



# troels barkholt & jonas trier

## what was the story about: poetics for larp in practice

We have all been there; on that grass covered field among pitched tents, camp-fires and people in various costumes. But at times you start thinking about the whole situation. We know that a group of very determined people have worked hard, so that we can be here. We know that they have put a year or mores worth of effort and work into it. We know that at this very moment they are all running around to retain, what has been their darling child of mind for months. Their highest concern the past couple of weeks. The larp we are participating in.

But then, why isn't anything happening? Why is it that the majority of all large scale larps, insist on not having anything to do with what is actually going on? Why is it that a challenge of us – as players – on the matter of background and character personality always fails to appear? Why is the player's impression of the larp always left in the hands of coincidence or sheer luck, under the pretence of individual freedom of acts?

Publications of the latter years have shown quite a bit of theoretical conquest in the field of *what* role-playing is. However, in accordance with the particular guidelines of this publication, we will strive to comment on the practical sphere, though without

renouncing the possibility of saying something of general concern. Therefore we will not waste much time on differentiating between one term and another. We have chosen the term *story* for what, in Denmark at least, usually is known as plot (the diegetic events, the organizers have planned out), even though *narrative* probably would have been more accurate. We do so, because we believe that the notion of one singular story is exactly what we want of organizers.

We wish to establish a normative theory and take some of the fundamental presumptions and prejudice about role-playing up for revision. This is an attempt to establish guidelines for what one *should* do when organizing a larp.

Larp organizers cannot with certainty be said to be artists. That is a discussion we do not want to embark onto. It takes focus away from that which is our main concern: Organizers are storytellers. E.g. in many flyers and pamphlets and on numerous websites on role-playing it says that "*Insert random name here*", is a story about a king who is trying to maintain control of his country. But is that really it? The experience of the story derived from this is not at all an experience of having a story conveyed. Of having been told a

story. More over it feels rather like being placed in a *playpen* where, should we be so lucky, we get to witness a mere shred of the story.

To further examine this discussion we must first look a bit closer at that which defines a story.

### **The story**

In our definition, a random set of events have three unquestionable demands they must meet in order to be characterized as a story. First and foremost someone or something must act (in the sense of an action). No action, no story. Subsequently something must come of this act. Thus a story has a sequential or temporal dimension. And as the third and deciding criteria, something must be told (narrated). A sort of narrator has to be present.

And this is exactly where many larps fail. Being a narrator requires an overview of that which happened, that which is happening and that which is going to happen. Within a larp only the organizer is in a position where such a massive overview is attainable. In this context the organizer is understood as a single position, where as, in real life, the organizer position is often made up by several individuals. Throughout the article we will view the organizer position as a single entity.

Please note that the term *story*, in this context, is not to be understood under the strict rules of literary and dramaturgic theory. Hence it is not our task to create an analogy between the theatre director and the larp organizer, because the creator of a larp will always work from the basic assumption that players can and will react to elements in the story in whatever way pleases them. This article's main focus is on the organizer's intention of motivating and leading his or her players in a predestined direction.

On one hand an organizer is just that (someone who organizes), but on the other hand an organizer is also a conveyor of a story - a storyteller. In our view a larp

is constituted of every element a participant/player experiences from beginning to end. Therefore both off-game experiences such as tidying up the location as well as off-game thoughts, such as the double level of consciousness are included.

We believe that it is imperative that organizers also accept their role as storytellers or narrators of the larp. But a natural responsibility also comes with that accept. When an organizer accepts that it is his or her story to tell, a responsibility of carrying out the story successfully also arises. No storyteller – no story.

### **Playpens and frameworks**

We wish to come to terms with a tendency among Scandinavian larps. The particular notion that the organizer's field of operations is situated outside of the story. In other words, larps, where the organizer's only influence on the concrete unravelling of the event, is to create a frame. Somewhat provocatively we have chosen to call these specific events, *playpen-larps*, as the experience has often been compatible with that of being stuck in a *playpen* throughout the larp. Why is it that we see such a blatant lack of intervention and will, to adjust a story that these people have spent months preparing? Because it is not a story as such, a fact that brings us back to the core of our argument.

To meet the requirements we have stated, it is necessary that our whole perspective, of how to set up a larp, is changed. As organizers we must not settle for simply establishing the frame of the larp. We must actively partake in the management of the story and create – what we choose to call – the *framework*. *A basic structure where everything - all the elements of the story – are connected, so that the player participating in the larp may leave it with a sense of story-wise coherence.*

Naturally this raises the question of how a project of such profound impact is achieved. How can an entire larp be turned into a framework without falling back onto the theatrical aspect? To us the only apparent

solution is to make sure that all the elements of the framework (i.e. roles/characters, props etc.) are firmly based on a common denominator. The story must have a theme which is reflected in everything and to which everything refers.

