

Rules of Engagement

In most larps there is, strangely enough, a far higher risk of the character getting killed than making love. It seems that amorous interaction such as lovemaking, cuddling, bugging or just holding hands in a sensual or sexual manner, is quite taboo. Many seem to believe that it might be difficult to separate between the player's and the character's feelings and that the risk of someone trying to take advantage of the situation or getting hurt is too big. During most games this is unfortunately probably true.

Typically “rules” are all about portraying physical situations that one doesn’t want the player to experience the same way as the character does and vice versa. A magician throwing a fireball or a blade hitting the character both require methods that make the events playable. It seems like the first genre of larp, just as the first genre of tabletop role-playing, was the typical hack ‘n’ slash in which the only methods needed would be those that simulate violence.

Since then role-playing themes have diversified and the methods have changed accordingly. Still, it is somewhat surprising how little the methodologies and thematic structures have changed. Perhaps there has been no demand for dramas without terror as primus motor and therefore there has been no need for methods unrelated to aggression – or maybe since there have been no effective methods, enacting other kinds of dramas have been too difficult.

Building the Stage

While drafting an agreement on what kind of interaction is to be expected, one in effect creates a safety net, or a stage, which will work as the frame of the game. By deciding beforehand what reactions are possible, it is easier for the players to experiment within their own limits and reach character emotions that they otherwise might feel too insecure to aim for. For example a common agreement is, regardless of rule-system, that no one will be stabbed by a real blade. This makes it possible for the opposing fighting units to clash and although the characters might experience fear of dying (a risk that they are apparently ready to take), the player won’t have to evaluate it quite as seriously. This keeps the fighting within the diegesis.

Obviously, these agreements should be general, applying to all such interaction since each player isn’t capable of communicating with all others beforehand on a one-to-one basis. Also, remembering who is comfortable with what can be difficult. It is simply

more straightforward to state what methods are to be used and then let the players decide if they want to take part in that when they sign up for the game.

When it comes to other strong emotions than aggression there haven't been such general agreements traditionally. Some might even ban amorous interaction altogether. The general strategy, however, seems to be open to the idea that if players want to act on strong emotions together they should work something out between them beforehand. This would, in comparison with building a stage together, be like pointing players to a pile of boards and nails.

This *laissez-faire* strategy is rather counterproductive from a safety point of view as it leaves much room for group pressure and miscommunication. Neither does it cover situations that arise during the game, i.e. situations that have not been prepared for. It also puts a big part of the interaction outside the diegesis, as it requires for the players to communicate borders and limits as the situation proceeds. That makes it virtually impossible for them to relax and for the character to fully experience the moment.

The discussion

Two of the strongest peaks of the human scale of emotions are aggression and lust. Whereas most people agree that the unleashed display of aggression would be a bad thing, even a discussion about the deployment of lust seems to be avoided. In its limited existence the discussion on acting out love on larps has, on most occasions, been banal. A typical example of the discussion is available as late as in December 2003 at the G-punkt forum¹ (author's summary):

In the thread *Sex och lajv* the issue of sex in larps was approached. The question was put forward as "Is it possible?" Not only was the poster thinking about doing a larp on prostitution and therefore might be perceived as quite ignorant in asking about sex, but the discussion also soon amounted to a typical debate on contraceptives and STDs. The discussion showed quite clearly that sex is understood as heterosexual, vaginal (pregnancy) and penetrative (STDs), limiting the possibilities of methods. It also shows that no general understanding has been reached (as it has been when it comes to violence).

The main schism lay in "in token" versus "in true". Tokenism was seen as using rules and thereby the debaters missed that both tokenism and "true" are possible methods (rules). Several of the posts also suggested that sex that isn't intercourse is either not sex or a simulation of sex. The only alternative to a token rules solution that was initially presented was clearly defining personal limits and responsibility.

The *positive power drama* strategy was formed partly as a counterpoint to this kind of reasoning (read more about that strategy in the other article by the author in this book) and has since then been a tool to bring the discussion to a more sensible level. The point being to be able to discuss the enacting of amorous (i.e. loving, sensual or sexual) situations in a way that allows participants to distinguish between player and character and to remove the uneasiness that seem to accompany the theme in many other discussions.

