



Fødselsnr	SHASBPCTD AB	høsting	40 00 KR
BOK	824	26 % MCMS	10 00 KR
Adresse	135 26 TYRBYSC	Brutto	90 00 KR
Telefon	06 - 449 70 00	Forsikringsnr	30 11 2006
Auktomat	1042	Månedsløn	SE 50007M3307

# tobias harding

## immersion revisited: role-playing as interpretation and narrative

Larping has traditionally been interpreted as a situation in which players play characters in a game world. Some work has been done on understanding larp from a narrative point of view, as a story. Larp can also be understood as performance. Academic theories of performance tend however to ignore character immersion, which is a central point of larping, but of only secondary importance in other forms of performance art. To understand immersion we need a different theory. I propose that larp can alternatively be understood as a change in how the player interprets the world. Experiences are now interpreted according to a fictional story that is created when the player interprets his or her surroundings (which may be more or less controlled by the organiser). In traditional fantasy larps the world is re-interpreted to fit in a medieval (or fantasy) framework; plastic sticks become swords, traffic signs are ignored and so on. Understood in this way, immersion is not a change of personality, but a change of interpretative framework, understandable from a hermeneutic perspective. Understanding larp in this way may lead to a change of focus that would

show us new aspects of how role-playing works. Before we look closer on these matters, I should add that there is no empirical study behind the arguments in this text. Neither are they presented in a form that encourages theoretical “testing”. I am simply trying to understand what it means to play a character, based on my own ten years of experience of live action and tabletop role-playing and by (loosely) applying theory. I hope that this essay can help others to do the same.

The word *role-playing* is to a high degree self-explanatory. Someone plays a role (or to put it less individualistically: a role is being played). Convention says that the play takes place within a game world. Role-playing theorists inspired by semiotics tend to use the word *diegesis* (e.g. Montola 2003). The ethnologist Lotten Gustavsson (2002) has coined the term *play chronotope* (“lekkronotop”) to cover the world in which a fictional time and space in which a game takes place. For practical purposes I will continue to use the word role-players coined in the infancy of their hobby: *game world*, by

which I mean the fictional time and space in which the narrative of a role-playing game takes place. Examples of game worlds are the world of the Society for Creative Anachronism and the World of Darkness of the White Wolf products, or more correctly the adaptations of these that are used in actual role-playing games. The term is also taken to include the un-named and much less explicit worlds that are used in games that focus on different things.

Markus Montola (2003) claim that “larp is role-playing, where physical reality is used to construct diegesis, in addition to communication, both directly and arbitrarily”. Following this definition the difference between larps and other types of role-playing lies in the relationship between the “real” (or material) world and the game world, which are supposed to be relatively similar. In a tabletop game, characters may for example be on a desert island in the game world while the players are sipping tea in the game master’s living room. In a larp, a forest is generally a forest and tea cup is generally a tea cup. An extreme point of this was the *Dogma 99* rule that “No object shall be used to represent another object (all things shall be what they appear to be)” (Fatland & Wingård 2003) although very few larps (if any) have actually gone that far.

The character is traditionally taken to be a “person” different from the player. He or she may have a different background, a different way of looking at the world as well as dress, talk and act differently, depending on what the player focuses on when assuming the character and depending on what the character writer (who may or may not be the player or the game organiser) have focused on at character creation. The character may also change during the game as the player more or less consciously fills in the blanks or adjusts the character by improvisation. Many role-players have testified that characters after a while may start acting on their own. A somewhat static view of this was taken in the Manifesto of the Turku School:

*“Role-playing is immersion (‘eläytyminen’) to an outside consciousness (‘a character’) and interacting with its surroundings. [...] as a role-player I vow to refrain from any personal style of gaming! I do not try to play, but to mould myself after the game master’s wishes. [...] My greatest goal shall be to fulfil the game master’s vision, forcing myself to immerse in the character as truthfully and realistically as possible. I swear to do this in all ways possible to myself, regardless of any concepts of good taste and the convenience of other players”* (Pohjola 2003).

Even more extreme than this was the arguments of the Swedish so-called role-playing critic Diddi Örnstedt (1997) who argued – much as the Turku School – that role-playing is about immersing into a character and follow the lead of a game master. According to Örnstedt most role-players would easily lose the ability to differentiate between themselves and their characters and thus lose all contact with reality. Whether or not this change is seen as a revolution or as a potential childhood trauma, it has been fantastically overrated and misinterpreted. As the Turku School acknowledged, immersion is a difficult goal, one that can only be reached with great difficulty and only temporarily. The idea that someone would “get stuck” is unlikely to the extreme.

