to a typical *Clark*, the legislature considered 29 measures in a single month. A bill that called for severing diplomatic relations with the micronation of Triparia failed (but passed with subsequent revisions), while a resolution labeling Wal-Mart a "fascist state" sailed through, as did an amendment to the Talossan constitution easing immigration restrictions.

Nonetheless, becoming a Talossan is nearly as difficult as becoming a US citizen. Law requires prospective immigrants to read 1 online book about Talossa and purchase at least 2 of the 16 others for sale on the nation's Web site. Candidates for citizenship must then pass a test on Talossan history, compose an essay titled "What Talossa Means to Me," and receive judicial and legislative approval in both parliamentary houses to earn naturalization.

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In the old days, when Talossa consisted only of a few of Madison's acquaintances in Milwaukee, immigration wasn't so formal an affair. Madison stumbled across people he thought might be interested in his project and invited them to join, and the parliament generally granted them citizenship. The Web launch necessitated the tougher, more standardized citizenship rules in place today. But these rigorous entrance requirements - and the occasional xenophobic flare-up in online posts - haven't limited Talossa's expansion. In a micronational world composed primarily of one- to five-person Liechtensteins and Christmas Islands, most of which beg for new members, Talossa has experienced a virtual population explosion. More people joined the country in 1996 - its first year on the Web, during which several browsers placed it under their What's New buttons - than in all the previous years combined. The growth shows no signs of abating.

Talossans hail from Sweden, Norway, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Cyprus, Brazil, Poland, Argentina, the Netherlands, California, Florida, and Milwaukee. They are grad students, journalists, carpenters, teachers, legislative aides, musicians, retail clerks, parents, and teens. They're

mostly men - only 3 out of the 60 citizens are female - and they spend from less than an hour a week to more than 20 "in" Talossa. Usually, this means posting discussion-group gossip and jokes to a bulletin board. But the Talossan board, called Wittenberg, is also the forum for political dialogue, which gets heated, even though there aren't really any issues to debate. The citizens compensate for this lack of substance with a firm sense of histrionics and a well-developed ability to foster controversy. Discourse gets overblown and bombastic. Citizens are passionate and occasionally less than considerate, denouncing ideas - and often their proponents - as fascistic or moronic.

One might think that so specific an activity as pretending to be a citizen of a fictional country would attract a certain sort of person. In fact, Talossans are more different than alike. Take Ken Oplinger, a pillar of the Visalia, California, business community. Oplinger, 30, is president and CEO of Visalia's chamber of commerce, where he spends his days reviewing proposed laws, working the press, and lobbying politicians. Outside of the office, he does more of the same - but in a different realm.

"I'll hear him on the phone discussing legislation," says his fiancée, Diana Stein, "and I'll assume it's for work. Then I'll realize, 'Wait, Visalia doesn't have a king.'"

In real life, Oplinger belongs to a drinking group called Viva Visalia that meets in various bars around town. He plays pickup basketball on the weekends, visits his family in Phoenix regularly, and just recently bought a house with Stein. He joined Talossa in 1996. Soon thereafter, he started his own political party and launched a campaign to rewrite the constitution, granting equal rights to citizens living outside the physical territory of Talossa. Oplinger says his real-life job as a lobbyist "sometimes frustrated me because I had to represent interests I didn't necessarily believe in. Talossa gave me the opportunity to speak my mind without fear of the ramifications of speaking one's mind in the real world."

Fellow Talossan Chris Gruber spent half the year after his 20th birthday in a homeless shelter. His fiancée had left him and his parents refused to take his calls. "Playing my guitar," he says, "was the only thing that kept me sane." Now 25, he's a husband, father, and software consultant in Tallahassee, Florida, and Talossa's minister of propaganda. He's also an eager conversationalist who can discuss with equal volubility the decline of 1970s rock and the challenges of raising his 3-year-old son.

"The great thing about Talossa," he says, "is that all these people are doing stuff that would otherwise be very solitary, but they're together. Like, I design and play my own games, I write and play music, I'm interested in writing sketch comedy and parody, and for years I've designed my own religions. So I'm sitting here doing all this stuff, but it's all solitary - I'm alone. And I think everyone in Talossa feels that way. We all have our selfish indulgences we do by ourselves. But Talossa is a place where we can do them together, rather than as isolated geeks all over the country, which is essentially what we are."

