

Fun for everybody?

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PLAY

STATEMENT

What does fun mean in a live action role-playing game? The idea of *fun* differs from player to player, from larp-writer to larp-writer. What is fun for one person can be depressing for another and stressing for a third one. Sometimes your personal history and childhood reveal what you experience as “fun” as a grown up. Sometimes your everyday life provides the tools to understand what you need in order to get the maximum enjoyment out of a game. The important thing as a game writer is to understand your players’ needs and try to fulfill them as well as you can. As a player, it is important to recognize what is fun for you and inform your directors about it.

I propose that the game writing should be an opportunity for both – the players and the directors – to express themselves in a social and creative way with each other, while considering the respective needs in cooperation.

Why do we play live action role-playing games? I cannot speak for others, but at any rate for me the reasons have stayed the same ever since I started. They can be put in an order, starting from the early childhood, when I played Robin Hood with my friends, attacked the cowboys as an Indian warrior or was kidnapped by the evil Black Knight as a medieval princess. I never had difficulties imagining the forest near my parents' house as the Forest of Sherwood, or the beautiful Finnish archipelago as the Great Lakes in North America. My little sister, six years younger, was sometimes Little John, sometimes servant or – more seldom – the High Queen herself. Then I was her loyal bodyguard, lethally wounded in the fight against the rebels. I continued playing till I was quite old, as my sister needed somebody to play with and I enjoyed it so deeply.

I was in my teens when I first read *The Lord of the Rings* (eleven times in a row, actually) and felt the urge to plunge deeper into the adventure myself. The films were the next natural step. I saw *The Last of the Mohicans* in the movie theatre seven times. I cried every single time when Uncas died in the end.

The urge for the adventure kept growing, and neither movies nor literature seemed powerful enough to boost my imagination anymore. Then I discovered tabletop role-playing games and got along with the adventures in the oldest Finnish role-playing club, *Kaksi Kuuta ry*¹. For a couple of years, the adventures around the table were enough.

When I was seventeen I went on a student exchange in Québec, French-speaking Canada, for a year. There I started to play live action role-playing with my friends. “Live Donjon”, as it was called there, nearby Montréal, was arranged in the woods and imitated the adventures of the tabletop games, with demons, vampires and wizards. The rules were always simple, based on hit point values and attack bonuses. The small forest in the peaceful village of Lorraine was the usual venue for the games and the dragon's scales were made of old car tyres. Childhood was still not too distant and the more complex plots weren't needed.

¹ *Kaksi Kuuta ry* (The Two Moons) is the oldest active Finnish role-playing club, started by four friends in Vihti in 1983. One of the original founder members later used to run the role-playing club at the University of Helsinki. The *Kaksi Kuuta* club started playing with *Dungeons and Dragons* (the first edition) brought from the US. Since then, they have been playing a wide range of tabletop and card games, the third generation of players gathering every Sunday afternoon. The club organised its first larp, *kaksivirtain kartano* (The Mansion of the Two Rivers) to celebrate its 15th birthday in the autumn of 1998.



As we grow up and get more experience in playing, the stakes get higher. As adults, we start to build more interesting stories in the games, longer characters, and surprising plots. We debate over the immersion or the pervasion. We take along pastiches from history, literature and art. We use techniques from the field of theatre or psychological research. The game itself is not enough anymore, but we are eager to tie it together with art, performance, or science. Why?

Some years ago I wrote a column in the *Roolipelaaja* magazine, where I questioned the idea of putting larp in the category of art or in a scientific context as at that time I did not understand why we needed to talk about the subculture related to art or science. Were we afraid that otherwise it would not be serious enough? Were we afraid not to be taken seriously when playing as adults? Was that the reason why the role-play research has become so important? Does it come from the need of giving the act of role-playing the credibility it would not otherwise hold?

Role-playing research in all its forms is undeniably a very interesting area. For some reason, however, all the research-based live action role-playing games I have been involved in have been more or less boring. The heat of adventure has been long gone. If I am to impersonate a deceived servant or a dying patient in a hospital, a war prisoner or a teacher in need of sex, I can enjoy that immensely. But for that I need the different levels of the game. I usually want to experience also the meta-level, the adventure outside the plot, immerse myself in the history behind it and distance myself to see the idea from the outside. The older I get, the more I want to hold the strings instead of taking all in as if I were blindfolded. The little particles of the game seem to be sometimes too similar compared to each other, as a great number of the usual plots of a game have been used as a rule in several others before. What makes the game unique is the whole, and I feel that the more experienced we get, the more we are able to enjoy the game as a whole.

