

# Deconstructing Larp Analysis

## Or, “Let’s Recognize a Bias Where There Is One”

*The last few years have seen a marked increase in both general role-playing and specific larp analysis. The major problem, as this provocation will show you, is no longer in the quantity or skill of willing analysts, but in their limited fields of study. Personal issues, most commonly represented by whether or not an analysis follows a theoretical or a utilitarian template, further complicate the situation.*

**D**espite the situation being the product of a long-term evolution, I have chosen most of my examples from the 2003 book *As Larp Grows Up* due to its easy accessibility online. It also serves as a demonstration on what is supposedly most up-to-date research of the subject. Furthermore, it symbolizes my (very subjective) opinion that currently practically all valuable larp analysis of any kind is done within, or at least in tight connection to, the Nordic larp scene.<sup>1</sup> Some of my footnotes have been left intentionally vague due to the fact that the articles they refer to must be analysed in their entirety, and thus the results I refer to cannot be pointed out by textual samples. I strongly suggest re-reading them with a critical eye before making any comments about the validity of this deconstruction.

Welcome to the quagmire.

### First, the Feet. Agenda.

Even a quick glance at the best-known larp-applicable theories and “theories” such as the *Threefold Model* displays a phenomenon common to low-quality science: the interference of personal agendas on objectivity. While it’s quite easy to point at several examples that recognize this problem and deal with it, it is also clearly observable that those are practically all “manifestoes for improvement” or “vows of chastity” concerning their creator’s own work, not scientific studies or attempts at objective analysis. They are representations of what their writers want larps – or at least their own larps – to be. And, as a result, too limited to be considered as phenomenologically explanatory.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Readers desiring a cultural comparison should have a look at Young (ed.), *The Book of Larp*. (Interactivities Ink Ltd 2003). It exemplarily displays that while Nordic-centred larp literature currently concentrates on issues of “what” and “why”, the North American scene is (still) very much tied to the issue of “how”.

When one does go for actual analysis, it is invariably driven by an agenda. The analyst intentionally creates either a theoretical model or a utilitarian one, only rarely mixing those two together. The end result is thus of very limited use, being either a descriptive hypothesis with no recommended applications or a bunch of helpful hints with no real information content to back it up<sup>2</sup> Only the general context therefore makes the results usable, not any innate quality of the studies themselves.

It can be argued that creating theories for their own sake is a valuable contribution, in this context pure academic speculation is actually harmful to the subject at hand. Likewise, while a “how-to” guide does provide occasional observable changes (called “improvements” but not necessarily qualifiable as such) to games, without a concept-bound frame of interpretation it is impossible to convey the real value of those changes.

## Knees In. Vorverständnis.

A far more insidious danger is created by unscientific presumptions.<sup>3</sup> The findings of larp analysts correspond alarmingly well with what they themselves claim they set out to find.<sup>4</sup> This partially correlates with the selection of methods. It is nevertheless primarily a product of the researcher’s own attitude towards larp and larping as a phenomenon, made possible by the diversity of game participants and the unmeasurability of their game experiences. The same can be said of all role-playing studies, though.

An analyst interested in immersion is likelier to observe factors that result in an immersionism-supportive conclusion.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, one seeking correlation with theatrical expression has a higher probability of finding it. At the very least, they will both find indicators interpretable as supporting their initial assumptions. Given the nature of the subject and variables like the immersion/simulation split, the same indicators can even be presumed to support mutually exclusive viewpoints.

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<sup>2</sup> A clear exception to this is the Meilahti model, which presents analytic observations on the phenomenon of larp but is not actual analysis in itself. As an application of available data it is a far superior work to most similar manifestoes. It fails on the “isolation” criterion, though, due to drawing most arguments from the works of the authors themselves or their close associates.

<sup>3</sup> For an example of pure-form theory see Gade, 2003. For an example of essentially contextless item application see Salomonsen, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> I’ve borrowed the German word “Vorverständnis” (literally “pre-understanding”) which Biblical scholars use to describe this problem from hermeneutic theory, as the phenomenon at hand is essentially the same. The difference with an agenda or a pre-existing theory later supported by finding suitable facts is that Vorverständnis is a primarily subconscious element, an obstruction the researcher is not herself aware of.

<sup>5</sup> For example, in *The Two Faces of Immersion* (in Panclou, issue 7, 2003) Montola categorically states that “[The character] is the lens through which the player reflects the fictional situation, and a safeguard protecting the player from the diegetic framework”, then proceeds to essentially prove that very point as key in Montola, 2003 while seemingly analyzing interaction. Note that the Panclou article in question has been written far earlier than its publication date would suggest.

<sup>6</sup> Best realized by referencing anything Mike Pohjola has written.

The problem gets complicated further by the *Vorverständnis* containing fixed elements, significant by negation-oriented expectations such as “X is a bad thing” or “Y doesn’t exist” and/or blanket statements like “games of type X are better”.<sup>7</sup> By introducing such factors into the equation the analyst completely disrupts the validity of her work, making its use solely dependant on the adaptability of any suggestions it contains.

Recognizing one’s own *Vorverständnis* is much harder than it initially seems. It is not a singular factor that can be eliminated, but a set of varying dispositions complicated by personal gaming preferences. For example, a typical Nordic *Vorverständnis* includes the view on whether a player is an immersionist or a simulationist, and a feeling of value based on that assumption. It is possible to at least partially eliminate pre-understanding by public trend analysis, which is presumably one of the key purposes of this entire book.

