

Why do Bad Larps Happen to Good People?

A Swedish friend of mine recently described somebody as “A pretty bad larper, the sort of person who doesn’t understand why you need to make your own shoes for a fantasy game.” As an experienced all-genre larper, yet to put one stitch to a piece of leather, I was pretty rattled. The most talked-about larp theories like the Turku

Manifesto have been normative; describing what larp sometimes is and what the authors think it should be instead. Descriptive theory, like the Meilahti Model, focuses on what all role-playing always is. No larp theorist so far has seen the goddamn shoe norm coming, and to the ones that might have, like my friend, it was too obvious to write about.

The Author

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She was introduced to larping in the Helsinki Clan Raven in 1995, organised ten bilingual larps and served as chairman of the national larp society before moving to Sweden in 1999.

She has since contributed character work for several Swedish larps and played in several, as well as a few in Norway and Denmark. Her favourite larp activities include editing the nordic fanzine Panclou and overdosing in a bathtub in Martin Ericsson’s Hamlet.

A gaming culture to me is a group of players who share the same assumptions about what a larp is and what measures are relevant in describing its quality. If a gaming culture takes its assumptions and writes them down in instruction form, that’s a normative larp text right there. You can find one, headlined either “Introduction” or “Vision”, in the source material of almost every modern larp. Those texts usually concern themselves with the conceived purpose of larping in general and the game in particular. Sometimes instructions are also given on gaming method and style.

If the makers of a game consider their vision to be far from the player group’s every-day assumptions on

these matters, the game will be called “experimental” and all of its requirements described in great detail. If it’s considered standard fare, the most you get is probably something like “we have high ambitions for the quality of equipment”. Sometimes, in Norway, that means they have a genuine 40s fishing boat but pierced noses are still OK, and sometimes, in Sweden, it means all goddamn shoes should be hand-made.

You don’t even have to go abroad to find a gaming culture different from your own. Any metal bar in your town will probably shelter a community of vampire gamers with character sheets, hit-points and all. I will make only one normative statement in this article, and this is it: everybody should participate in a larp from a different culture. It will change your understanding of your own games and show you how several of your most basic assumptions about game quality are really opinions and subject to change.

Non-negotiable: The lowest common denominator

Role-playing = people creating and sharing a story through the process of assuming characters and imagining actions, feelings and dialogue for these characters in interaction with each other and their surroundings. Some or all players can assume different characters at different times within the story, and will to different degrees simulate the surroundings, including

natural laws and fate.

Larp = form of role-play that fulfils two additional criteria:

Representation of space

Larp always has a geographical dimension. Live bodies traversing actual distances represent movement of characters through space, although not always to scale. (In other forms of role-playing games, describing the movement is generally enough: I walk to the door). Exceptions occur when a physical representation of the diegetic truth would be boring, dangerous or complicated – like when players aren’t actually dead or invisible.

Representation of time

On the scene level, character time advances in real time, although cut techniques are sometimes used between scenes, and time freezes within a scene can sometimes be necessary to portray supernatural speed or simultaneous events. Although a game where all players would move and talk very fast in some segments is conceivable, I can’t say I’ve ever heard of one. (In many other forms of role-play, conversations and actions are routinely fast-forwarded through gamemaster input: And they talked about the plans for an hour, drinking beer, while you...)

Only this, I believe, is true for all larps all over the world. Everything else is negotiable. Americans run very advanced historical larps in

ordinary classrooms, and can play fantasy games in public parks with only symbolic character apparel, like a tunic and jeans. In their view the kind of highly mobile free-form tabletop-role-playing popular especially at conventions in Sweden would probably count as larp. Sometimes it fits my definition too.

The Meilahti School, in its functional description of RPG, argues that RPG always requires a gamemaster. I agree. I believe, however, that further study of the uses of the gamemaster role in different kinds of RPG could identify a distinction between larp and other forms. Since this article has a practical focus I will use the wider term organiser instead. A larp organiser is often a gamemaster, but the term also includes crew that is not involved with decisions about the diegetic framework of the larp. A player wielding gamemaster powers temporarily is not an organiser, but an organiser can be a player.

Different gaming cultures differ in their basic assumptions of at least the following topics: Player-organiser relations including division of labour; relative status of the individual and the collective experience; and the acceptable amount of abstract representation or simulation. I will elaborate on the less obvious ones briefly.

