

Three Basic Concepts for Larp Organizers

In the following article I will attempt explain the three basic principles, or concepts, which have been widely utilized in Einherjernes Nemefrego larpS and the one-shot Efter Vinter Kommer Vår (“After Winter Comes Spring”^{*}).

The first concept is called “Kan-man-så-kan-man” (which translates directly into “If You Can, You Can” and will be abbreviated through the remainder of this article as KMSKM). It began as a general attitude towards rule-based Live Roleplaying, but has in time developed into a separate style of larp’ing in its own right.

The other two concepts encompass what we, as organizers, have experienced as worth paying attention to when creating plots for your larp.

All three concepts were created, developed and tested over a period of several years, in connection with the Nemefrego larpS. These were a series of larpS which began in the realm of common fantasy, and grew to become a separate and unique style dubbed Mythic Medieval (roughly translated). The main concept in this was that the

mythical element (the adventure or story so to speak) is more intense when experienced in small subtle doses, as well as when the story is framed by a well-functioning, believable society, where the full spectrum of a proper hierarchy is represented. In this fashion, the last three Nemefrego larpS had over 300 participants, playing parts ranging from king to page to peasant to beggar.

KMSKM: “If You Can Can Can”, or “Using Your Own Abilities”.

KMSKM is a phrase which was originally developed as a counterconcept to rules, but has in time become a separate style of larp’ing. It boils down to playing with as few rules as possible, and preferably with no rules, plots or sets/props that can prevent players from using their given abilities. KMSKM can be used in several ways within the world of larp’ing, which I will account for in the following.

A. Counter-rules.

In the past KMSKM was used to answer questions like “Can I climb over the town walls?” or “Can I steal the king’s crown?”. As an Organizer

you would simply reply: “I don’t know, can you?”. This created a focus on doing things for real instead of using rules to solve plots or play your part. Examples of these rule-based solutions could be winning the crown or the successfully wooing the fair maiden simply by having the rules on your side. There could, for example, be a rule that allows the player to charm other players, and thus allowing the player in question to gain power. This, however, creates a lot of disappointing experiences for everybody surrounding this player, because they were forced to act on something that never happened. You were never charmed or wooed, you merely had a rule thrown in your face that you were forced to accept. On the contrary, there can be parts that are played so charismatically that you are actually and truly charmed, and you probably won’t even realize until the game is over why you “allowed” that player to win, as it were.

What often occurs when playing with rules is that a lot of the larp is played off-game. By letting plots and parts be resolved and played through rules, results in the players not getting real experiences to react upon, but only rules. This gives a far less intense and atmospheric larp than if these things were allowed to happen for real.

One of the main consequences of demanding that your players do all the things for real is that you have to edit out a lot of the things that only

rules can make possible. For example magic, small boys playing great warriors (see section b) and other things that are not actually possible. But this does not limit play. On the contrary, rules actually create more limits than possibilities in a larp, while the absence of rules gives limitless possibilities.

The idea that rules create limits must be understood in the sense that every time you allow somebody to do something that they couldn’t in real life by way of a rule, you remove other players opportunity to do the same even though they are actually able to. This works both for mundane physical rules, such as climbing, opening locks, etc., as well as rules relating to magic. When you create magical rules, you subsequently give a group of players the possibility to use these rules, which naturally gives them an advantage over other players. This means that there are players who will lose their plots no matter how skilled and creative they are, because the opposition can use the rules to win. By using KMSKM as the foundation for play, you promise players that rules won’t inhibit them, that is, they won’t be fighting against metaphysical, abstract rules, but against other peoples’ real and true abilities.

B. KMSKM; accepting your own limitations.

With KMSKM there are certain limits which our own physical reality imposes, and which we have to accept.

