

PLOT AND CHARACTER DESIGN



Laura Kröger, Knudepunkt 2019

Laura Kröger

35-year-old mum of two kids, project manager in IT-company

Larped since 2000

Organized larps since 2001

Main organizer (and story lead) in 18 larps

Story or character designer in 6 larps



Referens larps

Pyhävuoren perilliset



31-42 characters
Played 7 times
2014-2018



104 characters
3 runs
Summer 2019

SANDBOX

Events from outside

Plot suggestions

Help for creating contacts

Etc...

COOPERATION

Own character concept,
GM revision

Own character concept
GM ties contacts

Character creation with
GM aid questions

Etc...

PRE-WRITTEN

Group character

Pre-written character,
selfmade contacts

Pre-written characters,
pre-written contacts

Etc...

Why?

- Pre-written character allow players to be surprised
- It isn't dependant on players skills to create play for themselves
- It allows organizers to create coherent story arcs
- It is more balanced in terms of different storylines
- It allows players to step out from comfort zone and try different things

Mainly just matter of preference!

What is plot design?

- Inventing and fine-tuning
- Character building
- Structure planning
- Matching plots for each other
- Creating the story frame
- Game mastering

15%
Skill

Idea
Planning
Writing
Casting
Perception

15%
Luck

Player feeling
Chemistry
Timings
Surprises

70%
Work

Planning
Writing
Fine-tuning
Creating background
Crosscheck
Game mastering

Pyhävuoren perilliset



Noora's foster father Otso is imprisoned in Ivanov's basement, after he tried to take revenge on his spouse's death and failed. Jelena's second ex, Arto, who's also Noora's dad and is present at the party too, killed Filip, the love of Jelena's life, because of whom Jelena once abandoned her child...

Alec cheats on his girlfriend Amanda with the person she hates Janet. Alec also hides it from his friends that ten years ago he (accidentally) killed their sister.

Vampires

Jelena

Alec

"It's complicated"

Ex-lovers

"Siblings"

"Brothers"

Is a maid of honor in her best friends and step brothers wedding. Finds out that her ex-flirt killed her parents and that it was deliberately concealed, and that actually her father was not who she thought it was, but a werewolf, whose son - or more precisely adopted son - was the one behind her parents' murder, and...

Humans

Amanda

Nathanel

Alec is Amanda's uncle too

Romance

Noora and Alec had an affair, which Jelena torpedoed to get Alec for herself.

Grandmother Jelena accidentally killed her daughter, Noora's mother, trying to turn her into a vampire.

Alec killed Eelis's girlfriend Oona a decade ago, and Eelis believed for a long time that he himself inadvertently killed Oona.

Crush, one-night stand, pregnancy, Lilith, end of the world, blablabla.

Werewolves

Eelis

Noora

Salme

Cousins

Flirt

Friends

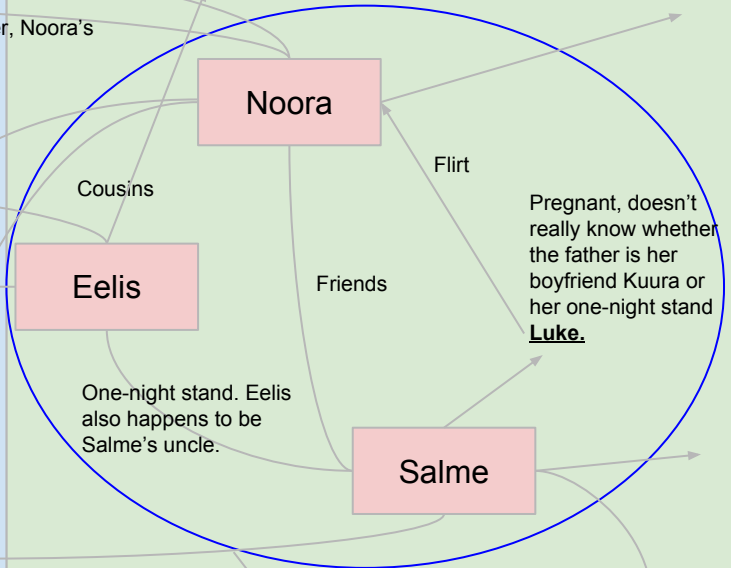
One-night stand. Eelis also happens to be Salme's uncle.

Pregnant, doesn't really know whether the father is her boyfriend Kuura or her one-night stand Luke.

Bitten by accident in wolf form during the last full moon, which led to Amanda's and Nathanel's one-night stand, as Amanda happened to come by...

Stepsisters

...which saved Nathanel, when Salme in wolf form sensed her family relation with Amanda, which she didn't previously know.



