

The Narrative Experience

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Abstract

The narrative experience is defined as a practical approach to larp design focused on narrativism. Through study of narrative inclined players and the toolbox of narrative concepts that are applied in contemporary larp design and larp culture the article attempts to create groundwork for the design of narrative focused larps; including a suggested redefinition of NPCs and suggested structures of larps that include a narrative experience.

Introduction

As larpers, we are world-class in making character immersion experiences. We have mastered it through years of larp making, and can apply this skill in many settings and with many different themes and end results. We can design experiences for bleed or even make them transformative.

Yet despite such experiences, there are other types of experiences with which we are not as proficient. In fact, one in particular I'm thinking of, I choose to call the *narrative experience*.

The narrative experience has roots in “narrativism,” or the disposition that rules and play should serve to tell *narratives* above all other goals. It comes from Ron Edwards' (1999) reformulation of the “drama” component of the popular “Threefold Model” — Game, Drama, and Simulation — but narrativism and dramatism has been redefined, blurred, confused, and misunderstood many times since, such that today narrativism and dramatism is commonly not understood to mean the same thing. What separates them is difficult to define; I give a suggestion later on. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that a player perspective, play style or player goal exists called “narrativism,” and it

182 Shuffling the Deck

is one of possibly many such perspectives in the complex field of preferences and motivations for play theorized by many, such as Robin D. Laws' (2002) theory for pen-and-paper roleplay or Nick Yee's (2005) work on motivations in MMORPGs.

In the Nordic larp community, and to my knowledge in the larp world in general, we have yet to discover good ways to make full-scale larps, not freeform or chamber larps, focused on a narrative experience. Sure, there have been larps with narrativist ideas, and some went well, but generally I see full-scale larps struggling with their narrative aspects, and the community has not learned much to confront this fact. Personal observations by Juhana Pettersson (2017) and my own experiences tell me that we do not have a coherent understanding of narrativism, mostly due to getting lost in semantics of Edwards' (1999) formulation or the Nordic interpretation The Three Way Model (Bøckman, 2003). There are many diverging views and preferences, and I doubt I completely understand all of them.

Instead of focusing on narrativism in the abstract, I take a more hands-on approach to the narrative experience. In this article, I will talk *about narratively inclined players* and *what they tend to do* when they larp, recount some tools and methods with narrativistic leanings, then discuss a possible narrativistic redefinition of NPCs. Finally, I offer ideas for the structures of narrative larps as a foundation for further work.

The narrative experience in larp design I loosely define as: “the object of the larp is for players to focus on the story (or stories) of the larp, and one's character (or characters) are merely a tool to play out these stories”. This should be seen as contrary to the character immersion experience, loosely defined as; “the object of the larp is for you to immerse yourself into a character, the actions you take during the larp should be rooted in character motivation and coherence”. These two experiences are not necessarily opposites. Definitions here stress the difference between the experiences; they are not meant to establish a false dichotomy.

My overall hope is that we as larp players and designers may become more skilled and versatile to play larps with any kind of mix between immersive and narrative experiences, and that we are more conscious about the choices we make in design and play style. At the same time, I want to expand our capabilities with new experiences within the narrative domain, as it is my notion there is a lot more to be gained there.

Narratively Inclined Players

Some larpers prefer to play with focus on stories and narratives and less focus on character feelings, motives or coherence. We all have our own preferences as to what we want from a larp, and there are definitely those for whom stories is the most important thing.

Preference and skill usually go together, also in larp, so narratively inclined players are quite often adept story handlers, who like nothing better than when a good story comes together. When these players participate in larps, they most often get their greatest kick when they are able to steer their character's story or the story of other characters. Narrative steering is explained later.

To learn about the narrative experience, it makes sense to look at what narratively inclined players do when they play. In my experience, there are two types of narratively inclined players; those that like *to create a good story centered on their own character*, and those that like *to manipulate the stories and characters of others*. The first type is usually a master of drama and of setting the scene, while the second type is usually a master of intrigue and timely remarks. Both will have very good feel for the flow of play and "playing ball," explained later.

