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FOOD AS A NARRATIVE

ABOUT THE GAME SAVING AND DESTROYING POWERS OF OUR FAVOURITE SUBSTANCE

In the beginning there was light ... then someone got hungry and went out for a kebab – a perfectly good late Saturday night scenario when the munchies get to you at 2:00 a.m. As in late night kebab-grapping operations, the actual quality of the nutrition in LARP games are often left to those people who actually care, like Gordon Ramsay, Anthony Bourdain... or me. I am one of those unfortunate fools who actually think that food should have a bigger part in LARP, and not just by tasting and smelling good or being fulfilling as divine ambrosia. My claim is that food can be used as a narrative tool, as a way to tell stories and to further the enchantment of roleplaying games.

In this article, I will go over and beyond and claim that food can save and destroy LARP events by affecting the mood and even plotlines. Most of the examples used will be from fantasy games, but some post-apocalyptic and other genres are included as well.

‘WHERE DOES MILK COME FROM?’ AND HUNDRED OTHER TOPICS FOR A CONVERSATION

My father offered an excellent piece of hard cheese to me some time ago. One of the best chevrettes I have ever tried. Of course my first question was where to get more and how much my wallet would suffer from it. This is something players often neglect. We, as humans, are very interested in our food. As players we tend to be even more interested in xp, levels, plots

and whatnot. Even Finnish larpers who do not have xp or levels, tend to eat in haste (and almost out of the character) and then rush towards to their next evil intrigue or hot romance. It pains the person who plans the 2000 Euro menu to see all these people just finishing off their gourmet food. A simple question to the servant about the chef and *how this food was done* or *what kind of bird is this* would actually be an appropriate and in-character reaction. Not to mention *Where the **** did you get that chocolate from???* in a *Fallout* larp. We as players should actually remember that our characters like their food as well and are interested in its origins.

Of course, clever gamemasters use parts of the food as plot items. Not necessary as something you have to own, but something that will bring you glory. In a Finnish larp, *The Chronicles of Lourney-family part 1*, some of the characters had been hunting with their falcons before the actual game. They rolled dice about a nice fat duck the gamemaster team had purchased. The winner had his falcon snatch the bird and during the feast, he had the right to have servants cut portions to those characters he wanted to reward or impress. This of course included his host, but other than that he was basically given really, really delicious bird. Impressing ladies, encouraging friendship and buying your way to the table of the influential and powerful were all in his reach. In intrigue, a duck just might make a difference. After all, in a real court game, the higher you are, the better the food is.

Example two is from my own experience. In a post-apocalyptic game *Laskeuma (Fallout)* I needed to recruit a group of people to blunder a vault. Well, I didn't want to get the *Brotherhood of Steel* (an important faction in this game) sneaking behind me and stealing all that beautiful technology, so I decided to go for the one thing they were interested in, but not fanatic about: food. I told a story about stumbling into an old food processing facility, not further than two weeks hike away. As there had been raider attacks, I needed few experienced companions with decent combat skills. As a travelling merchant who was quite well off, I produced canned fruits and such to back my story. I gambled with them and after gambling, I made quite a nice and spicy meal for those involved. In my game experience in that game, food was everything. I actually claim that those people who took

part in our little picnic or the other cooking operations had a better game experience than those who just went to the 'bar' and got food handed to them as a 'social support' of sorts. Our food had a story, making it was a social in-character happening predated by a thrill of gambling when we were trying to win more unmarked tin cans for our mystery meal.

All in all, the first chapter is simple. Food comes with background. Use it.

FEASTS, SHORTAGES AND TABOOS

When we imagine feasts in larp events, we are thinking Vikings devouring pork with their bare hands, grease dripping from their beards. Or a court of nobles sipping wine and eating exotic things like peacocks' tongues. What is often forgotten is the message that the feast should send. Holy Day, marriage, whatever, this is just the reason for celebrating. What the feast truly tells is that we are rich, powerful and have more to eat than we can fit into our barrel size stomachs. You do not have a feast to celebrate or to fill yourself; you have feasts to tell everyone else that you *can*. You eat more than you are able because you can afford to, and if you throw up, you can afford that too. Most of us are far too civilized to enter into such a feeding frenzy that would do justice to the concept of a medieval or pre-medieval feast. Thus, we tend to use feasts as a part of *the* celebration, not as the celebration. Let the priest pray quickly and then let us eat.

The Finnish larp scene is filled with games in which the playing actually stops for the dinner. People are still 'in-character' but they are eating like Finns (=silently and fast). It's just an example how your own culture will shine through any layer of immersion. I doubt that you could get a Dane to eat without stopping to chat for fifteen minutes between every spoonful. This is why the gamemaster who wishes to have feasts fitting to their genre must do a lot of work to set the mood right. Get few people to drink their characters into oblivion and have them stand on the table and tell greasy stories. Have some people challenging others into drinking or eating competitions. Set the mood and the mood will tell a story of a great feast. And you know, even ordinary ham will be a delicacy fit for gods if the mood is right.

Of course, a *feast* could be a modern dinner party in the world of nouveau riche, where the actual focus would be in bewilderment of participants when they see one cubic centimeter of vinegar soaked parsley flavoured cod served on a huge designed plate. How delightful! Imagine! Or the feast could be a bowl of watery soap in a WW2 environment. Example three is from WW2 style game which I held in autumn 2009. The game started quite late in the afternoon, so that the players were hungry. We had prepared food for them so that it would be ready quite early on in the game. It was just soup with potatoes, carrots and few other such veggies, but during the boiling we had added tons of herbs that smell really delicious but do not add that much real flavour. All the players were drooling and waiting for a delicious meal like in my usual games and they got the water soup, Mark I. The players told me after that game that the soup really underlined their hunger and made them realize how hungry their characters were because of the food shortage. One of the female players told me that she ate about five bowls of that nasty soup, even when she hated it out of character. Her character was obsessed about getting enough food. The soup told the story of food shortage.