Thomas Leigh, 29, spent the summer of 1999 touring the East Coast music-festival circuit playing pop renditions of Gaelic folk songs with his fiancée. Leigh doesn't just sing Gaelic, he speaks it fluently, and he's conversant in Czech, French, and Esperanto. He taught himself Talossan in six months, thereby upping the planetary total of fully fluent speakers to two. He calls his adopted tongue "the most beautiful and expressive language I've ever seen." He's at work on a Talossan translation of *Winnie the Pooh*.

Leigh, Gruber, and Oplinger live outside the physical boundaries that Talossa claims. They and others who became citizens after Talossa went on the Web are known collectively

as cybercits. Cybercits now comprise a majority of the population, but the original citizens, the old-growthers, established much of the country's tradition and lore.

Of the dozen or so old-growthers, many of whom were friends with Madison around the time he created Talossa, John Jahn (pronounced "yan") is probably the most important presence, second only to Madison in influencing Talossa's development. The two met during Madison's sophomore year in high school. Madison describes Jahn at that time as "a raving Nazi racist whose amicable character saved him from total condemnation." Over the years, Jahn played a vocal, rabid, occasionally fascist foil to the more liberal Madison. For nearly two decades he put out a newspaper, *The Talossan National News*, to rival Madison's own weekly, *Stötanneu*. *TNN* featured Germanic logos of eagles and helmets, and diatribes against bleeding-heart liberals, do-nothing minorities, homosexuals, and other "sexual deviants." Then Jahn came out of the closet.

"After he admitted he was gay," chuckles friend and fellow old-growther John Eiffler, "he mellowed quite a bit."

Every Talossan mentions a feeling of camaraderie. "I feel sort of like an ethnic minority," says one cybercit, "a Talossan-American."

There is one thing almost all Talossans have in common - a Y chromosome. The few Talossan women tend to be passive participants in the national culture, notwithstanding the leadership of the short-lived Vacillation Party a few years back by former prime minister Sandee Macht (néé Prachel). The king's theory on the preponderance of men goes back to the fiery nature of Talossan debate: "The discussions can get a little hot. I think most women, for whatever reason, might not be comfortable with that." Thomas Leigh agrees. "The political debates can get rambunctious, the insults and accusations can fly," he says. "The friendliness behind the superficial nastiness is not always obvious or perceived." Diana Stein, Ken Oplinger's fiancée, has a different take: "Most of us have enough to juggle in real life."

Aside from the fact that they're almost all men, most Talossans share little beyond a desire to be Talossan. Oplinger posits that if they all lived in the same physical community but didn't have Talossa, "I'd be very surprised if many of us would even be friends." Each citizen talks a lot about the fun of it, how it's a great way to escape, like a role-playing game. They comment willingly on the absurdity of the endeavor, often with baffled near-embarrassment. But every Talossan, in explaining his continued participation, mentions a subtle feeling of camaraderie. "When I'm walking down the street in Boston," says Leigh, "I don't feel Talossan, exactly, but Talossa is always with me. I guess I feel sort of like an ethnic minority - a Talossan-American."

The king of Talossa steps over some papers lying on the floor in front of a bookcase, stands on tiptoe, and pulls a large computer-paper box from the top shelf. "Box 1, file 1," he says. "The Talossan archives."

Box 1, file 1 contains the earliest documents of Talossan nationhood, starting in 1979, when 14-year-old Madison was its sole citizen. Naturally he became king and, for the next year or so, kept things interesting by regularly switching the national language and periodically overthrowing himself. On slow days, he produced and attended to paperwork - the Magic Marker manifestos that now fill box 1, file 1. Madison titled one representative document from this period "Outline of T.L.R.P. (the Talossan Land Reclamation Program). Goal: A Clean Talossa." He broke the plan into seven steps, including phase two, "Remove the table," phase six, "Clean the closet," and phase seven, "Map the nation."

A later document shows a bird's-eye schematic of an adolescent bedroom, dashed lines indicating its boundaries. Outside the dotted line, the letters "U.S.A." cover the hallway and steps. Inside, the word "Talossa" stretches diagonally from the corner of the room near the record player to a bookshelf near the window. The bed is one province, the desk another. The piece of floor between them is called the Great Plains. In the southwest corner of the country, in a region called Vaate-Komero (the closet, apparently), an asterisk designates a spot named Vanha Hyllly. Next to it, in bold letters, appear the words "Highest Point."

