

# The Diegetic Rooms of Larp

In this article I will argue that during a larp there exists two different rooms at the same time. These rooms are respectively diegetic and non-diegetic. The object of this article is to identify which persons, ideas, objects and artefacts are present in the two rooms. And what are the consequences of the co-existence of those two rooms. To ensure the players' understanding of the diegetic affiliations of artefacts and people in the game is important to avoid breaks in the players immersion in their roles.

## The Author

Carsten Andreasen is 27 years old and lives in Copenhagen, Denmark with his wife and soon a little child. He is research executive at the Marketresearch Company TNS Gallup. Carsten is educated in communications and business administration from Roskilde University. He has organised LARPs since 1989 and counts more than 25 projects in many different genres. This year he is an organiser of Knudepunkt as he was in 1999.

But first I'll define the meaning of the term diegetic. In movies you often see both diegetic and non-diegetic music. The diegetic sound is the sound, which both the viewer and the persons on the screen hear (ex. a passing car). The non-diegetic sound is sound only heard by the viewer (ex. the movies soundtrack).

Even though the Dogme95 manifest by the two Danish filmmakers Lars Von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg does not use the word 'diegetic', the second rule in their "Vow of Chastity" is a rule against non-diegetic sounds and music: "2. The sound must never be produced apart from the images or vice versa. (Music must not be used unless it occurs where the scene is being shot)." (Dogme95, 1995). This is a classic example of a definition of diegesis.

In the paper "The Meilahti School" by Hakkarainen and Stenros diegesis is defined as that which is true within the game (Hakkarainen & Stenros, 2002). I will use the definition of diegesis as being the framework of the game universe and an diegetic object as an object that is present (e.g. exists) within the diegetic room. This last definition focuses on presence, which

is a little more precise than true, since a lie present within the diegetic room also is diegetic.

Markus Montola argues that all diegesis is subjective and that a player can only experience her own diegesis (Montola, 2003). I will argue that two forms of diegesis exist, the subjective and the objective. The subjective is created by the player's subjective interpretations of background information, rules, media normalities and genre normalities and interaction between the players. The objective diegesis is created by interaction between the subjective diegesis' and as such is a product of all the subjective diegesis'.

### **The two rooms**

At a larp there co-exists two rooms. The first room is the physical location where the larp is played as it exists in the normal world – This is called the playground. The second room is the fictive universe where the larp is played – This is called the game universe.

The Playground - As mentioned above the playground is the physical location where the larp is played. Everything that exists on the location of the larp exists on the playground, i.e. players, building, first aid kits, costumes etc. This room is the non-diegetic room, as an object existing in this room does not necessarily exist in the game universe.

The Game Universe - The game universe is the fictive universe set up by the larp's organizers. The diegetic framework defines the game universe (Hakkarainen & Stenros, 2002). An object or person from the playground (where all physical objects are present) may also exist in the game universe if it is included in the diegetic framework. This means that objects can cross over from the playground to the game universe and thus exist in both rooms at the same time.

How a given artefact or person from the playground is perceived by the player in the game universe is defined not only by the organizer, but in many instances also by media- and genre normalities. That means that a person dressed with a pointy hat and a staff will be recognized as a wizard in a fantasy larp even though the organizers may not specifically have told the players to have this given understanding. The genre normalities both helps and limits the organizers as they help her not having to define and explain every little bit of the universe, but also limits her in his creation of the game universe as there is a risk that the genre normalities will confuse the creative work of the organizer.

### **The diegetic state**

Any given person or object present in both rooms will have a double state of being. At the same time the person will be present on the playground; i.e. the normal world and in the game universe. This double presence is

called double diegetic state.

An object (most often a artefact) can be present in the two rooms at the same time, but not be the same artefact. In the game universe an artefact can be a real deadly gun while at the same time it is only a toy gun on the playground.

If the object with a double diegetic state is the same in both rooms it has a homogeneous double diegetic state, while an object that is different in the two rooms has a heterogeneous double diegetic state.



Objects without the double diegetic state will always be a distraction and as such hurt the illusion. Non-diegetic artefacts, may serve a purpose depending on the type of game:

1. Practical necessities (ex. first aid kits, a persons glasses)
2. Atmosphere (ex. background music)

It is a matter of taste, and as such not within this article area whether non-diegetic artefacts are allowed on the physical location of the game.