Better than as shift from “real identity” to “character”, the larping experience have been described by Martin Ericson as a step into a liminoid space:

*“making the players shed their former selves along with their entire socio-moral luggage before entering the game should be the primary goal. Currently there seems to be a lot of hesitation among players and organisers about going into games naked and head over heels, yet the game will touch deeper if one gives oneself up to it completely and enters the liminoid space as a humble initiate rather than a headstrong actor.”* (Ericsson 2004)

The long-time Swedish larper Elge Larsson (2005) has frequently described this as the magical moment of role-playing, the moment when the game world becomes real and both ones ordinary self and the material world fades before ones eyes. Both Larsson and Ericsson use the language of ritual-induced religious experience to describe this moment, whether as metaphor or not.

In this essay, I use instead the language of academic hermeneutic theory. Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation. Historically this has generally been the study of texts, especially of authoritative texts such as the Bible and legal sources. In more recent years the method has however been used to approach virtually any meaningful contexts. The core idea is that *any text is interpreted by someone within a context*, which composes the interpreter's horizon of understanding. The same text will thus mean different things to different people in different contexts. Yet it is possible to increase ones own understanding of a writer by reading his works. An extreme example from early hermeneutics would be striving to come closer to God by closely reading the Bible. The concept is that by understanding the text (by use of close reading and the study of additional material) one can strive to merge ones own horizon of understanding with that of the writer. This is of course not possible, but the distance can still be shortened and distances between human beings can thus be at least partially overcome. From this perspective reading is a process in which each part of the text is interpreted in relation to the whole. At the same time the whole is reinterpreted according to the new understanding gained from understanding the part. Interpretation is thus a circular process, a kind of spiral in which understanding increases for each circle (Ödman 1994).

A hermeneutic approach to the immersion of role-playing would thus imply that *the main purpose of the character is to conceptualise how I want to change my way of interpreting the world during*

*the larp*. The last part of this sentence is as important as the first: The way we interpret the world changes and it changes within the limits of a specific area in space and time. A role-player who managed to merge the relevant parts of his horizon of understanding with the fictional horizons of his character's understanding could thus be said to view the world through the eyes of the character. This would be immersion.

### **The Narrative**

The larp is interpreted as a *narrative*. This may be a story of a valiant struggle against evil trolls, the scheming of vampires or any other story that the participants agree upon. Generally each player character gets the chance of being the hero of his or her very own version of the story. When this works, larp becomes intensely meaningful. It is in no way unique for the fictional realities of larping to produce a narrative. We all try to understand our lives by interpreting them as narratives in which we are ourselves (to some extent and hopefully) the protagonists (the main characters). It has been argued that the novel is the model for how people in the modern era understand themselves and their relationship to the world as a narrative (Armstrong 2006). The reading of some novels changes how we interpret ourselves and our surrounding. Thus a novel may be the prototype of how we understand life and not merely a description.

I have myself often written down my own experiences of a larp both during and after the larp, that is both "in character" and "out of character". This is a wonderful way of getting in character; it makes explicit how the character views the world and how his view is different from how I view my world. Describing the meaning of texts, the hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur distinguishes between *events*, *plot*, and *narrative*. The plot consists of events that are ordered into a plot when they are narrated by someone – a *narrator* – as a narrative. To further complicate things many narratives include

fictional narrators (Ricoeur 1991, Gunnarsson 2006), as when the fictional character Dr. Watson narrates the adventures of Sherlock Holmes in books written by Conan Doyle. A text written by a larp character is a text written by a fictional character. As a larp is a role-playing game in which the game-world corresponds to the material world this character however corresponds to physical person; me. I argue that this is how we always understand larping as long as our act is not merely an outwards pretence (“theatrical acting” as described by the Turku school): interpreted as a narrative as interpreted by our characters as fictional narrators. While the player character may not always be the protagonist (as argued by Kim 2004) immersion makes it the fictional narrator.

When I tell someone about the larp after it has ended this is something else: the fictional narrator is gone; I am telling the story as told by me. In this way telling each other about what happened during a larp directly afterwards is not only retelling the events, it is also telling them for the first time as oneself, thus re-narrating the experience not as the lived experience of oneself playing a fictional character but the larp as a narrative told by oneself. This may be why telling each other of the events of the larp can be a vehicle to return to oneself. At the same time it is however also a return to the community of fellow larpers: remembering together has always been a certain way to create identification with one another (Ricoeur 1991).

