

The Three Way Model

Revision of the Threefold Model

1 Prologue

The Threefold model for RPG was developed by the debaters on the newsgroup `rec.games.frp.advocacy`, and subsequently written down in FAQ form by John H. Kim. As a model it has several things going for it: It is short, concise, uses lay-mans terms and restricts it self in scope. It has therefore been tempting to convert it for LARP-use, LARP being closely related to RPG.

The Scandinavian forms of LARP and RPG differ on some points.

The emphasis on game-mechanics in the original RPG version is not really applicable to LARP, where most actions are done in person, not through simulation. The rule-part of the original »Simulationist« category has been omitted, the category renamed »Immersionist« to avoid confusion. This model is thus not the original one, and has been renamed the Three Way Model. I strongly suggest looking up John H. Kims original. It is found together with other highly interesting material at:

<http://www.darkshire.org/~jhkim/rpg/styles/>

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The Author

Petter Bøckman (35) grew a beard at 19 and is a zoologist by education, teaching school classes at the Museum of Natural History. He was one of the founders of the Oslo LARP-scene in the mid 80'ies, and is still around. Having done the »LARP theory for dummies« last year, his current project is making a comprehensive catalogue of LARP-terminology. He has a weakness for dark beer and scientific squabble.

2 What is the Three Way Model?

The Three Way Model is one way of grouping many aspects of playing live role-play into logical categories. The model addresses how the game is played, particularly the style of gaming, but also how setting are constructed, how game style influence players style, level of authenticity and so forth. The Three Ways divides up many of these into categories known as Dramatist,

Gamist, and Immersionist.

An important part of the model is recognizing that there are valid different goals for gaming. Live role-playing games don't simply classify into good and bad. The exact same game which one player enjoys, another might dislike. Rather than say that one or the other has bad taste, it is more useful to try to make sense of patterns of what different players and organisers enjoy.

3 Which one am I? A Dramatist, a Gamist, or an Immersionist?

Most likely, none of the above. Your individual style cannot be pigeonholed into a single word. More to the point, live role-play depends on all three to function properly, and you probably go for a mix of different techniques, and work towards more than one goal. You may tend more towards one corner of the triangle, but you probably value a mix.

4 Stop beating around the bush!! What is it already?

OK, here are the short definitions:

»Dramatist« is the style which values how well the in-game action creates a satisfying storyline. Different kinds of stories may be viewed as satisfying, depending on individual tastes, varying from fanciful pulp action to believable character drama. It is the end result of the story that is important.

»Gamist« is the style which values solving a plot, or setting one up if you are an organiser. The challenges may be tactical combat, intellectual mysteries, politics, or anything else. The players will try to solve the problems they are presented with, and in turn the organisers will make these challenges fair and solvable to the players.

»Immersionist« is the style which values living the role's life, feeling what the role would feel. Immersionists insist on resolving in-game events based solely on game-world considerations. Thus, a fully immersionist player will not fudge rules to save its role's neck or the plot, or even change details of background story irrelevant in the setting to suite the play. An immersionist organiser will try to make the plots and setting such that they are believable to the players.

5 Don't those categories overlap?

True, these goals are not at odds. A given conflict or plot might happen to be both a fair challenge and realistically resolved, every game will have dramatic aspects, realistic aspects, and competitive aspects. However, The Three Way asks the players what bit is the more fun and the organisers how much comparative effort they put into making these.

Even a perfectly immersionist or gamist LARPs will have dramatic

scenes in them. After all, the players are playing a role, and a certain bit of drama is needed to convey the roles feelings and actions. Similarly, a dramatist LARP will have some conflicts that are a fair challenge for the players, and some events that are realistic. But an gamist organiser, who doesn't put effort into drama of the roles, will be able to make more challenging plots. Similarly, an immersionist player, who focuses only on the roles reactions and feelings and ignoring playing drama to the other participants, will act more realistically in that setting.

6 But I always try to feel what my character feels and act it out. Don't I play both fully dramatistic and fully immersionistic?