### **What is present in the two rooms?**

In understanding in which rooms that persons and objects are present we will need to follow a set of guidelines:

- All persons and physical objects are present on the playground, but not necessarily in the game universe.
- Physical artefacts can have a symbolic meaning and as such be present in the game universe as another object than on the playground.
- All diegetic knowledge about the game universe, such as background stories, is only present in the game universe.
- Rules are present in both rooms. On the playground as non-diegetic knowledge about the game and in the game universe as “laws of nature”.

Using the above guidelines the table below shows examples of presence for persons and objects.

**Orwellian double think**

Besides interaction and the narrative, immersion is one of the most important qualities of larp. Immersion can be seen as the process of stepping from the playground into the game universe. I'll argue that it is absolutely necessary that the player never leaves the playground but keeps the double diegetic state.

This is necessary for two reasons:

1. To understand the simulated objects. This means that a person not present on the playground will not be able to understand
2. To cope in the right way with potential dangers

Being present in both worlds at the same time is not only a physical feature, but also a question of mindset. This mindset I will call the Orwellian double think. Orweillan double think comes from the novel '1984' by George Orwell (Orwell, 1949) where people are forced to have two

Person or object	Playground	Game universe	Diegetic State
Persons ingame	Present	Present	Heterogeneous
Persons offgame (Organizers, public)	Present		
First aid kit at a fantasy larp	Present		
A river on the location	Present	Present	Homogeneous
Music played by a flute	Present	Present	Homogeneous
Music from hidden ghetto blaster	Present		
A toy gun symbolising a real gun	Present	Present	Heterogeneous
Background stories		Present	
Rules	Present	Present	Heterogeneous

coexisting mindsets to cope with the nearly surreal inconsistencies of the government. In this context, Orwellian double thinking is the feature which a player while being the great berserker warrior Thorbjørnwulf still is able to act in a way that is safe to his surroundings; still able to understand where the game starts and ends. Thus I will argue that a player is fully able to immerse into a role while still be present on the playground.

Spencer-Brown describes the possibility of flexible changing between the two rooms. This flexible changing is called oscillation (Spencer-Brown, 1979, here Walther, 2001). Oscillation describes how a person changes her focus between the two rooms and it that way becomes present in both rooms.

The Orwellian double thinking and the player's active state of being in the two rooms make a unique possibility for making and understating art (Andreasen, 2002). It is possible for the player to experience the larp in three simultaneous ways:

1. To experience the larp as life in the fictive world of the role inside the game universe. Thus being object within the artwork.
2. Secondly as a subject viewing the artwork as the player on the playground (receiver).
3. Thirdly as subject actively contributing to the piece of

art, thus being artist herself (sender).

This is a unique characteristic for interactive arts and only possible when immersion is strong. If the immersion element is not strong the Orwellian double think will not be present and as such not all three elements will be simultaneous present.

### **Why is it almost never a problem to resolve where an object belongs?**

It is very seldom that confusion arises at a larp regarding whether an objects belongs to the game universe. This is because of the player's implicit understanding of the genre and the characteristics of larp as a media.

But what happens when it is a problem? - Illusion is broken because the player needs to be aware and is no longer able to maintain the Orwellian double think. They will have to leave the game universe and decide how to relate to the person or artefact. Sometimes this decision will be based on analysis, discussion with fellow players or maybe even the games organizers. This will off course lead to a massive breakdown of the illusion.

One of the main objects of confusion is the border of the game. For an example a door to a non-game area is a potential object of confusion. This is if not either clearly marked (which could be a danger to the illusion) or clearly stated before the game starts (rules,

briefing etc.). If the players do not know whether the door exists within the game universe their roles cannot relate to the object. Is there anything beyond that door? Should we care?

### **Conclusion - the consequences of the diegetic rooms**

Being present in both rooms at the same time is essential for the larp'er. Without this double presence she cannot relate to both the diegetic framework and the necessities of the playground (borders, rules, national law etc). The Orwellian double think makes immersion possible while being aware of the playground.

The larp's organizers need to ensure that the players have a complete understanding of the diegetic affiliations of artefacts and people. If this is not clear to the players, the illusion will be broken and the players will be forced to step out of the diegetic framework to consider their actions. When the player steps out of the game universe immersion is no longer possible and the game's spell is broken.

#### Sources:

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