Experience changes us. The more meaningful the experience, the more it influences us. Meaning is however determined by how we interpret the context and the meaningfulness of an event is thus determined by its relationship to the narrative context in which we put it when we interpret it. This is an aspect of the circular relationship between the part and the whole in hermeneutic theory. Unfortunately, our own lives often seem meaningless in a way that a good larp does not. A

good larp is rigged to produce a working narrative and players generally do what they can to help the story envelop. It is thus understandable that larps often feel more meaningful than real-life situations.

This power of narrative meaning is further illustrated by the power that political and religious ideologies can gain by offering people a grand narrative that gives meaning to their lives. There is little doubt that life seemed meaningful for example to the men who forced passenger planes to fly into the World Trade Centre. Making someone believing in a narrative is a certain way to power. Understanding what narratives we make from the events of our lives is thus important to everyone. The influence of a master narrative is in my view among the political phenomena that larps have been most successful in exploring. The Swedish larp *Vreden* aimed directly at this. I was not there but have experienced fanaticism in my own characters in many other fictional worlds. With enough immersion even a fictional ideology may create fanaticism. Luckily this fanaticism is precisely that – fiction – and can thus give the participants an opportunity to gain experience without embracing fanaticism in real life. What then is fiction?

### **Fiction**

Actions in larp are symbolised by actions made by the player. An event that takes place in a larp is thus not necessarily un-real. It is however fiction. This is an important distinction. Fiction is a matter of genre not of ontological status. A novel – or a larp – can sometimes say more of our reality than a biography. Its claims are however different (Ricoeur 1993). The difference lies not simply in the work itself but also in how one reads it. Reading a novel as a biography is different from reading it as a novel. It might even remove important values that we would have appreciated if we had read it as a less literal description of reality. When I hear or see something in a larp, my experience is different from what it would be if I had heard or seen the same thing in a non-fictional context. The difference has

nothing to do with the situation. In a realistic larp, the situation could in fact be indistinguishable from a non-larp situation. Instead, the difference is in how I interpret the situation. Language for example includes what is known as performative statements, i.e. statements that are not descriptions of acts but acts in themselves. Making a promise is an example of this, the proclamation of a gift may be another. If I say that I give you this paper, it is not meant as a description of something that I do. It is the action in itself (Lübcke 1997). If I say the same in a larp this may not be the case. The statement is still performative, it is however not a real act (nor a lie) but a part of the fiction, theatrical acting, not a real act. The act itself takes place only in the game-world. This often makes the border between the real and the game-world highly important.

As the larp-narrative is understood as fictional, players may do things that they would not do with their own lives. They may for example consciously try to create a tragedy, something that is decidedly rare in real life. They may or may not be looking for other qualities in this narrative than in their own life-story. This has a number of important consequences for those who plan a larp, one is that many people will be more inclined to take risks in larps than in reality. Even if their characters are not very different from themselves, they may be more inclined to take the consequences of their beliefs and actions, simply because those consequences are not perceived as real. This may be considered a problem by organisers and writers who want realism. If they do, they should agree with the players to try to avoid this. This may on the other hand be one of the causes behind the sense of freedom that many larpers feel during games, and perhaps not something one should try to overcome.

Larp narratives are fiction. Yet they have other properties in common with the non-fictional narratives through which we understand our own lives. Unlike for example most novels they are created more or

less collectively as well as retroactively. While one is expected to read a novel from beginning to end, it is in fact written and rewritten in a fashion that means that the author have known the end when he wrote the beginning. While the novel is an image (perhaps *the* image) of how life progress through causality and cumulative experience it is in fact created as a whole by the author before we read it. The writers and organisers of a larp have much less control over how the things develop. Even the storyteller or game-master of a tabletop role-playing game has less control than the novelists: he may control the game-world and most if its inhabitants but not the player-characters themselves. In a larp, author-control range from nearly as much as that of a game-master to games in which control ends when the game starts. Turku style larping is an impossibility. Even when game-master control is introduced, the development of a chain of events in a larp remains a product of an interaction between the production team and the players. The larp as a material chain of events will thus be a product of the actions of a collective rather than of the imagination of a single author, much like reality.