These are skills that have high status in most larping circles. Thus, you will usually see that narratively inclined players are regarded as skillful roleplayers in their local communities, which is ironic since narratively inclined players will often work to create stories and drama, even if it is not in their character's personality to do so. In fact, they may find themselves breaking character coherence several times during a larp in order to advance stories, which, for many players that are more inclined towards character immersion, would otherwise be absolutely taboo.

On the other hand, when narratively inclined players steer to advance stories in a larp, they do not go completely haywire. Even if they break character coherence, there are other things keeping them in check; some sort of narrative coherence or the instinctive feeling of a good story: This, to me, is what separates narrativism from dramatism.

Narrative concepts

Despite my earlier claim that we as a community haven't experimented much with narrative experiences, we nevertheless have a long list of concepts with a possible narrativistic interpretation.

184 Shuffling the Deck

“Playing to lose”

“Playing to lose” is where a player increases drama though actively trying to have their character come out worse off following each engagement. It is employed in many Nordic larps so often that many players culturally assume it by default.

“Playing to lose” can be interpreted as an anti-gamism or anti-powerplay rule to avoid players attempting to use the larp for character empowerment. More interestingly, however, it incorporates the sentiment that tragedies and stories about a fall from greatness are better stories, and this rule is in place to promote those stories by encouraging players to make sure they do not succeed in their characters’ goals without at least a dire cost.

Steering

Steering is simply the act of influencing your character’s actions for reasons that are extra-diegetic (Montola, Stenros, Saitta, 2015). As such, steering is itself not narrativistic, however in many cases these extra-diegetic reasons are. Whenever a player steers her character’s action with the aim to create a certain scene or promote a certain plot line, it is narrativism at work.

“Playing ball”

To “play ball” is a common expression for the concept of answering play with play; to see opportunities in the larp, to recognize plot points, or to register another player’s initiative and choosing to act upon it. A splendid article is written about this concept by Josefin Westborg and Carl Nordblom (2017).

To “play ball” is a skill that can be practiced and mastered, and it is useful for roleplayers of all preferences. In a narrativistic interpretation, it is a skill that enables a roleplayer to see story points and choose how to best act on them in order to further the stories of larp. It is an essential skill for the narratively inclined player.

Telegraphing

The act of telegraphing is to communicate intent without specifically expressing it. In sports and other places telegraphing is typically unintentional and many times viewed as a bad thing, as it enables your opponent to read you. In larp, it is a good thing and can be used intentionally.

Telegraphing in roleplay is the use of winks, intonation of words, and general body language to intentionally meta-communicate to your co-players. Note that this diverges from the technique of telegraphing as used in jeepform (Wrigstad, 2008).

Telegraphing is typically used to communicate intentions and desires for the outcome of an interaction. Not all of these intentions are related to the plots of a larp, but a great deal may be. For instance, it may be used to communicate about the intended outcome of a scene. When used proficiently, it is a very useful tool for a larper.

Play distribution

Play distribution comes from the idea that play is a resource in larps that we create with our actions and share among each other, but this resource tends to gravitate towards the high-status characters of the larp, who are then supposed to make sure that it is distributed back to the characters of lower status, hopefully with some manner of fairness so that everybody gets a piece.

This task of distributing play can be quite demanding to the point of being labor (Jones et.al., 2016), and usually the players that take it on will have their hands full the whole larp, leaving them with less time to pursue their desired larp experience. I would not consider play distribution specifically a narrative task, but it is interesting to note that it involves a great deal of steering and possibly narrative consideration as to how play should be distributed. Thus, the task of play distribution may easily quell the possibility of a good character immersion experience, but not the possibility a narrative experience.

Foreshadowing

Premonitions, forewarnings, or foreshadowing are gamemaster tools to hint at a future event within the confines of the fiction, so that the players react appropriately when the event does or does not come about. A classic example would be sending a messenger telling that the orcs are on the move some hours before the fantasy village is attacked, thus giving players time to discuss defense strategies and prepare for the fight.

