

## The Storyteller's Manifesto

*The Storyteller's Manifesto is an attempt to create a more concrete model for making narrativist larps. While other papers on the subject exist, I wanted to create a more radical model, one that borrows heavily from film and theatre as well as from "realistic" literature. With the manifesto, I seek to depart from gamist and immersionist larping, laying the foundations for larps with a clear story and a strong message. Larps that speak to us and challenge us and change our ways of thinking. I want larps people either love or hate, larps that mean something. When reading the manifesto, one might get the idea that I abhor all other forms of larping. This is not true; I see that gamist and immersionist techniques suit some larps, but I view both as weak techniques when it comes to telling stories.*

Given that, the Storyteller's Manifesto is rather geometrically opposed to the hallmark of immersionism, *The Manifesto of the Turku School* by Mike Pohjola (1999). Where Turku cries for total character immersion and liberation from dramatism, the Storyteller's Manifesto sees immersionism as a potential obstacle in the telling of a story, and drama techniques and meta-considerations as necessary to making the larp function. Where Dogma 99 (by Eirik Fatland and Lars Wingård 1999) outlaws secrecy and forbids the organisers to influence play, both are desirable when trying to tell a moving story. The biggest difference between the Storyteller's Manifesto and earlier works is that it does not see character immersion as the highest goal; immersion in the story and fiction is paramount, and the characters are acted out as much as they are *lived*. By setting a "new" goal for larping, I hope to inspire the creation of new larps.

### Story?

What constitutes a story to me differs from the narrativist view of a story and a narrative. While books and films deal with stories in their completed state, the Storyteller's Manifesto deals with the seeds of stories: beginnings, ends and vague paths towards the goals – frameworks of stories, but not stories already told. The "feel" and theme of the story can be set without writing the story. The process is somewhat like musical improvisation over a series of chords; The chords set the boundaries and influence the result, but the result is still not given but created through playing.

The ideal of writing games with only important characters has been very problematic to attain so far. My guideline is stripping the game to the bone: Start with an idea, the seeds of the story and the theme. Throw away all other ideas but the theme, and start wrapping the elements of the larp around it. Does the theme require a specific

setting (e.g. historical, sci-fi or fantasy)? If not, stick with a contemporary setting. Write out the premises of the story, adding on characters as they become necessary – and only when they become necessary. If this means ending up with only ten characters, all the better. Flesh out the character relations, intrigues and plots, again only including plots that are tied to the theme. When making the characters, concentrate only on their function in relation to the story.

The characters' backgrounds and personalities should be added when you know who is going to play the character. After this, write a story to fit the theme with as few words as possible. Reduce the story to its most basic components and find out where it ends. Write the ending and start implementing the plots and intrigues into the skeleton of the story. Fate-play is a good technique for attaching the skeleton to the larp, but the number of "fate nodes" should be kept to a bare minimum; The more freedom the players get, the more they can contribute. When you feel you have the larp quite ready, but before you go out recruiting players, you should look over it a last time and try to weed out all that is not needed, not sparing any unnecessary character or idea. By stripping away all unnecessary fluff, the essence of the idea is found, and it will become much stronger for it.

Employ heavy casting. Match each character to player, and write the backgrounds and personalities to suit the players. Get the players involved in the creation process, get them just as engaged in the larp as you are. You should choose the costumes, location and other things according to the needs of the story. Make sure that all parts of the scenery have something to do with the story; no part of the scenography should be irrelevant. Make sure all the little details add up to something bigger.

Last, but not least: Find a story that rocks your bones. Without a really good story, the Storyteller's Manifesto is useless, and you should probably do something else instead.