LESSONS LEARNED

THERE CAN BE TOO MANY PLOTS

BAD FOR ONE, BRILLIANT TO ANOTHER

- 7 runs, 31-42 characters in each
- 56% of the players gave feedback (145 out of 260)
- 37% was the lowest and 71% the highest response percent
- 60% of the players loved their character and 31% of the players liked it
- Each of the characters in the larp received feedback (3 characters only once, 5 characters twice and 33 characters 3-5 times)
- Only 2 characters did not receive the highest 'loved it' option (both late additions and ranked with second highest option 'liked it')
- Only 10 out of 42 characters received one of the lower options 'most parts' or 'no'
- *Each of these 10 characters received the best option 'loved it' from another run!*

**MAKE EVERYTHING AS EASY
AND ATTAINABLE AS POSSIBLE**

IF IT IS IMPORTANT - MAKE BACK UP PLANS

CHARACTER DESIGN

Good character?

- Is a good match with the player
- Well written (atmosphere and information)

- Has a function
- Offers relevant and intriguing play
- Fits for the larp and is in line with other characters

Is it possible to say what is or isn't a good character?

Yes...

- There are certain wishes that keep appearing on casting questionnaires as well as few themes most players love to play
- In most characters it is possible to follow few basic principles to make it better.

...and no.

- Some players have very specific requests
- Experimental or purposely different characters

Good is not good for everyone

- What is perfect for one, is mediocre for another and utter rubbish to third
- Players look for very different things
- Good character is defined equally in casting as it is in writing
- It is easier to define a bad character than a good one
- The fact that it is not possible to define 'perfect character' doesn't mean you shouldn't try
- Most problems characters have could easily be erased by plot design and with a small analyzes what will and won't work

What is bad?

- No relevant contacts, your character have bunch of friends, ex-partners, maybe even family members, but your character isn't really that relevant to them. There is no one your character is important
- Your character has no influence nor it would make any difference to any plots should they be removed
- Your character is only there to support someone else. They are defined by their meaning to some other characters 'the fishermans wife'
- There are lot of conflicts, errors and inconsistencies in the character. Actions of the character seem stupid or illogical
- Your most important contact is not available, due being stuck in other activities or they have more important contact to play with
- Your characters all contacts are negative in nature

What is good?

- Relevance
 - Most players want to feel that their actions matter. Feel that the decisions they make have a meaning. For the whole larp or those close to them
- Tight group
 - Fellowship, bonding, being there together, being a part of something bigger
- Emotional
 - Character where you can feel real emotions. Be touched by the story of your character and those around them
- Logic/real
 - Character that feels genuine, who's choices, decisions and mistakes feel logic and to whom it is easy to identify with

Fits for the larp, fits for the player, fits for expectations.

Basic elements of a good character

- 1.) Main character (in their own storylines)
- 2.) Mirror contact
- 3.) Inclusivity/Positive contacts
- 4.) Conflict/Dilemma
- 5.) Surprise

Good character does not equal good experience

- Chemistry
- Timings
- Players personal issues
- Player factor in other plots
- Player interpretation
- Bad weather, breaking technology, other disruption to the plans
- Last minute cancels and changes
- Or some other unexpected problem.

Writing of a good character

- Basic information, who they are and where they come from
- Personality, what kind of person they are and why
- Character defining history and events
- Description of plots and what led to them
- Contacts

Player shouldn't need to read character with a highlight pen!

Communicating with the writers

What need to be communicated?

- Active plots
 - What is the plot, why is it there, how does it become reality in the larp
 - What is the function of the plot and how important it is for the character
- Tone of the contact
 - Positive, negative, neutral, complicated
 - What is the function of the contact in the larp and does the tone support it
- Importance of the contact
 - Primary/secondary/nice to have
 - Mirror contacts and blocking plots

Communicating about plots

- What happened?
- When it happened?
- Who were involved?
- Do all participants know same things?
 - Was there someone witnessing the event, but those involved don't know about it?
 - Is it misunderstanding between characters, did they interpret things differently, why?
 - Is it necessary to describe in character that it happened
- How did the event affect these characters?
- How does the event influence to the larp?
 - If it doesn't -> why is it there??

Tone matters

- Everyone interprets things differently
 - Story designer
 - Writer
 - Proofreader
 - Croschecker
 - Player
 - Contact
 - Observer
- The more specifically the contact or plot is written the less it is influence by the different interpretations.

A movie poster for 'Odysseus' set in a dramatic space environment. The scene features a view of Earth from space, with a large planet and a moon in the background. A bright blue light source, possibly a star or nebula, illuminates the scene. A comet streaks across the sky, and a dense field of asteroids is visible in the foreground. The title 'ODYSSEUS' is written in large, white, serif capital letters across the center.