Let us, for instance, look at a hypothetical case - a larp where the story is based on the theme of unrequited love. Now, should half of the parts written for this particular larp be centred on a notion of how the system of state is structured, they would largely avoid the actual theme at hand. The factor which is meant to be a guideline throughout the larp, our hypothetical unrequited love theme, would now disappear or even worse, become a sort of strange obstacle for the remaining unfolding of the larp. It would be a clash on the thematic level which, at best, is irrelevant. On the other hand, had the organizer of our hypothetical larp made sure that every role-player knew about the thematic guideline, the obstacle could have been circumvented. If the players were aware of what aspects of their roles they should emphasize according to the guideline, the organizer would have been able to create the thematic congruity which is the sole reason for there being a story in the first place.

To briefly sum up our point, we see a profound tendency towards creating larps from the *playpen* model. The organizer point out the frame (scene, setting and the particular 'world' etc.) and then leave the rest of the work, carrying out the story in a responsible way, to the players. In order to create a story the organizer must first accept his responsibility and then set up the *framework*. Thus creating larps, where all elements (*both* roles and settings) are rooted in a shared theme. Not to say that this, in any way is a new thought. It is one of the most profound notions of the more dominant storytelling genres, such as literature, theatre and film etc.

Why do we, as role-players, feel a need to opposition ourselves to the more established genres? Why can't

we be inspired, learn and perhaps even borrow from them instead?

To briefly return to the necessity of the theme, we do not only want the organizer to see the diegetic events as being an integral part of his field. We also want to challenge the ruling notion that a larp is to be viewed as a bi-polarized event. A story separated from its background – the outside aspects.

The most pressing example (at least in Denmark) is a large scaled larp centred on a city where the ruling power, for instance a king, does something. The story, from the organizer's point of view, is this *something* which takes place around the court. It is not a conversation between two peasants thirteen miles from the main castle. Instead the thematic guideline of the larp should be so profound that, regardless of whether or not the peasants are aware of what has happened, their actions are never the less determined by it. To speak in terms of our previous example, maybe the peasants have experienced the same type of unrequited love that the court and king have. A well thought out and well implemented theme can provide the guidelines for a larp, in spite of the complexity that arises when hundreds of players act simultaneously. This is the very fabric of the story.

From a narratologic point of view the *playpen*-larp strives to create an epic display. It tries to implement a superior, distanced perspective where the roles have different value in the story. Some roles (e.g. the king) have a superior view of the story and participate in it. The peasants, on the other hand, are thrown back and forth as mere pawns in a game of chess without ever having the possibility to see the whole perspective. They are mere background – upholders of a scene on which the actual *players* act out their larp.

That which we are trying to endorse is a scenic display where the internal conflicts and social relations of every role determine their path of action. We wish to establish an intimate, understanding and scenic

perspective. To remain within the boundaries of this metaphor: We would much rather play checkers.

The theme is made obvious to all players by being the firmament upon which all the elements are based. Also, it provides all players with a tool to navigate within the actions possible in the larp.

In our hypothetical example, the theme is unrequited love. If all players are aware that this is fundamental for their actions, they will know that they should rather fall in love with a married woman than with a willing virgin.

The theme can thus be viewed as a possibility – a tool - for the individual larp and its players to establish a principle upon which the framework is constructed and constituted. In many ways it is similar to the rules of a genre. If you're playing the private eye in a noir-story you will know that the dame in the red dress most likely is a *femme fatale*.

In the same way the organizer has a strict guideline and structure for the story, which should give him the possibility to judge, at every turn in the process of organizing the larp, if a given element is constructive or destructive to the game and its focus. In our personal experience of organizing a larp, a principle of keeping it simple, has proved valuable and effective. The story's theme should rather be simple and clear than complex and blurred.

### **Being or representing**

The quest for the authentic set design has been an almost canonized notion in recent years (at least within the Danish larp-community). The main logic behind this is an idea about keeping the level of abstraction and forced imagining at a low. In short, the less abstraction within the larp, the better the actual play will be. We feel that this is a faulty assumption. The notion of "*what you see is what you get*" is fundamentally wrong. We might as well make this point sooner or later: The perfect illusion is unattainable.

