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my name is jimbo the orc

Kicking back some beers at the beach one late summer evening a few years back one of my friends wanted to introduce me to a suave looking fellow that had just joined our small camp-fire, complete with cooled drinks and Dylan guitar playing. I wasn't really in my chatty corner, just trying to squeeze the last drops of leisure out of my vacation, but my friend insisted. 'He is really a nice guy' he said. 'And a role-player, too'. That settled it. I had to go talk to the guy. It is an almost sacred rule amongst role-players that we have to maintain some sort of secret connection or common identity by always gathering in small crowds, no matter the situation. I went over to him and introduced myself. I'd been told he'd just returned from a big German larp that I'd wanted to go to myself, so I could at least ask him what I'd missed out on. Besides, he looked like a nice fellow. Blond hair and a smile. Clean, nice shirt. One of those blokes that can walk into a bar anywhere in the world and get that crucial first-glance acceptance by the regulars.

'Hi' I said, adding my name and referring to our mutual friend.

'Hi' he returned, so far still in the green-zone of my social barometer 'My name is Jimbo the orc'. 'What the fuck!', I thought, restraining all my face muscles to keep it secret from him that he'd just redefined my concept of 'bad first impressions'. But I was stuck

there. Moving away from someone at a camp-fire cannot go unnoticed. Everyone will know that you got bored out or disliked whoever sat next to you and that is, per strange definition, a rude manoeuvre – no matter the behaviour of your company. So once you slap down you have to wait until you have to either piss, get a new drink or – if you are lucky – the smoke from the fire is trying to kill you. And that was at least 5 more minutes, so I decided to politely ignore his first remark and ask him about the German larp that I knew he'd been to. Bad move altogether.

He started jabbering about how he'd played this orc-character named Jimbo who had this really cool special cleave-move that the gamemasters had bestowed specifically on him because his latex-axe was the coolest one they'd ever seen and how he'd been all tangled up in these family intrigues in his orc group and how they'd totally wrecked the entire scenario by suicide charging the kings convoy on Saturday, because they were bored and hung over from drinking ouzo in their camp the night before with some really cute Goth-chick dark elves. Now I've been a role-player for almost twenty years, so I have highly acute survival tactics for these geek-sieges, but this guy was totally over the edge. And he even had on such a nice shirt. I tried vainly to ask him what the whole scenario had been about. How they

had conducted the gameflow. How the characters had been written. How the city had been built. How the story had unfolded. What the mechanisms of the society was like. How the scenario had worked for the players. But all I ever got out of Jimbo was how his experience as the orc with great cleave had been. How his game had flowed. Why he had gone there. How his interaction was with his co-orcs. How his character was written and so on and so on. It still puzzles me how 4 pages of character can amount to nothing more but ‘Wow, what a cool axe. We are giving you GREAT CLEAVE, which is a +5 dam modifier’ which apparently was what Jimbo had picked up. Oh, and that he was an orc.

No matter what and how I tried, all Jimbo could talk about was his own, subjective angle to the larp. How it had been for *him*. Hard pressed he told me that it had taken place in Germany near Hamburg, been for around 500 people and that the setting had cost around 200.000 euro to build. This still left me with a feeling that I’d never really heard anything about the scenario in and of itself. I had no feel of it. Nothing to discuss with him about it. He had talked, and talked, and talked and not once had he said anything that allowed me to respond in any meaningful manner – apart from asking more “How was that, then”-questions.

Saved by a full bladder I excused myself and got up, carefully not settling down next to Jimbo as I returned relieved from the dark. But the problem still kept puzzling me. When had I in fact, ever, heard a decent description of any larp, by any person, that allowed me to get a solid grasp on what had gone down, what the larp had been about and if I regretted not going there myself? Had I ever gotten such a description? It seemed to me not. Now some of my friends are professional writers, communicators and storytellers but even they have always digressed into the same dichotomy as Jimbo: either tell about hard, overarching facts about the scenario or dig deep into your own experience of play.

There have been plenty of attempts to define and describe role-playing on numerous theoretical levels. The activity of acting under the common assumption that you are someone else and interact with others that do the same is well described. This goes for several levels of play, ranging from what it means in a semiotic or dramaturgical sense to ‘play a role’ and what is happening on a social level when groups of role-players interact in larger plays. But all these theories aim at a description of role-playing as a type of action, and never the single larp as an actual event. Saying about the aforementioned German larp that it was ‘a large group of people acting under a mutual, wordless assumption that they were all someone else, interacting in a large, constructed, social meta-structure, following a pre-generated narration in accordance with their pretended selves’ gives me (nearly) absolutely no information about that specific larp. It gives me a lot of information about the type or nature of the activity that was going on, but – knowing that already – I’m left with no clue as to the actual feel, structure and story of the larp. How well it was played out. If there was an idea or a story, how it came across on a general, non-personal level.