ODYSSEUS

A STORY ABOUT SURVIVAL

Character concept

- Mirror contact
- Positive contact
- Reference group contact
- Job or function
- Plot or agenda
- Conflict
- Surprise
- Contact network
- NPC contact

MIRROR CONTACT

- Who is the most important character for your character
- Is your character also equally important to that character
- Can be lover, sibling, parent, friend, even antagonist
- Doesn't need to be positive but need to have big ongoing impact for the larp
- Need an opportunity to play together (your mirror contact can't be tight half of the larp into a negotiations your character isn't part of)
- Mirror contact can also be a group your character is a part of
- Role can also be divided between few characters
- Point is not to tie your play into a single character, but to ensure that no one is left alone and that the plots have equal meaning for characters involved

POSITIVE CONTACT

- Unconditionally positive contact
- Someone that doesn't stab you in the back
- Someone with who you can share your plots
- Someone who supports when everything else fails
- Someone who is interested on what happens to your character

REFERENCE GROUP CONTACT

- What is characters link to their own reference group
- How are they welcomed to the group?
- Are they a childhood friend, old boss or former colleague of someone in that group?
- How to make sure they are not excluded from the plots concerning that reference group?

JOB OR FUNCTION

- What the character does?
- What is their job?
- How does it create play?
- Does it? If not what is the function of that role in the larp?
- If it doesn't have any, could something be added?

PLOT OR AGENDA

- What creates play for that character?
- Can they influence it?
- Are all plots dependant from someone else? If so does the character have a change to interact with them?
- What the character wants?
- Do they have means to get it?
- Is it relevant for the larp or the character themselves?
- Is it interesting?

CONFLICT

- Is something preventing the character from getting what they want?
- Do they have argument with someone?
- Do they have conflicting agendas with someone?
- What creates tension for that character?

SURPRISE

- Is there some surprise in store for this character?
 - Something that they didn't expect?
 - It can be 'small thing' (discovery in your work, getting to know some background information that feels relevant, etc.)
 - Or it can be huge (child you didn't know existed, meeting someone you thought was lost, big secret your significant other kept hidden from you, etc.)
-
- Some players love surprises, some hate them, so with these there need to be more cautious.

CONTACT NETWORK

- Does the character have good amount of contacts?
 - Are there too many to remember or reasonably interact
 - Are there too few? Is there a risk that character is left alone?
 - Are there links to assure relevant information reaches the character?
-
- Does every group have cross-group contacts

NPC CONTACT

WHEN YOU KNOW THE 'RULES'

YOU CAN BREAK THEM

- Every character is not supposed to be made out of the same mold
- There are players who enjoy eg. characters that don't have anyone they can trust
- When you know your player and what they enjoy you can give them exactly that regardless of any guidelines
- These lists are there to create the baseline of what elements make a good character.
- They are based on feedback and experimenting
- Still they shouldn't be blindly followed, if there is an argument why some of the aspects shouldn't apply to the character - it probably shouldn't
- But if you can't reason why that character don't need that element, they most likely do

PLOT DESIGN

Phases of plot design

- Initial idea
- Molding the idea
- Connecting the plot to characters / embedding it to plot map
- Reality check - Is it good? Does it fit?
- Fine-tuning or adding things
- Writing the plot - maybe adding something more
- Final reality check
- Cross-check

Adding plot to the character or characters to the plot

- Use existing characters
- Make adjustments to what is already planned if it doesn't break anything
- Early on leave hooks and holes you can fill in later
- Crossing plots start to create new plots, look where these paths take you
- Previous generations and joined npc's can easily create more drama and more plots

Fine-tuning and enhancing the plot

- If necessary create triggers and hooks that make the plot more dramatic
- Build into the plot reasons why it need to played now
- Make sure there are enough characters who know the secrets of other characters
 - And have a motivation to get involved!
- Create links and chains from plots, triangle drama is a plot that is losing it's charm, try adding people to make it more even

Good plot

- Thoroughly thought out and well written
- Character have motivation and opportunity to play it
- Player and the plot fit to each other
- Plot creates scenes and emotions instead of reducing them
- Fits to the larp, it's style and situation

Different plot types

Internal

Written in character.

Active

Passive

External

Comes from outside.

Personal

General

Does a plot type matter?

- Passive plot without a trigger isn't a plot
- Predict the effect of external plots to internal
- Players expectations will be based on internal plots
- Connect active and passive plots to create more drama
- In an ideal situation character have both internal and external plots

Tips for organizers

- Communicate as clearly as you can what is your vision, the theme, aspects, plots, characters
- Use time and effort on designing plots, think not only what kind of plot would be cool but also how it will be played out and what is the impact
- If there are secrets, make plans how they are revealed. Make backup plans and backup plans for your backup plans...
- Create balanced characters with both passive and active plots as well as something that comes from outside
- Make as much ready for the players as possible, information should be easily attainable and easy to take in
- Be available for your players, answer their questions and notice their concerns

Tips for players

- Be specific what you want and don't want to experience
- Make the character your own and interpret it the way that creates play instead of removing it
- Tell organizers if you have concerns
- Connect with your character, pick aspects that you enjoy and enhance them
- Read provided material carefully
- Talk to your contacts about your expectations and boundaries
- Arrive at the larp with positive attitude
- Use the time at the venue
- Read the game and create scenes for others as well, play inclusively
- Be available for debriefing for your co-players
- Give positive feedback

Was this useful?

Did you get any new ideas?

Any questions?

Thank you!