



Corresponding Expectations

Alternative Approaches to Enhanced Game Presence

A binding concept within recent larp design – seemingly regardless of design tradition –and the resulting research has been the ideal of set patterns in both diegetic behavior and extradiegetic goals. In order to discuss gaming experiences, those very experiences have been pigeonholed into tight, nearly immutable categories that are then used as a basis of both analysis and design. The purpose of this article is to break that mold.

Active divisions

In order to disarm the current preconceptions we must first analyze them. The most visibly dominant divisions are:

Immersion versus Simulation

What kind of a sense of 'self' do the participants of a game have during the course of the event? For most larp-related issues, this is the supposed "key distinction". It is treated as the most important criterion in deciding whether or not a piece of game design and/or participation is to be treated as high-

quality. It is also the underlying basis predicated which goals a particular larp manifesto is built upon, regardless of whether or not that manifesto sees immersion as something desirable. A very important part of this question's status is that it often is not even truly stated in such a manner.

Thus a more realistic definition would be to speak of preferred gaming experiences, but it nevertheless boils down to the point of actually dealing with immersion issues.

About the author

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Entertainment versus “Something of Value”

A resultant division, this one is created by participant expectations, including those of the games’ designers. That it indeed is a resultant division becomes only apparent if this is observed from the point of experience emphasis, as the separation of “art” and “entertainment” in gaming is far older than the immersion-simulation discussion. This is a heavily cultural issue, on both local and international levels.¹ When combined with the question of immersion, it forms the basic schools of thought in game design. This correspondence between goal-orientation and end result is a very vital thing to note. It is the most important factor determining whether or not a game can be considered successful. Usually this can be calculated by analyzing the correlation between the expectations of the designers and those of their players, but occasionally – especially in the case of art or media games – a correlation will not exist, or will work in reverse.

Scale and Quality

Another classic problem that, while seemingly not directly relevant to the issue at hand, must be addressed at this point. Unlike what many larp-participants think, it is this issue, not the gaming experience division, that is actually the cause of the aforementioned question of larp value. All local gaming cultures eventually form an image on the ideal relationship between experimentation/innovation and game scale, based on fiscal concerns.

These local assumptions and presumptions then influence the way game design is conducted.² Commitment to the game and its goals by its designers is appraised based on how well the game is perceived as matching the cultural template. Thus, when experimentation on elements like character immersion or mediated experiences is made, those paradigms distort the results.³

Mood versus Events, Plot versus Free Will

This is the pair of conflicts through which we may approach the solutions. Not because it is intrinsically of a higher value, or more important, but because it’s a division game participants actually observe and discuss. Whereas the “entertainment” dilemma was about external participant motivation, these two concern the game-internal expectations.⁴ Participation and commitment happens through matching of given narrative material with self-perceived requirements of the game. Since this is an individual process, the result often clashes with the vision of the game’s designers.



With these distinctions in mind, I suggest the following techniques. Some of them are relatively new, others are refinements of older methods. They are intended to be used together, not to maximize an impact, but because all four work to eliminate each other's negative sides.

Approach One: Being and Doing

According to my research, all role-players have an individual set of gaming preferences. All of them are aware of it to some extent, often to the point of it becoming a constrictive paradigm instead of a tool. I call this the Being/Doing scale. When gaming, a person has a pair of elements to which he or she devotes effort and energy. The first represents a desire to be a character, experience its life and surroundings, etc. The second represents narrative interests, on both a character-action and storytelling level. The rest is made up of disinterest and tangential elements such as enjoyment of extradiegetic social contact through gaming.

In this manner, a player could be quantifiable as 55% Being, 35% Doing.⁵ Naturally this is not an exact science, but can, with some practice, be used to enhance game casting. Even a rough description of desires in this manner from each player will substantially raise the possibility of getting to play a character one finds enjoyable and interesting.

