

A Good Character Description

Introduction

Understanding your character for a larp is essential for being able to play it properly, whether you want to immerse yourself or play for show. The key to this understanding is to have a good character description. This article will focus on what such a description should contain and which form and length is recommendable. Although most of the points presented

here should be generally valid the article primarily deals with character descriptions for »normal« larps, meaning that the setting is (more or less) serious, and that the duration is at least one day. Mini-larps, experiments, theme parties and games for children have other requirements and will get no mention here. The article is aimed at people writing character descriptions for others, but people writing for themselves will find that most of the guidelines still apply.

Everything in this article is of course based solely on my own experiences and ideologies, developed throughout my larping career.

The Author

Martin Enghoff is a 24 year old Dane, currently residing in Amager, southern Copenhagen. He studies Environmental Chemistry and is on his fifth and (hopefully) last year. Also he is the co-owner of Situid a company using LARP as an educational media. Besides this Martin works at a youth school (teaching roleplaying) and at a day nursery. Other interests include soccer and a bit of theatre.

He has LARPed for 10 years, co-organized 4 LARPS, and assisted on an additional handful. Favourite LARP subjects are the writing of flavour texts and character backgrounds plus the actual playing of a role.

Basics

On the most basic of levels the character background should contain three sets of information:

- 1) Who is the character
- 2) How is the character
- 3) Why is the character the way it is

“Who is the character” simply means the basic facts: Name, sex, age, occupation and so forth. “How is the character” is a description of the personality of the character. Which traits does it possess, how does it react under stress, what are its goals and motivations. Finally there is the

“Why”. This could also be called the background of the character – that is some chain of events that has led character to what and where it is now. Acquaintances of the character (if any) are contained in 1) and 3).

These three items can not, and indeed should not, be described completely separately. It is meant as a sort of checklist. All three should be described and text that does not go towards describing any of them should probably be discarded.

Form

Choosing an appropriate form is an important step in character generation. The number of characters to be generated is a heavily weighing factor here. If this is more than a handful it is recommendable to choose a quite strict and simple form. This must be done to facilitate the writing process. At this point it is essential to realise that every character cannot be a piece of art and that craftsmanship is good enough. The less time you have the more this is true. Making 40 characters as art means 40 times of original inspiration, while you can use »standardized« templates (Desperate Businessman in Debt, Seeker of Forbidden Love, Wanting to Prove Herself) if you use the craft instead. By taking this approach the task of writing becomes not quite so insurmountable. Inspiration will most probably come to you during the process and when this happens you should put no constrains on yourself and instead apply all of your

creativity into making a character that is art - and which can perhaps act as a template at a later point.

When choosing the form it is important to keep the three basic items to be included in mind – the form must be able to include it all. The choice of form can be broken down to two major decisions.

- A) Writing style (First, second, third person or other, descriptive or narrative)
- B) List of contents

Writing style

Different styles of writing all have their forces and weaknesses. First person character descriptions allow for deep insight into the characters thoughts. This, unfortunately, comes at the cost of one-sidedness, meaning that you only get the character's own view of things, which can be quite different from the general opinion. To understand a character fully one must know the character from both in- and outside. First person descriptions thus work best in conjunction with something else. Also they are, perhaps, the most difficult to make as one must create the language of the person in addition to everything else.

Using third person allows for an objective description of the character, typically presented as a kind of biography made by an undefined and all knowing author (unless the description is made by another character which really makes things both interesting and confusing). This

kind of description is often more easily accessible and complements a more diffuse kind quite well. Writing in second person gives a more direct form of communication between writer and player, but does not separate itself from third person in other ways. Some like one, some the other – I myself prefer third person.

Other ways could be a poem or song written by the character.

Descriptive writing means describing the character in a more or less neutral way while narrative could be writing a novel about the character or as mentioned above let another character describe it. This is as difficult to make as first person writing but offers great advantages in terms of mood. However it tends to get quite long if it is to stand alone and is generally best as a complement to something else.

