

Nothing is True; Everything is Permissible Using Deception as a Productive Tool

by Markku Jenti

As creators of role-playing stories, we are all accustomed to stretching the truth. In tabletop, we do it all the time: describing new characters and plots in false light, all in the name of a good story. Yet, when it comes to larp, we are often much more reluctant to use treachery to get what we want.

This article will introduce a combination of old and new larp preparation methods, collectively called “deceptive design”, that have been collected into a single body of work for the purpose of explaining how to use lies and illusions to make better games. What the text does not do, however, is exist within any single field of thought as to the purpose of larps, or the purpose of creating larps, although it does contain a few notes about reasons people should *not* have for creating larp material. The ideas within are meant to be an option for enhancing all kinds of larps.

Every Thing Possible to be Believ'd is an Image of Truth

Despite my grandiose title, two perimeters should always restrict the use of deception as a design tool. First of all, due to liability issues it should not be used at all in games that have underage participants. Complaints from people you have tricked are fine, complaints from third parties who feel their children have been cheated are not. Secondly, the designer must always avoid taking advantage of his status in any way: Cheating players for monetary gains or romantic/sexual potential is not acceptable behavior. It is the intent here that counts: Erotic narrative is fine. So is getting paid for one's work and the money invested into the project. Only when the purpose is to take advantage of the situation, the thin ice cracks.

Other than that, anything goes. If dishonesty will make a game better for the players, go ahead and lie. Until the project is over, everything you will have stated as a truth will be seen as one. Almost always everything you've even just implied might be true will be treated the same way. The only real measure is taken when the game ends. If you succeeded, no one will complain about you making the game more effective. If you fail, they may still see the amount of effort you put in the project, and appreciate that. Or they may be disappointed – but, since the game failed, they would have probably been anyway. So go ahead and try if deception is a method that suits you.

Die Elektrischen Vorspiele

Well-prepped players are an incredible resource. They are far more flexible than any gymnast you may dream of bedding. Tell them that a game will follow a certain pattern and style, and they will make that happen. Not exactly, but closely enough, and will feel that they did it of their own free will. During the initial advertisement/recruitment stage, state clearly enough what the theme(s), style(s) and genre(s) of the project are. While you're actually describing just what the game will be about, and how you intend to present it, your future players will read a further semiotic meaning into that advertisement. They will see it as a description of what kind of a game you want *them* to make it. Say "soap opera", and they will create one. Say "full-contact prison camp game about emotions", and that will happen. Just make

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sure you do say it out loud. Otherwise the players will create a genre out of their own expectations, and you will have no control over your project.

At this stage it's also important to let loose all the important falsehoods you want to be told about the game. For example, if you're actually making a horror game, feel free to advertise it using a descriptive genre that is close enough for your purposes but not the actual genre, so that you can create a sense of shock. Call it a "week-end long game about the sense of social isolation" or some such. Note that if you use a bad combination of false and true genres and/or playing styles, you'll ruin the whole project.<2> The same thing will happen if you lie too much about the scale of certain game elements, and by doing so end up changing the genre by default. This is a very delicate thing, and is closely tied to genre conventions. A deceptive change from detective mystery to horror will probably work, but one from low to high fantasy (or vice versa) probably won't. And any slip-ups that make a supposedly introspective or social interaction oriented game into a "hack'n'slash" will almost certainly make players hate you – and you will most certainly deserve that hatred.

The next logical step is a good pre-game hype. Make promises about your upcoming game's high quality, the effort put into its creation, and so on. Draw from what you believe will be its strengths – since before the game you're actually just speaking about your preparations. You do not have a finished product you can truly, honestly talk about before the game is over. Selective omissions will prove very useful here, as you move from one potential target audience to another. Leave out anything a group might see as a problem, but remember to tell it elsewhere. In this way, all elements will be introduced into the common pool of (staged, possibly even forged) knowledge in the most positive light. Players who like a certain idea or a certain co-designer others might be wary of will always prove more persuasive than a lone game writer.<3> Let them do your work for you, and remember that the means will eventually be justified.

If at all possible, try to get your game a transcendent status within your gaming community. Should you succeed, the game will be treated as "legendary" if it's even a marginal success.<4> Good tools in this are talking about the number of people involved in the game, mentioning names of well-known, well-liked organizers, and the size of the game budget.<5> One of the best status-gaining techniques is to refer to your works as "experimental", but this carries a serious risk of alienating players interested only in what they see as more traditional gaming. (Again, by using selective descriptions, you can turn this too to your advantage.) Finally, if your game is a part of a longer thematic flow of games – campaign, themed series, etc. – prepare the descriptions so that people will see your previous works in the best possible light and style for the current project's success. The reason you are doing this is to make the players feel special. That mood will translate into a heightened game experience – as well as gather you a useful reputation for other upcoming projects.