Especially in the case when a gamemaster wants to make some kind of plot twist, it is in most larping cultures plain good style to foreshadow it; otherwise, the players may very likely react negatively to it. Cases of players feeling

186 Shuffling the Deck

wronged by an unsuspected plot twist are too many to count. The feeling of surprise is rarely positive, without the chance to have seen it coming.

Foreshadowing can be made with varying degrees of bluntness, depending on the intent of the gamemaster. Sometimes you want to be very clear about what is going to happen, sometimes more subtle and cryptic, but the act of giving players hints of things to come is narrativism.

Act structure

The method of having an act structure in a larp is usually to promote some kind of story through those acts. Usually in larps, the different acts will have different themes ascribed to them in order to align players with the story. It is a rather blunt-but-effective way to enforce the story of the larp without having NPCs or high status characters directing it. Rather: if all players follow the themes of the acts, the story will emerge almost in its own.

An act structure provides another important advantage to the average larper: it helps us structure the narratives of our characters to have the right escalation, climax, and resolution to fit with the larp. It helps with building a narrative experience, even for a player that is not particular narratively inclined.

Fateplay

Fateplay (Fatland, 2000) is a gamemaster tool to direct a player to take certain actions or pursue certain goals with her character. Typically, it will be in the form of a message, called a “fate,” that is given to the player before the larp starts, stating an action that shall be performed and a condition for when it must be done. The condition can either be a set time or it can be whenever something specific happens. With this kind of messages the gamemaster can make entire chains of events and thus make sure a plot is moving forward the right way.

To my knowledge there are two types of fateplay larps: the strict fateplay as designed and played by the Oslo larp scene in the late 1990s, in which fates are imperative actions that must be undertaken, and the loose fateplay in which fates are merely suggested actions that a player can choose from.

Although the idea behind fateplay is clearly narrativistic, it is often the loose fateplay type that is seeing use in modern Nordic larp design, and it does not necessarily bring much narrative experience with it. Strict fateplay can be seen as intrusive by players with character immersion preferences.

But fateplay can yield great narrative experiences if, instead of focusing on the action that needs to be done and the problems with character coherence this may entail, one focuses on the story of the character that is going to do this action and what hidden agenda this character holds. Sometimes when playing narratively, it helps to see the character from the outside.

Planned scenes

In many larps it has become a common thing that players agree on certain scenes prior to the larp. Sometimes the organizer is involved, but in most cases players plan it among themselves. Especially in larps of a sandbox design, it is well-known that planning of plots, character relations and scenes to be executed during the larp will greatly increase the chances that you will have an awesome larp.

In my experience, most scenes planned in this manner do not include specific actions or things that should happen during the scene, they are typically more in the form of interesting setups where things might happen because of the engaged characters.

The whole planning of plots and scenes is narrativistic thinking, yet as long as it is done before the larp, most larpers are cool with it. For most larpers, the planning is done in such a way that what is agreed upon will seamlessly fit together with their character and not be a cause for distraction during the larp.

Directed play

In some larp cultures, it has become practice to create stories and tension in the larp through scenes of directed play. The idea is that these directed scenes will visualize to the players what is at stake in the larp, and it can be a good way to demonstrate to all when a story progresses to a new stage, or when a new event changes the stakes for the characters.

Actual directed play can be done in many ways, from the use of playbooks with lines and actions that players should perform to scenes that have been rehearsed before the larp, to an actual director on stage who tells people what to do and say.

To many players, directed play feels like a brute-force means of advancing the story and they react strongly against it unless the implementation of the scene is done in way to fit with the overall design of the larp. A seamless transition

188 Shuffling the Deck

to directed scenes or having the scenes in breaks between acts or simply having directed play as part of the larp's premise all help make such actions fit.

Break and assembly

Break and assembly is a technique that pauses a larp at a certain time and has the players convene to talk about the current state of characters, relations and stories and where to take them forward when the larp is started again. Usually, break and assembly is used when there is traditionally low activity in the larp, for instance in morning hours, or between acts.

Some players may feel that break and assembly ruins their flow in the larp, but it can do a lot more good than harm, though naturally the break should be made gently to minimize disruption.