## A Model for Narrative Larps

The Storyteller's Manifesto is a manifesto for narrativist larping. It stems from two main concepts: collective artistic expression and a good story. The manifesto views larp as an art form equal to music and theatre, and the players as artists. However, the manifesto wishes to lessen the differences between the makers of the larp and the players. This will be achieved by a clear focus on collective storytelling. The larp should be centred on a story with a clear theme and a strong message. The larp should intrigue and pull the players into the story, and at the same time it should lead to contemplation and new thoughts and ideas about the theme or the message that is told through the story. The manifesto recognises the former works in the area of narrativist larp (The Sestiamovement<sup>1</sup> and the Manifest Sunday (2001)) while trying to narrow its focus to include

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.interactingarts.org/ia1quick\\_revised.html](http://www.interactingarts.org/ia1quick_revised.html) (December 2003)

only larps and to create a concrete and radical model for creating narrativist larps – something none of the earlier works tried to do.

### Definitions

“A larp is a meeting between persons who through characters relate to each other in a fictional world” (Fatland & Wingård 1999). I would like to add physical boundaries as a necessary element to the definition of larp.

A narrativist larp (Bøckman 2003) is a larp that bases itself on the telling of a story and communicating a message in collaboration with the players.

Narrativist playing places its main focus on extroverted playing. This means playing the characters to increase and strengthen the fiction and the other players’ experiences of the fiction, as opposed to focusing on solving plots or becoming “one with the character”.

In this text the word ‘fiction’ means “the total sum of everything that is real within the larp”, the larp’s diegesis, the game universe (Andreasen 2003), the story’s foundation, the setting where the story is played out. This includes written background material, character descriptions, props, scenery etc.

In this text the word ‘story’ means the story that the larprawrights, and the players, are attempting to tell. The story is built on the fiction, and is both a part of the fiction and a separate entity. The story is not a story in the traditional sense, i.e. something that has already happened, but the seeds of a story: a framework or an idea, yet to be fleshed out.

### The Strengths of Narrativist Larp

Larping is a collective experience. By aiming the focus of the larp outwards instead of inwards, towards the common good instead of the individual player’s good, one will be able to benefit from all the players’ resources. This will strengthen the larp as a whole as well as the players’ involvement in both the story and the fiction of the larp.

There are few experiences that can engage people like a well-told story. Since the dawn of mankind, stories have been a central part of human culture both as a way of teaching and as a way of remembering the past. By letting players be a part of the telling of a story, a larp may achieve engagement and immersion in a story like no other media. This makes larp ideal both in telling a story and in conveying a message, and thus both entertaining and enlightening to the participants.

A gamist (Bøckman 2003) style of play is at a disadvantage because it requires competition, and competition requires a loser. By dividing the larp into winners and losers, the players will turn their focus to winning and thus away from the larp itself. This will weaken the larp as a whole. Larping is not a well-suited medium for problem solving in any case; computer games and table-top role-playing games are much better suited to this purpose since they can achieve objectivity and fairness more easily; in a tabletop role-playing game or a computer game, game mechanics can be easily employed to achieve a balance between the players.

An immersionist (Bøckman 2003) style of play turns the focus inwards into the character's mind and seeks the fusion of player and character. Despite the fact that an immersionist style of play leads to a situation where the characters indirectly strengthen the fiction through being "true" or "realistic", the style focuses mainly on an individual player's experience, not the larp as a whole. In addition, a great degree of inner conflicts and introverted play pull the focus away from the story or the message, if the inner conflicts are not in direct relevance to the theme and story. A certain degree of meta-considerations is inevitable in any larp. Since utilizing meta-considerations go against the principles of immersionist play, the narrativist method is better suited to handle such problems. The players' meta-considerations (concerning the needs of the story and the larp as a whole) strengthen the larp and are a necessity for the larp to function.

### Principles

The larp seeks to tell a story with a theme and a message. Without this, the larp is without value, fit only for entertainment without substance or meaning.

The makers of the larp will decide the beginning and the end of the story; the players will fill the space between these points.

The fiction, and thus all written material, will be constructed around the story, not the other way around.