The scale apparently corresponds but is not equal to the immersion issue. A player with a high level of Being is more likely to see herself as an immersionist, but without extensive psychological study the reality of such statements can not be ascertained. This scale also correlates with devotion to a game, but – unfortunately – not necessarily to skill or talent in playing. While most game participants have both Being and Doing factors in their relationship to gaming, it is also possible to have only one of them. In those cases, the Disinterest factor acts as a safety mechanism that protects the player, other participants and the gaming environment.⁶

A key element to note here is that neither aspect prevents acting in the manner normally attributed to the other category. Thus, it is quite possible to Being-do things in a game, as well as Doing-be in a diegetic environment.⁷ All experienced players subconsciously do this to some extent.⁸

With these factors in mind, a player's expectations of a good character and/or plot, and the narrative/anarrative desires of the game's designers can be matched. Neither the actions nor the influence of a character or plot



element will change, but the emotional enjoyment of all involved parties will be heightened as a result.

Please bear in mind that this does not mean that a player's BD-based requests should always be granted. Especially in long-term game campaigns it is quite possible for the game masters to mold a player's BD-ratio, as well as for a player to adapt his or her BD-expectations to optimize with the character's potential.

Approach Two: Manipulation of the Perikhoresis State

A role-playing character and its player's sense of self exist in a state where each is influenced by the other.⁹ The character derives new information from the player and is, when necessary, spontaneously expanded to new directions by him. At the same time, the player experiences new things with the character acting as both a mask enabling events not normally possible for the player and as a filter through which the player experiences only the parts of the game events which he deems necessary (or just interesting). In theology such a relationship of reciprocal penetration that leaves both parties intact is called "perikhoresis", a word that I've appropriated as suitable to describe the character-player interdependence and interaction.¹⁰

By manipulating one half of the perikhoresis relationship, it is possible to also influence the other.¹¹ For example, any discomfort experienced by a player usually transfers also to her character. Similarly a character experiencing a moment of physical intimacy will almost certainly produce reactions in its player. Thus, by using elements that actually force only the players to alter their state of being, a game's organizers can alter the mental and physical states of the characters, and through that create large-scale changes in the diegetic environment.¹²

The necessity of perikhoretic manipulation rises when games deal with sensitive subject matter. There are already a few recorded instances of it being absolutely necessary, such as the pre-game workshops on sexuality and body language done before the highly acclaimed *Mellan himmel och hav* in Sweden.¹³

A secondary version of this method has only recently been detected as being separate from the traditional rule of non-existence, which designates selected items that are present as non-diegetic (a door does not exist, the phone lines leading to the castle are not there, etc.). This technique, which



I refer to as “genre logic”, designates certain courses of action as unthinkable. While at the surface this may appear as just a thematic choice, it goes much further. In essence, by telling players that a genre logic rule is in effect their characters get re-edited so that they will now think and act according to the new rules and think of them as logical. This saves a lot of work with excuses, both for the game’s organizers – who no longer need a tree to block the only road away from the mansion - and the players – who no longer need to wonder why their character stays in a dangerous place.

Classical forms of this kind of manipulation are a murder mystery’s “you don’t want to leave”, a horror game’s “it will take a long time for small things to start looking suspicious” and a soap opera game’s “all character secrets must become public during the game’s course, but they must be told in an overtly dramatic, drawn-out manner.”¹⁴ As long as the game maintains its integrity as an extradiegetically enjoyable event, all internal manipulation is acceptable.¹⁵

Approach Three: Advance molding of expectations

This is actually a classic technique, but has only been appropriated to intentional use over the last couple of years. It is done by giving players a polished picture of the game beforehand, so that when the event itself actualizes, they have already been acclimatized to the necessary requirements. The methods used may vary, from a simple mention of theme and style in a game ad to a full series of preparatory workshops. Less obvious but often even more effective techniques are the use of thematic series in design and – quite simply – the reputation a game designer or design team has gained over the years.¹⁶

There are two notable sets of circumstances where advance molding is especially necessary. The first, more common one is an occasion where a game will include participants who are used to a completely different gaming paradigm. As stated above, this may result from having foreign players, but also where simply inexperienced participants used to just one style of playing exist. In those cases, invoking the theme and mood criteria, and explaining the basics of the paradigm the game was designed within, is often enough.

