

Testing Larp Theories and Methods

Results for Years Zero to One

J. Tuomas Harviainen

This article reports the results and observed difficulties of my experiments in testing larp theories and methods that have been presented over the last few years. An emphasis is placed on studying the classics of the field, but the research has not been limited to them.

Origins of the Test Run Initiative

This project – which I hope will soon spread – began as a reaction to my own text in *Beyond Role and Play*.^{<1>} I realized that I had no right to demand results from other larp scholars if I was not myself willing to do testing on the material I criticized. The test runs described below were all conducted by my initiative, some of them in games I produced myself, others in joint works. The tests yielding the findings are briefly described along with the results. There are two reasons for this abbreviated approach: The primary one is that full exposition of any one of these experiments would be an article in itself, and should in the interests of objectivity be written by someone other than myself. The secondary purpose is to show how small-scale some of the experiments can be, and that they do not necessarily have to be essential parts of a game in order to be still integral to the whole, and useful for the information they provide.

Reliability of the Results

From a scientific point of view, all my findings should be considered contaminated data. My own game writing has had a clear impact on the reception of all these studied applications of the theories and methods examined. I am thus not truly objective in analyzing them. The way my experiments show a strong influence by local gaming paradigms also hints towards the results not being automatically adaptable to other game paradigms.^{<2>}

The most obvious problem, however, rises from the fact that compared to other forms of art/media, larps have a unique, fragile structure that makes it practically impossible to use some normal scientific methods in studying them. As an example, comparing two different ways – manifestoes – to make a larp out of a single concept is not truly possible. The first run will always contaminate the second, if the participants are the same. If they are not, it can easily be argued that the difference in players resulted in any observed changes. My research suggests that the problem could be alleviated within a long-term project with full-time play testers – by removing the “special” status larps have due to their limited availability – but that is not at the moment feasible to organize.

It also bears noting that it has not been possible to conduct these test runs in clinical conditions that would have been completely isolated from outside influence.

The contamination does not, however, render the findings irrelevant. Instead, it directs the studies to more immediate points of research, in forms that can – and should – be re-

tested in close enough forms within different larp paradigms until a satisfactory amount of data has been collected to support more advanced experiments. In the mean time, the findings themselves can be seen as having significant ground-level value, as they indicate quite clear tendencies on whether or not certain forms of larp and certain theories and/or methods show a desirable synergetic effect, producing new beneficial results gained from using those things together – benefits that would not otherwise have been possible.

Code of Conduct

I have therefore set out to study elements of larp theory and methodology from a practical point of view. The idea is that every test run is conducted according to the following principles:

1. Whenever a core idea for a larp is invented, a suitable-looking theory, manifesto or (set of) method(s) is chosen. Due to the project being at this point a personal, non-funded operation, the choice is made primarily by personal preference supported by previous design experience and, if possible, earlier findings of this research project. The game will then be designed in the writer's own style, using the chosen element(s), with the intent of making the game as good as possible. It is permissible to choose which parts of the subject matter are to be tested, but after the element(s) have been selected, they must be treated without prejudice for the duration of the experiment.

2. When the creative process is finished, an appraisal is made on the element(s) used. The primary question is always "did using this new element make creating the game easier or harder, or did it produce a result that was new in such a way that creating it should be considered worthwhile?" (Ease of creation in this case means whether or not a similar result could have been gained with less effort through other means. The purpose is simply to find functional tools and not to comment on any preference in correlation between product quality and "artistic suffering".) If the answer is "yes", the process moves to the playing stage. If not, the negative results are noted, and the product discarded. Either way, notes are made on all parts of the element(s) that contributed to the result or were counter to it, as well as any points of potential interest such as the kinds of obstacles the circumvention of which might prove to be good challenges in themselves. This way also the interests of those desiring the aforementioned artistic suffering are taken into account.