At the writing stage, first make an almost complete version of the diegetic environment – "that which is real within the context of the game", in this case the general story structure and the intended perception of the actual gaming space of the larp – the game is going to happen in. Then create characters according to their purposes within the story, but leave them otherwise skeletal. Either let the players select characters from a list, send you a list of preferences, or send them brief outlines

of suggested concepts yourself. The purpose is to let them believe they have a say in the make-up of the people they're going to be playing, while you're actually typecasting them to the roles they'll themselves get the most out of at the same time they're supporting the joint game experience. Most players will be very happy if they get to dictate the motives of their characters. Let them help you – they're only providing you with material that you'd otherwise have to invent yourself. Simply make sure the resulting actions stay the same, and your story plan will not only survive, it will become stronger. If every player feels that he or she is a star, you're certainly on the right track.

Access to electronic media will help you here. Using web pages that differ from one another is a relatively easy trick that will help you distribute slightly different information without appearing to do so. So are fake "group" emails, whether from different sources, or by giving an illusion that everything is sent as Bcc to "keep player anonymity" while everyone is actually receiving a separate email briefing. Electronic communication also helps to preserve your anonymity, should that be needed.<6>

Thinking Like a Vampire

With the game about to begin, put in the second gear. As you observe the forming group dynamics at the game site, take special note of any elements that might – not just those that will, *might* is enough – cause deviance from your vision. Typical examples of such items are misunderstood points of character connections and questions about plot paths you do not want the game to proceed to, such as leaving the area. Most of these can be easily spotted from the pre-game small talk between the players, and the things they ask you about. Then, during the opening speech and possible character/group briefings, address each and every one of those points. If needed, make up excuses and new rules as you go along. Players will always adapt if you give them a reason – any reason – to do so. The reason has to be relatively plausible, but need not be one that could survive any closer examination.<7> All excuses, as stated before, can be dismantled as "necessary trickery" at the end of the game.

One of the best game master guides ever written, the Mastering chapter of the game book *The World of Necroscope*, has a short section about playing incomprehensible evil creatures. The text states: "Never draw a conclusion for the players, but feed them the information to draw their own conclusion, and make sure that the conclusion they draw is wrong" (Bolme 1995) In larps, this applies to both almost all narrative-related questions in the pre-game briefing and absolutely everything the players ask about the subject during the game. The latter has an additional benefit: by letting the players come to false conclusions you desire, you lessen the feel that you're railroading them. Self-made choices always seem more palatable to larp participants than external, extra-diegetic measures such as game master directions do. The basic rule here is that a player enjoys a character wanting to become the king out of its own decision the most, is quite happy to make such a decision based on pre-written material, but will be much less likely to enjoy it if the choice is either written as an absolute plan into the character or is stated by a game master during the game. Certain forms of Fateplay are an exception to this, but only because they work on a structure agreed upon by all players in advance.

A further refinement of this technique also exists. More properly, it is a combination of using traditional, scripted non-player characters in a larp and the "draw your own wrong conclusions" method explained above. This technique, called "intra-diegetic scripting", places hidden game masters within a game, with full rights to edit any situation and leak any information needed to keep the game on track.<8> They are listed among players and pretend to be players, so that their actions do not appear to come from "outside". In this way, everything they do will have a diegetic explanation.

Using intra-diegetic scripting works at first as a surprise trick. At the next stage, it will create a small sense of paranoia in every game, but test runs seem to predict that it will eventually lead to a state of improved general acceptance of all narrative control. By blurring the lines, it helps remove resistance to extra-diegetic control.

And finally, read the mood of your players at the end of the game. Explain all inconsistencies away as needed. Improvise if you must, but it's usually much safer to simply say that it was all done in order to enhance their game. If the game proved to be disappointment, apologize.<9> Honestly, if you can – this is not a time for deception.

Grandfather arrives at Kåge valley

Done the wrong way, such systematic manipulation of players – friends – will get you nothing but contempt. Take thus extra care when you are using these tricks. At any given new locale, the first "deceptive design"-based game should be an intentionally created showcase piece. That way all the effort will be seen as a value in itself, and the trickery will be perceived as just a part of that well-made preparation.

Humor may prove a useful extra tool. If you can make the tricks you use clever and entertaining as well as effective, your players will love you more. After giving yourself through deception a lot more leeway in design than is normal, feel free to utilize it. A few good jokes done in the game's general style, especially at the invitation stage, can work wonders. And if you're clever enough, those too can be recycled to further the deception. For example, creating characters that players associate with real people will enable you to slip in them some extra material the players will not expect.<10>

Do That, And No Other Shall Say Nay

Excluding the mandatory limitations outlined in the beginning, there is only one more rule to hold on to. It is that you always ask yourself whether or not the game you are making would benefit from your using deceptive design methods. No simple method for doing such an analysis exists, so you may well have to rely on both your instincts and the view of the game's concept you have. There is absolutely no point in tricking players just for your personal amusement, or even for the sake of a few extra laughs during the debriefing.

If it looks like the game might become stronger with some deceptive methods, take a bold step forward and use them. It's only cheating if you do it for selfish reasons. As a

game designer you have an obligation to do the best games you can. So do not deny yourself the use of this very effective tool.