Box 1, file 1 also contains a small stapled booklet, lettered neatly in green felt-tipped marker, bearing the title *Talossan for Travelers*. Among the phrases deemed essential for a visit to Madison's bedroom: "May I have my bill?" "I have nothing to declare," and "May I listen to some ABBA?"

"In the early days," Madison admits, "ABBA wrote most of our national anthems."

This is clearly not the work of a future high school football captain. And, indeed, in one of his dozen books on Talossan history, Madison describes - in third person, as always - a childhood spent "persecuted by violent, snowball-throwing mobs of 'sport-infested youth' chasing him home every day." But if Madison was a loner, he wasn't lonely. When he got to high school, he made new friends, like fellow outcasts John Jahn and John Eiffler. By 1981, he'd awarded the first titular positions in his government.

Madison's magnum opus, *The History of the Kingdom of Talossa, Part I*, runs 200 pages. It renders with compulsive precision both the autobiographical details of his life - run-ins with classroom bullies, the storylines of invented fifth-grade comic books - as well as political and cultural episodes from Talossa's history: breakdown and analysis of election results, recaps of editorial feuds in the Talossan press. Often, personal and national history are inseparable. In 1980, for example, a neighborhood kid named Gary Cone, who had a rival micronation called the Glib Room Empire, splashed ink on the Madison family garage. Madison dubbed the incident the Cone War and awarded it an entire chapter. (He declared victory by tattling to his own father; Cone has since become a citizen of Talossa.) And since Madison himself created most of Talossa's written record, the self-referential citations in the *History* can be dizzying. It's not uncommon for Madison to cite a Talossan newspaper article he wrote in which he quotes a statement he made as king.

The newspapers, proclamations, translations, treaties, laws, and edicts, and the dozen or so supplemental histories of Talossan culture and politics, almost all of which Madison wrote himself, span two decades and fill a pair of computer-paper boxes and 20 or so large three-ring binders. They bear witness to neighborhood rivalries, religious conversions, Desert Storm, and Madison's marriage. They chart the stages of Talossa's evolution from solitary boy's imaginary world to a game his friends shared, then to a loose confederation of coworkers and college classmates, and finally to an Internet microempire.

An attic stuffed with historical analyses of an imaginary country might call into question Madison's grip on reality, if not for the pesky fact of his sanity. He has a life - and, by all indications, it's a healthy, even enviable one that includes active involvement in a church, travel, and summer cookouts. For years he worked toward a PhD in history, but he stopped, quite sanely, to pursue a career path with more job prospects. He's almost finished with the course work for his Wisconsin teaching certificate. What's more, Madison's *History* is a surprisingly entertaining read, peppered with a wry, occasionally nerdy wit and an unexpectedly affecting tone of tongue-in-cheek megalomania:

Talossa's Monarch returned to his country on 3 July, with

souvenirs from Florida in hand for his friends who gathered at Josh Macht's ... for a Ceremony of Knighthood. Photocopied "Certificates of Knighthood" had been prepared and signed by the King, carefully rolled and tied in red and green ribbon. Each Royal friend ... received a Certificate, honorary citizenship in the Kingdom of Talossa, and a handshake. Later, all marched to the beach where the King, overwhelmed as usual by the hugeness of the lake, mused and thought.

Still, no matter how ironic the *History* is, the fact remains that he traded years of naps, dinner parties, sex, TV, and conversation to do it. Since Talossa's founding, Madison has sacrificed, on average, roughly eight hours a week to serve as king. That's all day Saturday, all day Sunday, or a couple evenings during the week for the past two decades.

Ruling an imaginary country might call into question Madison's grip on reality, if not for the pesky fact of his sanity - and his enviable real life.

The *History* contains some clues to the origin of Madison's obsession. In the chapter called "Crucifixion and Interregnum," written in 1981, he describes his first and only real crisis of faith in Talossa. Soon after he'd knighted all his friends, Madison became filled with doubt about Talossa and "the label of eccentricity that it pinned upon him. It was easy to explain Talossa to his closest friends; they understood his whimsicalities and even enjoyed playing the game. But how to explain it to strangers? ... A trickier problem still: How to explain it to girls?" He decided to end Talossa.

Talossa didn't disappear for long, of course, and a few weeks later, his romantic exploits having achieved the same degree of success post-Talossa as pre-, he was back on the throne. But what the adult Madison makes of his adolescent self's attempt at normalcy is telling. "Mediocrity and averageness had abruptly replaced the old goal of independence and identity that Ben Madison had striven for over the past half-decade," he wrote. "What had been sacrificed was not just Talossan independence, but Ben Madison's personal independence. Eccentricity had been exiled, peculiarity had been purged."