3. After the game has been played, as much feedback as possible – both immediate and long-term – is gathered and recorded. Then a process similar to the previous one is gone through, with emphasis on the question whether or not the element(s) used made the game more effective or enjoyable. The primary method here is the use of qualitative interview techniques during the post-game debriefing. In small-scale games, of which type most experimental larps are, qualitative data both better represents the individual experiences of the participants and, given the size of the test groups, presents a more accurate picture of experiential dispersion among the group than a quantitative analysis would. Should it be possible, I naturally recommend collecting and recording both kinds of data. Key elements in this form of debriefing are that all game participants should be interviewed, by directing the flow of discussion as needed, and that even when using

conversation-based interview techniques the sense of dialogical intersubjectivity (objectivity through interactive validation of interpretation) is preserved. Similarly, key questions to ask should concern the sense of general enjoyment, observed results of the tested elements and emotional states during and after the game, as well as the reasons for all those. Due to the material dealing mostly with personal experiences and perceptions, better results are gained by using the questioning techniques of therapeutic psychology or pastoral counseling than with the interview techniques used in social sciences. This, of course, again favors a qualitative approach to data.

The purpose of this experimentation structure is two-fold: On one hand, the idea is to simply gather good tools for further games, by examining what does or does not work in the given context. On the other hand, all results are gathered in such a manner that should the study of larps at some point become a legitimate science with the funding necessary to conducting valid studies, these preliminary findings can – despite their contamination and limited scale – be used as signposts that will mark up subjects most deserving of such testing.

The plan has from the beginning been to make complete games by using larp manifestoes, and to test methodological elements in conjunction with them when possible. Making a complete game to test just one method is not economically feasible in Finland. The player base willing to participate in experimentation is too small, and outside funding is not available.

During the last one and a half years, the following results have been gained:

Turku School Immersion

The first of the manifesto test-runs was based on the Turku school.<3> The game was “Valkoisia Tahroja / White Stains”, a dream-state concept larp with character material drawn from the poetry of Aleister Crowley.<4> Observations and player feedback strongly pointed towards a Turkuan approach being both valid and productive within an artistic-immersive game frame. Using Turku-school design methods made creating the game easier. All negative comments were also related to the Turku parameters, with a clearly detectable correlation between a lack of interest in immersion and the sense of momentary boredom. This relationship was explicitly stated by the participants themselves during the debriefing interview, to the accuracy of “I was bored because character immersion was not enough to keep up my interest for the game’s duration”, and should thus be considered a very accurate result as far as their personal sense of mental state is concerned. It covers their own limitations and expectations, such as “optimal form of character” only to some extent, and thus should be considered only indicative of possible problems that may occur with the Turku parameters, not as proof of flaws.

Westlundian Narrativism

The second manifesto targeted was Aksel Westlund’s Storyteller Manifesto.<5> The murder mystery game “Mehiläiset Saapuvat” was entirely created using the design

principles Westlund lists. <6> However, previous experience and research – in the form of discussions about the value differences of roles and characters, and quantitative analysis of questions such as “would you like to participate in a game where major character choices would be pre-scripted – has shown that the dominant Finnish larp paradigm has a high level of resistance towards any sense of a lack of free will, and thus the actual production of the game was made using Deceptive Design instead of Westlund’s “Pledge of Allegiance”.<7> To have done otherwise would have meant a serious risk of either lack of participants, hostile treatment of the game material by the players, or both, none of which would have been conducive to the experiment.

Clear findings through both the design process and post-game analysis made it very obvious that using the Storyteller’s Manifesto’s design principles enables the creation of far stronger plots and narration than a normal free innovation probably would. I highly recommend using that segment of the manifesto – with adaptations for mechanics, if necessary – when designing such games. Especially useful were Westlund’s suggestions about mirroring plots and ascertaining that material meant by the game’s designers to become public during the game really does that.

It Might Be Possible That You Could Perhaps Be Able to Do That

There is a third larger test-run was actually conducted in 2003, before the project “officially” began. It was a game called “Valon Yö”, but has been more often referred to as “Waiting for Lucifer”. The story was about a group of occultists spending 24 hours in a country house waiting for a summoning spell to take effect. Being a low-key immersion game without any larger diegetic narration, it was a suitable place to try out the KMSKM method, a system where a character’s skills and limitations are equal to those of its player.<8>

As a method experiment, the game produced a definite result. KMSKM proved far too limited in form to fully cover interaction whenever characters went into specifics. As a post-game resolution, many players stated a feeling that the method would only function in games designed with the sole purpose of supporting the method, not the other way around.<9> Examples of such games would be realistic low-key larps about social interaction, in general anything rooted to non-violent realism by advance restrictions of all kinds of behavior and activity that can not be covered by the KMSKM method. In a broader sense, it always requires having a game design system created or converted to support the method, with the method’s use being one of the starting points of the game-creative process.