List of contents

By list of contents I simply mean which headers there is going to be in the description – e.g. “Name; Childhood; Now; Goals; Personality” - and an idea of what is contained in each header. For example it could be that Childhood should contain a description of all the characters birthdays, that Now should include a story of the last time the character was really happy and sad, and that Goals should contain at least two short term goals and one long term.

Example

In the following I will give an example of a form along with advice on how to

fill out that form in the best possible way.

I must stress that the finest task of the writer is to make the character both as accessible and attractive to the player as possible. Often there is also some overall feel or theme of the scenario you are writing, for that should be weaved into the description to some degree. These points must be kept in mind during the entire process lest the description drifts of in a random direction.

The first part of the form will be the characters name – it is always nice to know the name of the person you are reading about.

Starting with the beginning I will make Background the first header of the body text. Writing the background can be a tricky thing. One often feels that there should be lots of information, but as I will come back to this can be very wrong. Instead one should choose a few main events and focus on these. It is also important to remember that an event in itself is of little value in terms of understanding the character. What really matters is how the character reacted to the event in question. E.g.: “Few days before his seventh birthday Richards father died”. So Richard has no father – that does not tell us much. But the reaction: “This made Richard so scared that he’d lose his mother too that he did not dare leave her out of sight for years to come” or “This made Richard hate his father for abandoning him, and his mother as well, for not being his father” tells us a whole lot about Richard.

So in the background I choose to include the following: A description of the character's parents as this is something that is important to almost anyone, one major event of the character's childhood (first day at school, breaking an arm, getting a favourite toy, parents getting divorced), one from the teens (first kiss, best friend stole girlfriend, not getting invited to an important party, meeting best friend, death of grandmother) and one event from the adult life (Wedding, getting fired, moving abroad, buying a Mercedes). This will be written as a continuous

story bound together by minor events. My next header will be Today. The character's current job situation and marital status will be mentioned as well as a description of what the character does on a typical day.

Following this there will be a Personality header. Included here is what really makes the character mad and happy, how he treats other people, his dreams and goals, plus I will try to put in at least three personality keywords.

Finally I will make a Facts section. All basic facts as well as a list of acquaintances, described briefly, and



the personality keywords will be listed here.

All of the text will be written in third person as I find it both easiest and most appropriate for this kind of description.

The form described is fitting for a large scenario but if I wanted to use it for something smaller or if I really was struck by creativity I would add a personal paragraph at the top, where I would put excerpts from a letter, a diary entry, a job application or something else made by the character as this really can capture its spirit.

Length

Character descriptions are typically evaluated on length and it is often heard that »the longer, the better«. This is however, in my opinion, not the case. Two main arguments support this statement. The first is what I call the »Skeleton vs. Zombie theory«. If a character description is incomplete – that is, too short – a skeleton will be created. Firstly this means that the feel of playing a character disappears – there is simply not enough flesh on the character to make it interesting. Secondly it means that whatever intention the writer had with the character, it will probably not be realized by the player and in its place will be a conceptual skeleton with some random skin on it.

The other extreme is when too much information is supplied. In this case the player will drown in facts, leaving no room for character interpretation and joy of playing.

Instead of breathing life into a character the player will be a lumbering, dead body trying to do and remember everything that was written in the description – a zombie would be born.

Unless the character is a specific, historical person it is my opinion that a player should be allowed (even encouraged) to interpret it, within the given boundaries. This makes the character come more alive. The description should give the player a clear idea of how the character acts, and not a complete encyclopaedia of what to do and why in every situation. The second argument is the simple fact that most larpers are (more or less) ordinary people with no formal education in acting or text analysis. This simply means that too much text can defeat its own purpose by confusing instead of clarifying.

One could argue that more text only can be an advantage, since it provides extra information for the player but, based on the above arguments, I must disagree.

A good character description, including the three items listed under "Basics" but not detailed world description, has a length of about two to four pages standard text. Less makes a skeleton and more a zombie.

Using this on the sample form given above I would allow Background and Today to be up to two pages, Personality up to one and Facts up to one. This will give a character description that is well balanced and of fitting total length.