

Positive Power Drama

A Theoretical and Practical Approach on Emotive Larping

Positive power drama is really an awareness raising campaign. The strategy was born out of frustration about the fact that almost each and every game had focused exclusively on the negative feelings in life. If themes such as friendship, love or partnership were used it was either within the background story, motivation for the terror the character experienced or inflicted, or in the context of a twisted or perverted version of the relationship not generating any of the positive experiences it could have.

What we perceive as possible will forever influence what we are willing to try. The methods we create for ourselves are therefore imperative, not only to the experience but also to the whole concept of theme. Desire to achieve what we dream is the reason for having methods to begin with. Although this is an article on methodology, it should definitely be understood from the perspective of wanting magical things to happen.

Larp, larping and role-playing in general can be seen from various angles and perspectives. This article focuses on two main areas: the method and the theme. The method can be described as the “How” and the theme as the “What”.

In the making of a larp a great number of methods are employed. Most of these are used without reflection, out of habit, or because thinking too much about the How can seem to draw energy from the What. These methods include everything from how the participants interact with each other and with the organisers before the event to how the characters are generated and the rules used in the game.

Apart from distinguishing between organisational methods and different kinds of rules, it is possible to differentiate the rule types more specifically depending on whether it is the player or the character that performs the action and abides with the rule. These can be categorized as diegetic (character) and simulation (player) rules. For example in *Knappnålsbuvudet* there were angels in the diegesis, the players were instructed to disregard them and the invisibility was a simulation just as the latex sword is used as a simulation for a real sword in most fantasy larps. In the diegesis of *Mellan himmel och bav* death was not primarily a physical event rather than a social state. The characters were taught to disregard the dead people and the invisibility was a rule within the diegesis, just as one could create a world where latex swords are as deadly

to its inhabitants as metal blades are in our world, and that then would be a diegetical rule.

The theme is quite often understood in a limited fashion as the genre or the diegetic frame of a game. In this article the term is used in a broader sense to also include some of the less visible Whats, such as the dramatic curve, mood phases and emotional aims of the production.

Positive power drama is neither a method nor a theme but rather a system of thought, or a perspective, that aims to increase awareness about the methods and themes chosen.

Using Methods

Method, as defined here, encompasses all the different strategies and possibilities of action. This means that, whichever way something is carried out, a method is always employed implicitly or explicitly. Most games are created without giving much thought to the majority of the methods used. In general there will be a decision on what methods (rule systems) will be used for aggression and negativity. Methods for other types of interaction are typically left up to the individual players. (See Wieslander 2004).

To declare the use of methods is to communicate what is to be expected from the game. The safe word methods (words that seems foreign in the characters normal language and that holds other meanings to the players such as cool down, stop the game or I'm ok. e.g. cut, brems, hold) are a brilliant example of how an agreement has enabled players to engage in situations that might have been, or perceived to have been, too risky to enact without a method. Possibly, having any method at all is better than not having one from the perspective of creating an environment in which the player feels comfortable enough to let the character take risks. As *Futuredrome* clearly demonstrated, the setting means nothing if the participants haven't reached an agreement on what will be done by which means. *Futuredrome* was a multi-art project that used a cyberpunk end-of-the-world party as a setting. Although everyone attending were supposed to be in character while in the game area not everybody present chose to participate in the game. As a result of this the different expectations lead both to hurt feelings and to physical damage. The organisers hadn't communicated any methods regarding diegesis other than how the world was perceived from a character perspective. Methods for interaction was left up to the individual players, which led to difficult inter-group interaction as well as to a clash between drunken concertgoers not involved in the game and players playing challenging characters.

Positive Power Drama

Positive power drama was originally introduced at Knutpunkt 2002. Since then it has formed into a theoretical viewpoint for discussing themes and methods within larps. The intention of the discussion is simply to argue that organizers do have a choice with

regards to both methods and themes, and that the possibilities are much greater than what has been explored so far. In 2003 it was given a cousin in the *Humane strategy* (Gunnerud & Wieslander 2003) focusing not on the diegetic aspects as much as on the equality and collegial spirit in organizing larps.