The assembly, which should always be facilitated by a dedicated person, gives a splendid opportunity to coordinate narratives in the midst of larp runtime. Even for players that lean heavily towards character immersion, the assembly can help them discuss their character's motives and plots so they do not have to be distracted by that during play.

Non-Player Characters

The saying that NPCs are players too, or even humans too, has been catching on the last few years. It is a topic that is emerging and I believe we will see more discussion aimed at finding good solutions to implement in larps.

"NPCs are dehumanizing", Jaakko Stenros said in his keynote talk at Knutepunkt 2017. In a related article (Stenros, 2013) he speculates that the meaning of the different words we commonly use to describe NPCs are insufficient and all of them relate to some unspoken expectation of a norm that the NPCs are not part of.

Clearly that norm is the norm of what constitutes a player. NPC as an acronym for non-player character was coined in the early days of pen-and-paper roleplaying. It simply refers to the characters that are roleplayed by the dungeon master and not the players. Roleplay has evolved greatly since then, and somewhere along the way larp came and borrowed the acronym without thinking much about it.

It is strange that the name was just copied directly, since the concept doesn't really make sense in a larp context where you actually have to have individual

people playing the NPCs instead of a dungeon master handling them all; they are, in fact, characters played by people.

Since then, larp itself has changed; how larp is played and what we can do with it has nearly no resemblance to how it used to be, and the roles of both players and NPCs have changed with it. They have grown to become much closer to each other to the point where it is actually difficult to recognize a player character from a non-player character.

Yet our thinking of NPCs has not changed that much. We still see NPCs as persons or entities that provide a service to the players. The experience of NPCs has ostensibly no significance — only the experience of players is important. Therein lies the dehumanization.

The norm of what constitutes a player is complex to define and probably consists of many things; one thing I believe is important is the type of experience a larp is aiming for, or a larp culture attributes value. Players make a social contract to aspire to the experience that the larp intended.

For instance, at a larp made as a dungeoncrawl, players would be the people actually able to go down into the dungeon, solve puzzles, fight with monsters, and emerge victorious or die in the attempt, because that is the experience provided by the larp. The wizard providing the quest at the inn and the storekeeper providing options to buy magic potions are NPCs to the larp.

Similarly, for sandbox larps and the majority of Nordic larps, one focuses on character immersion experiences, so players expect this experience. NPCs in this context are characters that only exist in the larp universe for a limited time or that are so heavily scripted that character immersion is difficult.

Yet why are we indifferent towards NPC experience? It is clear that NPCs cannot experience what the larp is providing, but still their experiences should not be regarded as insignificant. Maybe it is worth to consider that larps may provide multiple experiences and as a larp culture to be open to attribute value to more than one type of experience.

In their truest function NPCs are narrative vessels, it is the far most common reason to introduce an NPC that it serves a purpose for a plot in the larp. Yet we only focus on how the plot is experienced by the players, while the experience of relaying the plot, playing it, and making it work during larp runtime, in essence the narrative experience, is given no credit.

But the narrative experience fits perfectly with NPCs, and if they are given the opportunity to explore it, to develop narratives and play them out in response to the players' backgrounds and wishes, I am sure that it will give both the NPCs and the players a more fulfilling experience of the larp. As larp designers and players we are already proficient at applying NPCs in many different narrative constellations, but for NPCs to have a narrative experience they require to be given ownership of their experience and of making plots and narratives for the players.

In the case of a sandbox larp, NPCs will have a lot to offer in terms of a narrative experience. There could be a lot of excitement in being the ones that manipulate the players and spin them around in a web of stories, intrigues and drama. But it requires that the NPCs are given autonomy by gamemasters and agency by the players.

Indeed, another problem with the indifference towards the experience of NPCs is that they have been stripped of anything but their core functions in the larp; as such they are given very limited options to gain meaningful experiences at all. What NPCs need to be given are autonomy and agency.

Autonomy to make plots instead of just heeding the call of a gamemaster, and agency to exert power over those plots and execute them on behalf of the players. For this to happen, there needs to be trust between all parties of the larp – especially between NPCs and players, who have to recognize that NPCs are in fact co-players instead of non-players.