Use of pre-written material or copying from secondary sources (for instance history books) should be avoided if the material is not critical in telling the story. Using ready-made material or secondary sources for their own sake is patching up a weak story with trappings of originality and authenticity, forcing the focus away from the story.

Any form of staging<sup>2</sup> used merely to make the larp more entertaining or interesting should be avoided. Larping is about working together to tell a story, not about standing by while people play out constructed events doing nothing for the story except serving as entertainment.

Game mechanics should be avoided. Situations where they might be considered necessary (fights, magic etc.) should be solved by improvising according to the needs of the story.

All written material has to be made available for the players after the larp is over, making it easier for the players to reflect over the story and their parts in it.

All characters must be relevant, invaluable parts of the story (see Rognli 2003). Characters that exist only to fill a function not directly linked to the story, or whose place is to fill blank spaces in the fiction, should be avoided. No character should be a bystander or an "extra".

Each character's written background has to have parallels to the story, the theme, and the message of the larp. Letting the story be seen through the eyes of the characters

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<sup>2</sup> Petter Bøckman defines this Norwegian term as "a short event conducted by specially instructed players, monsters or the organisers themselves during a LARP. These usually connected to a plot, and serve to steer the game, introduce new information or reinforce the theme of the game" in Gade, M., Thorup, L. & Sander, M. (ed) (2003): *As Larp Grows Up. Theory and Methods in Larp.*

increases the players' identification with the story. The theme of the story must be depicted in all conflicts of the character's past.

All intrigues, plots and fates must mirror the story or advance it. Intrigues for the sake of having intrigues or plots that exist only to be solved take the focus away from the story. It should be possible to draw parallels between the characters' conflicts and the conflicts of the story. The theme of the story should saturate the larp.

Every character's function in the larp takes precedence over their background and personality. The characters' personalities and backgrounds should be written around the characters' functions, not vice versa.

Each character should be written for a specific player. If the character changes hands after it has been written, it should be revised to suit the new player, thus making sure the player suits the character's appearance and presence.

The players' abilities should not be critical to the choice of character. Any holes in the players' skills can be filled through collective improvisation. The larpwright, on the other hand, should keep the players' physical attributes in mind when assigning and writing characters; lacking abilities can be covered up by good acting, but fooling the eyes is more difficult. A character's appearance should match the character's inner being to some extent.

Any incident or conflict written into a character must be made with the clear intent of surfacing during play. Incidents or conflicts made only to exist solely inside the characters head are worthless since they do not benefit the larp as a whole. All drama written into a character should at some point be shared with the other players.

The larpwright should avoid having too many characters in the larp. Too many characters complicate the making of the larp and fragment the story. The larp should contain only the characters the story needs to function, no more.

The players are free to decide and influence the path to the end of the story, but not the end itself. The road towards the goal is as important as the goal itself. The point of a larp is to tell a story together, not to make one from scratch.

No character is more important than the larp as a whole. Characters may be killed to serve the story. Good stories do not require happy endings.

Character immersion should not be a goal in itself, but a means to achieve immersion in the story. The players should give up their sense of self to a certain degree, and be one with the story. By seeing their characters through the eyes of the story, the players are able to see how their characters' actions might best benefit the story. The characters are not isolated individuals, but pieces of a larger puzzle. By achieving unity with the fiction of the larp, the story and the message will creep under the players' skin, since the fiction will reflect the story and message. Too great degree of character immersion draws the focus away from the theme and the message of the larp.

Costumes, props and other visual effects are used to strengthen the story as a whole. Realism should not be sought after for its own sake. A good costume tells the others something about the character. Realism, authenticity and historical accuracy are not important.

The organisers have the final say in all matters in the larp. Though they hold absolute power over the game, they should seek to use it as little as possible and allow the players to influence the game as much as the organisers. Narrativist larp is about collective storytelling and collective art, not players carrying out the artistic ambitions of the organisers to the letter.