We can easily make all such claims and analyses when we watch plays, go to the movies or read a book. We can criticize plot and structure, execution, language, length, story, narrational economy etc. But why can’t we do this when it comes to larps? Why can’t we, condensed in a single concept, make a literary analysis of a larp?

Well, the answer lies head on: because the larp is seen as a largely non-intentional happening. There are characters, background information, NPC contributors and all that, but at the end of the day anyone agrees that the main contribution to any particular larp comes from the players themselves. No matter how rail-roaded or tightly knit a plot is, the main content itself – the actual role-playing – is something that is brought to the larp by the players in their role of individual subjects. It is always *me* that is playing a

specific role, and whatever is happening, I will always see *my* role-playing as largely attributable to myself. It is a personal experience that I create myself, strengthened and supported by my surroundings, who are in turn also creating an experience for themselves.

How could we talk about *the* Plot or *the* Structure of an actual larp, when we all know that these concepts only exist, in their capital sense, as something actualized by the subjective actions of several players on some open plot and structure laid out by the producers? How can we talk about Execution of the idea or story of a larp, when we all know that these things are not meant to happen in a strictly specific way, like in a book or a movie, actualized by the players as they see fit. Indeed, how can we even talk about Story with a capital 'S' in a larp, without using it as either a mere synonym for 'plot-outline' or as a term that bundles up the individual stories of the players, generated in interaction with the plot-outline.

And this is why Jimbo keeps jabbering on about his experience at the German larp. Because the main content of the experience – the story – was something that he brought with him himself in his interaction with the setting provided by the producers of the larp. Hardly pressed, he tells me his impression of this production as well, but it doesn't lie at the heart of his experience.

So what are we left with here? Does larp evade any literary analysis that tries to look at large perspectives, but not focus on the pre-made material, the actual, physical circumstances or the plot-outline? Can we not talk about *the* Story of a larp? Because if we can't talk about the story we have no hope of invoking any kind of literary analysis, complete with talks about structure, execution and economy.

It seems that the very heart of the matter, the individual story, prohibits any such literary or general

analysis. But why is that really an obstacle? Just because we immediately recognize the personal experience of story as that intrinsic to role-playing in general, we are not as a result prohibited from drawing out a story-whole for us to talk about. We can't, however, hope to find this 'story-whole' by simply adding up all the smaller personal stories. We have to change perspective altogether and look beyond the subjective approach that is so inherent in role-playing, but so alien to literary analysis.

To find the larger story in a larp, we have to look at it and pretend that everything that happens is in some way intentionally composed and made by the producer(s). When Jimbo and his band of orcs attacks the king's convoy, we have to see it as *not* a group of individual players acting out their roles as they see fit, but as a narrative manoeuvre, well planned, orchestrated and set in motion by the author. They were *meant* to attack the convoy. And the kings' knights were *meant* to loose the battle in the way they did. Everything that happens in a scenario should be seen as coming from a united source of intentionality. Then, and only then, do we have access to a story that contains the whole larp, and not just a single character.

But isn't this cheating? Isn't this taking the role-playing out of the analysis of the larp? The very personal experience that constitutes it as what it is? Sure it is. Or rather, it is a way for us to ask questions of the larp that we otherwise could not. We forcedly see the larp as a single 'story-whole' and as a consequence can treat it momentarily as such while we try to interpret and explain what was happening.

On another level, this isn't cheating at all. In a way it is, in fact, a method of loyalty towards the main aspect of role-playing, namely story. If we do not perceive the larp as a 'story-whole' we are forced to talk about it in meta terms, explaining how the producers made characters, plot-outlines, setting etc., and how the players interacted into this pre-made

frame. This is telling the story of the larp as a ‘the-making-of-story, not as the story in the larp itself.

To do that we need to invoke this story by allowing ourselves to see story features in the happenings that took place. Story features simply means that we allow ourselves to interpret and explain A in terms of B (i.e. the band of orcs attacked the king so that he couldn’t return to find his queen in bed with her lover). Something happened because this allowed for something else to happen (or not happen), not because Jimbo thought it would be cool to do it so that he could get killed and go to the off-game zone and smoke cigarettes and eat junk-food.

Let us call this method the method of story attribution, since it attributes a single story to a large amount of events.

If we use this tool of story attribution we can start analyzing larps in a new way. We can talk about how well we thought the individual groups and people fitted together. How the events played out to form an interesting, overarching whole. How much time and activity that went into doing things that maybe didn’t improve so much on the larp as a whole.

Of course the method of story attribution is not any sort of an exact science. It is devoid of any kind of truth. It is simply a tool which we can use to compare and order different events and types of events in a larp. Also it can be quite fun.

