

## Narrative Function

### A Larpwright's Tool

*Narrative function is a method aimed at helping larpwrights create involving larps. I believe that one of the main attractions of larping is the possibility for participating in interesting and moving tales. I also believe that ensuring that all attending players are essential participants (instead of just extras) should be the larpwright's primary concern. True immersion in the character, on the other hand, is primarily a private affair and furthermore not attainable, nor desired, by all larpers. On the basis of that, I believe that facilitating immersion shouldn't be a major priority of the larpwrights in the construction of a larp, as the potential for immersion depends much more on the individual players. Ensuring that each player has a part in the story is something that, on the contrary, will benefit all players, and is largely dependent on the larpwrights.*

The method at hand is a narrativistic one, in that it facilitates narrativist play, but it does not necessarily prohibit other playing styles. As I am outlining a narrativistic method, I also feel compelled to make a few remarks on what in my opinion is the greatest pitfall of narrativistic larp; the dominant type of story in our culture. It is important to remember that larp, as any other medium, makes certain demands on the stories to be told. Because the experience of participation is so important, telling linear stories with a main character and a supporting cast (as most films and books do) is fundamentally wrong. In the craft of the larpwright, it is important to be aware of the nature of mainstream storytelling, and its incompatibility with our medium.

By simple habit larpwrights will often conjure stories that revolve around main characters and central storylines, just as the players by the very same habit will search for and attempt to identify the main narrative. They will label this story as the important one, and its participants as the main characters. The result is the all too familiar situation where the players are divided into three groups, the ones who are part of the main plot, the ones who are trying to get into the main plot, and those who never got the opportunity. In these larps, the experience of participation is reserved for a select few.

A larp should contain a multiplicity of stories, a spectrum of individual experiences that together tell the story of a place, a situation and the people there. It shouldn't be about the few main characters and their important story, in which the other players are used as a backdrop or supporting cast. The challenge, then, is to break the

bonds of cultural habit and create a different kind of story; one that is equally important and interesting from all points of view.

## The Method

The core concept of the method is that of deconstructing the larpwright's vision, breaking it down into its essential narrative elements, and formulating narrative functions based on them. A narrative function is a task, a responsibility to the larp as a whole, which is used as the basis of a character and communicated openly to the player in question. In this way, each character supplies the larp with a needed narrative element; the characters being created to meet the needs of the larp rather than the opposite.

It is important to note, however, that narrative function is not the same as the character's motivation. Narrative functions aren't real within the larp as fictional reality, only within the larp as a story. The difference might be subtle to some, but it is nevertheless important and distinct.

### 1. Defining the Vision

The first step is to define the initial idea of the game into a vision. Having a general idea about a larp is not the same as having a Vision. The idea must be explored, as must the intentions and expectations of the larpwright. If the larp is to have a message, whether in the form of a statement or a question, this must be established. Things such as levels of realism, freedom accorded the players and ambitions as art must also be decided. Other common points to clarify would be the scale of the project, ambitions of innovation and the use of such things as genre.

Time and effort must be expended to ensure that the whole group of larpwrights share the same Vision, and everyone involved must be aware of and agree on how much time and effort it will take to realise it.

It is vital to not get too specific at this point. Visions are not very detailed; they are about the *whats*, not the *hows*. The final Vision should be a clearly formulated summary, in writing, of what the larp should be as a coherent whole.

### 2. Analysing the Vision

When the larpwright knows what he wants, it's time to consider how to achieve it. Analyzing the Vision is perhaps the most crucial stage of the process. In aiming to deconstruct the vision, the larpwright should carefully pick apart the coherent idea and see what it is made of, or rather; what it *could* be made of. After all, there are several possible ways of interpreting any given Vision, several conceivable constellations of narrative elements that might bring about the same general result. The process of breaking down the vision into separate narrative elements will probably result in the vision being refined and maybe slightly changed. This is not a problem.

The larpwright should remember that the larp at the end of the process is the actual goal, not adherence to a specific method. It might be useful to start with the grand lines of the vision, the central themes and moods, the main conflicts and the message, if present.

Central questions should be identified. Which worldviews must be represented? Which symbols are essential? Are violence and fear present? Love and hope? Revolution? Fanaticism? Are there specific themes that must resound throughout the game and need repeating on many levels of play?

Conflicts, as these are essential to driving the game forwards, should be identified as well. The larpwright should consider the moods he wished to convey, and whether contrasting moods are needed to make them stand out. Starting with the big picture, and working downwards, without regard for the players' part in this yet, is a good strategy. This is still an abstract and structural overview.

### 3. Separating the Setting and the Characters

The characters are not the only bearers of meaning within the larp. Other parts of the game can also represent necessary narrative elements, and at least some of them should do so. Some narrative elements are difficult to bring into the game by characters, and are better represented by non-player structures.