Drama?

The term drama has, in the larp discourse, to a certain degree become synonymous with the concept of tragedy only. From that point of view it might seem obvious to question any existence of a positive drama. Drama, the way it is interpreted here, is rather used to describe dynamics, conflicting interests, and more importantly, changes in tempo, emotional states and in story direction. Whether it is tragic or not is not necessarily implied.

That the word positive is used should not be mistaken for cosiness or general feelgood. The concept simply means that dramaturgy primarily focuses on the feelings we generally attribute as "good". Just as the negative dramas sometimes use good things such as love and friendship as motivators it is not strange, in order to achieve dynamics, to use the death of a loved one, jealousy or other negative emotions as contrasts in the positive drama. What is important, however, is that the theme in the greater sense is not aimed at sending a message of hopelessness and perishableness of life and happiness but rather that there is in fact both beauty and hope.

The Agenda

All larps have agendas. Some strive to entertain, some leave the agenda up to individual players, while others kindle a more ambitious political idea. The more defined the agenda gets, the more important is the awareness of the implications of the chosen methods. The different larps that can be described as drama larps (e.g. *De tusen rosornas väg*, *OB 7*, *Europa*, *Hamlet*) have, in spite of the difference in genre, all chosen methods emphasising the negative twist on their stories.

Unfortunately very few larps, even among the drama larps, have an openly communicated agenda. Even fewer seem to be aware of (or care about) the effects the larp might have on the lives and opinions of the participants. By not communicating the plan and the theme of the larp, the organizers limit the participants' possibilities to be fellow creators. The unawareness and lack of openly discussed themes make the outcomes less predictable, an unwanted variable if some kind of statement is wanted to be made with the event.

The Full Monty

Regardless of reasons, limiting an entire form of dramatised production to either aimless entertainment or to tragedy seems wasteful. There are many areas in society where an ambition to go further than before seems to be in opposition with expanding and exploring the possibilities. Tabloids, for example, weekly feature articles on how to reach various sorts of orgasms, but in that process the smaller things are lost. We are left

with a public medium that has gone “as far as possible”, while having actually explored a very limited area. Rather than expanding media in a way to make the explicitly sexual possible as well as other eroticism, it’s been done in an excluding manner implying that change is something linear.

These tendencies can be seen though out the mainstream western society, influencing the very perception of sex and sensuality to the extent that any discussion, even in larp methodology, focuses on the extreme expressions as the main points of the issue. Possibilities are limited, not because we weren’t able to perceive and be strongly touched by them, but because people, in one way, are desensitised, or numbed, as it becomes explicit rather than mystical.

Showing “everything” has become just another way to only show a piece of the puzzle, although the piece is now different. Reclaiming the full process gives us room for drama. Within any small portion of anything there is very little room for dramatic changes, and therefore also for dramaturgy. Just as all-aggression larps (as opposed to ones exploring the full scale of negative emotions) make boring drama, the use of only the penetrative aspects of sexuality or only the cuddly elements of love are dramaturgically uninteresting. In the escalation of intensity there is always a risk of numbness. It’s to avoid having to constantly escalate stimuli in order to reach intensity, the concept of expanding and exploring rather than border-breaking that becomes such an interesting, although difficult, enterprise.

The Power of Choice

Luckily there is always Choice! There are as many strategies to face lack of feelings as there are potential strategists. So far the dominant strategy, in order to make things emotionally strong, seems to be making it hurt more. Positive power drama is a strategy that favours intensity in areas other than hurt and humiliation. The key words are awareness, respect and room for emotional growth.

Positive power drama focuses on emotional rather than intellectual analysis. This process of creating sensitive drama could therefore be summed up as an emotive selection process. As any goal can’t be truly reached with means incoherent with it, the emotive selection process will not only be conscious but also inter-subjectively collective.

