

Play to Lift, not Just to Lose

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André-Jean-Jacques Deshayes as Achilles (being lifted) and James Harvey d'Egville as Mentor (lifter). Painting by Antoine Cardon, 1804.

Abstract

If we can trust that other players will Lift us to wins, we can focus on Playing to Lose. This article argues that the two techniques – Play to Lift, Play to Lose – are often most effective when used in tandem.

Introduction

One of the best-known larp techniques (and/or buzzwords) to come out of the Nordic Scene is “Play to Lose”. It has been met with both enthusiastic welcome and wary scepticism in other larp communities – in the latter case, larpers often question how you would get dramatic potential from everyone just trying to make their characters as miserable as possible.

I find that in order to explain how this technique is effectively used in practice, it is very helpful to mention another technique, which I have named “Play to Lift”.

Play to Lose

First off – what is “Play to Lose”? This is the definition from the Nordic Larp Wiki¹:

“Playing to lose is a technique or concept used by a player to create better drama by not trying to win, letting their character lose. It is used in a collaborative play style rather than a competitive play style”

A very similar definition can be found in Willer Piironen & Thurøe (2014, pp 35–36):

“ “When a player plays to lose she actively sets her character up to fail. (...). This strategy is used by many Nordic players to create interesting conflicts and personal drama in games. The concept is often used in opposition to a gameist player strategy where the player treats the larp as a contest that can be won through the character’s achievements, often at the expense of emotional depth in the story.”

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1. Nordic Larp Wiki: Playing to Lose. Accessed 18 November 2017. https://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Playing_to_Lose

2. For a definition of “gameist”, see (Bøckman 2003).

“Play to lose” is thus when your main focus as a player is to create better drama. Your character is always ‘playing to win’ as the character understands a win: e.g. they don’t want their horrible secret to come to light, they don’t want to be drafted into the army, they don’t want to be discovered underneath their lover’s bed. By playing to lose you, the player, look for good chances to let your character lose, in a way that creates better drama. So you forget your character’s diary on the porch, you get drunk and stumble into the drafting party, you make a sound so that your lover’s wife notices that you are hiding under the bed.

Play to Lift

In practice in Nordic Larps, however, I find that a lot of the great play that seems to be generated by Play to Lose is often in fact a product of when Play to Lose is coupled with “Play to Lift”. Play to Lift means that the responsibility for your drama and your character also rests on all your co-players. You have to lift each other. You don’t, off game, have to worry about delivering the best speech ever just because everyone knows that your character is the best orator in the country. The reason that you don’t need to worry is because the other players will lift your character up, and applaud loudly – they will give you a win. An alternative name to Play to Lift might actually be: “Play to Let Others Win”.

Why is this so effective? Well, it is much easier for a particular individual to lose than to win. And it is much easier for me to give you a win (I happen to spill my secret in the middle of our heated argument) than for you to carve out a win (You must out-of-game-cleverly manipulate me into spilling my secret). The drama that we both want rests on the secret coming out, however – and the easiest way for us to ensure that to happen, is for me to lift you. So trust that the other players will lift you to wins, and you can focus on losing.

Note that the win we are talking about is a win for the player, not for the character. It may very well be that I recognize that you clearly want your tragic character to fail horribly at the public speech she is giving. Well, then the way I would Play to Lift you is to throw a (verbal) rotten tomato at you and boo your character off the stage.

Do not people sometimes read each other wrong, when it comes to what they want? Certainly. Just as in a dance, you can sometimes step on your partner’s toe or twirl him when he was really expecting something else. Just as in a dance, you get better at it with practice.

The Principle of Shared Responsibility for Co-Creation

Another worry that I have often encountered in non-Nordic larp communities is that these kinds of techniques will make larps boring. If people's horrible secrets are discovered, they'll just be forced to sit, shunned, in the corner and no one will want to talk to them.

It is true that both Play to Lift and Play to Lose need something else to work effectively. They are both fed by a social contract to co-create the best narrative. To make co-creation of drama and experience a shared responsibility. Sometimes Play to Lift and Play to Lose work seamlessly when two players click and just get each other's needs – but often a bit of off game discussion doesn't go amiss to compare notes on what kind of drama is wanted.

Now, if you are sitting shunned and shamed and friendless in a corner, another player will be along to pull you into other, new drama – because they have to. Because that is what being a competent larper means according to this social contract – you take shared responsibility for the entire drama. Not everywhere all the time – but when you can.

Acknowledgements

A special thank-you to Charles Bo Nielsen for hunting down Play to Lose references and Mo Holkar for superb content and editing advice.

References

Bøckman, Petter. (2003) The Three Way Model: Revision of the Threefold Model. In Gade, Thorup, Sander. When Larp Grows Up – Theory and Methods in Larp. Pp 12-16. <https://nordiclarp.org/w/images/c/c2/2003-As.Larp.Grows.Up.pdf>

Willer Piironen & Kristoffer Thurøe. 2014. An Introduction to the Nordic Player Culture. In Saitta, Holm-Andersen & Back: The Foundation Stone of Nordic Larp, pp 33-36. https://nordiclarp.org/w/images/8/80/2014_The_Foundation_Stone_of_Nordic_Larp.pdf