- Troll and dryad from the romanticist larp Albión, which mixed the legend of Robin Hood, William Shakespeare's *The Midsummer Night's Dream* and Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*

Photo
Tuomas Hakkarainen
Erkki Tapola

Dead-serious confessing of my sins in the family gathering is not exactly my idea of fun, adventure or of a larger-than-life –experience. And that is why I larp in the end: To get the experiences I am not getting in my real life. And as my life has never been exactly dull, I find it more difficult, the older I get, to enjoy too realistic larps. At least the story should be level with the most fascinating novels of our history. And here we start with a problem, as very few of us are writers equal to Arthur Conan Doyle, Emily Brönte or James Fenimore Cooper.

I bang my head against the wall every time I try to create stories interesting enough for my players. Despite having arranged several games, I am still light-years away from my goal.

But even when I'm not enjoying impersonating an inactive wife sitting by the fire waiting for her husband to return from the hunting trip (why are still most of the inactive characters given to women, I wonder?), somebody else would probably enjoy that immensely. In a similar situation I first noticed how greatly the idea of “fun” differs from person to person. And it really does, more than you could imagine. It does not make much difference if you are man or woman, gay or straight. It is about the person, the player only, I have come to notice.

The Players as Characters

In my experience there are several different types of players, and all the types need different resources or stories in order to have fun from the game. Roughly, I tend to divide the larping people in five different categories. Of course the categories are in reality as many as the players, but for simplicity's sake I limit myself to the following ones:

1. The Adventure/Action/Romance Addicts

In this category I put part of myself. The “fisherman’s wife” characters² are not cut out for these persons. They need interesting and active characters, fights, kidnappings, quarrels, melodrama; they are able to solve big issues like the democracy’s future or the War Demon’s summoning. The adventure players are sometimes able to see the different levels in the game and use them wisely. By levels I am referring to the different layers of the game plots. We see the plots of the character, but also through the style of the game or the hints of the directors we are able to get a bigger picture. The different levels enrich the game: the narrative style of the characters, for instance tells us the style in which the game is supposed to be played. A wise player recognizes the meanings behind the given information or the hints in the text and uses them for everybody’s enjoyment. If addicted to romance, these players are easy to satisfy. Write a tragic triple drama or a Romeo & Juliet-story, and the players will enjoy the whole game. Often people with too little action in their real love life play these characters, or the ever-desperate romantics, like myself. Drama queens/kings fall often in this category, as they enjoy being in the center of the action.

2. The Meta-players

This is the other category I belong to. The meta-players see without difficulties the levels of the game. They are able to solve the mysteries nestled in the style of the game and use their knowledge of the intended playing style to create a more enjoyable experience for everybody. Some people are not capable of contemplating their character’s actions from the outside at all, and that normally gives a lot of headache to the directors, as sometimes it is necessary to judge the game by the drama and not by the personal victory or defeat of your character.. Meta-players are the opposite. They can be described as adult players. For them, the whole of the game is more important than the success or failure of their character. It is important to remind them that they are still players and not directors, and that

² The Fisherman’s Wife is a term created by Laura Kalli and used first at Ropecon 2003 to describe a dull character, as opposed to a character written by the standards of the adventurous romanticism. Fisherman’s Wife is a side character, with no plots or great interaction, coming from a character whose idea in a game was to sit by the fire, sew a net and wait for her husband to return from the sea. Similar characters with equally thin personalities can be found in most of the larps in soldiers, guards, servants, general’s wives etc. The goal should be to replace these fill-in characters with the helping players, as instructed by the directors.

they should not look after the others too much. Still, they are often able to dive deep into the emotions of their character and experience strongly all the feelings.

3. The Immersionists³

The opposite of the meta-players, in the sense that they are not capable of seeing the others in the game, but still play their character deeply from the inside. They reach the goals if necessary, but they often consider that as secondary to playing the character, being the character. The character's emotions are for them of the utmost importance. They are not interested in the game of the others, but are more than wonderful game companions as they are able to enjoy themselves and swim in the deep waters of their character's soul, often needing little guidance. They are usually easy players to cope with, as long as the director remembers that they act solely in their character.