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Deceptive Design in a Nutshell

- All deception must always be used for the sole purpose of enhancing the game experience. To use it for anything else is cheating.
- Larps are heavily influenced by the expectations of their participants. By altering those expectations one alters the game. The easiest way is through selective deception. It is often, but not always, also the most effective way to create the desired alterations.
- All pre-game hype, if analyzed properly, is actually a lie. The question is thus not whether one lies to the participants, but in what way and how much.
- The presumed "status" of a larp has a life of its own, initially modified by factors such as scale and designer reputation. That status can be prepared to a certain extent at the early stages, but becomes more difficult to adjust over time. A game with a positive status before it actually happens is more likely to be enjoyed by its players.
- When used for the purpose of creating a better game, all forms and methods of deception are permissible.
- The most effective deceptions are both plausible and entertaining. That way the participants will enjoy them even if the effects are not exactly those that were expected.
- All deceptions should be credibly explained away at the end of the game, but not before that. Explanations may be edited to correspond with the end results of the larp, if that will make the project seem more holistic or refined in nature.
- Apology is always proper policy, even when the game was a success. The fact that the players (and occasionally other unwitting participants, such as outsiders propagating the deception) have been lied to, must be addressed, and given the correct context.
- As a rule of thumb, comparing this situation to lying to a friend when organizing his upcoming surprise party will provide good ideas about the limits of acceptable deception. (With experience it's of course possible to harmlessly proceed far beyond those.)

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References

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Misztal, Barbara A. (1996): *Trust in Modern Societies*. Polity. Cambridge.

Serban, George (2001): *Lying, Mans's Second Nature*. Praeger. Westport.

Games

Mehiläiset Saapuvat (2004) by J. Tuomas Harviainen, Julius Sepponen and Jere Suvanto. Originally credited to Julius Sepponen and Markku Jenti. Finland.

<1> Writing a plot that may enable your friend to possibly get laid is respectable. Writing that same plotline with that particular intent purely in mind is not. A game

master should avoid creating such plotlines for his own character completely, in order to stay truly objective.

<2> Especially never, ever tell your players a game is a Soap Opera if it is not. That particular genre has its own momentum, which will sweep away the plausibility of all other themes you might want to introduce. And never call a “hack’n’slash” something else, or something else a “hack’n’slash”. Organizing an orgy under the pretense of making a larp is also considered bad form, but it’s been nevertheless known to occasionally happen.

<3> Should a negative view of such an element become dominant within the pool of knowledge, be ready to discard that trait without hesitation, even when it means firing a friend from the project. Then blatantly lie about the reason why.

<4> The Swedes are extremely skilled in this. Study and then adapt their techniques – it’s always best to learn directly from the masters.

<5> Be careful in all of these. Make sure people see the part they like most in games as the most emphasized one. Also make *extremely* sure that they understand half of the budget isn’t going to be spent on things like engine rooms only one player is going to see during a 300 participant game - unless you’re a self-centered idiot who doesn’t care, that is.

<6> The Finnish game ”Mehiläiset Saapuvat” was credited to a fictional game designer (“Markku Jenti”, to be exact), and the aforementioned means were used to obscure the fact that he did not exist, as well as that the actual designers were familiar with their players. This enabled the writers to seemingly accidentally place certain people to certain roles without appearing to do any typecasting.

<7> Yet again, an excuse needs only to stay together until the game’s end. Usually all that is necessary is that it lasts long enough for the diegetic frame of the game to catch the player’s full attention.

<8> In narrativist or plot-based game, they pace the game so that all conclusions are reached at suitable times. In immersion-oriented games they help preserve immersive states intact by introducing and removing phenomena and stimuli as needed.

The main plotlines in larps commonly proceed by “intra-diegetic flux” (character choices forming a chaotic network), “extra-diegetic scripting” (game master-directed narrative) or “peri-diegetic scripting” (game master-directed narrative implemented through pre-scripted characters without a free will). Intra-diegetic scripting is a synthesis of the latter two, disguised as intra-diegetic flux. Note that other forms of plot procession also exist, but they are either variations of these or harmful forms of player-based intrusion (such as “extra-diegetic flux”, which would be a state were the desires of players – not characters or a game master – would dictate the plot).

<9> Shifting blame is not a good idea. The only exception is that if someone is actually guilty of the failure, feel free to try pointing him out. You may garner some enemies, but the larp community will benefit as a whole from such social Darwinism. And it’s not like you weren’t already disliked – remember that this happens at the point where it is evident your larp wasted other people’s time and money.

<10> Mehiläiset Saapuvat contained three characters named and described after known Nordic larp figures, one of whom (the murder victim, “Martin Ericsson”) was mentioned by name in the original game advertisements in order to draw in the attention of experienced players who might otherwise have not been interested in a larp with a typical-seeming theme written by strangers.

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Markku Jenti

Markku Jenti does not exist. He is a pseudonym created by a group of Finnish larp writers to assist in distancing games from the reputations of their creators, and in developing new methods of narrative control. The mask stays the same, but the people behind it change. Markku loves seeing his influence expand.

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