¹ *G-punkt* (eng. G-spot [sic]) hosts the Galadrim web forum at www.larp.com/galadrim/debatt/

Methods at hand

Although few larps have had any general agreement on deployment of methods for amorous situations, there have been methods available for those who wanted to play such scenes. Historically there seem to have been a couple of main “schools”:

- **WYSIWYG:** What you see is what you get. The participant acts out everything that the character does. There is no distinction between the player's and the character's actions, although there might be differences in how the player and the character interpret these actions and the reactions they provoke. Whether this means that it is acceptable for the participant to have intercourse as a character or the belief that a participant can in fact have intercourse completely in character are the main themes of discussion in this school. Deciding how far one wants to go is up to the individual.
- **Massage:** One participant gives a back massage to another participant who then groans to give players nearby something to react to. This line of thinking implies that sexual interaction can be normalised as something not mutual.
- **Conversation:** Participants talk through what happens – a fusion of larp and storytelling.
- **Clothes On:** The way of simulating intercourse where parties grind against each other with their clothes on. Quite often the mood is ironic or at least distanced rather than amorous. This seems to have been a quite common way of simulating a “harmless” version of rape in orc games in the past.

Still, the method that seems to have been most common (at least in Sweden), is where players that know in advance that their characters might have amorous encounters during the game talk through what areas of their respective bodies they are willing to let the other player touch – and then stick with that within the WYSIWYG method. Also, in games where safe words (such as *cut* and *brems*²) are used, these can be employed as possible safety net.

Hand-to-Hand Love Making

The most recent lovemaking method was created within the project *Mellan himmel och hav* (Between Heaven and Sea). It is both a very limiting and enabling method. The lovers restrict themselves to touching only each other's hands, arms, shoulders and necks as part of the lovemaking. Above armpit and below earlobes is permitted. To make

² Cut and brems are Norwegian expressions for cut and brake. Using brems means that the scene is progressing toward uneasy ground and the player told to brems should steer the situation in a different direction. Cut stops the game; participants leave the game area and talk through what just happened in the game.

this exciting they use eye contact, a lot of focus and vary the touch in sensual, rough or playful manners. Variations can be made where different usage might translate into different types of amorous interaction, but this has to be agreed on within the specific game.

Since the hands are very sensitive, most of the emotions that can be present in an amorous situation can be conveyed in this fashion. Only the hands, arms and neck are to be used in touching the other person. If mouth, tongue or teeth are employed it could easily get too intimate for the player/character distinction to be made. Sound, breathing and other body language communication is however possible means of amplifying the experience.

Using the Method

The *Ars Amandi method*³ has been used as the general agreement at two larps so far, Mellan himmel och hav and *Ringblomman* (The Marigold). It was also tested in an unfinished form at *Futuredrome*. The two larps that have used it were very different in themes and in their deployment of the method as well. Mellan himmel och hav was a science fiction game set in an alternative world and had seventy players. Ringblomman was a social game exploring communal living in 1978 with approximately thirty players.

There are basically two ways to use a method. Either it's a diegetic method (this is how the characters does it, e.g. Mellan himmel och hav) or it is a player method (this is what the player does to simulate something that the character experiences, e.g. Ringblomman). In the diegesis of Mellan himmel och hav intercourse was considered to be something very unpleasant that one only subjected oneself to in order to produce children. It was basically seen as the uncomfortable necessity; no sane person would ever think that having intercourse was something they did for pleasure. Instead, people made love using the *Ars Amandi* method and the main erogenous zones where simply diegetically placed there (hands, arms, neck).

This made it possible not only for the lovemaking to be gender-blind, but also for a diegetic distinction between those the characters could and would produce offspring with and those they only felt loving lust for. The hands, although highly eroticised, were of course also used for everyday things but the diegetic way to make love made a random touch of another's hand much more tantalising.