Narrativist Larps

The Nordic larp community has not committed itself to narrativism, at least not compared to the large number of larps based on character immersion, simulation or other perspectives. But that's not saying that we haven't done anything.

Below, I offer ideas for structures of larps that can offer a narrative experience to all or a part of the players. Some of these structures are well-known, and larps have been made with them before.

Pearls on a string

All players go for a narrative experience in this larp. The idea is that all players form groups before the larp to coordinate and rehearse a sequence of predetermined scenes, so as to form a story, like pearls on a string. During

the larp, there will be time to execute the planned scenes, but there will be a lot more time in between the scenes where the characters are supposed find motivation and get to a point where the next scene seems plausible to the character.

The interesting thing is that the predetermined scene will work as a guide for the story, but they will not in themselves be the story. The story will be built during larp runtime, and it is a question of building coherence in both story and characters, something that a lot of larpers actually love to do.

Typically, when planning such a series of predetermined scenes, one tries to logically link scenes together into a well-known story. To make matters more interesting, however, one might try a set of scenes that have no apparent logical connection, just to make it a bigger challenge to play through the larp and make everything fit together in play.

Larp as adaptation

A good way to make a larp with some narrativist undercurrents is to base the larp on a book, theatrical play or movie. With varying degrees of adherence to the original material the larp can scale from “inspired by”, where players try to fit their stories with the original theme and mood, to “adaptation of”, where players play through the original story with a strict act structure and sometimes with scripted scenes.

Larps based on a well-known story will always give a hint of a narrative experience, but it is up to the organisers how much they actually want to give players an experience of living the original story, or if they will rather give an experience of being with the theme and setting of the story.

NPCs with agency

Following the possible redefinition of NPCs above, these new NPCs would require testing in full-scale larps. This larp should provide narrative experience to the NPCs while character immersion and simulation experiences to the players as normal.

Take an example of a standard character immersion larp with NPCs, make an agreement that the NPCs can decide themselves what they want to play and that they will have charge over the plot of the larp. Make sure that NPCs are a tight-knit group that have workshopped a lot together and have a good understanding of each other’s strengths and weaknesses. Give the NPCs insight

192 Shuffling the Deck

into the player characters and relations and instruct them to play on these things. Finally make sure that the players are in agreement with this, as it will greatly influence their play and take away some of their autonomy.

The melting pot

In any Nordic larp, there are both players that look for character immersion experiences and players that lean more towards a narrative experience. The recognition and knowledge that not all wish for the same experience can be enough to alter the larp's design. If the players are brought into that recognition it could probably also alter their play and give more room to different kinds of experiences.

If organisers knew in advance what kind of experience the players were looking for, they could tailor characters after that and make the appropriate casting. It would also give the organisers knowledge of where in the network of characters they should give different kinds of input.

This is however not as easy as it sounds. Casting characters on the basis of players' preferences in terms of the Three Way Model has been attempted before with little success. The problem is, I believe, that character casting is simply not enough when a larp in itself is designed around one single type of experience. The creation of a multi-experience larp is difficult, but necessary.

Shadow characters

A larp could be built up in such a way that for each ordinary player character you would also have one or more shadow characters acting in relation to the player character, for instance as guardian angels, good and bad conscience, or anything else fitting with the theme of the larp.

The purpose of the shadow characters would be to have them plan events and make setups for the player character, both good and bad, which should give the shadow characters a good narrative experience.

Different rules should apply to these shadow characters; how they could communicate to the player characters, to the other shadow characters, and to other player characters, how they could make events, or if they can make impersonations and thus also act as NPCs. All this can be decided through the theme and setting for the larp.

Conclusion

With this article, I lay the foundation for creating narrative experiences in full-scale larp and finding out what we can do with them. It has been my goal to keep this text on a level where it is directly applicable to the larps we make and the larps we play in.

I want to stress that I don't rate narrativism or narrative experiences higher than any other player perspectives or experiences available from a larp. Within character immersion in particular, I find an enviable perspective, and I am proud of the excellence with which we can make experiences to fit with this play goal.

I have however the belief that there are many good larp experiences that can be found in the realms of narrativism, if only we went looking for them.

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