Explication of the game’s intended purpose may also prove helpful (“This game was created as just plain entertainment.”), but may occasionally prove counterproductive.¹⁷



A more rare, and much more difficult, instance is when a designer's, team's or series' reputation would work against the requirements of the game. Even most of these may be handled with the methods stated above, but occasionally a project will need more drastic preparation. When such a deadlock happens, it is best to analyze each needed piece on a case-by-case basis, and create an individual solution for it.¹⁸

Approach Four: Multi-Layering

The fourth method is more of a back-up plan, but may nevertheless prove useful. It is the idea that a game, regardless of genre, scale or style, should not happen on only one level. Basically this is similar to a movie being, for example, both an action film and a story of personal growth. But with the interaction and perikhoretic meta-levels available in role-playing games, the idea can be taken further. It is possible to build a net (or several nets) of correspondences between game elements that are not connected on the diegetic level.

As an example, imagine a low-fantasy game of court intrigue. On the basic level, it's simply part soap opera and part low-key action. Yet at the same time, on the first meta-level it has been designed as a political satire, and mirrors real-world events to a certain extent. If crafted well enough, only the participants interested in making such comparisons see the connection. Further on, a second meta-level consists of all characters being based on abstract metaphors, with their names reflecting this if examined properly. Again, this will only be obvious to those who enjoy such elements.

The creation of multiple layers not only enhances the experience for Doing-oriented players, it also creates a sense of meaning – and, of artistry – to a game, and helps it rise above the level of what are perceived as “common” works. Done well, it makes all parts of a game stronger, more intense. Westlund's *Storyteller Manifesto* includes a very good version of this for narration-heavy games.¹⁹ Note that, as Westlund's statement suggests, the layers need not be very far apart, nor do they have to be obscure. What is necessary is that a player desiring a bigger picture with thematic connections will be able to find one.

Conclusion

Creating a larp is relatively easy. Making them really good games with a meaning or goal is not. Game designers need to go further than before, in



both examining the external and internal participant motivation expectations of their players, and making sure the game's structure corresponds with those. In order for this to happen, the players must be ready to quantify their expectations to a certain extent, and communicate that information to the people creating games. Not only on the level of *"I'd like to play an evil person with lots of intrigue"* but also *"...because I like to have lots to do in games"* or *"...because trying to be such a person in this game might be interesting."* Immersion and simulation are to be seen as side effects of the Being/Doing ratio, not as goals, tools or enemies in themselves. Note that neither of these approaches, Being or Doing, is better than the other. The important thing is that the motivation is realized, and treated accordingly by correct character design and player placement.

Likewise all manipulation done in order to enhance the game's effectiveness for players of different kinds should be both utilized by the designers and appreciated by the players. Especially when games with a message are concerned. Winnicott states: *"There is a direct development from transitional phenomena to playing, and from playing to shared playing, and from this to cultural experiences."*²⁰ All attempts to keep that chain intact in games should be respected.

Notes

¹ This refers mainly to the generic American/Nordic division, but it bears noting that even within the "Nordic larp scene" generalization there are both gaming groups and prominent larp designers who do not consider this division relevant. Likewise, individuals interested in such issues naturally exist outside the Nordic area, but so often as a minority within their local gaming cultures that generalizations like these can be made.

² For example, Sweden has a long-standing tradition of government subsidizing, players used to higher game prices and larp organizations offering a financial security net. Thus the Swedish default paradigm is that of a game being acceptable as "high-quality" when it has been sufficiently large in scale and its extradiegetic game environment has been made as close as possible to what the diegetic game environment would look and feel like. Finnish game design, lacking those resources, has evolved into the opposite. The default paradigm there is that a "high-quality game" is conducted in small scale and with the idea that the game material should be so effective that as few extradiegetic elements as possible should be necessary. Large-scale games are seen as "pandering to the public". Bear in mind that this is the most clear-cut example. As a direct counterpoint, it must be noted that Norway, despite not having a subsidization system, has a paradigm very close to the Swedish one. And Denmark, despite having an almost as strong fiscal larp support system as that in Sweden, has a paradigm closer to the Finnish one. An alternative



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explanation hypothesis to the reasons in paradigm difference has been suggested by Eirik Fatland, according to whom there is a definite correlation between the scale issue and local, historical tabletop role-play/larp connection. By this hypothesis, countries like Sweden and Norway, where larps evolved without any major tabletop role-playing connections, favor large-scale experimentation. And countries such as Denmark and Finland, with a strong connection between the two forms of role-play, favor smaller experimentation closer to the format of an “rpg session”.