Often this is due to practical concerns. Swords are simulated with latex-weapons, in order to prevent deaths during battles, and building full-scale houses would be too much of a financial and time consuming activity – thus plywood is used. From time to time it is desirable to have a larp contain certain elements that, due to various reasons, are not something that should be imposed on the role-player as an experience with the larp as a concrete event. These are elements like drugs, sex and violence, and in order to incorporate these elements into the story, rules are, of course, a necessity. Finally - and perhaps most importantly - it is imperative to differentiate between *player* and *role*. The player is *not* the role. The player will most likely never become a knight. He or she is genetically ill disposed to be so and the often supernatural abilities cannot be accounted for either. Far more important though, is the fact that a player, regardless of role, does not create a new personality for him- or herself. The player experiences the larp and the event as a whole. In our definition the player represents that structural element of the story which is his or her role. In other words, the player is the flash of lightning which sparks Frankenstein's monster – in our case the story – to life.

The player is someone who pays to take part in the larp. In the dullest of senses, he or she is a customer, who, in exchange for money, expects admittance to the event. The player is the only real audience the story has. The role on the other hand, is part of the diegesis – one of many structural elements in the framework created by the organizer. From our point of view the role does not separate itself from any of the other elements that constitute the framework. Thus the role is not par excellence any more important than the set design. Should a story – God forbid – be centred on the quest for a magical sword, we should be able to agree upon the relationship of equal importance between the actual sword and the peasant boy who learns about its existence.

The idea here is that we have to be able to fully differentiate between player and role – both in theory as well as practice. The player is of most importance, seeing as it is his or her experience with the entire event that really matters. The role is just a place in the diegesis where the experience is conceived.

What we, in reality, are trying to question is a very common prejudice that focuses on the experience of the role as the most important aspect of larping. As it was in the case of “*what you see is what you get*”, so is it here - a faulty assumption. The most important aspect of larping is, in fact, the player’s experience of the larp. Thus the simulation of living in e.g. the Middle Ages or in a distant future is not of importance. The overall experience, however, is. It is what shapes the story. The conversation between a village merchant and a black-cloaked stranger is in reality quite dull. But because the player representing the merchant-character is aware on his double level of consciousness that the stranger is in fact a rogue assassin, the seemingly innocent contents of the conversation are suddenly filled with new meaning. The player, being conscious of his role’s separate and limited supply of information, experiences a tragic story where a merchant stands on the brink of death facing an unstable killer, whereas the character, on his level of consciousness only experiences another day in the line of being a merchant.

In much the same manner the set design also represents structural elements of the story – e.g. locations and objects of physical character. From our point of view it does not matter whether you - as in the Danish film *Dogville* - draw chalk lines on the floor to represent buildings, or build them in plywood and stone. They represent the same thing in the diegesis. But why settle with doing so? Why is the set-design only considered a background for the story? Why can’t we let the set design help shape the story? After all it is one of the largest resources in shaping a setting the organizer has available to him or her.

Elements of meaning in the outskirts of the diegesis  
The blacksmith’s son is teary eyed. From his hideout at the brink of the woods he can see clear through the windows of the forest magistrate’s house, and observe the love of his life – the forest magistrate’s daughter – embarking on her wedding night. They both know that their love will never be, and it is only a question of time before her newly wed husband discovers that she, in fact, is not a virgin. The blacksmith’s son is doomed. On the windowsill a bouquet of dried roses sway gently in the evening breeze. The blacksmith’s son is filled with grief and sorrow. Meanwhile, the player acting out the role of the blacksmith’s son is filled with thoughts of death, decay and lost innocence.

The above mentioned example is banal. But if we follow through on our quest to rid the world of larp from the “*what you see is what you get*”-mentality, we will find a changed perspective on the meaningful elements in the larp. We will find a passage for the integration of symbolism. Of course several larp events has tried to incorporate this aspect into their campaigns, but on a larger scale it is a narratologic and aesthetic tool that has not reached its full potential.

Symbolism is easily confused with the practice of allegories. The allegory is the classical image where something portrayed means something else. Thus the lion is Christ, and the sun is life etc. The symbol however, is characterized by the transaction that occurs between image and interpreter. It is a process in which the two elements that constitute the meaning – what is shown and what is meant – constantly exchange positions. To put it plainly, the interpreter reflects on the image and the image reflects on the interpreter<sup>1</sup>.

In practical usage the allegory is suited to draw conclusions in the larp, whereas the symbol is better suited to create atmosphere. The symbol is constantly saying *something* of what is about to happen and is thus in a constant connection with the larp’s theme.

Within the world of larp, the allegory is what the symbol used to be.