### The World

Most larp theory assume that there are limits to larps. I agree. Luckily these limits are generally easy to understand as they are made very clear. Most larps have very explicit limits in both space and time: off-game areas are distinguished from in-game areas, as are the time in which the larp is going on and the time before and after (as well as in between, if one or all players interrupt the larp, something that is often done by leaving the game area and entering an off-zone). Ignoring these lines is generally frowned upon: in the larping community openly acting contrary to the larp within larp-space and larp-time is considered the worst of sins. This is among first things one has to understand as a larper, the very concept that makes larping possible.

The liminal space that lies within these borders is often called the *larp-area*. This area corresponds

to the game-world. Within its borders the player is supposed to interpret their impressions as a part of the game-world and the events in which they take part as parts of the larp narrative. Most larpers usually spend most of their larping time fighting the impulse to instead interpret events within the context and narrative of their own lives. In a fantasy larp (at least as I remember them from a time when larp was young), each player would do their best to pretend that kids painted in gray and black were orcs and that gray plastic sticks were swords and spears. The rules of what to imagine and when makes this effort easier, just as it become much more difficult if it is contradicted. Unfortunately, the rules themselves are contradictions to the narrative as they are not part of the game-world.

The borders of the larp-area are thus often more complex than one would expect at the first glance. This is true especially of two types of larp: (1) larps ruled by formal rules and close to tabletop role-playing (e.g. White Wolf's "Mind's Eye Theatre") and (2) artistic larps in which breaks are introduced to further the narrative. Both types may include breaks in which the larp stops in the whole or parts of the physical larp area. After the break, the larp begins either at the same or a different time and place in the game-world (continuing at a different time or place in the game-world may in fact be the reason for the break). This illustrates the flexibility with which an organiser can actually treat the game-world-larp-area relationship, provided that all participants agree on the changes that are introduced.

In spite of this, many larpers have become almost obsessed with creating perfect resemblance between the material world and game-world, creating for example hand made medieval armoury and clothing. It may however be argued that the most important part of the world that I meet during a larp is the other players, and that the part that I concentrate on is (hopefully) their words and actions. Acting skills have been discussed elsewhere. They are definitely useful

but I am in no way an expert and will leave writing about them to others. Like many other larpers I am however convinced that acting according to how my character interprets the world will (when moderated only slightly by respect for the other players and common sense) produce a style of acting that enforces immersion for the other players, i.e. helps them to interpret what they see as a part of the game-world rather than as a part of the "ordinary world".

If the purpose is to help the players uphold illusion, then the game-world has to be consistent. The most important parts of it is furthermore those that could help interpret the events that will actually appear are during the larp, especially those that could become important parts of the plot. This is *not* to say that events that takes place (in the game-world) before the events of the larp are irrelevant (as the *Dogma 99* argues that they should be). No one interprets the world without reference to previous events. How my character became who he is should be the important parts of the description, not the dates of his history, but the events that formed him, not how he acts, but how he thinks! This is the context in which he should interpret his world. Without it immersion becomes impossible.

### **The Player**

The most complex relationship between the material world and the game-world is arguably that between the character and the player. The character's body is by definition that of the player. The relationship between mind and body is one of the bigger questions in the history of philosophy. Luckily, we do not need to solve this question. The relationship between the character and the player's body is not only that of mind and body. The relationship between character and player is not that of two people in the same body. That would be multiple-personality disorder or possession. The difference between a player who is in-character and one who is out-of-character is instead a matter of how the player interprets reality – not outside the personality, but inside – I am

not another person when I larp. I am me. I may act – and sometimes think – differently but I remain me. The contrary opinion may however not be the result of a misconception of what larp is but instead of the misconception that the I is a constant entity. This is neither the time nor the place to discuss whether there is a constant essence to the human psyche. Regardless of ones opinion on that issue, one could however accept that identity is fleeting, that people change over time, and that we think a little bit differently in different situations. My characters have many of the same limits as I have: they are no smarter than I am; they have the same body et cetera. Some of these limits can be bridged via game mechanics and imagination, while others may not.