Hands-on Methodology

Probably the most important piece of game methodology invented during the last few years has been the Ars Amandi method.<10> Both of my manifesto-testing games used derivative versions of it, and Mehiläiset Saapuvat also the original technique.<11> Every test run I have conducted with it points to the Ars Amandi method being an invaluable contribution to larp tools, both by removing unnecessary game tension and allowing the

creation of more intense emotional and erotic content – necessary tension – without risking player safety or reputation. The use of other altered diegetic meanings in touching – designated changes in the significance and meaning of certain forms of touching, the replacement of forms of verbal communication with forms of touching, or vice versa – is also worth investigating further.

Smaller Tests and Projections

I have been using for several years the basic design methods Christian Badse lists in “The Development of Ideas”.^{<12>} While they are not especially new or radical, nor specifically larp-related in any way, it bears noting that the techniques he recommends are indeed worth utilization.

In contrast, despite several serious attempts I have been utterly unable to reconcile Martin Enghoff’s character design guidelines with my game creation style.^{<13>} This does not mean that they are not fundamentally useful, but it does however point towards definite incompatibility with some forms of larp design, something that Enghoff himself also notes in the beginning of his text. While essentially suitable for most typical large-scale games, his rules are too rigid and too prejudiced (by value of certain forms of information, as well as optimum styles and segment sizes) to be of direct use in anything outside the style of games for which it was developed.

Both runs of “Valkoisia Tahroja” had a pre-planned soundtrack of music that was heard by the characters within the diegesis, but they were unable to affect the music or even comment on it. The sound design was directly based on Henrik Summanen’s principles, and according to post-game feedback – gathered, again, through direct interview questions – succeeded very well in influencing altered mood states.^{<14>}

Future Projects

I have intentionally been avoiding a test of Dogma 99 manifesto and the character-role-player theories of Morten Gade.^{<15>} The former is antithetic to everything I have so far recorded as producing more effective and innovative games.^{<16>} It, like Westlund’s Pledge of Allegiance, also requires a heavy reduction in diegetic options of the characters, and is thus extremely hard to experiment with in Finland. Gade’s theory includes a template of the character-player relationship that is completely incompatible with my own views and design style. Gade uses a divisive model, strongly separating player, role and character, whereas I hold tight to a view about information and experiences flowing between player and character in such a manner that neither is purely within or outside the diegesis.^{<17>} In the interest of the project, however, both of the aforementioned “problem” texts will be used in test run projects during this year.

As a side product, player feedback about the aforementioned games, in both debriefing and elsewhere – intentional interviews included – has brought up two questions worth further examination.^{<18>} The first one is that player descriptions of the diegetic reality of games is seemingly identical to Winnicott’s description of the space where child’s play

happens.<19> Likewise, comments on behavioral and motivational changes in long-term game diegesis presence suggest that studying whether a correlation between what Martin Ericsson describes as the liminal states in gaming and real-world liminal phenomena exists.<20> Both questions need to be answered – at least to some extent – before any truly scientific research into not only the experience of larp participation, but also larp theories’ and manifests’ effects, can be analyzed.

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A final “thank you” will be extended to all those who dare pick up the banner and join us in actually testing larp theories and methods instead of just speculating. More than one testing team is needed to get results that are even close to being acceptable as “reliable”.

<1> Harviainen, 2004.

<2> This of course does not automatically make them invalid in the given context. It only means that they should not be treated as universally reliable until cross-paradigm testing has been made.

<3> Pohjola, 2000.

<4> Crowley, 1898. A second run of the same game was later made, but it included an added character-change experiment and thus did not qualify as fully Turkuan.