From a structural point of view the symbol is placed somewhere in the outskirts between the inter- and the extra-diegetic. It does not belong here or there but is rather a forger of the two main elements of the event – the story and the larp. It is an element in the framework not concerned with meaning anything to either the player or the role, but rather to reach into both worlds.

As previously stated the ‘dried rose’-example is banal, because the player’s ability of adapting to the world isn’t challenged properly, as the roses would tend to drift away as a mere prop. But to the keen eye it still has potential of greater meaning.

In the other end of the symbol-spectrum we find elements that are quite capable of parting ways entirely with the homogenous set design. But still they serve the purpose of commenting on theme, story and framework. Imagine for instance a medieval larp. Now, on your way to church in our hypothetical world you encounter a great, big neon sign that reads “*Have Faith!*” in purple letters. Obviously the reaction we are hoping for here isn’t a large group of peasants talking about ‘*A big shiny sign*’. It is an element of set design which is supposed to create atmosphere and state a point.

The use of symbols can make even the most hardened organizer tremble with fear of having his precious larp ruined by players. Players, who have not been informed that all visible elements are visible in the diegesis.

A way to get around this problem is often a question of supplying a sufficient amount of information about the larp to the players. Things like pamphlets and oral instructions that point to the fact that “*what you see isn’t what you get*”. Another alternative would be to supply all the interdiegetic elements with a special icon (perhaps the particular logo etc.<sup>2</sup>).

Another possibility is to avoid the use of symbols within the story all together. Props can be used effectively, even though they are not considered symbols anymore. A good example for such a procedure would be to, for instance, play the theme-melody from a Tim Burton film in the bus en route to the location of a surreal horror larp. From our viewpoint it is a good idea to constantly, yet discretely, use elements that subtly point towards the theme of the larp. This however, must be done without ever turning into explicit attempts. It is our hope that the schism between event and story can be laid to rest, so a more direct influence on the experience of the player is made possible. All this is to prevent that all the information about the story has to go through the role, because roles often have a tendency to filter out much of the original information, and thereby the possibility of incorporating symbols.

### **The Final Question/The Big Fat Kill**

All of the above mentioned leads us towards establishing definitions of how to regard larping, and in turn how this affects the combination of both event and story. We do not necessarily mean that our focus on the narrative element is the only correct way to regard larping. It is our hope though that this focus can help resolve issues on how to grasp and understand the medium, and maybe become an important factor or catalyst in the future shaping of larp events.

To briefly sum up our point, we feel that it is important to differentiate between the actual event and the story within it. Both are elements in, what up until recently has been called the larp scenario. The event is in the field of the participants. This is where the plywood houses, the rubber-swords and festival-styled toilets are located. The story, on the other hand, is where we find all the structural elements such as roles, the town or spaceship in which the story takes place. These are the inward looking faces of the elements in the diegesis.

A second important point is the fact that all things are equally important structural elements within the story. Hence all elements must be granted an equal amount of time and effort from the organizer or the storyteller. No one role is but background and no plywood house can be placed arbitrarily. Everything – all the elements – is a part of the story. The theme-based plot does not focus its energy any more on the prince than on the peasant. They are equally relevant and defining for all roles. On the other hand we welcome differentiation between information passed on to the player and information passed on to the role. The player is a participant, where as the role is the position from which the player supplies Frankenstein's monster – the story – with a vital flash of lightning.

We recognize the fact that some might find our argumentation unfavourable to the player's own initiative. This however, is not what is it implied. The entire article is conceived from an organizer's point of view, so naturally we have disregarded the players' input to the story. This input is not something one can account for or even take into consideration when planning out the story. Therefore one must totally disregard this aspect, because players will always have a will and mind of their own.

Furthermore we do not deny that *playpen*-larps with all their player-autonomy and improvised intrigue, can be great fun. However they rarely challenge the players' views and opinions, they are questionable as mediums and perhaps most importantly – they are not stories.

All that is left to do is to appeal to you, the organizer, and have faith that in the future you will devise your larp's based on one single question: *"When my players leave my larp after having participated in something they've spent months preparing for, will they then be able to answer this very simple question: What was the story about?"*.

### Notes

- 1 The difference between symbol and allegory is still an issue of much debate within art and literary studies. The definition that we lean against is the one made popular by J.W. Goethe which to our perspective is the most suitable.
- 2 This method of approach was among other places used in the Danish, political larp *System Danmarc* (Opus, September 2005), where janitors responsible for technical equipment, electricity etc. took care of their tasks both in-game and off-game, wearing a specially designed logo.