

# Institutional Development of Larp in Oslo

In the past 10 years the Larp (Live Action Role Playing) community in Oslo has undergone large institutional development. This has led to improved practical organisation and increased flexibility, but also a new hierarchical structure.

What is New Institutional Larp? As a tool to analyse the institutional development in the Oslo Larp community I introduce the theory of New Institutional Larp (NIL).

NIL is inspired by New Institutional Economics (NIE) and Douglas North's theory claiming that institutions

play an important role in economic development. According to NIE, economic development is achieved by increasing economic investment. Institutions reduce the transaction costs of investments, i.e. reducing money wasted on transactions and securing larger outcomes for the investments. This increases the incentives for individuals to invest. Individuals and groups create institutions as a response to political, economical and cultural impulses, but these also influence each other.

In NIE institutions are the formal and informal rules and organisation of economic activity. In NIL, institutions are the formal and informal rules and organisation of creative activity. Improvements in the Larp-institutions will make it "easier" to organise Larps because the transaction costs are reduced. Examples of Larp institutions are the players, storytellers, FX and the practical organisers.

In Larp, economic development is not the issue, instead creative development is. The "money" we invest is human capital i.e. the knowledge we bring, our creativity, energy, and ideas. By increasing human capital investment,

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Larp will experience creative development and the individual increases her status in the community as well as her personal satisfaction. Institutional change is essential in this development.

### **History of institutional change**

Larp in Oslo started in 1989 and has since then developed an increasingly complex institutional system to attempt to solve the problems that can occur in Larp making, such as practical and communicational glitches. Much of the institutional development has happened on the practical side of Larp organising. However, lately changes have also happened on the creative side. Below follows a general categorisation of Larp institutional development in Oslo. Please note that there were and are exceptions to the categories.

1989: two institutions existed at this time: the players and the organisers. The organisational responsibilities consisted of storytelling (writing roles and background information), practical responsibilities (e.g. sanitation, the lease, permits and administration) and special effects (FX, such as monster-making and explosions). These responsibilities were more or less randomly distributed between the organisers according to personal interest, but rarely as specialised responsibilities. The organisational structure was flat and decisions made democratically. Storytelling was usually the main priority, second came

FX and third came the least popular responsibilities, the practical work.

The organisers often played central roles in the Larp. This made it possible to control and influence the game, as well as enhanced their status. According to Petter Bøckmann this practice ceased in the middle of the 1990's, around the time Larp-theory and the increasing realisation of GMing (GM= Game master) as a highly skilled proficiency, or even art (some of the younger groups practice it today). The debriefings and after-larp-parties, where the plots of the game are reviewed, were also places where honour was distributed, e.g. prizes for "Most funny" or "Most heroic". The type of ovation, which the organisers received, signalled the players satisfaction.

1994: three institutions can be identified: the players, the organisers and the FX group. The FX group had by then become a separate institution. The practical responsibilities were often placed on one of the organisers, often the visionary or one of the driving forces behind the Larp. This person still participated in storytelling.

1998/9: four institutions can be identified: the players, the storytellers, the FX group and the practical organiser. The practical responsibilities become a separate institution and given the responsibility of coordinating the work and the other institutions involved in the Larp, as well as the practical and administrative work.

2000/2: four institutions are still identifiable, however the institutions are unclear because some have spawned subgroups. “The players” as an institution remain unaltered. “The storytellers”, however put out part of their work. It is primarily the writing of roles, which is put out. This type of work can be called piecework because individuals take on writing 5 - 30 roles to which they have been given guidelines. The storytellers keep control of the overall setting and plots (mysteries and tasks) by writing these.

The practical responsibilities have also been split and outsourced. The organising committee still has one person responsible for coordinating. However, much of the work is on the administrative side of the Larp, such as doing accounts, mail and planning. This work, which is mostly done before or after the Larp. External, independent groups perform much of the visible practical work during the Larp, such as security, sanitation and the organisation of the camp. The same type of specialisation and outsourcing can be identified in FX.

### **Results and challenges**

One of the major things that the institutional development in the Oslo Larp community has led to, is specialisation of Larp organisation. This has especially affected the practical side of Larp making, and is generally understood as a positive development. Roles now usually come about 4 weeks before the Larp,

sanitation has improved, and were we before hauled out bags, we now get them driven to camp. Putting out work such as administrative tasks, writing roles and doing FX has reduced parts of the organisers workload and made it possible to focus more on other tasks.

However the increase in specialisation has also brought new problems. One is that the institutional development has created a new hierarchy in Larp. The concept of “payment” from the players is important to understand the new hierarchy. The Larp community has no money to give; instead we pay in status and social standing in the community. The “pay” is distributed based on the visibility during a Larp and in the community.

The practical organiser and coordinator today receive much respect and thus pay because of the memories of badly coordinated larps. However, this area of responsibility is not very visible because much of the work involves institutions outside the Larp, such as police and landlords and also because most of the work is done before and after the Larp. During the Larp, the practical organiser is not very visible. An interesting question is therefore: will the “pay” given to this institution be reduced over time as the players come to take well organised Larps for granted?

The “pay” given to the specialised outsourced groups is presently high. They are given status as skilled

based on experience. They are well organised in small groups, visible both in the community and on Larps and advertise their services. Comparatively, the pieceworkers in storytelling receive low “pay”. They are not organised and there are many willing to take on the work because it gives a “taste” of organising, yet not the full responsibility. The pieceworkers are less visible because their work is done before the game and involves few players and other institutions. These pieceworkers do not have full control over what they produce because they have not participated in creating the setting and the mysteries that gives the overall view of the story line. Instead they work within a structure dictated by the storytellers.

The storyteller is the institution that is most visible to the players, and thus receives the most pay. They have created the story line and coordinated the pieceworkers. It is the storytellers, not the piece-workers who sum up the Larp and hand out honours at the debrief.

Curiously the institutional development in the Oslo Larp community can be compared to the development of the labour hierarchy in the Industrial Revolution. Organised groups of labourers took on jobs e.g. mechanics, claiming they were skilled, and thus received high pay and status. Another group, mostly women, neither organised nor claiming they were skilled, took on piecework at low

wages. The employers (in the Larp-community the storytellers) dictated the production and cashed in the profit.

Larp in Oslo has undergone many changes in the institutional structure. It has gone from a primarily flat organisational structure with glitches to a more hierarchical structure working more efficiently. The development has led to great improvements on the practical and perhaps also the creative side of Larp making, thus aiding creative development. The increasing complexity of the institutional framework has also made Larp organisation more flexible. Individuals can invest as much of their human capital as they wish, without actually becoming full time organisers. This may have a positive impact on recruitment of new organisers by giving a soft introduction as well as experience. However, the institutional development has also led to the establishing of an organisational hierarchy and systems where functions and tasks are separated and loose touch.

### **Bibliography:**

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Discussion following “Larp at a deagregated level” between Eirik Fatland, Petter Bøckman and Ragnhild Hutchison march/april 2000