Now, we have gone through over plentiful feasts and food shortages. They are relatively simple. But what if the food we have would be uneatable because of an ethical or religious problem? Several cultures have foods that are taboos. Good examples would be historical Japan where a samurai class would not eat red meat, Islamic countries where pork is forbidden or a biblical prohibition to eat shellfish. Or we can go extreme and consider cannibalism as a part of the storyline. What will characters do when they have to combat hunger and possible starvation? In an airplane accident, do survivors eat those who didn't? Are paladins forced to eat their mounts in a siege? Must slaves choose between religious laws and survival? These would tell great stories on their own right. Sadly, I can't give you an example. I have none.

THE RUBBER CHICKEN AND OTHER HORROR STORIES

Now, let's face the music. I have written about food making the games better. How about the promise of food that destroyed games? It does

happen. Sometimes it happens 'because.' Sometimes it happens because no one spent a minute thinking.

The biggest threat that food can represent to a game is destroying of mood. Some genres and themes are too fragile and can be shattered by anything that goes wrong. And if you don't plan ahead, food can go majestically wrong.

Example number four is about a game called *An Evening in the Manor of Lord Death*, which was supposed to be a dark, wicked and decadent game. It was killed by a rubber chicken. Everything else was perfect. The scene was propped to perfection, the players had excellent costumes, the characters were well planned and written perfectly. Even the casting of players was a success. Then, in the early game, a dinner is served. This is when the intrigue was supposed to begin in a big way. People gather food to their plates, giving evil glances to their competitors and sizing each other up. Until they come to the chicken. They try to cut it. It doesn't flinch. They try to again, going for group effort. Still nothing. Then one of the players just goes to the chicken, grips it tight and rips it into pieces. People gather pieces to their plates. It tastes like shit and acts like chewing gum. Someone says *No matter what they say about Lord Death, he can't be more terrible than this chicken he serves*. General amusement. Jokes fly around. Decadence, fear, all the dark intrigue, gone. Truly gone. Even though some people manage to find the mood for some brief moments, every empty space is filled with jokes about the food. No wonder, it was the most bloody awful larp dinner ever. The gamemasters had made the chicken before. For some unknown reason it didn't work that day. Their biggest mistake was not checking the chicken beforehand. They had a spare, which actually succeeded just as they wanted, but they ate it in the kitchen. Serving that for the players would have saved their game. Well, the food told a story, but not the story the gamemasters wanted to tell.

One game actually advertised excellent food. In this example number five, the advertisement and reality clashed hard. People arrived to the game waiting for really nice 19th century banquet. There was even published menu before the game. This time, the intended food and the cooking skills

of the gamemaster team didn't meet in the middle. They met in a puddle of ****. They even managed to fail the morning porridge. Not to mention mostly raw fish, cold side dishes and dessert that tasted like rat droppings. Players just left in-game area and went for their bags to get anything to eat. If you plan an excellent menu and advertise with it, make sure that you can actually cook the said food.

Example number six is not actually a failed food or a horror story, but a dinner that changed the overall alliances in a game. It happened in *The Christ Emperor*, either part two or three. Church council offered really crappy gruel. It didn't really make people happy, especially the group of Northmen who took it as an insult. The food wasn't good but what was worse, only members of the inquisitor council were served at tables. Others had to stand in line. A clear insult. This led into a scenario in which the Northmen found another person who was dissatisfied with the way the dinner was handled and he just happened to be the agent of Muslim states. This led into an alliance between Northmen, Muslims and several other groups. This would have never happened if the food had been better or if there had been some kind of servants delivering the food to tables.

'PIES, MASTER BRACEGIRDLE' AND THE STORIES YET UNTOLD

Even as I write this article, I am also organizing a larp which only about food. Set in The Shire, in Middle Earth, populated by Hobbits and the focus is set on food. Old hobbit, Master Bracegirdle, is nearing his 100th birthday and holds a competition for all those who wish to participate in preparation of the birthday feast. Old and honourable (=fat) hobbits will serve as judges and best five or so cooks will get the honour of throwing the party for Master Bracegirdle. Players are allowed to enter their own dishes or get a dish prepared the game crew. Sabotage of foods, presentation of one's own dishes and bribery of the judges will be the intrigues of the day. Other than that, it will be only eating, dancing, storytelling and smoking Longbottom Leaf.

Beyond this, I am not sure where the larping and food conversation will take me. I will continue to spend most of my game budgets for awesome meals and pray for the day when I don't have to encourage the players to do the things I have written in this article. There is a plan for a bigger and better article co-written by me and Jacob Bavnsjø from Denmark, most likely for Danish Knutepunkt book of 2011. We are also planning a demonstration in a form of two short larp scenarios set in a dinner party. The Way of the LARP Chef might be here for good, it seems. Then again, we do eat every day (unless we are 16 year old goth girls) and why wouldn't our games be about something that we do daily? It's not like I don't fight ogres in my way to the nearest supermarket, you know...

All and all, I want to thank Jacob and other larpers in favour of culinary pleasures for giving me a reason to write this article and of course, to my long lasting organisation known as *Guild of the Uncast Die*. Someday we will meet near the cooking fires and share a game... or at least a good meal.

JUPE RANTALAINEN is a Finnish larper and gamemaster of long standing, known for serving both the best food for the players and players as the best food.