Taking the German larp as an example it is possible to interpret it as a mainly Marxist story, where the rise of the orcs are perceived as a symbolical commentary to the rise of the working class against a ruling aristocracy (i.e. they attacked the kings convoy). They seize the means of production (looted the corpses) and society as we knew it broke down. A criticism to this analysis could be to point out that no Marxist society was established in the course of this ‘revolution’,

which must mean that the story is in reality a criticism of revolutionary tendencies, showing that they lead only to instability and anarchy.

Another interpretation of the German larp could be to see it as a clear tribute to the legacy of classical writers such as Lucan (or Aesop or Homer). The very setup made a confrontation inevitable and tragedy ensued, showing how the brutish nature of Man (the orcs) will always seek to destroy the nobility of our spirits (the king), resulting in chaos and instability and internal conflict (the ensuing civil war is seen as a symbol of inner, human conflict), that can only, possibly, be salvaged by true love (when the widowed queen marries her lover at the final day of the larp).

Another interpretation could be to see the scenario as a mainly absurd genre critique. The setting and props themselves seemed on a superficial level to invite us to believe that we were dealing with some sort of medieval scene with a few fantastic elements, but everywhere you saw the ‘actors’ and the material components trying to disrupt and break down this illusion. The ‘actors’ sometimes referred to current events like 9/11 and even spoke of themselves as actors (and some of them wore wristwatches) – and we haven’t even begun to speak about the clear Von Trier/Dogville tribute in the use of common rope to symbolise walls! This is clearly a commentary to the multiple layers of fiction that we, as human beings, involve ourselves in at an everyday basis, living our lives as they weren’t absurd! Wonderfully sharp observation!

It is hopefully clear from the above examples how story attribution can both be fun and challenging and how it can provide us with a way to compare and order different events in a larp into coherent, meaningful stories. Below you will find a suggestion as to how you in praxis can use this method to evaluate a larp.

SYMPOSIUM**– A GAME OF STORY ATTRIBUTION**

The game consists of 3 simple rules and 7 easy steps.

3 Simple Rules

- 1 The larp is always referred to as ‘The Piece’ or some similar wording that in and of itself stresses that we are now seeing the larp as a single story-whole where everything is planned and intended. Accordingly the producers of the larp are referred to as ‘The Author’, ‘The Larpwright’ or ‘The Director’.
- 2 As a speaker of the table you must under no circumstances refer to your own experience as a player in the larp. You must act as if you were present as audience only, not as a participant. If you want to refer to something that your role did, simply say something like “I think everybody is missing the shift that happened in the scene where Jimbo goads his fellow ores into attacking the convoy”. Remember, however, always to have the focus of creating a story-whole.
- 3 It is encouraged for the speakers of the table to take on different roles or styles of story attribution. In this way the game becomes a mini-larp in itself. You can be the socialist critic, the hip fashion-magazine reporter, the art nouveau literate, the layman, etc. Act and attribute accordingly.

7 Simple Steps

- 1 Place yourselves around a table or in a similar comfortable situation. It is recommended to be no more than 8 people and no less than 4, at least if this is your first game.
- 2 Appoint a host of the symposium. The host stewards who gets to talk when and how much and makes sure that nobody gets lost in their interpretation.
- 3 The host gives a presentation of all the speakers present. He tells from where in The Piece they were situated as audience and, if you invoked rule #3 above, what critical inclination the speaker has.

- 4 The host now gives a swift presentation of the brute facts of The Piece. What happened when, how much and for how long. Be as specific and to the point as you can be, so you don’t accidentally push the interpretations in a certain direction. Think of yourself as a serious news speaker or as a stiff, British clerk giving a debriefing.
- 5 On request from the host, the first speaker presents his interpretation of the meaning and story of The Piece. The host asks the table to comment on the interpretation, ask questions and discuss it. He makes sure that not too much times goes with this discussion by inviting the next speaker (the hardest critic of the current speaker for example) to give his interpretation.
- 6 When all speakers have presented their interpretation of The Piece the discussion is open for general criticism and evaluation such as The Authors ability to get his points across, the narrational economy, the quality of the set, the actors, the morale of The Piece etc.
- 7 Let all hell loose, get drinks and talk about the scenario in any way you like: personal anecdotes, kudos to brilliant or funny performances or situations, slap backs and enjoy yourselves like you use to.

Have fun.¹

Notes

- 1 The idea of story attribution in terms of regarding a larp as an intentional whole was conceived in a discussion with Malik Hyltoft, the co-headmaster of the RPG-inspired Østerskov Efterskole, during a lecture he gave on the possibility of creating a typology for describing larps in the fall of 2006. Without him, as with so many other things in Danish role-playing, this couldn’t have been.