Like others on the margins of the mainstream, Madison coopted the terms of his oppression and embraced his freak status. Instead of turning into a stoner or joining a punk band, Madison seized on Talossa, choosing "imaginary-nation builder" as his ID tag in weirdo society.

That's one theory. Another, darker one presents itself in an earlier portion of the *History* detailing Madison's entrance into high school. He spends most of the chapter, titled "Freshman Year, 1978-1979," outlining the impact a trip to Europe had on his intellectual development. Suddenly, without fanfare, he announces his mother's death, dispatching the news with uncomfortable brevity. Amid pages and pages of political philosophy and abandoned science fiction novels, Madison spares his mother's demise just one slim paragraph:

February saw tragedy with the death of Ben Madison's mother, who died in her sleep of unknown causes. The family met to discuss the future, and it was decided to put the event behind them, and not get bogged down in sentimentalities. It was an event that gave young Ben his first experience with death, and he learned that a strong will was the only way to respond.

It seems possible that Madison created the imaginary world of Talossa to retreat from his loss. Less than a year later, after all, he was crossing national boundaries every time he went to the bathroom. But Madison displays no interest in exploring the connection between his mother's death and his kingdom come. About her passing, he says only, "I got over it pretty quickly" and "It didn't really affect me that much."

It's odd that Madison can write a 20-page critical analysis of imaginary election results but can't muster the slightest reflection on the death of his mother - presumably one of the most important events in his psychological and emotional development.

He displays the same lack of insight when he tries to explain Talossa. "I've always been fascinated with dictators," he offers, shrugging his shoulders, "their posturing and flair for public spectacle. There's something about that image - the man in a uniform issuing proclamations to the assembled masses from a balcony. I'm doing basically the same thing - taking normal events and giving them this pompous ballyhooing. It's just a way of feeling that what you do means something."

Madison struggles to describe the reasons he created Talossa in the same way artists try to explain why they paint or musicians why they play - the way anyone struggles to explain a method of self-expression. If he had never convinced his friends to join Talossa, had never conscripted dozens of outcasts and eccentrics, not to mention a few bemused high school teachers, into participation in his fantasy, he probably would have maintained Talossa to this day as a kingdom of one.

What's miraculous about Talossa is what's miraculous about great art: not simply that Madison has channeled a deep and private need into an act of creation, but that, in doing so, he has forged a vision that others can share.

It's early evening, the end of the workday and already dark, and the king of Talossa steps across a strip-mall parking lot in the bustling district not far from the university and his house. Streetlights make halos in the winter air, and cars bunch in rows at red lights, then stream forward when the colors change. A drowsy snow has begun to fall. The king is discussing his year-old decision to abandon his PhD program in history and pursue a high school teaching certificate instead.

"If I'd become a professor, I would have had to move," Madison says. "That would've meant leaving this."

Lunatics see a different world than the one around them - but so do visionaries. What Ben Madison sees is real, because others see it too.

He sweeps his arm in an arc encompassing North Avenue in front of him, the Kinko's on the corner, a sports bar's neon beer can, the UWM students - caught unprepared by the sudden snowfall - skidding along the sidewalk in loafers and thin leather jackets. "This is where I belong," he says, "in Talossa."

Lunatics see a different world than the one around them - but so do visionaries. Though Madison sees something other than what he's looking at, he's not deluded. What he sees is real, because others see it too.

Chris Gruber hasn't spoken to his parents in three and a half years - which, he says, "is probably the best thing." They were distant and bitter, and Gruber has few fond recollections of growing up. His best memories from childhood are of the times he and his brothers, huddled in upstairs rooms, spent inventing a new world. They named it Pacaria, from the Latin word "to make peace." Gruber, his two brothers, and their stuffed animals were the country's only citizens as they ran base paths in the playoffs of their very own Pacarian baseball league in the backyard of their Tennessee home. At that time, 10 years had already passed since Ben Madison, in a small ceremony before his family and friends, announced the secession of his bedroom from the

city of Milwaukee.

"When we were growing up," says Gruber, "maybe we looked around and things were OK. Maybe we saw both good and bad. But we kept looking up, kept thinking, 'There must be people like me somewhere out there.' And then when we find Talossa, we think, 'Holy moly, this is what I've been thinking about all my life.'"

"In a way," he adds, "I feel like I've always been Talossan. I just didn't know it before."

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