This has shown itself to be to the advantage of the mass of players, but to the disadvantage of the singular player. This is however only the players wishing to play a role which they aren't actually capable of, for example a little boy wishing to play a great warrior or an socially unskilled person wishing to play a leader – this is simply not possible with KMSKM. It is important to make this clear to the host of players before the larp, so as to avoid disappointment and moaning once it commences. But the advantage of setting these limitations outweighs the loss of individual imagined possibilities. When the leader is truly charismatic or when the great warrior is truly the best at wielding his sword, the play becomes much more believable, and moving, for everyone.

C. Getting to know your own abilities.

In KMSKM you base your part on your personal abilities. This means that the resulting play obtained in the larp is much more valuable to yourself than if you had played based on rules. When your person is the basis of your role, it is in a sense also yourself being tested and challenged. Thus when you return from a KMSKM larp, you will often find that you have learned a lot about your own abilities, and probably also enhanced them through playing.

D. Greater responsibility to the singular player.

KMSKM brings with itself a greater responsibility to the players; a

responsibility that most players should be capable of handling. It is important to specify to the players that “you can if you can” is not synonymous with “you HAVE TO if you can”. You should, for example, not steal just because you can. It is important to play your own part and keep your senses about you, as all it takes is one irresponsible and selfish player to ruin a good experience, and a KMSKM larp is easily wrecked if players abuse their absolute freedom. It is essential to respect the physical and mental borders of your fellow players and to respect the role you have been given to play.

E. Safety and economy - the limitations of KMSKM.

Every larp, of course, has its limitations, and one should be especially aware of this when creating a KMSKM. You shouldn't let yourself be blinded by the concept, but rather remember what is possible. It is for example very important to respect that sets and props for the most part get re-used over and over again by the impoverished organizers, or are on loan, so this is one situation where KMSKM cannot be used in full (don't go burning the city even if you can).

Another situation is the physical and mental well-being of all players, which must be respected. KMSKM does, for example, not apply to battle, torture, physical intimacy or other such compromising situations.

With regards to economy and safety, KMSKM is often the heavier burden, while rules provide an easy way out.

Rules allow you to build a city out of white plastic tents and create city walls with rope, but that just doesn't cut it with KMSKM. Therefore it is a style of larping better suited to ambitious larps, where sweat and hard labour are a part of the bargain.

F. Conclusion and reflection

KMSKM is all in all a rather simple concept, the aim of which is to ensure a free game, that is, with as few rules as possible. However, this also creates problems, which are important to address. At the same time it gives a lot of advantages, which are not mentioned here, one of which is that it is possible grade your larps according to how much you want to integrate the concept of KMSKM. Efter Vinter Kommer Vår ("After Winter Comes Spring"), which was held in Denmark in the summer of 2001, is an example of a larp which was made entirely according to KMSKM, which meant that both setting, roles, food, props and rules (or lack thereof) complied perfectly with the concept. But there have been many other larps which have had KMSKM as an aim only to the extent that genre, participants and location allowed.

The individual goal

It is important for the organizers to consider, that the goal that the roleplayer is fighting to achieve should be actively included in the larp they are participating in. The quality of the playing is dependent on what goals you give the players and what

their motivations are, which basically means that you should give them goals that are worth fighting for. Some examples of goals that are unrealistic would be the fight for deed to a shire far to the north, or the secret formula to make gold, if you never get to make gold in the given scenario. The fight to achieve these goals can very well be entertaining, but it is a somewhat lax feeling to have fought for something that is of no real value within the game.

For example, if you have solved the mystery behind the old alchemist and have found his secret formula to make gold, and you discover that it is a ritual that takes far more time than you have in the game, that is, that it will never have any impact on your game. Or when you find out that you will never see your new territory in the north, it reminds you that you are only playing a part and that it is not a real world your part is reacting to. The illusion is shattered and the players feel cheated. On top of this, you, as an organizer, will have securely emphasized the holes in your ability to plan and construct a believable larp.