³ An even more harmful effect is that they make the transferal of useful results from one gaming culture to another – even with distortion, let alone without it – a rare occurrence.

⁴ External participant motivation (EPM) is roughly describable through the question “why do I want to play”, whereas internal participant motivation (IPM) is describable with “how do I want to experience in the game”. Note that IPM includes both diegetic and extradiegetic expectations.

⁵ And would thus have a Disinterest ratio of 20%.

⁶ Theoretically, a player with a 100% Being ratio would enter a state of Diegetic Psychosis, in which he would consider every aspect of the game an actual, “real” fact. Likewise, a 100% Doing ratio would lead to Diegetic Dissociation, in which a player’s actions would be completely separate from the surrounding reality on both diegetic and extradiegetic levels. Such states have not been documented outside anti-role-playing propaganda.⁷ An idealized Bd state would be similar to a Zen exercise in which every aspect of an action is experienced as a continuation of one’s existence. A very accurate depiction of what a total Db state would be like can be found in J-K Huysmans’ novel *A Rebours* (1884).

⁸ An earlier version of this theory used German words (“Machen” and “Sein”) to illustrate the difference between the mental state and the resulting action, but the practice has been discarded due to it resulting in an easily misinterpreted abbreviation, the “BDSM ratio”.

⁹ This follows the normal construction pattern of the everyday self. “We must keep in mind that self construction is a complex process that responds to multiple ‘layers’ of interpretive constraint and narrative resources. While discursive pattern is always local, those contingencies that are bought to bear at any particular place and time coalesce from a vast array of possibilities, including those taken from broader cultural understandings such as might be drawn from race, gender, class, and myriad other configurations of meaning.” Holstein & Gubrium 2000, 167. Experiences of the constructed “social” self reflect back on the self-perceived “core self traits”.

¹⁰ I follow here the lettering of the original Greek word. The term originally represents the relationship of the human and divine parts in Christ.



¹¹ “In playing, the child manipulates external phenomena in the service of the dream and invests chosen external phenomena with dream meaning.” (Winnicott 1971/1980, 51). Exactly the same relationship exists within a larp participant’s mind, and therefore presents a way to designate the “dream” (diegetic) meaning of events and elements.

¹² For example, games such as *Luminescence* and *White Stains* used systems of communication based on required physical contact in order to provoke deeper, perikhoretic reactions to diegetic elements and thus reinforce the diegetic experience itself by providing player-level emotional feedback to it.

¹³ The game is also noteworthy for perikhoretic character theory, because unlike other noteworthy games about sexual roles in society, it had several male players publicly worry about having to play out elements of love that were normal behavior within the game’s four-gendered diegesis, but to them seemed extradiegetically homosexual. This is a clear example of an explicated, pre-empted perikhoretic reaction.

¹⁴ This method is most suitable for plot and story arc-oriented games, but may provide new innovative forms of game expression also to highly immersion-oriented games by introducing factors that can not be presented by staging alone.

¹⁵ “Playing is essentially satisfying. This is true even when it leads to a high degree of anxiety. There is a level of anxiety that is unbearable and destroys playing.” Winnicott 1971/1980, 52.

¹⁶ Thematic series are campaigns that are interconnected solely through themes and/or methods, not by reappearing characters or continuing storylines.

¹⁷ Usually by making the players very paranoid about the presumed “real intent” of the designers, even if that does not actually exist.

¹⁸ For example, the Finnish game *Mehiläiset Saapuvat* (“Honeybees Arrive”) was advertised as having a completely fictional author in order to prevent player preconceptions from intruding into its diegesis and to present new opportunities for narrative control.

¹⁹ “All intrigues, plots and fates must mirror the story or advance it. ... It should be possible to draw parallels between the character’s conflicts and the conflicts of the story.” Westlund 2004, 253.

²⁰ Winnicott 1971/1980, 51.