This basically means that the intended feeling pervades the project as a whole, rather than being seen as a goal possible to reach through a non-feeling process. Within the positive power drama this emotive process is humanly possible. Of course it can be argued that since there’s never any empirical basis for decisions in larp-making, choices are always emotive, and the issue is just what we call them. As this strategy is based on the idea that how we describe things defines them, the difference is vast and the definition therefore becomes essential as to how the process is conducted.

The Case

Mellan himmel och hav was a project with a very explicit agenda that definitely focused on the more positive emotions and inter-human relations. That made it suitable as a test case for some of these ideas and consequently the project itself made the development of new tools imperative.

Agenda and Theme

MHOH had a well-expressed agenda that consisted of four main goals. The idea was to create means for the positive power drama. The goals as stipulated in the project description were to:

- Create methods for love-oriented drama in larp.
- Through a fictitious reality comment on gender and equality.
- Expand larp as a medium by exploring new ways of working with characters and their expressions.
- Integrate artistic music, light and performance to a joint co-created art experience.

Action focusing on love and trust calls for love and trust to be present. Situations leading up to uncomplicated amorous interaction requires that everyone involved feels secure with such interaction (see Wieslander 2004). In order to create the atmosphere of trust, off-game methods were needed, and an ensemble was created which together could take on the task of realising the final event.

Within the fiction gender, as we know it, was non-existent and sex was irrelevant. Instead, new genders, not related to the sex, were created. In addition one of the fundamentals in our gender system, the hetero-normativity, was removed. The construction of genders enabled participants to experience how masculinity and femininity are constructs rather than innate attributes. The basic equality issues were addressed by analysing the abilities of subject and object as well as how these are created and perceived.

The characters were able to grow into existence rather than being written or created in a “top down” fashion or “individualistic” fashion. Partly this was because of the work with the ensemble, and partly it was managed by new methods of character creation. Very little of the material was written down, but rather passed on by exercises and storytelling. This was essential to the results reached but not something that fits with every player and certainly not with most larps.

Music and light installations and the performance together created the out-of-this-world science fiction feel for the whole event. By employing this multi-disciplinary approach to building the setting the intention of being very low key yet highly intense was reached. Light made the eighteen-hour cycle possible and the sound helped create the mood and also to enable players to be silent (see also Summanen 2004). To a

certain extent they also worked as décor. The crossover concept was imperative to the functioning of the positive power drama.

Methods - Tools

In the making of MHOH a number of methods were employed, both in the final event and during the rest of the project. Quite a few of them are traditional organizational tools, some are commonly used in the making of larps and some are completely new. The methods can be broken down into three categories: First the structure of organisation, the backbone of the project; second the tools of the process leading up to the event within which the fiction and characters were created; and third the tools for game-mastering and character interaction during the game itself.

The organisation of Ars Amandi –group was a *circular hierarchic* structure with three main focuses: administration, fiction and production. Each area had a group of it's own. This structure mainly kept to traditional methods such as *meetings, email lists* and *decision-making by consent*.

In the beginning of the project the initiators made up only the Whats, while the Hows were created by the ensemble. For example the bipolar gender structure consisting of Morning and Evening people was set by the initiators, but what a Morning person was like was not. The initiators chose to *view participants as fellow creators* very early on in the production, enabling them to be a part of the emotive process. In order to create a process rather than an event several methods such as *participant seminars, email lists, web forum, pre-larp, de-rolling, character developers, de-briefing follow-up* and *participant-initiated meetings* were used. Within this process, methods of character-building were used as well, including *drama exercises*, some created for the project. Among others we used *walking and motion exercises* to de-gender players expressions (such as *"The Lionesses"* to create a sensual new body language), *Frozen Moments* to create character memories and expressions, *value exercises* to think through the characters positioning and views, *trust and comfort exercises* to create the feeling of living together and of course *the "rules" were rehearsed*.