Ringblomman, being a historical game, had no such elements in its diegetic frame. The characters that made love during Ringblomman had sex the way most humans do, some by caressing and some by penetrative intercourse. The players, however, only touched the areas of the *Ars Amandi* method. This requires a tad more of the players' imagination and some might choose to translate touches into their different counterparts. Whether this is done by verbal communication, in the respective players imagination or by other means is left open to the players in that specific situation.

³ *Ars Amandi* means the art of lovemaking and is the name of the organizers' collective that produced both *Ringblomman* and *Mellan himmel och hav*.

The point of using the method here is to allow for the parties to explore and devote themselves to the situation without player interaction suddenly substituting character interaction.

The real challenge of using the method as a symbol for diegetic action is the shift between WYSIWYG interaction and method interaction. This worked very well in the game and also other sensual interaction like kissing could be worked in with touching cheek to cheek. During Ringblomman the method was used to enact everything from innocent teen love to dramatic games of dominance. This rather extensive testing of the method shows that it is very flexible since it works equally well in amorous situations that are sensual and esthetical as well as in other types of interaction.

Amorous and Not

The term *amorous* is an all-encompassing term for describing loving un-platonic interaction. It encompasses everything from suggestive eye contact to full blown sexual activity. In order for interaction to be amorous it has to be loving. That means that not all sexual, or even sensual, interaction can be seen as amorous. Both Ringblomman and Mellan himmel och hav were games produced within the positive power drama and the method was used exclusively to enact mutual interaction, even when used in a rougher fashion. It is however possible to use the method in more negatively coloured events and even in situations where the characters aren't necessarily consenting.

The method, being created for use within the positive power drama, is mainly intended to enable the making of amorous situations. It is however flexible enough to be used in other sexual or close to sexual interaction. It might also be even more important for the negative drama to use methods that separate the players' and characters' experiences. In the case of molestation or sexual abuse the areas of the method work just as well as the genital and breast areas. When a prostitute performs it is easy to interact without the spark and eye contact and to just stretch the arms forward inanimately. Using the method would in all likeliness enhance the experience of degradation and stop such interaction from being romanticized or done mindlessly.

Possibly the method could be used even in non-drama larps such as mainstream fantasy, generic cyberpunk games or costumes larps. A possible variation of the method might be to limit it to encompass only the arms (not hands and neck) in order to prevent it from being too powerful. The notion might sound strange to someone who hasn't tried the method, but it really should be considered in games where maximum intensity isn't a top priority.

Conclusions

A powerful method to enact amorous situation was greatly needed. Although the Ars Amandi method is a neat tool, it isn't everything one might wish for. There is definitely room for other methods that serve similar purposes just as there are several different systems for fighting. It seems to have worked rather well during the events it's been used in so far. What is especially striking is its flexibility. The downside of the method is however that it requires both concentration and, in the player method version, some imagination of the players using it.

One possible scenario is to expand the method into a larger system of methods (like the latex system is not one method but several disciplines of how to make weapons and use them). The cheek-to-cheek kissing is one such addition. Possible general area or touch "translations" might become available, usable in games where the difference between types of sexual interaction is important. Crossover versions usable in tabletop role-playing might evolve as well as lighter versions for non-drama larps. Another scenario is of course that the making of one such system inspires others to create other systems that are better suited for other types of interaction or that would be attractive to other types of gaming than the ones that the method has been used in so far.

The bottom-line of working with the Ars Amandi method is that it has proved very useful, both in diegetical and in player versions. The magic of making love without the involvement of any of the areas that are generally perceived as the parts involved in lovemaking is impossible to convey through text. What can be described are merely the why and the clinical how. The emotional impact is, like reactions to other amorous interaction, so individual that it is impossible to generalize. That is probably where the real virtue of the method lies; it truly begins in the people, not the frame, making them, rather than the method, the focus and simply letting them love and be loved.

Games

Futuredrome (2002) by Henrik Wallgren, Staffan Sörensson et al., Sweden

Mellan himmel och hav (2003) by Emma Wieslander, Katarina Björk et al., Sweden

Ringblomman (2004) by Karin Tidbeck et al., Sweden