A larpwright should by now have a list of necessary narrative elements. He then divides this list in two by picking out those elements he wants to be brought to the game by players, leaving the rest to be introduced through the setting. With this in mind, he can start shaping the setting of the larp. Everything in the setting doesn't have to represent a specific narrative element. In fact, this might make the purpose of its construction so blatantly visible that it feels less real and believable. There is nothing wrong with including elements in the setting that are quite unrelated to the larp's overall themes, simply for flavour and diversion. Generally, it's a good idea to let the central elements of the setting be part of the narrative structure of the larp, and include other elements for added depth and scope. Of course, it is also important that these elements aren't counterproductive. They should elaborate, embellish and improve the story, but never diminish its narrative strength. Take care to ensure that the setting doesn't accidentally contradict itself thematically, as this will greatly weaken the narrative structure of the larp.

### 4. Formulating Narrative Functions

Taking the list of narrative elements chosen for the players, a larpwright can start creating the narrative functions that will ensure the presence of those elements in the larp. This is accomplished simply by transforming the required elements into clearly defined tasks for players to handle. Each player is given a clear and specific obligation to the whole of the larp, making clear what *his* essential contribution to the story is supposed to be.

Once this is done, the functions should be committed to paper. Writing them down in as short and concise a form as possible is recommended, as there will be time to elaborate later. It's important that the narrative function is firm enough to build a good character on and around. It should be a sentence or two, not half a page of prose.

## 5. Creating the Characters

With the recently formulated narrative functions in hand, a larpwright can start working out the characters and their internal relationships. The methods that can be employed in character creation are legion, and choosing one or a few is largely a matter of personal taste. The essential point is that the character should logically follow from its assigned narrative function. It should be created so that simply playing true to the character equals fulfilling its function. This is extremely important if the player in question is a dedicated immersionist, because it is hard to consider the needs of the story while immersing.

## Elaborations and Complications

There are many kinds of narrative functions, but they can be roughly divided into three groups: *structure-building*, *conflict-driving* and *mood-setting*. There is, of course, considerable overlap between the groups. Creating functions that do not fit neatly into any of them is also possible. These groups might be called meta-functions, as they describe the general purpose of a function belonging to them. They are dependent on context, in that a given narrative function could be mood-setting in one larp, but conflict-driving in another. For example, 'being the angry man' can be conflict-driving in a larp about the conflicts arising from newcomers arriving in a peaceful village where anger is taboo, but mood-setting in a larp about finding friends and building trust in a hostile environment.

**Structure-building** functions create and maintain structures in the story. These can take many forms, the structures being open or secret, formal or informal. A structure could be an organization or just a single character; it could also be tradition, work-routines or procedures for handling situations. The structures of the larp are the solids of the story, the bones of the tale. Structures can be challenged and overthrown, or be the unchallengeable absolutes of the narrative. They can be helpers or obstacles, or both, depending on the perspective. Examples of typical structure-building functions are:

- Making the town militia work, maintaining harsh law and order.
- Being the local rumour-monger, making sure that keeping secrets is nearly impossible.
- Keeping religiousness and Christian Duty at the front of everyone's mind as the preacher of a small frontier town in Arizona.

- Personifying some arch- or stereotype, like the wise old woman, the impressionable youngster, or the glib seller of second-hand cars.

**Conflict-driving** functions are about wanting something, or very much *not* wanting something. A story needs conflict to drive it forward, although this doesn't necessarily mean violence, or even enmity. There are many classic conflicts, like dynamics vs. stasis, good vs. evil, order vs. chaos and so on. Conflicts in a larp shouldn't be entirely abstract; a conflict of ideas should be represented by something more worldly and concrete, because this creates more emotion and play than debating on an abstract level does. Conflict-driving functions will usually need to be balanced carefully against an opposition, usually another conflict-driving or a structure-building function. Balancing is important to avoid a single conflict dominating and streamlining the narrative, which is usually undesirable. Remember to take into account the individual players' style of play, force of personality, and social skills, when balancing the conflicts of the larp. Examples follow:

- As a schoolmistress, speaking out for reason, science and atheism in the frontier town of Arizona.
- Opposing the chief of the village at every turn.
- Being egoistic and greedy, trying to profit from every relation, having rapidly built power to threaten the other vampires of the city.
- Introducing the concept of private property in a communitarian society, by refusing to share and attempting to buy goods from others.

**Mood-setting** functions are extremely important, and challenging for a player to fulfil. Setting the mood of the game is vital, as this colours the whole experience for everybody. It is of particular importance to be specific and clear when formulating these, as they deal with less tangible things than conflicts and structures. Moods can be set by actions bringing out emotions in others, or by exhibiting emotions yourself. The use of symbols and symbolic actions can be helpful, but clichés should be avoided at all costs, as these will detract from the mood. Making use of contrasts can be very effective. Examples below:

- Bringing in feelings of despair and madness, and the fear of succumbing to them, by slowly losing your sanity.
- Evoking a mixture of pity and laughter, being a crippled clown.
- Randomly abusing and punishing the servants, making their work environment feel hostile.
- Creating a mood of urgency and effectiveness in the office.