The character as a played person is a product of both the player's personality and that of the character as it was originally thought or written (with the intermediary of a spoken or written description if the character was invented by someone else than the player). This is why played characters continue to surprise their inventors. This may of course also be the case when a writer immerses in her work. Many writers have told of how characters of their fictional narratives do things that they had not expected. This is how interpretation by a real person makes a fictive character come alive. Fulfilling the Turkuist player's vow is thus not only impossible; it not only ignores that the character (as it is played) will to a large part be the player, it also ignores that the important thing is how the player experiences the larp, which is in turn as much the result of who the player is as of what the larp is. A book may have millions of readers and be read thousands of years after it was written. A larp-narrative is the product of all participants and organisers. A larp – like life – thus only happen once and the only ones to experience it directly are the players (Kim 2004).

The fictional narrative of the larp is furthermore an event in the player's life. It thus receives much of its meaning from the part it plays in the player's

life-narrative. Generally, it is not the other way around. As larp-narratives are unique to each player it is however possible to include events from the personal life-narrative of the player in the fictional narrative of the larp. As I understand it, the Swedish larp *Prosopopeia* ([www.prosopopeia.se](http://www.prosopopeia.se)) includes the entirety of the players' life as a prehistory of the character's body (which is however possessed by the ghost that is the actual character). It is likely that this would produce the effect of increased realism to the larp-narrative, as well as an increased sense of relevance to the players own life. My guess is however, that increased realism also increases the difficulty for the player to continue to interpret the world within the context of the game, an effort that is difficult already.

### **The Plot**

The narratives of different players in the same larp may diverge violently. Not only does each player experience different plots (as they face different events), they also interpret these within different horizons of interpretation and thus form different narratives. I remember when I tried to write something like a qualitative review of the Swedish larp *Knappnålshuvudet* based on my own experiences. This is far from a review of the larp itself; my character had very little to do with the narratives experienced by most of the other players. In this case, this may have been the experience of many or most players. *Knappnålshuvudet* aimed to abolish the "main plot" to instead concentrate on the many smaller plots that are often more central to player experience. A main plot is only relevant to the player as long as it makes his or her character more meaningful as a part of a larger narrative. One way of dealing with this is to reduce the main plot and instead focus on smaller plots closer to each participant.

Another way of dealing with the problem is to focus on the difference between plot and narrative (as described above). The character sees only certain

events. These are the events that make up the plot. Yet the player may have more information on the general plot and narrative than the character. Such information may make his or her own plot more meaningful as a part of a larger whole. The larp version of *Hamlet* is an excellent example of this. In this larp, the main plot – the play by Shakespeare – was already known to everyone. Like at *Knappnålshuvudet* the larp was composed of a number of sub-plots with the player characters as protagonists. As narratives, these were however designed to correspond to the main narrative so that they progressed more or less simultaneously towards their ultimate tragic end. The vast majority of the characters in fact died in the last act (my own character emptied a crystal glass of poison). This would have been parodic rather than tragic to an audience, and many in fact saw the comic side when they told the tale afterwards (the narrative as told by the player). Within the larp itself, the narrative as seen by the character was however (at least to me) given intense meaning as a part of a larger narrative, one that even happened to be among the greatest narratives of our culture.

The meaningfulness of the larp to the player thus depend the relationship between player, character and narrative. Many larp writers start with the narrative and produce the characters that the narrative would need, maybe in the false belief that the characteristics of the played characters and the narrative meaningfulness of their actions can be predicted. As I learned from *Knappnålshuvudet* – as I experienced it through the eyes of a character written by Karin Tidbeck – one solution is that the player and a writer create each character together,

while the writers develop the plot simultaneously. Only by creating a character that is meaningful to the player can the larp become meaningful. The reason for this is simple: the meaning of the larp is a product of the narrative that the player creates when experiencing the larp through the eyes of the character. Narratives in a larp are individual to each player. From the perspective of the organiser very little can be known of what a played character will be like without taking the player into account. The certain way to produce a meaningful narrative is thus to take the player into account, not only the character and the larp-world. This is unfortunately the most time-consuming way to do it, but then one should perhaps not consider it unfortunate that true art is created by effort rather than manufactured in a way that can be rationalised.

### **Change**

The leaking of character traits into the player personality is not unheard of. Neither should this phenomenon be unexpected from the perspective described above. The mistake made by Örnstedt and others is instead that of the Turku Manifesto: to believe in the character as a fixed entity, possibly even identical to a character description written by a game-master or other writer. This level of control is however impossible. Immersion is a change created by the player, even though organisers, writers, and fellow player may provide help. When it works larping is to experience the world somewhat differently from how one usually experiences it. As all experiences worth having, it may change how one will experience the world afterwards.

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