4. The Munchkins

Yes, I think that there are munchkins also in the field of larp. Even though that normally means that the person in question only lacks some amount of imagination. The person acts based on the character's success and strives to achieve as much goods/riches/status/experience as possible. He/she (but in my experience way more often "he") is not able to see the big picture, nor act for the greater good of the story. That is the evil wizard you fired ten times with a lightning bolt and still he stands. Or Doctor Moriarty, who in the end should have fallen from the cliff but who didn't, and not because of the character's remarkable stamina, but because of the stubbornness of the player. I avoid these players at any cost. Given their strong character, one single munchkin can cause a great deal of suffering and even the death of the game. Players of this kind are the main reason why all my games are based on invitation. If a player acts destructively

³ I am not referring to an immersionist here as a player who is able to feel the character's feelings, but to a stereotype of a player, who sees the game from only his/hers character's point of view. The ability to feel the character's emotions is indeed strongly recommended and achieved by most of the experienced players, as I have noticed. Therefore there is no reason to divide players into immersionist and non-immersionist categories, as immersion can be reached by several different means and strategies. For most of the players it seems that the easiest way is the interaction with other characters, as I think that larp has always something to do with interaction and social relationships.

on purpose, I do not see a reason to let him mess about in the sandbox. The fun in larp is possible only if everybody plays along and follows certain rules. The rules in larps might sometimes be looser than in tabletop role-playing games, but they are equally important. If a player shows the signs of munchkinism, it is possible to save the situation by giving him/her some really unimaginably well-paying goal, which would completely satisfy the lusting for success.

5. The Shy Ones

Most of the larpers I know in Finland have been bullied in childhood. Some more, some less, but most of them in some ways. That is why there are also players who do not feel comfortable being in social situations. The shyness sometimes decreases with experience and age, but for some people it is still an issue difficult to deal with. In larp that means normally that a shy player does not wish to draw attention to him/herself in any way. The plots or ideas allocated to those types are sometimes in vain, as they only wait for the right moment to confess their dirty secrets to such lengths that the game ends. I avoid giving strong leading characters to these players, as they sometimes end up suffering more than having fun. It is wise to ask in advance about the player's preferences concerning characters. I prefer to discuss personally with all the players what their wishes are, or, if the characters are written together with the players, encourage them to tell me openly about their ideas and expectations. It is not the director's duty to change a player's nature; it comes in due time, if it happens at all. It is difficult sometimes, as you never know if they really are enjoying the game or not. But if you just trust that they are, and encourage them a little in advance, they may find all new tools from the game to open up a little bit in the real life. In larp it's easier, for instance, to give a speech in public, as the speaker can hide behind the character and the audience is consisting mostly of his or her friends.

As it is customary with narrow categories, few of us fit solely into one. Normally you find a bit of yourself in at least two, sometimes



■ Characters from Albión.

Photo:
Tuomas Hakkarainen
Erkki Tapola

even in all of them, as it happens with the character tests in magazines. Nevertheless, sometimes such categories prove a useful tool to understand what elements in a game provide the most fun for each and every player.

The Quest for a Larp More Fun

My idea of writing a larp is player-based. The fun is what the director wants to provide for the players and for him/herself. The fun of creating a world, the stories, and the fun for the players who actually enact the game. I do not intend to educate my players, nor use them as part of my art or of my research. If they pay for my game, they are paying customers, treated with respect as long as they treat me well, and they must get what they pay for.

What makes the task easier nowadays is age and experience. My players are older, they know what they like and are able to say it. They have been playing for a long time and they jump easily into their characters. They are kind, helpful and cooperative, willing to give their best in the game. They enjoy the game as much as the social circle around it. Usually I have not been satisfied with the games I have created, even when most players were contented. The goal of offering a remarkable experience in a short one-shot game is not an easy task. Maybe the challenge is just what keeps me going.

I wonder whether it would be possible to set up a game where everything would work perfectly? Is it possible to create a fun game for everybody, starting from myself and spreading to every single player? When we find out what fun means for a single player and for the director, it is then and only then that we are able to customize the same game individually for everyone, by carefully choosing the right plots and characters for the right players. It is then possible to reach the ultimate fun. The individual game design sounds like quite a complex task; it certainly is not the easiest one, but I think that it gives more than it takes. Of course this technique is not applicable to games with hundreds of players, but here the question arises: Do we really need games that big? In my opinion, if what is needed is the mass effect, then the crowds of similar soldiers should be played by the helping characters, not by the individually written ones. The game individually designed for each and every player? It seems impossible, you may say. Let's give it a try, I answer.