## Waist Deep. Scientific Background.

The fragmentation of the field, as stated above, is connected to the forms of analysis used. This is a direct result of the analysts being either non-paid volunteers applying their own areas of expertise to the subject, or, very rarely, professional academics using larp-study as material for their own projects. Either way, this results in a very limited view of the concept of larp, bound by the requirements and limitations of the chosen methodology.<sup>8</sup> In the case of project-oriented research, it also locks the results very firmly to another pre-existing subject, such as media or drama studies.

The positive side of this effect is that professionals well versed in the techniques they are using study larps and larping. Unfortunately it also renders their findings practically unusable to most other larp researchers, let alone the layman public. Some well-explained exceptions do of course exist, but even those are more tied to the material handled, not the intent of the researcher.<sup>9</sup> This, in my opinion, is the real key to the current semi-futility of all larp research, a question I will return to below.

A secondary benefit that must be noted is that this native-field approach occasionally raises external awareness of larp analysis, bringing in new analytic talent by showing that in a given context (such as media studies) game analysis can be considered valid scientific research.

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<sup>7</sup> This is commonly observable in the analysis of persons responsible for larp manifestoes or guides (my own works included). By semantics-based ideology categorization, a text explaining an aspect of role-playing using descriptive language is a “theory”, a text using normative language a “manifesto”, a text using absolute language a “model” and a text using hortative language a “guide”. Each of these categories can be the result of either an agenda, *Vorverständnis* or – typically – both.

<sup>8</sup> A phenomenon one notices easily by simply looking at the academic credits of the writers of this book and comparing them to their articles’ information content.

<sup>9</sup> Andreasen, 2003 is an excellent example. While representing the “pure-form theory” template, it has been constructed in an easily interpretable form even though no clear applications are given in it.

## Up to the Neck. Isolation.

Understandably not satisfied with just the limits created by their background, larp analysts end up gathering in small cliques of like-minded people. Being outside such a cell results in one's research being more or less ignored by that group. This is not due to academic snubbing or social one-upmanship, but rather a simple case of information not reaching its intended target audience. Furthermore, without those interpersonal relations to explain one's views even a received message gets easily distorted.<sup>10</sup>

This has led to a degenerative state where it's normal practice to completely ignore larp theories that one is not personally connected to. Even the works of one's close associates more often than not get a polite nod, nothing more.<sup>11</sup> The sole exception are the so-called "classics", which are – correspondingly – almost mandatory to reference.

This is a practice that would be completely anathema to any self-respecting field of academia or hard science, but in larp studies it has become nearly normative. The phrase "recent trends in larp research" has sadly become synonymous with "*my* most recent ideas".

Unlike the other targets of criticism here, this problem has actually been addressed to a limited degree. Recent years have seen a marked effort to create a universal system of terminology all larp researchers could use. At the same time, by affixing key words with a limited meaning the analytic community has restricted their use.<sup>12</sup> The end results of such progression remain to be seen.

## Drowning. Gleeful Abandonment.

Compounded together, these isolated minor problems produce a bigger handicap: A gap has formed between research and application. Not only within the research itself, but in how the findings get treated. As the ignorance and impracticality increase step by step (the way I state above), the products themselves fall by the wayside. A theory becomes "valid" by getting publicized and then ignored, not by any process of actual verification.

The best one can hope for after creating a theory and finding corresponding evidence to support it (typically in this order) is to get a few critical responses from friends, possibly even a handful of postings on some supposedly analytical list or forum. But that is the utmost limit.

In direct opposition to normal sciences, no outside test-runs are made. Theories remain personal pets of their owners, eventually resulting in manifestoes about a "school

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<sup>10</sup> As displayed most prominently in Petter Bøckman's Dictionary at the end of *As Larp Grows Up*.

<sup>11</sup> Montola, 2003 is an excellent example of this practice. It creates an appearance of continuity while actually staying isolated.

of thought". But what are these, essentially? Not theories seeking a holistic view of the hobby/lifestyle/medium/art form. They are, intents aside, purely trade marks. Regardless of original intent, they, and the theories behind them, degenerate into customer advice on what one can expect from a specified group of game designers.

Any suggestions to the contrary meet with exceptional amounts of resistance, formulated into value-statements equating "you're simply wrong, and I don't want to waste my time on your bad idea" or, at best, into "that's just not *my* design style". For analysis, this is catastrophic. We have several decades' worth of published research (with a few exceptions, most of it from within the last couple of years, though), and the only things that get taken into general game design account are *direct* improvement hints paraphrased from (mis)understanding that research, and a couple of convenient pieces of jargon.

## Lifelines?

I will give no corrective assistance, just a few possibly helpful suggestions. The only real way out is by determined avoidance of the pitfalls I have listed above. Avoidance. Because as soon as one yields to one of these dangers, the slow descent into complete loss of functionality inevitably begins.

A possible start to a better direction might be the willingness of game writers and organizers to utilize the research provided in recent years. This may or may not involve the same people who do the analysis, something that does not even matter, because the important thing would be to use theories provided by others in planning one's own games. That would both test the theories and create an idea that studying the subject field actually matters. This is the final obstacle: lack of external reception keeps the research under. Fixing all of the internal problems will not help if the findings, flawed as they may be, are ignored by those who actually arrange games.

At the moment we're on the level of academic masturbation. Let us move on to intercourse.

## Selected Bibliography

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