The players shall not use any concept of logic or realism other than what the organisers give them. For the artificial reality to function, it must be embraced without hesitation or doubt.

## The Pledge of Allegiance

As a participant of a larp made after the tenets of the Storyteller's Manifesto, I hereby pledge:

- To respect larp as an art form and to see the organisers and the players involved in the larp as artists. I shall view the larp as a work of art I have created in collaboration with all the other artists, and I will take full responsibility for any flaws in the larp as a whole, sharing the responsibility fully with all the other participants.

By recognising larp as an art form, and by viewing themselves as artists on equal terms with the organisers, the players leaves the classic relationship between artist and audience and between artist and performer behind; the classic way of viewing art cannot be applied to larp. The game should strive towards being more like jazz improvisation, where several artists create music together spontaneously, than a symphony, where a single artist uses the performers as tools of her own expression.

- To further the story and the larp as a whole instead of focusing on my own experience.

Focusing on personal experience leads easily to memorable situations for the individual, but will not necessarily strengthen the larp as a whole. By playing outwards, the players' experiences of the larp will even out as everybody will be pulling everybody else up.

- To see my character, as well as the reason for her existence, as a part of the story and the fiction. I shall try to view my character objectively, not subjectively.

By viewing a character as a part of a greater whole, it is easier to see how the character's actions can best strengthen and improve that whole. By keeping an objective eye on the character, it is easier to avoid losing sight of the collective experience and the larp as a whole.

- To strive to express all aspects of my character so that others can participate in the unique story that is my character.

In a narrativist larp all aspects of a character are there for a reason, inseparably tied to the story and message, and should thus all be acted out. By acting out all aspects of their characters, the players will achieve a greater understanding of the characters, and thereby a greater understanding of the theme and message that are the foundations of the story as well as a better understanding about the foundations of their characters. This also means that all the other players will, directly or indirectly, be able to participate in the player's reflections of the character and the story. Striving to express your character fully builds a clear image of the character for the other players. This makes sure that no character will seem like an extra.

- To contemplate my character and her place in the story and fiction, both before and after the larp, as well as the story and fiction in itself.

During a larp, reflection on the fiction, theme and story can easily drown in personal experiences. It is therefore important to thoroughly contemplate your character before a larp. An understanding of a larp's themes enables the player to feel like an irreplaceable part of the whole.

- To thoroughly purge myself of any concepts of realism, authenticity, political correctness and preconceptions on what constitutes good taste or a good larp. Instead, I will give myself mindlessly over to the reality of the larp.

Larp is an art form, and for art to be of any value, it must be free. All groundbreaking art is made where creativity smashes the boundaries of conservative society. Cemented notions of right and wrong, good and bad (et cetera) get in the way of free artistic expression, and can distort a larp beyond recognition. The theme and the message of a larp should not be quelled in bourgeois political correctness, and conservative notions on what constitutes "good" larping or art should not destroy its form. The players should accept reality as it is given by the organisers, and contribute to it with an open, creative mind free of prejudices.

- To play out the total degradation, defeat and decay of my character with the same joy and zeal as her greatest victories. Victory and loss are equal.

Many of the greatest and most moving stories end in tragedy. As much understanding and value can be gleaned from the depths of tragedy as from the heights of bliss. The players should not seek personal gain for the character to fulfil their own need for success.

- To give fully of myself, and to expect others to do the same.

All true art requires engagement. Good stories engage and rouse us. The players should enter the larp with the intention of giving all they can and knowing that the other players will do the same.

- To willingly share my experiences from the larp with others so that they too can benefit from my experiences.

Larp is a fragile medium. There are few methods of preserving a larp after it is complete; Playing the same game again would not yield the same result. This is why it is important that the larp is shared with those who did not participate and

that the contemplation about the themes and messages do not end when the larp does. The best stories live by the word of mouth; the best larps should do the same.

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## Games

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