This isn't a complete set of scales to measure the type of a larp (and it

is absolutely useless for measuring quality). But I hope it can be a tool in avoiding confusion, at Knudepunkt, around strange shoe statements, and most importantly at games. One thing is certain about gamemastering larps: What is not specified in game instructions is left for players to decide. If the game includes even one participant from another gaming culture, the organisers are likely to be very surprised with how freedom on any of these listed issues has been interpreted.

Organisers and players

Division of labour of the game organisers and the players, especially in regards to plot composition and character creation, and the physical representations of the game world.

Defining story limits or the diegesis is usually known as “the writing” and is done by organisers in the role of gamemaster. They will choose a setting and a theme, and usually a general storyline, often including fairly specific plots and character ideas. In some games players are encouraged to make up plots as they go along, often forcing odd choices upon their characters to create interesting conflicts. In others the whole plot is painstakingly constructed by the gamemasters as a framework that marks the borders for experimentation with character psychology – an experiment that is automatically ruined if the player decides to remove the character from the situation.

In very broad terms the first game might be a five-day fantasy game with several hundred players, in which the organisers leave it to the players to create and submit their own character descriptions. The sheer scale makes it highly unlikely that a game that big could be centrally plotted to make each player feel like the star in a movie about his or her character. The second

in accordance with organiser instructions. In some cultures these instructions are wishes. In other they are laws.

Ownership of the game, including material and immaterial game elements, control of the game once it has started and rights to game information once it's over;



kind of game could be a tightly plotted murder mystery, played for 36 hours in a basement in Turku. Here each participant would receive a character description of nine pages detailing his past, personality and ambition, and the meetings of these individual readings of those characters would unravel the plot.

As for creating physical representation, it is normal that the organisers, with more or less help from participants, create location and sets. Although some organisers provide outfits for a fee, players are normally required to prepare their kit and costume

The authorship of a Turku game is fairly obvious: somebody wrote it. But who owns the fantasy game of the first example? If each group wrote all characters, created its own society and culture? Are they allowed to introduce new elements that spring naturally out of their playing like, say, a kill-em-all-cult to complicate the game? Or should they hand gamemaster powers back to the organisers? And after the game – who has the right to organise more games within the same “world”? Who should decide what is diegetic in each game, and what isn't?

Artistic ambition of the organisers

and players, political content and awareness thereof.

Artistic ambition is intimately connected to genre and style. A classic Finnish example was the Post-Björneborgian war game Valokaari, which by the participants, mostly Turku style adepts, was understood to be (and played as) a psychologically intense low-key portrayal of fear. The organisers, it turned out, had wanted it to become a study of people snapping under pressure and turning internal tension into an all-out conflict. The



artistic ambition of the players was so different the organisers were bored to tears by their own game.

And politics? Politics are everywhere, even when organisers forget.

Patriarchal villages morph into housewife democracies; people protecting their homes give some players an ugly nationalist vibe. These reactions are fairly predictable, yet they are often overlooked, causing unnecessary conflict during and after games.

The gaming experience

Whether larp is an individual or a collective experience, and whether the construction of the game should reflect this. The relative status of different gaming styles and the objectives of the single player. The relative status of character logic, plot logic and game dramaturgy where these are in conflict. Genre and style: awareness thereof. Acting and directing.

On a theoretical level, the individual-collective divide is often about where the larp actually exists – in the physical room, in the interaction between immersed players and their surroundings (“interimmersion”), or in the mind of each player separately. Players don’t need to agree to be able to play together, even though some games are more easily adapted to some preferences. The tradition of going to larps in groups tends to make each player responsible for the experience of the whole group. Abandoning the group, even where this would be

logical for the character, is a form of treachery, robbing the group of all potential plot-related action represented by the character.

In Finland, where organisers write nigh-all characters, and games are generally smaller, the focus is usually on the individual. That makes the divide between gaming styles much more obvious. Regardless of character personality some larpers will play for the emotional experiences, some for the actual experiences and some to win. In a fantasy scenario these groups are glaringly obvious. The first kind will enjoy sitting around at the inn, whispering to his trusty companion or no one at all, living the life of the character, as boring as it may seem. The second kind will react to any rumour strongly, lead the villagers in vocal protests and organising a team of swashbucklers to go out and fight something, anything. The third kind will never brood, but sometimes sit around at the inn for networking purposes, taking action only when he's certain the group he tags along with will perform the coolest actions – or take power over the game society.

Not all gaming styles are appropriate in all games. As the awareness of these issues has heightened, it has become obvious that most players are comfortable in many styles. Even the ones who cannot leave their gamist urges behind can deliver their performance in many ways: low-key and naturalist, or highly theatrically.