Immersionism is not defined in terms of believability, it is defined in terms of method. Rightly or wrongly, an immersionist isn't simply trying to play in a way that is believable. She is trying to actually do what would »really« happen by trying to put her self in her roles shoes. Of course, it is impossible to perfectly feel what a different person feels, but she finds interest and value in the attempt.

Such devotion to the internal logic of the game must go bout ways to work. As a dramatist organiser, you could have a dramatic storyline in mind, and set up the background and characters so well that during the game, the drama unfolds without you having to noticeably intervene in

the game. A very immersionist player might not notice that the events where constructed to produce that story. However, if you use blatant means of making the story happened, she would feel frustration: Her and your ways of play are not compatible.

How the game will run is also dependent on the player's style of play. Take for example, a player playing the wizard's apprentice, facing a horrible monster with the local guardsmen. The dramatist player would perhaps take a stand, deciding this would be a fine time to make a dramatic scene and sacrificing him selves for the town, without regard for the roles agenda. The immersionist would most likely turn tail and run, or possibly faint. The gamist might decide to try to engage the monster in conversation, knowing the organisers have put the monster there for some reason and that the guardsmen don't have a chance against it. These decisions will influence how the game turn out. Thus, incompatibility of style may alter and potentially ruin an otherwise well made game.

7 So dramatism is ham actors playing through arty nonsense, gamism is munchkins who want to win the game, and immersionism is introspective realism-suckers?

No, those are rabid stereotypes. Even if the stereotypes have some truth to them, the Three Way model is not about just the lowest common denominator. There are good and bad

examples of each type of game and each type of players.

A pure dramatist might play a gritty, low-key role that perhaps concentrates on her work. In this case, the drama of the story might be framed around how she relate to each others and the tension produced. Dramatist may also enjoy comedic games, where the in-game action is tailored for humorous effect rather than classical »drama«. The key is that in-game events are tailored based on how satisfying the storyline of the game is.

Games for gamist could be a mystery game where the roles are challenged to find the killer based not just on physical clues, but also on the personalities and motivations of the suspects. Note that this is similar on the surface to a dramatic story, but the emphasis is on solving the murder, even if the methods are a bit theatrical. A purely dramatist mystery might make a better story, but a purely gamist mystery will be a fairer test of the player's wits.

Immersionism by definition is going to try to be »realistic« within the game-world, although it may contain magic or other unrealistic phenomena. However, the players are not necessarily obsessed with pictorial realism. An immersionist game could just as well focus on political discussion between important figures, or power-full wizards plotting against each other, where game-mechanic

necessarily play an important part. A purely immersionist murder-mystery game is not really focused on the solving of the plot, but on how such a mystery is experienced. An ardent immersionist player will refrain from using information gained in a manner not true to character to solve the riddle: Solving it is really not her prime aim.

8 OK, but what's it for, then?

The Three Way model is meant as a sort of checklist for recognising player's motivation for attending games, and how they play out their roles as a result. Organisers too have preferences, and it is when the preferred style of play by the players collide with that of organisers, or that of other players, that things may go wrong. This model may hopefully prevent a few such mismatches.

Different plots too, fall into this three-way form. Different plots demand different solutions, and players who prefer the style in question will solve the plot in a way that serve the overall game. Recognising the different types of plots and storylines and mating them with appropriate players should be an organiser's priority. The same apply the other way around: Finding the live role-play that suits your particular style of playing is preferable over trying to force your style of gaming where it is really not appropriate.

9 But, I don't recognise myself in

these categories, what's wrong?

The Three Ways is not intended as a be-all and end-all of LARPing, nor is it necessarily complete. One might suggested a fourth styles, called »Social«, where out-game considerations is a motivating force, or divide the immersionist category into immersionist and simulationist, and the dramatist into dramatist and narrativist. However, this discussion is outside the scope of the model.

The modified Threefold model in this form is meant to describe the prevailing Scandinavian style of LARPing. Many aspects of gaming are not covered by it. For example, any of the three can vary from »Light« to »Serious«, and there are other ways of analysing LARPs not touched upon in this work, and LARPs who fall outside of forms for which this model is appropriate. Shoehorning everything into the model may lead to some really funny results.