When thinking up goals for the players, one should instead think of what they'll need during the scenario, or what could be cool to achieve. This could be power over other players, for example being duke instead of the other duke, or to gain personal welfare, which especially becomes important once food is an integrated

part of the scenario. This means that you should always keep in mind how the achievement of the goal will affect the player during the timespan of the larp. It's not only the role that should feel the sweet taste of victory, the player should as well.

It is also possible to create a plot merely for the sake of plotting, or to phrase it differently, a goal for the sake of having one. This is not really preferable if there are other possibilities, but it can be effective. Especially if all the players are on equal ground, that is if, for example, you have a scenario where there is nothing of true value to be gained and where food and lodging is not an integral part of the scenario. I don't have a lot of experience with this type of larp, but my experience has taught me that this works best if the goals are timed so that they are not achieved until the game ends. If the players have to save the world, there is nothing more to do once that goal is reached; the game ends. What else is there to do? So if the goal and the ending are reached at about the same time, it is experienced as a happily won soccer match, rather than a disappointingly busted illusion.

The conflict at hand.

This last principle is best explained with this example: "nobody cares who killed their mother when their pouch of gold has just been nicked". This refers to the typical plot where a player is informed in his prehistory that the mother to the role he is to play

has been murdered under mystical circumstances, that is, the player is to search for his mother's murderer. But the moment his pouch is nicked, the hunt for the thief becomes much more interesting to both the role and the player, while the murder is only "happened" to the role. This could perhaps be interpreted as sloppy roleplay on behalf of the player, who should remember that finding the murderer is much more important than finding the thief. But that train of thought misses the point that suppression of motivation cheats the player out of a fun experience, as finding the thief is likely to be much more exciting. This is because it is a turn of events that was instigated in the course of the game, and therefore all clues, all witnesses and the entire process of solving the crime are quite real, and not just an illusion laid out by the organizers. Most organizers should be familiar with how the players often rave happily on for hours about some event they actually instigated themselves, and which the organizers never even dreamed of could occur.

In this fashion, the third principle becomes a rule of thumb for all organizers to let the larp run its own course, and therefore concentrate more on creating good frames and relations for the players, rather than attempting to scheme out grand plots for them to play. The concrete plots are good enough if there's nothing else for the players to do, but if the framework and the relations are good enough,

there should be plenty of Conflict At Hand, which is what ultimately gives the players the best experiences. By framework I am referring to the society, the setting and the level of freedom given to the individual player. A good framework is equal to a well-constructed and functioning society, a scenography that is believable and durable and freedom to the extent where the players are allowed to act totally on their own accord. If you have based your larp on all the players uniting to defeat the demon army, you have given them very little freedom indeed.

It is possible to imagine the framework as a playground which can be used in two ways: either as an obstacle course to be completed, or a sandpit where you scatter toys randomly and let the children play with them as they please. A good framework allows the children to play as freely as they wish, whereas a poor framework demands that they complete the obstacle course. Conflicts At Hand in a playground are the ones that occur when two children want the same toy, whereas preconceived conflicts are the ones that occur when the grownups want all the children to play football against each other.

Conclusion

The three above-mentioned basic concepts can be used in a variety of ways. They can for example be used to inform the player of what kind of larp is in the works, or as rules of thumb when creating framework, goals and rules. They have shown themselves to be pretty fundamental to free roleplaying, being roleplaying which allows the players to be the instigators of their own experiences and story.

Apart from this the principles can be used to test your ideas while they are still at the conceptual stage, and last but not least to create larp. For *Efter Vinter Kommer Vår* (After Winter Comes Spring) the bearing concept were these three principles, and it was based on this that we found the setting, location, scenography and props that complied.

There are lots of possibilities in this style of roleplaying, so it's just a matter of getting started on it.

* For those who are interested, the organizers behind *Efter Vinter Kommer Vår* have written and printed a fine description and evaluation of the scenario (only in Danish – sorry), which is available by contacting runelippert@laiv.dk.