In order to facilitate the intended drama, the *music and lighting* were instrumental game mastering methods, especially since they were the basis in the *altered day cycle*, a way of creating better dramatic intervals. There were also two groups of *pecially informed* (rather than instructed) *players* whom had both diegetic and extradiegetic methods at hand in order to influence the drama. The first group, the dead, were *socially invisible* to the characters and they had possibilities to take players to a temple (the Heart) to *play out dreams* and strange encounters. The site contained an *off-game room* that was a core in administrating what happened to players and to drama. In order to enable challenging interaction a *safe word method* (cut/brems) was employed, as were *the Ars Amandi method* for lovemaking. *Colour-coded clothing including headgear* and *restrictions regarding body hair* were used to put less emphasis on sex and to visualize the new genders and the social statuses instead. *Language alterations* were used to make the diegesis work and implement the new genders and *visualization*

techniques were used to enable the Sunnivas (the clergy) to see the characters' spiritual needs. Even the *specially designed food* was part of the theme to create an off this world feeling.

Conclusions from Mellan Himmel och Hav

All in all MHOH showed that being consistent in choosing an agenda and sticking with it through the process pays off. The methods used were a big part of how the project turned out, regarding both to the total impact of the project and to the dramaturgy of the game. It also showed that it is indeed possible to maintain a game that is extremely intense and still very subtle.

MHOH was also an example of how the role-playing medium can be used, not only as art, but as political art with a message – not trying to subterfuge an agenda in with the entertainment but to honestly have a point and communicate it openly throughout the experience. The gender de-construction and re-construction could not have been done by a single artist or group; it was so vividly put across because the event had no passive spectators, only fellow creators. That makes the utilisation of larp as a tool of change and awareness very powerful. By handling the agenda and method openly during the whole process, the participants could and had to work with themselves relating to it. Whether it was to get the idea of social constructivism proved wrong or right, to be a part of the art work or to be an agent of change learning new methods. That choice was made possible by gaining awareness.

The event resulted in a multitude of different emotions being played and felt. It was not the cuddly love feast some feared that it might be, although it could have gone that way if the elements of individualism and “larp democracy” had been able to override the aim for drama. As it were, enough room was made within the different aspects of love to create very dramatic changes in the characters minds. Still, it was not a total success. Whether it is that the larpers still prefer to feel miserable, or tiredness, or just that the negative is safer to play when a player wants to make an impact, the fact remains that during the third diegetic day things looked quite depressing. In the end though, the urge to do what was intended won. This proved that tragedy could be used as a backdrop for positive drama just as well as the positive can function as a background for tragedy, too.

The Challenge

With Mellan himmel och hav the mitten was thrown and hopefully the future will hold more larps that are conscious, not only with regards to the agenda and the methods, but also of the fact that we can indeed change the way we perceive things with larp as a tool to do so. By pretending, putting on a different set of spectacles, we might very well see things in a way that also enables us to do something about it. This does not mean that all larps from now on should be serious political art events, but the thought of positive

power drama has through MHOH shown that the possibility exists. Thus it has, as it set out to, already expanded our concept of the medium.

Other events like *Ringblomman* show similarly that the means communicate the message. There the important concept was togetherness and consequently the larp was also constructed with an unusually high amount of co-creativity. Positive power drama will continue to be a strategy, one of many, and as such it will hopefully not only inspire more larps with positive agendas but also other strategies to be formulated and communicated. That would really change the world.

Games

Europa (2001) by Eirik Fatland, Irene Tanke et al., Weltschmerz, Norway.

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

Hamlet (2002) by Martin Ericsson, Anna Ericson, Christopher Sandberg, Martin Brodén et al., Interaktiva Uppsättningar, Sweden.

Knappnålshuvudet (1999), by Daniel Krauklis, Martin Eriksson, Susanne Gräslund et al., Interaktiva uppsättningar, Sweden.

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

OB 7 (2001) by Per Wetterstrand, Carl Heath et al., Sweden

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

De tusen rosornas väg (2000) Emil Boss, Johnny Hjortter, Staffan Johnsson et al., Sisyfos, Sweden.

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Gunnerud, Liv & Wieslander, Emma (2003): The humane strategy. www.ars-amandi.nu/

Summanen, Henrik (2004): Composing for larp. Larp and sound environments. In this book.

Wieslander, Emma (2004): Rules of engagement. In this book.