## The Hidden Structure

While the narrative function should always be communicated clearly to the player, it's not necessarily a good idea to reveal the entire narrative structure of the larp. If the 'mechanic' structures that shape the story become too obvious, the magic and impact of the narrative tends to fade. On the other hand, some narrative functions are impossible to maintain without the direct support of other players. This means that the distribution of information about the narrative structure is something every larpwright must consider carefully, handing out enough information to the right players to make it work, while maintaining the surprises and the magic that participating in a good story should bring. One should remember, however, that it's always better to hand out a bit too much information, than handing out a bit less than needed. Overlooking things one knows is easy; knowing things one doesn't is not.

## Active and Reactive Functions

A narrative function should usually be of an active nature, meaning that it should be possible for the player to actively attempt to fill it within the game. On the other hand, one could also make functions that are reactive; the player responding in specific ways to certain events, rather than initiating play. Grandfather Grump could, for example, fiercely oppose any and all attempts to change the ways things have always been done, but without actively working to maintain them. A special use of reactive functions could be called the 'mob-function'. By including the same reactive function in an appropriate number of characters, detailing a specific behaviour in response to a certain kind of trigger action, the reactions in the larp can be shaped as a community. The most obvious purpose is the creation of spontaneous mobs of people, reacting to something in a way that fits the story – to, for instance, ensure that the farmers become the bloodthirsty lynch mob they should when someone claims to have found a witch. Farmers in larps often fail horribly in doing this, usually because of the players' contemporary morals, and not due to their characters high regard for the right to a fair trial.

## Supporting Functions

A player could have a narrative function intended to support another player's ability to fulfil a demanding narrative function. It is important that such supporting functions are not mere repetitions or weaker copies of the supported function, but interesting in their own right. If they're not, they should at least not be a player's primary function.

As an example, the wicked Countess Impuna has the narrative function 'personifying the oppressive nobility of the country'. Her right-hand man and oppressive iron fist, Captain Bragg, has a supportive function. By behaving like the brutish lieutenant of an oppressive Countess, beating up farmers who bend knee too slowly, bringing less than willing young men and women to the Countess' bedchamber and generally being a bastard wherever he goes, he can reinforce the image of the Countess as an evil oppressor. A supporting function could also work by contrast; the cowardly sidekick of the valiant hero is the classic example of this.

## Multiple Functions

There is nothing wrong with giving a character more than one function. A character should usually have one primary function, but there is no reason not to give it one or more secondary functions, although it's not necessarily a requirement. Secondary functions may be functions of a supportive or reactive nature, or something completely different. For example, the aforementioned Captain Bragg could have 'portraying a traitor to his class, the farmers', as his secondary function. This would give the villagers' enmity towards him an extra dimension, and introduce the divide-and-conquer tactics employed by the nobility.

## Group Functions

Instead of basing each character on a narrative function, one could give a whole group of players a narrative function to fulfil. The characters will then act as a group in the game, but this group doesn't necessarily have to be of an overt nature. One could, for example, give each of the members of the 'Secret n'Evil Society' the secondary function 'to spread fear and suspicion in the village as a group'. The players will then be doing this in addition to maintaining the narrative functions their characters fill in their daytime personas. Group functions can be particularly useful in larps of a greater scope, where the larpwrights deal in factions of characters rather than in individual ones.

## Narrative Functions and Practical Responsibilities

One should always keep in mind that practical responsibilities and narrative functions are two different things. Giving a player practical tasks such as cooking is not the same as basing the player's character on an narrative function essential to the larp, although the practical function might be just as essential in its own way. This is not to say that the two may not be successfully combined, and even intermeshed. Care should be taken to ensure that players with extensive practical responsibilities also have the opportunity to fulfil their narrative function. Assigning reactive functions to these players will often work well. Whichever measures are used to avoid potential problems, one should always keep in mind that giving a player practical things to do is no reason to deny her or him a part in the story.

## Conclusion

Narrative functions are a tool and as such shouldn't be used as a purpose in itself, or pursued to an extreme. One will never make a larp fit perfectly into any method or theory, at least not without the larp suffering in quality. The ability to simply make the game work, without getting too caught up in method, theory, or ideology, is essential to larpwrights; the players are not the only ones in need of improvisational skills. As in all things creative, theory is one thing and practice is another; although hopefully not entirely. When a larpwright has decided to employ a method, it might be a good idea

to make an effort to stick to it. This article is intended to be a method for constructing the basic narrative structure of a larp in a way that will ensure that no player is an extra or irrelevant to the whole, and to ensure that all players participate in the same larp. Which, to me, are the most basic obligations of a larpwright.

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