<5> Westlund, 2004.

<6> The game deviated slightly by permitting a few minimal specific safety rules concerning sex and violence, but not so much as to affect the reliability of the test.

<7> For Deceptive Design, see Jenti 2005. Extrapolations on the pre-game analysis of questions related to Westlund’s Pledge requirements form a hypothesis that it might be fully functional within larp paradigms that consider fate elements and visibly pre-scripted plots valid parts of larping, and not a completely different (if related) form of play like people do within the Finnish paradigm. All pre-game analysis showed that to have produced the game using all of Westlund’s requirements would have resulted in a definite lack of interest in participation, to the point where the experiment would likely not have been at all possible to perform. Note that this situation is an exception to the norm of being open to experimentation. The main causes are a tradition of different value given to roles (theatrical, with pre-scripted major actions) and characters (semi- to complete freedom of action), and the way any game with a rigid, inflexible plot is seen as a boring waste of time and money. The latter reason was mentioned in precisely this form (with some additional expletives that I have removed) by several interview subjects as an answer to why they’d not like to participate in games requiring the kind of lack of diegetic free will that Westlund’s Pledge requires.

<8> Lippert 2003. The abbreviation means “If you can, you can”, denoting a simple, direct equality of player and character abilities, as well as a strict adherence to realism. Note that despite there being magic in the diegesis of the test larp, the possibility to create magical effects during the game did not exist.

<9> The experiment was exceptional in that almost none of the players had any larp experience, and thus should by pre-evaluation have been more likely to accept the method than systems-oriented gamers. Nevertheless the negative reaction was very strong and directly led to the creation of the FreeComm method, a combination of KMSKM and keywords allowing the use of extradiegetic commands. The idea in it is that most actions are covered by the “if you can, your character can” principle, but when that is not sufficient the players are allowed the use of certain code words within in-game speech. Those words mean the statements convey extradiegetic information which the listeners must react to accordingly. As the “systems information” is swiftly conveyed in conversation and handled through play-acting immediately afterwards, but is at the same time clearly at once different from all diegetic speech, the general illusion of continuity and realism is preserved.

<10> Described fully in Wieslander 2004.

<11> Valkoisia Tahroja had a system where skin contact with symbolic forms of touching was required for interpersonal communication. Mehiläiset Saapuvat, set within an orgy, permitted a free choice of sexual simulation for the players, but all nevertheless chose a version of the Ars Amandi method where they added some noise and rhythmic movement. The game also had additional rules within the method to cover masturbation.

<12> Badse 2003.

<13> Enghoff 2003.

<14> Summanen 2004, 225-226. By using a sequence of rhythmic, dreamy melodies and annoying noise, neither of which could be avoided nor commented on, the effects of the player/character vs. music relationship were carried over to the emotions of the characters. Most prominent of these was the way in which frustration caused to some players by the noise resulted in an increase of coping with it through character aggression. This was both observable during the game and reported in the interviews.

<15> Faitland & Wingård 1999 and Gade 2003.

<16> The original outline of the Deceptive Design technique was largely created by reversing the rules of Dogma 99 and then combining them with past uses of planning-stage deception methods.

<17> A more complete description of this theory, called “perikhoretic character relationship”, is included in my article “Corresponding Expectations”, also presented in this book.

<18> The interviews were conducted within free discourse, but followed scientific criteria for valid interviewing practice. The only reason I do not consider the found details truly reliable is the limited number of test subjects that was available.

<19> Summarized as “This area of playing is not inner psychic reality. It is outside the individual, but it is not the external world.” Winnicott 1971/1980, 51.

<20> Ericsson 2004. For a thorough ethnographic look at a modern-day, European liminal phenomenon see Young, 2000.

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About the author

J. Tuomas Harviainen is a 32-year old Finnish librarian-in-chief, with a background in theology and text analysis. He sees role-playing primarily – but not solely – as a new form of media, and is active in seeking new tools and methods to enhance the gaming experience. Harviainen is also running a long-term project that tests the supposed findings presented in role-playing studies and manifestoes. *jushar [at] utu.fi*