Although it is not always explicit in the written game material, organisers generally have a very clear idea of both the genre they want their game to represent and the style in which they wish it to be played. It makes sense for organisers to step into the role of director, treating the player output as an acting process that needs instruction to avoid meta-level conflict. Conflict like a slouching king, with the speech patterns of a Budweiser commercial, facing down a poker-straight innkeeper, who talks like a king.

Simulation and representation

The acceptable level of simulation in representations of physical contact, psychological conflicts, intense experiences, and the supernatural.

The acceptable level of simulation in representations of physical objects and surroundings.

Use of non-diegetic elements and other experimental techniques.

Physical and psychological safety issues, including awareness thereof.

Attitude towards and use of meta-game commentary and off-gaming (including game breaks and safety words).

In most Nordic larp cultures a low level of simulation is admired and respected. A game, where very few things or actions represent something they are not, is considered to be “good”, “ambitious” or “advanced”, whereas a piece of cardboard with “this is a door with a security lock”

penned on it is considered “bad”. The trend towards gradually less simulation has appeared in all gaming cultures I’ve come in contact with, to an extent that it is today considered something of a natural law. There is an understanding, probably false, that groups veer towards visually purer styles because they understand that these are “better”. Especially in collectively oriented gaming cultures, like most of Sweden, the quality of costume and equipment is very important. I believe this is no coincidence. If you do not look like part of the fiction, you remind the others of the off-game world at all times, and risk spoiling the collective experience. But as long as you do not speak of off-game matters no one will know whether or not you are immersed. Needless to say, a majority of larpers from different cultures, wearing ordinary army boots in fantasy games, will view this as hogwash. Yet, having observed naturalist tendencies in all larp cultures I’ve been in contact with, a short discussion of where this inevitably leads is in order.

The ambition to remove all simulation will at its logical extreme create games devoid of all physical and almost all psychological conflict. These are indeed very naturalistic, and often (unless placed in rare genres like situation comedy) very boring, even to immersionists. Actually, one might argue that some of them are not larps at all, rather life, just somebody else’s.

One way to address this boredom is to add “artistic expression” through surreal or symbolic elements, often through non-diegetic means. It can be a very effective way to add levels to character narrative. It is also, technically, opposed to the original ambition. The techniques used by the players at experimental Knappnålshuvudet to not “see” the angels walking around are of course the exact same ones used by all Vampire players to not “see” invisible vampires. But you would be hard pressed to get an Artistic Larper to admit it.

Another way is to bring the action and conflict back, but keep simulation at minimum levels (what is popularly, and critically, known as hard-core gaming). Full-contact, low-impact fighting is not uncommon, actual sex occurs occasionally and players regularly place their characters in psychologically taxing situations. After-effects of these, from bruising to trauma, always carry into the off-game world. To limit the damage, complex safety systems are usually installed. When they are not, the danger is a constant reminder of the outside world. When they are, the very borders that allow us to play will be one. Again, to remove all game-like qualities, all borders of the fiction, is to make the larp a non-game. Whatever comes just before that level, though, will probably be a very interesting larp experience.

One consequence of – and, I believe,

reason for – all cultures gradually lowering their tolerance for abstraction is that once you get used to not having to imagine something like medieval shoes, you forget how to do it. Or maybe the efforts of your internal imaginators are just directed at something else.

Agreeing to disagree

This is I: Larp happens through a psychological process of immersion into a character (eläytyminen). Since the game exists only inside each player's mind, all physical representation remains symbolic. Good gaming is acting as is logical for the character in the established situation. Larp for the player is his individual experience ("deep feelings") of the interaction between his character and the others as well as the game surroundings. Choosing to larp scenes alone enhances the overall game, if solitude is a logical character choice.

And this is my friend: Larp happens

though a physical process of acting like a character. Since the game exists at the juncture of diegetic reality and the physical truth, the physical representation of objects and places should never be abstract. Good gaming is when the action is never in conflict with the fiction. Larp for the player is helping create a collective experience ("cool scenes") through being a part of the physical fiction, constantly in interaction with the other players. Choosing to larp scenes alone will diminish the overall game, since solitude prevents interaction.

Spelled out that way, I get the shoe thing. I don't agree, but I get it, and having tried several kinds of games in the Nordic region I can describe my idea of perfection. It is a larp written by the Finns, produced by the Swedes, infused with meaning by the Norwegians, and enjoyed as though all players were Danes. It is taking my eläytyminen and sticking it up her, uh, footwear.

